

# HOW WOMEN BECOME INTERESTED IN POLITICS: CASE OF JAPANESE WOMEN

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## *Abstract*

*Women are politically underrepresented. This is true in Japan regardless of its political and economic standings suggesting that it is an industrialized democracy. While underrepresented in the political arena, Japanese women are fairly active in non-profit organizations. This paper explores the way in which women can be channeled into politics from civil society through organizational activities, I engaged in semi-structured interviews with 62 women from 41 non-profit organizations. I found that the relationship between organizations and the government was the key. The women in those organizations which have established a partnership with government were provided with the opportunity to enhance their self-efficacy by engaging in competitive selection processes and to dismantle the image of politics being contaminated and negative by developing a personalized network with government officials and members in other organizations. They come to view their activities as being political and even consider running for office.*

*Keywords: Japanese women, non-profit organizations, civil society, political participation.*

## Introduction

Socially weak groups are more likely to become political victims than those in power, and a socially weak group that exists in any given country is women. Such weakness can be seen from the number of women in politics. Scholars have investigated numerous factors that affect under-representation of women in politics. First, women are structurally

disadvantaged. In workplace and society, women are less likely to hold positions that are more likely to expose women to political solicitation such as administrative positions (Carroll and Fox 2013; Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994; Duerst-Lahti 1998). However, recently female and male representatives come from different occupational backgrounds (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu; Takeuchi 2004). Second, Politics has been generally thought to be part of a man's world. Women's participation in politics, therefore, is looked upon as being overly masculine or as abandoning more appropriate gender roles (Pharr 1981). Third, political opportunity structure is not conducive to women's representation. When only one individual can be elected from a district, political parties find it difficult to nominate women given that women are relative newcomers in politics when compared to men (Lakeman 1976; Rule 1987; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

However, the initial stage of how women become willing to participate in politics is under-studied. In particular, how women's attitudes toward politics can be changed through their daily activities should be investigated. This paper will investigate such process of women through activities in non-profit organizations (NPOs). While all countries need to work on the inclusion of women in politics, I will focus on Japan in this paper.

Women represent only 8.1% of the members of the lower house of the national parliament (Inter-parliamentary Union 2013). Not only in politics, but also in economic sphere, women are

underrepresented as only 5.4% of CEOs being women (Cabinet Office 2012). Gender pay gap also persists (59%), and 53% of all female workers are non-regular workers and women account for 69% of all the non-regular workers (Cabinet Office 2008). Contrary to their invisibility on national and local parliamentary floors,<sup>1</sup> and their underrepresentation among the economically powerful,<sup>2</sup> Japanese women are quite active in NPOs. Over 80% of registered NPOs in Japan engage in women's issues, and over 70% of these organizations have more female members than men (Cabinet Office, 2004).<sup>3</sup> In addition, voluntary sector itself has been revitalized in recent years. After Hanshin Earthquake in 1995, millions of volunteers flooded into the affected areas as rescue workers, and the number of volunteers has not dissipated yet.

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) contend that civil society organizational participation equips the members with skills necessary for political participation. By preparing for organizational meetings, members learn administrative skills. By delivering speeches in front of other members, they earn public speaking skills. However, these skills are not necessarily political. Realization that the skills earned through organizational activities are transferrable to political participation has to be made, and only when such realization occur, people become interested and willing to participate in

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<sup>1</sup>As of 2012, only 8.1% of the members of the lower house of national parliament were women (Interparliamentary Union 2013).

<sup>2</sup>As of 2011, only 5.4% of CEOs were women (Gender Equality Bureau 2012)

<sup>3</sup>The author's recalculation (re-aggregation) using the data.

politics. As discussed below, with increase presence of NPOs in society, government-NPO partnerships also became common in Japan.<sup>4</sup> When NPOs cooperate with government officials in accomplishing stated shared goals, the participants can learn day-to day operation of government and how their cooperation makes a difference. In absence of such interaction, the members may not be able to make this connection. They may become highly skilled organizational leaders without realizing how their activities have political consequences.

Therefore, this paper will show that the interaction between government and NPOs has a significant impact on the participating women. Absent of such interactions, women tend to believe politics to be something negative and remain unwilling to participate in it; however, such interaction shifts the women's view of politics toward more positive one and makes these women more interested in politics and willing to participate in it.

Of course, women are not a homogeneous group. However, it is undeniable that gender inequality still exists; and therefore, gender equality issue is still pertinent. Methods

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<sup>4</sup> Among 121 local governments examined by the International Institute for Human, Organization and Earth (IIHOE), the percentage of local governments that had ordinance or guideline for government-NPO partnership increased from 88.5% in 2004 to 95.1% in 2007 (IIHOE, 2007). Although it is only between four-year period with three time points and limited to 122 local governments, this preliminarily suggests that such actions by other local governments will increase in the future.

