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On a Personal Note

This was not my first visit to Japan. I have made several, including one over 20 years ago, when a League of Women Voters delegation was invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to learn about Japan, particularly its economy and bilateral relationships with the United States. I did learn a great deal. Moreover, I became an inveterate observer of Japan, and was delighted by the opportunity to return afforded by the Japan-US Women Leaders Dialogue.

One of the main lessons of my earlier visits proved itself again in the course of the Dialogue: The more I learn about Japan at first hand, the more I become aware of how little I really know.

Take a recent personal experience I had, for example. I bought myself a *yukata*. Having noticed that the *yukata* provided in the hotels where we stayed were "one-size-fits-all," I bought a handsome one in the Daiwa Department Store in Kanazawa without bothering to unfold it. When I did so, on our return to Tokyo, it unfolded . . . and unfolded . . . and unfolded. I discovered that there are, indeed, different size *yukata*, and I had purchased the one that fits sumo champions.

Wary as I usually am of letting preconceptions or first impressions inform my judgement, I had done so, and was reminded how poor the fit could be between assumptions and reality in Japan.

Citizen Participation

A less frivolous example—in fact, one that was close to the purpose of the Dialogue—was my inability to find a fit between what I saw, heard, and learned in Japan and what I know, believe, and have experienced with regard to citizen participation—the aspect of American life I helped represent in the Dialogue because of my background in the nonpartisan political activity of the League of Women Voters.

Perhaps Americans abroad should leave terms like "citizen participation" at home, loaded as they are for us with meaning derived from the history of Western political philosophy and the frontier, reform movements, the US Constitution, and a system

of government that not only allows for, but has institutionalized, a role for nonpartisan political organizations and influence.

I often felt when we were talking about citizen participation during the Dialogue that we were speaking a language that could not be translated. What frustrated me when I was describing the League of Women Voters in the Dialogue at the Alternative Lives Center in Yokohama wasn't the seven and a half minutes I had to do it in. (That's either too much or too little time to explain the purposes, structure, and operations of the League to someone born and bred in the United States!) What was frustrating was the sense that what I was saying wasn't connecting at all to the interests and needs or the situation of the Japanese women there, not even to the representative of the Alice Center, many of whose activities in assisting citizen activists are similar to the League's. By the same token, I had a hard time relating the polite advocacy she described to what's considered effective action to influence government in the United States.

Such gentle persuasion would not work in the United States. Nor did it work for the next speaker and colleagues from allied groups in seven cities. When their efforts to secure a ban on synthetic detergents were brushed off by local government, they decided they had to join the system to lick it. So they formed the Kanagawa Network party and elected her—and other women among them—to the Prefectural Assembly.

Perhaps the most telling illustration of the difference in Japanese and US understanding of the role and value of citizen participation was the process for securing public input on the proposed use of an important piece of public land in Kanazawa. Members of the public, we were told, would have a chance to comment *after* the city government had made its decision and formulated its land use plan, so that they—the citizens—would have something to react to. In the United States, there would be screams of a scandal and organized protests. In Kanazawa . . . the Mayor's longterm incumbency speaks for itself. But governments in the United States and Japan have their grassroots in very different soil.

Obstacles to NGO Development

The role of citizen activism is seen as an inherent and useful, if sometimes disruptive, part of governance in the United States. In Japan, according to what we observed, nonpartisan political participation seems to have a marginal presence and effect, which is not surprising in a country where conformity, respect for position, and the absence of confrontation are fundamentals.

Add to this context the practical difficulty of raising money faced by all Japanese NGOs due to extremely stringent conditions for tax deductible status, and it was easy for us US women to understand why politically oriented NGOs seemed so anemic and sparse compared to what we're used to.