According to the local government official in Osaka (interview, March 28th, 2008), there are four types of government-NPO partnership. These are (1) invitation of NPO members to government committees, (2) cohosting events, (3) outsourcing government tasks to NPOs, and (4) grants.

of political empowerment are not limited to the few already known, such as gender quotas, and scholars and practitioners should continue to seek various tools that can be utilized in diverse situations. The experience of Japanese women in this study adds to this toolbox.

#### NPO-Government Partnerships: Overall Picture

In this research, partnership between NPO and government is defined as cooperation between NPOs and government in pursuit of a particular stated goal. With increasing autonomy and mounting pressure for administrative efficiency, local governments began engaging in partnership relationships with NPOs (Auger 2003; Estevez-Abe 2003). Both parties can offer what the others do not have. While NPOs possess expert knowledge on particular issues and connections within localities, governments have monetary resources (Anheier and Seibel 1990). A random survey revealed that about 75% of NPOs had worked with government over the previous two years (Cabinet Office 2006). NPOs are also incorporated into decision-making processes. Increasing local autonomy generates demands for greater citizen participation in local government. Moreover, when citizen demands are not adequately reflected in government outputs, there are more demands left unmet, and this generates demand to change the outputs. Then, it makes more sense to incorporate NPOs into decision making process. By doing so, government can satisfy

the public demand for citizen participation, and produce outputs that reflect the public demands more closely.

Although different municipalities and prefectures have different combinations and variations, currently, there are largely four types of NPO-Government partnership in Japan. These are 1) the invitation of NPOs to sit on committees; 2) the co-hosting of an event between NPOs and governments; 3) the outsourcing of government tasks to NPOs; and 4) the giving of grant money to NPO. In order to make such NPO-Government partnership easier to conduct, local governments are increasingly engaging in an effort to provide environments that are conducive to such partnerships. According to the International Institute for Human, Organization and Earth (IIHOE), by 2007 all prefectures except for one (Gumma) had passed ordinance on NPO-government partnership. In 2008, Gumma finally passed guidelines on NPO-government partnerships, too. A similar pattern exists at a municipal level. Among 122 municipal governments that were continuously examined by IIHOE in 2004, 2005 and 2007, the percentage of them having had ordinance or guideline on government-NPO partnership increased from 88.52% in 2004 to 95.08% in 2007 (IIHOE 2007). In short, Japanese local governments are increasingly working with NPOs, and it is now time to examine its effects on the participants.

## Methodology

This study is based on my fieldwork in Osaka, Japan between March and August 2008. I first selected NPOs that were carrying out or had recently completed partnership programs with local governments. After selecting such NPOs, I sent an introductory email to organizations ask them to introduce some women in their organization. Response rate was 72%. The first interview took place twelve days after the initial contact, and the last interview took place within sixty days from the initial contact. I engaged in a matching process where I identified NPOs that were similar to partnership NPOs but were different in partnership status—they had not taken part in any partnership projects. The matching criteria I used was the organizational style (advocacy, service delivery or mixed). I will discuss this point and more in detail below.

Osaka prefectural government had a list of NPOs that carried out projects that were outsourced by municipal government between 2004 and 2006. Since the list only dated back to 2004, and it excluded NPOs that engaged in other three types of partnership projects described above. Therefore, in order to make an exclusive list of NPOs that engaged in partnership projects with NPOs, websites and database were utilized.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, Japanese keywords that are translated into partner and administration/government were used, then the contents of the NPO's websites that used such words to described their activities were analyzed. After omitting

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<sup>5</sup>They were websites of Osaka NPO Information Net, the Cabinet Office, and volunteer centers of each municipality.

inapplicable or overlapping NPOs, a combined list of "partnership" NPOs was generated. The combined list of partnership NPOs had 347 organizations. I recognize that this is not a comprehensive list of such NPOs, yet given that such list does not exist even in government offices which engaged in partnerships with these NPOs, I believe this is a good start for this study and future scholars who are interested in similar topics.

I contacted every 7th organization on the list. For those organizations that did not respond after seven days, a follow-up email was sent. Ultimately, I recruited 25 women from 17 partnership NPOs.