A big piece of the NGO puzzle fell into place for us when Tadashi Yamamoto pointed out that, until recently, citizen participation in Japan has been viewed as

a largely left-wing phenomenon. It made sense, then, that references to environmentalism were frequently linked to mention of the antinuclear movement; and almost all the women we met who are engaged in environmental activities eschewed the environmentalist label and identified themselves with specific activities such as recycling, waste reduction, reclamation, or saving the rainforests. Most of the stories of political activism we heard were about “anti-establishment” actions, action in opposition to something planned by the government—military bases, airport expansion, nuclear facilities, participation in UN peacekeeping. There were only a few stories of successful government/NGO cooperation, such as the public-private partnerships at work in the Yokohama Forum and AMIKAS in Fukuoka. Granted, in politics it’s always easier to oppose a policy or program than to promote one. (Lobbying in the US Congress is a clear case in point.) Nevertheless, it’s harder to be a political activist in Japan. It’s clearly harder for NGOs to get a hearing, make proposals, and forge working relationships with elected representatives or administrative officials.

Questions

Given the obstacles faced by political NGOs, is it realistic to surmise that citizen participation has emerged from its left-wing shadow and is becoming respectable? And if it does, in time, earn respectability, will it have to be at the cost of past or potential effectiveness?

In either case, is there a special role for women as agents of change? Women have already changed Japanese society to the extent that recently there has been a gradual, inexorable redefinition of roles and improvement in the status of women. Are they now better able than men to foster “internationalization,” or opening up of Japan, because they are less circumscribed by jobs or position? Or do they have just as much to lose in terms of their own jobs or position . . . or those of their husbands? And don’t they still face tremendous odds as a force to be reckoned with in the male-dominated arena of public discourse?

The only power strong enough to nudge the reigning consensus of the LDP/bureaucracy/business, we were frequently told, is *gaiatsu*, or pressure from the outside by foreign governments or public opinion. It’s a lever that even the “grass-roots” recognize and use, to wit, the letters sent by women in Kanazawa to members of the US Congress protesting passage of the Japanese ship bringing plutonium from France. Although no one in the Dialogue mentioned the possibility that *gaiatsu* can be a double-edged sword, isn’t it capable of causing a nationalistic reaction to foreign pressures seen as “Japan bashing?” Might it not cause a turning inward, rather than toward “internationalization?” Isn’t *gaiatsu* too dangerous and unreliable to serve as Japan’s principal agent for change?

My last question is the one that haunted me throughout our dialogues, and still does. Is the whole subject of promoting citizen participation a timely product of widespread unhappiness with the status quo in Japan? Or, if the apparent frailty

and paucity of NGOs in Japan is due to the fact that the Japanese are generally satisfied with government, the way it's doing things, and the system in general, was citizen participation a "straw man" in our dialogue? Where does it go from here?

Certainties

While my view of citizen participation in Japan was colored by the strictly US brand of nonpartisan political activity I've practiced, I had no trouble seeing and recognizing the quality of the women in Tokyo, Yokohama, Fukuoka, and Kanazawa with whom we met. They represented a variety of backgrounds and occupations, and ranged from the enterprising and inventive to the sophisticated and established—from the grassroots volunteer organizing activities with a group of neighbors to the top tier of prominent women officials, executives, and academics; from those just starting something to those at the height of their careers. They were intelligent, talented, purposeful, energetic, and enjoyable. They were the kind of women I'd want to recruit and like to work with.

Our Japanese host organization, the Japan Center for International Exchange, did a superb job of selecting host organizations in the four cities we visited, and those organizations, in turn, assembled impressive women leaders in their respective programs.

Everything about the Dialogue was first rate. The itinerary and local agendas were beautifully planned and executed with unbelievable efficiency. We US women leaders were treated graciously and attentively by people who (amazingly) always seemed to be in good spirits.

Thanks to JCIE, the Center for Global Partnership, and those wonderful Japanese women leaders, I had a great time, and I learned a lot. (Just before leaving Tokyo I even bought myself a *yukata* that's a perfect fit.)

I've concluded, after rereading my notes and thinking about what to say in this report, that the Dialogue raised at least as many questions in my mind as it has answered. My preconceptions were, indeed, overtaken by new ideas in the Japan-US Women Leaders Dialogue, a voyage of discovery.