According to Jenkins (1987), the main goal of the service-delivery NPOs is to provide goods and services to the members and residents of the neighborhood. Advocacy NPOs do not deliver tangible benefits as service-delivery NPOs do; yet, they attempt to influence policy outcomes by suggesting appropriate policies. Therefore, advocacy NPOs may attract women who are more politically interested and efficacious than service delivery NPOs. I sought to recruit women from both service-delivery and advocacy NPOs because if all the partnership NPOs in my sample were advocacy groups and all the non-partnership NPOs were service-delivery groups, or vice versa, any differences I might find among interviewees might be because of organizational style, rather than NPO relationship with government. Since service-delivery groups simply provide goods and services to targeted groups without

advocating for them vis-à-vis government, they can be apolitical. On the other hand, because advocacy groups aim to change policies or attitudes in society, they can be very political and they might influence likelihood of political discussions in the groups and or the political attitudes of members, regardless of the organizational relationship with government. Therefore, both of my samples of women from partnership NPOs and from non-partnership NPOs were drawn from both service-delivery and advocacy NPOs.

While it is necessary to draw a sample of women from both advocacy and service-delivery NPOs, it is not always easy to distinguish organizations into advocacy and service delivery ones. Many organizations indeed engage in both tasks (Minkoff 1997). To distinguish service delivery and advocacy NPOs in Osaka, I had to analyze a description of each NPO and determine which organizations would fall into which category.<sup>6</sup> To do so, I needed some keywords that distinguish between service-delivery and advocacy NPOs. I used Osaka NPO Information Net's website and the Cabinet Office's database on NPOs to generate keywords. I cumulated keywords in a snowballing manner doing content analysis of NPO websites starting with "saabisu" (service). At the end, following terms were identified :“nakama” (friends), “goraku” (entertainment), “enjo” (support), “shien” (support), and “teikyou”

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<sup>6</sup> It poses a possibility of subjectivity. However, in recruitment process, I asked the organizational members if their organizations engage in either service-delivery or advocacy activities to affirm that the categorization was correct. I encountered only three incidences in which that they were falsely categorized.

(provision/donation). Similarly I cumulated keywords for advocacy groups starting with the keyword “adobokashii” (advocacy) on their statement. The practice generated the following keywords: “teigen” (advocacy/suggestion), “seisaku” (policy), “seisakuteigen” (policy advocacy), “jogen” (advice), “keihatsu” (enlightenment/education), “jouhou hasshin”(information transmission), “kenkyuu” (research), and “gakushuu” (study). These keywords were then used to identify each group of NPOs through content analysis. After omitting the NPOs that were on the list of the partnership NPOs that I built above, I followed the same step to contact non-partnership NPOs. At the end, I recruited 37 women from 24 non-partnership NPOs. Table 1, 2, and 3 show the summary of the sample.<sup>7</sup>

Style	Partnership NPOs		Non-Partnership NPOs	
	# of NPOs	# of Women	# of NPOs	# of Women
Service Delivery	4	4	10	12
Advocacy/Mix	13	21	14	25
Total	17	25	24	37

Table 1: Summary of sample ①- Styles of organizations

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<sup>7</sup>If advocacy NPOs are more political and provide more political stimuli for members due to advocacy activities, there should be no distinction between advocacy and mixed groups since mixed groups engage both in service-delivery and advocacy activities.

Issue	Partnership NPOs		Non-Partnership NPOs	
	# of NPOs	# of Women	# of NPOs	# of Women
Health, medical and welfare	8	12	11	17
Community development	4	4	5	7
Environmental protection	3	3	5	8
Gender Equality	2	5	3	5

Table 2: Summary of sample ②- Issues of organizations

Issue	Style	Partnership NPOs		Non-Partnership NPOs	
		# of NPOs	# of Women	# of NPOs	# of Women
Health, medical, and welfare	Service deliery	2	2 (2)	7	8 (5)
Health, medical, and welfare	Advocacy/mix	6	10 (6)	4	9 (3)
Community development	Service deliery	1	1 (0)	1	1 (1)
Community development	Advocacy/mix	3	4 (4)	4	6 (4)
Environmental protection	Service deliery	1	1 (1)	2	3 (3)
Environmental protection	Advocacy/mix	2	2 (1)	3	5 (3)
Gender equality	Service deliery	0	0	0	0
Gender equality	Advocacy/mix	2	5 (5)	3	5 (5)
Total		17	25 (19)	24	37 (24)

The number in ( ) indicates the number of women in leadership positions.

Table 3: Summary of sample ③- Issues and styles of organizations

I conducted semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed some level of discretion and apace to maneuver for interviewees (Berg, 2001). In other words, questions can be explored, probed, and clarified during the process. Each interview took between 45 minutes to an hour and a half. All participations were voluntary and interviews were digitally recorded with their permission, and were later transcribed from Japanese to English. All names used in the interviews are fictional in order to protect their identities. The average age of the interviewees was 46.7 years.

## Results

### Differences

At the end of the interviews, I asked the participants if they had thought about running for office, and whether or not they had been encouraged to run for office by others. Even though willingness to participate or consideration of running for office does not guarantee these women's entrance into politics, as Lawless and Fox (2005) argue, the nascent development of ambition has to take place for anybody to actually enter politics. The results are shown on Table 4.

	Women in Partnership NPOs	Women in Non-partnership NPOs	Women in Service-delivery NPOs	Women in Advocacy/mix NPOs
Thought about running for office	52.00%	13.50%	25.00%	30.43%
Encouraged to run for office	32.00%	5.40%	25.00%	13.04%

Table 4: % of women thought about or encouraged to run for office

Significant differences were noted between women in partnership and non-partnership NPOs, while no such differences were found between those in service-delivery and advocacy/mix NPOs. The rest of the paper will illustrate how the differences in the levels of politicization were brought about.

## Discussion

### Hindrance to Politicization: Motivation to Volunteer, and Importance of Inclusiveness

Study of volunteer motivation is heavily influenced by the work of Clary and his colleagues (Clary, Snyder & Ridge 1992; Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene & Haugen 1994; Clary, Snyder, and Stukas 1996). In a series of their work, they developed an index which includes six factors to explain volunteer motivations: altruistic concerns, opportunity to gain and utilize unused skills and knowledge, networking with others, reduction of guilty feelings, and desire for personal

growth (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992; Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994; Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996). Among these six, the second element (opportunity to gain and utilize unused skills and knowledge) was the most common among my participants. Most of the participants expressed their desire for social recognition; they were searching for places where they would feel needed. This could be due to Japanese women's relatively low status in society. They are generally educated, but skills they have are underutilized in society, and they seek places where such skills are found useful.

While more male high school graduates enter college than their female counterparts (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan, 2007)<sup>8</sup>, and the proportion of women entering four-year colleges is below parity, more and more women are getting higher education these days. However, when they enter the workforce, they face a gender gap. According to the United Nations (2008), gender pay gap in Japan is 59% while the that in Australia, New Zealand, and United Kingdom are 90%, 83% and 75%, respectively.<sup>9</sup> In addition, according to the National Institute of Population and

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<sup>8</sup>The numbers are calculated from table 237 "Shinrobetsu Sotsugyousha Suu" (The number of graduates by career path after graduation) and table 239 "Gakkabetsu Daigaku Tankidaigaku toueno Shingaku Suu" (The number of students who advanced into four-year colleges and two-year colleges". Both tables are included in Gakkou Kihon Chousa (Report on School Systems). Retrieved on November 23, 2008. Website: [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/001/08010901/index.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/001/08010901/index.htm)

<sup>9</sup>The data for Japan was from 2006 those for Australia, New Zealand, and United Kingdom were from 2006, 2005 and 2004, respectively.

Social Security Research (2005), only a small proportion of married women who were in the workforce before marriage hold full-time employment after marriage.<sup>10</sup>Therefore, it is not surprising that many women seek social recognition outside of employment and household.

There were two groups of people in my sample, and there were no seeming commonalities among them. On the one hand, there were older housewives who devote their lives to their husbands and children. They were the ones who exited the workforce upon marriage or at the birth of their first child. Some reentered the workforce later as part-time employees after the children became old enough (usually elementary-school or junior-high-school age). Although some were employed at the time of interview as part-time workers, most of them identified themselves as housewives. Now that their children have grown older, they were feeling a void in their lives. They joined the NPOs while searching for places where they would feel needed by others. On the other hand, there were younger aspiring women with jobs. They often intentionally avoided the traditional gender roles and attempted to find a sense of self-actualization at work. However, their dreams were often met with the realization that society still held rather traditional gender expectations. At work, they found themselves facing a glass-ceiling and filling up positions with few responsibilities. Looking for an

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<sup>10</sup>Only 16.9%, 14.7% and 11% of those who had been married for 0 to 4 years, 5 to 9 years and 10-14 years were in workforce, respectively in 2005. (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2005).

alternative place where they could explore their sense of responsibility, belonging, and self-worth, they ended up in NPOs.

The desire for social recognition successfully brought two groups of women together who would not have otherwise. However, this very desire seems to have also prevented the women from becoming politically interested. In other words, women wished to avoid anything that can cause a fissure among them, and as it shown below, that included politics. Outside of household and workplace, they found a place to be connected with other women who were similarly situated in the society. In the NPOs, they were equal regardless of their gender, age, work experience, or initial skill levels. They were asked to contribute because they were all important for the organization's survival. The shortage of resources and personnel allow no room for divisiveness within the organization. When asked if she believed that her civic participation helped her understand politics, Chie (29-year old part-time worker) responded:

*I do not have much desire to understand what is going on in politics. I think politics is something polarizing and what is dividing society into different camps. In an organization like this, getting along together is one of the most important assets, so politics is something we should all avoid.*

Takiko (55-year old housewife), another participant, also said:

*Politics? I have nothing to do with it. It is also important to avoid it when we think about getting along with our neighbors.*

This fear of divisiveness prevented some women from bringing up issues they perceived to be political. Instead, daily conversations in the organizations were limited to their families, gossips, and day-to-day running of organizations. Politics, which they equated with partisanship, appeared as being necessarily divisive to these women and were a display or clash of self-interests. The NPOs, on the other hand, represented selflessness and inclusiveness. Therefore, the relationship between politics and life at NPOs was like that of oil and water: they did not mix. Discussion of politics and government was a taboo.

WhyPartnership?

That the organizational participants vehemently avoided discussion of politics and government does not mean that none of the organizations took initiatives to collaborate with the government. Indeed, 17 organizations (out of 41) that my respondents belonged to in my sample did. The decision to collaborate with the government, however, was not initiated by the already politically interested and efficacious women in the organizations. Instead, the financial and organizational insecurity of newer organizations was the key. With the

passage of the NPO Law, it became easier for citizens to organize such organizations and obtain legal status resulting in the number of NPOs with legal status to increase rapidly after 1998. The rapid increase in the NPOs however could cause competition between organizations. Organizations such as these can be organized to pursue a primary cause. Yet, once an organization is established, organizational maintenance often becomes one of the priorities (Weber 1946). No matter how valuable their goals are, without sound revenue sources, the organizations cannot sustain themselves. Indeed one of the top priorities that the participants of the current study listed was to find revenue sources. NPO-Government partnership projects were attractive since they could lead to an increase in the organizations' revenue sources in two ways. First, it can engage in partnership projects with government and establish some sense of legitimacy in the community. Second, some projects come with compensations.

Takiko, a 55-year old founder of a NPO to deliver services to senior citizens expressed the difficulty that her organizations had in raising money. Her organization was one of the many social service NPOs that were established after the Long-Term Care Service Act went into effect in 2000. As discussed, before the law went into effect, institutions that could deliver in-home-care services were limited to only a small number of institutions that were designated by local governments (Campbell and Ikegami 2000). With the new law it now was possible for private, small organizations such as

citizen-led, community-based NPOs to do so. However since a large number of such NPOs were established around the same time, the competition among them was severe. Takiko stated that partnership with the government became an attractive method to enhance legitimacy in the community, hence to win the competition. Her statement is compatible with the finding by the Cabinet Office. According to the surveys on randomly selected 1,019 NPOs with legal status, 60% of them responded that the participation in partnership project increased the organization's publicity (Cabinet Office 2006). The need for funding was not a unique issue for service delivery groups such as elderly care service NPOs. Advocacy and mixed NPO members also addressed their concern for raising revenues.

Miki, a 28-year old who organized NPO to promote civic activities with other young people also discussed the necessity for funding. In the same year they established the organization, they applied for an outsourced project by the city, which to their surprise they won. Under the contract, they were given office space in city within the city hall. They received not only the free office space but the payment from the city turned out to be a very significant part of their revenues. According to their budgetary report in 2005, which was the first year the organization was active for a full year, 88.8% of the revenue came from the payment by the city for the project.<sup>11</sup> The revenues from membership fees and donations were limited to \$880 and \$210, respectively. Miki

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<sup>11</sup>In 2005, they raised about 5.5 million yen (about \$55,000). Of which, around 4.9 million yen (about \$49,000) was from payment by the city for the outsourced project.

stated that even though it was still tough to collect donations, she felt that her organization was more recognized due to the partnership project and donations for 2007 increased to \$1,400. Moreover, they opened a community café where neighbors could network and engage in community activities. That project took off well and generated over \$59,000 in 2007 alone. Without the partnership project, Miki did not believe that the café could have been such a success.

Another example was Keiko, a poet who was the leader of a NPO that provided a café space where day-laborers and young artists could mingle. She first established the NPO in 2002 when she found out the city was providing a free office space with paid utilities for art groups in the community. In exchange of the free office space the NPOs were asked to participate in various city-planned art projects as well as launch workshops and lectures for the residents. Having been eager to become economically independent as a poet, she grabbed the opportunity. She recalled that she did not have much of a plan at the time. She thought having a free office would help kick start her career as a poet. She stated:

*Much of philanthropy came afterwards. I hesitate to say but my own interest was first. Then later by talking to other NPO leaders and being part of the projects, I realized that it was my duty to actually get involved in philanthropic work since the opportunity was given by taxpayers' money.*

The newer NPOs that were established after 1998 were in need of resources due to their relatively newness to the industry or the community and the competition imposed by

the growing number of NPOs due to the 1998 law. In comparison, NPOs that were established long before the 1998 law seemed to find no need of taking up new projects with the government unless the projects would well represent what their organizations stood for. Many of the older organizations only had one or two face projects that they carried at a time which that organization was known for doing. Yuma, a 43-year old volunteer worker for a NPO that helped patients and their families in hospitals explained when she was asked why her organization had not taken part in any partnership project with a government:

*Well, right now, we do not have any means to carry additional projects. Many of our volunteers also have jobs. An additional project will be burden to them. Even though our activities seem to be limiting, this (helping patients and their families in hospitals) requires a lot of patients, skills and time. We are afraid that additional projects will leave our current projects halfway dedicated.*

The organization for which Yuma volunteered had been active in the community over ten years before the NPO law went into effect. Yuma was not a member when the organization was first established, but she shared the story that she heard from the original members.

The NPO Law certainly made it easier for NPOs to be recognized. Before the law, I heard it was very difficult for volunteers to be entrusted. Once NPOs are widely recognized in the society, our activities became much easier. Yet, with all the difficulties before the law, our organization had survived.

So our founders did not see the reason to apply for legal status at the point. The same can be said to a partnership project.

Out of 17 partnership NPOs in my study, 11 (64.5%) were established less than ten years prior to the time of the interviews, while only 25.0% of the non-partnership NPOs were less than 10 years old, suggesting establishment of partnership relationships with local governments was not initiated by the already politically interested women in the organizations.

## Partnership Experiences

### Competition and Discretion

When government seeks partnership projects with NPOs such as co-hosting events or projects, outsourcing government tasks, and granting money to implement NPO projects, it advertises such opportunities on government websites, in voluntary centers, and on the Osaka NPO Information Net.

Projects are often roughly defined, and applicant NPOs determine the contents of the projects using their strength and expertise. This model of choosing partner NPOs and giving discretion to NPOs over the content of programs seems to empower women for at least two reasons. First, women often lack such opportunities to pursue a project as planners or initiators in society. Most of the women in the study (both partnership NPOs and non-partnership NPOs) reported

frustration with their roles outside the organizations. Older housewives with grown up children could no longer satisfy their desire to be of some assistance for others at home. In the organizations they could finally find themselves needed again. Younger women with jobs joined the NPOs to compensate for their frustration with lack of responsibilities given at work. Many of these women were highly educated. Indeed, among 20 single women in the study, 13 had college degrees (65%). Among these 13, only two of them were employed as a regular worker (15.4%). As much as 84.6% of college educated single women in my sample were either not employed at all or worked as non-regular workers. Using their words, partnership projects were where they could feel “as responsible as men” or “as important as men.” Their original motivation to join the organizations, that is social recognition, is finally achieved.

Second, discretions given to NPOs create information asymmetry between NPOs and government officials. This in turn facilitates government officials’ reliance on NPO expertise. Government officials are perceived by NPO members as administrators and facilitators rather than as experts. This is manifested in the difference in frequency/nature of contacts with government officials among partnership and non-partnership NPO members. Among 25 women in partnership NPOs, all of them had some interaction with government officials while only 27% of those in non-partnership NPOs did. Contacts between government officials and 92% of women in partnership-NPOs were based on mutual dependence. The

women initiated contacts when they need administrative help and government officials initiated contacts to seek expert knowledge from the members. Only 2 women (out of 37, 5.4%) in non-partnership NPOs had such contacts. The rest of those from non-partnership NPOs who had some kind of contact (8 of 32, 21.6%) reported that government officials had contacted them only when they needed to disseminate administrative information.

### Personalized Informal Relationships

The frequent contacts between government officials and the women established personalized and informal relationships between them. One indicator of such relationships is that many partnership participants referred to particular government officials by name (e.g. Yamada-san) when discussing their partnership experiences or views on politics/government. Indeed, out of 25 partnership participants, nine of them (36.0 %) referred to particular officials by name at least once during the interview. On the other hand, only 2 out of the 37 (5.4%) non-partnership participants did so. Thus, the participants in partnership projects seem to have developed close relationships with government officials and these close relationships seem to have been encouraged by the actions of the government officials. The participants reported that it was not uncommon for government officials to stop by their organizations to just socialize or to come to organizational events with their family members.

Women's lives are often more embedded in family and community than men's, and women are more likely to have and utilize informal networks they develop through communication with family members and community residents (Lowndes, 2004; Warr, 2006). The personalized relationships developed through partnership experiences within the organizations seemed to help break the perception of government as a monstrous, hierarchical, and impersonal institution. The women in the NPOs had not had much exposure to such institutions and felt intimidated by them.

Noriko, a 35-year old housewife in non-partnership NPO said:

*Government is just large and inflexible. We citizens do not know what they are about to do. We spend every day worrying about everyday things such as nursing of parents, safety of community, and how we sustain ourselves with the little money we have. Government is full of important people, not like us.*

Michie, a 45-year old housewife in non-partnership NPO said:

*Citizens have our own lives in community. In community, we help each other, and it is just natural thing. There is nothing like who is more respected and high-ranking, something like that. We connect as people. But when it comes to government, the ranking matters. It is about power; who has more power and who does not. The nature of connecting and communication is very different from what we know here. This is just how I feel. They are far away from our lives.*

They remained in private, isolated spheres as wives and mothers. When they entered the workforce, many of them physically or emotionally withdrew from the impersonal nature of the non-private relationship. Lack of responsibilities given to them at work may play a role here, and this reflects the current Japanese labor market reality for women. According to the Cabinet Office's report in 2008, 53% of all female workers are non-regular workers and women account for 69% of all the non-regular workers. Non regular workers often work on a contract basis and there is a slim chance for promotion. Therefore, it is no surprise that a significant portion of my employed participants were non-regular workers.<sup>12</sup> Only two out of 19 (10.5%) married women with jobs and two out of 16 (12.5%) of single women with jobs were employed as fulltime workers. As much as 89.5 % of married women with jobs and 87.5% single women with jobs in my sample were non-regular workers. When asked about why and when she began volunteering, Shizuka, a 32-year woman responded:

*It was four years ago. I had a job, but it did not inspire me. I did the same thing every day and I always felt that I was expendable. You know, after all, employers do not expect much out of a woman. What worse was I was a haken (non-regular, dispatch worker). So I looked for some place where people would appreciate me.*

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<sup>12</sup> According to the local government official in Osaka (interview, March 28th, 2008), there are four types of government-NPO partnership. These are (1) invitation of NPO members to government committees, (2) cohosting events, (3) outsourcing government tasks to NPOs, and (4) grants. They were websites of Osaka NPO Information Net, the Cabinet Office, and volunteer centers of each municipality.

Takako, a 40-year old volunteer from a partnership NPO said:

*I do data entry all day long. I go in before nine, then sit in front of a computer. I rarely talk to anyone. Nobody expects me to work overtime. Not much skill is needed. At first, I thought if I improve my skill, things would change, but after a while, I gave up. When I see people getting promotion or are recognized by bosses, I occasionally feel pain, but this is the reality.*

The participants were fond of their NPOs not only because they provided a place where their inputs were recognized and appreciated, but also because they allowed close personal relationships between the tight-knit members. The style of relationship and communication is based on the communication styles they used in their private spheres. When the participants did not have any personalized relationships with government officials, the government remained a hierarchical, remote, and impersonal institution, one which they did not know how to trust. Having a more familiar relationship with them, the women could feel that government and politics were closer to home.

### Seeing a Large Picture

Scholars of Japanese women often identify them as housewives (See LeBlanc 1999; Noguchi, 1992; Takeda, 2006). It is true that many of the participants in my study identified themselves as “housewives.” Among 62 women in my sample, 42 women (67.7%) were married and 20 (32.3%) were single. Among the 42 married women, 19 of them had a job (45.2% of

the married women). Among the 42 married women, 32 women (76.2% of the married women, and 51.6% of all the women in the sample) identified themselves as "housewives." This very "housewife" identity seemed to unite some women within organizations and prevented them from discussing politics from fear of breaking the inclusiveness of the organizations as discussed above. LeBlanc (1999) also found that since the women relied heavily on their housewife identity, instead of them evolving to become more generalist in the process of politicization, those who were not able to commit themselves to being fulltime housewives dropped out. This in turn prevented full-fledged politicization of the women through organizational activities. In my study, partnership NPOs seem to have provided the women with the opportunity to overcome this over-identification of themselves as housewives.

During and after participation in partnership projects, the experienced partnership NPOs became resources for other NPOs that sought their own partnership projects. They also became resources for NPOs and governments that sought to improve the NPO-government partnership environment in Osaka. They were invited to lecture at other NPOs and to hold workshops in multiple cities on how to make partnership projects successful. Their experiences in talking to members from various NPOs across issues and geographical areas helped them see larger implications of their immediate activities. Mayuko, leader of the NPO that participated in a partnership project with the city government to implement

gender-free education in public school, and Akiko, who participated in an environmental workshop project, succinctly summarized the process.

*I tell them my experience in partnership, but they have more to offer me because I learn a great deal from them. And a lot of things started to appear connected. We volunteer tend to focus on one particular issue. And we do not see the larger picture. But I begin to think it comes back to the issue of government and citizens' task sharing... I think what we do is part of politics, isn't it? It is about what we do everyday and how we share powers with others in determining things that affect our daily lives, including government. (Mayuko, 50-years old)*

*I had never thought that what I did was political. But as I went around these workshops and talked to people, I began to feel that maybe it was. Umm, I think civic participation can be political because essentially what we do in these organizations affect people's lives. (Akiko 53-years old)*

Moreover, after successfully carrying out one or more projects, the NPOs established a very close relationship with, and earned the trust of, government officials who valued their expert knowledge. That was when the NPOs started to be invited to committees when the government needed their expertise.

In the study, there were ten NPOs that were invited to sit on government committees. As many as 8 of these women had previous experience in partnerships with the government. Sharing their experiences through informal networks with other NPOs and sitting on committees dealing with possible

ordinances and the implementation of policies seemed to help the women become aware of issues beyond their neighborhood.

The women who participated in partnership programs, especially those who were invited to committees, now took dual roles. On one hand, they were volunteers in their NPOs, and on the other hand, they were government side players. Tomiko, a 46-year-old volunteer for the NPO that provided activities to protect the environment, was invited to the committee to implement a nature protection project and she was placed in charge of coordinating the NPOs that took part in the project. She was the liaison between the NPOs and the government. When explaining her experiences, she said:

*I think as a government official when I talk to NPOs, and I think as a volunteer member of an NPO when I discuss stuffs with the government officials. I know how NPOs think because that is what I do all the time. But putting myself in other's shoe was eye-opening. I started to think about accountability, budget, and paperwork.*

She continued:

*When NPOs have ideas, we tend to want things right then. When the government does not respond quickly, we think that they do not care about ordinary people. It never occurs to us that the government has to be fair, produce some sort of results, has a limited budget, and records everything for future reference. That NPOs do not think about these things became clearer to me since now I had to represent the government as well. I think it was good because I was like that too. I got to know that it is not as easy as we all wish.*

Through informal networks with other NPOs, their information and knowledge on governments was exchanged across issues and geographical areas. Without these exchanges of knowledge, interaction between government officials and NPO members were confined to focus exclusively on particular projects, groups, or issues. Yet by communicating with other NPOs, learning from each other's experiences, and building trust among peer NPOs, interactions began to have a more public meaning. In other words, without horizontal networks and trusting relationships between NPOs, they might have just focused on benefiting their own organizations and people they are directly serving to. By sharing their experiences, female NPO members began to see a larger implication of their activities and governmental roles in society.

Thus, participants in NPO-government partnership projects began to view politics as a process through which different actors in society come together to achieve common public good instead of as a power struggle among political parties pursuing their own self-interests. Moreover, they perceive that what they do is part of the political process. Encouraged by their participation in the process, some came to feel competent enough in political processes, competent enough to even think about running for office.

## Conclusion and Notes for Future Studies

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with women in NPOs revealed a dynamic process of politicization in NPOs. Participation in partnership projects with local governments increased the participants' opportunities to interact with government officials. Moreover, the interactions with government officials established through partnership projects were those of mutual dependence and were informal in nature. Interestingly, disadvantaged positions of NPOs and women in Japanese society mutually reinforced the possibility of the politicization of women. Lack of resources and increased competition pushed newly established NPOs to get involved in partnership projects. Confronted with a lack of opportunities outside NPOs, women in these NPOs took advantage of such opportunities within the organizations and became aware of their accomplishments and power.

These findings encourage us to continue our study of NPOs and their effects on the politicization of women in Japan in the future. Sixteen years after the Great Hanshin Earthquake, Japan was again hit by an unprecedentedly large earthquake, and we are witnessing increase in volunteers in the country again. We must ask whether an increase in women's status in society diverts women from NPOs, and whether other agents of politicization, such as employment and political parties, which have been associated with men's politicization, will replace NPOs. Moreover, when NPO-

government partnerships take roots, continued partnership may increase the formalization and professionalization of NPOs, which may deprive women in these organizations of opportunities that are currently seen, due to division of labor. In any case, those who study women's empowerment, Japanese women, and civil society should take note of the effects of NPO-partnership projects in the future.

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