

Women's Empowerment in Communities

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Abstract

We explore the process of women's empowerment in their communities. In Japan, approximately 400 gender equality promotion centers have been installed where women can learn problem-solving techniques. In addition, approximately 15,000 kominkan (community learning centers) have been installed across the country, and these provide women with education programs in their communities. Many types of programs have been initiated to empower women, depending on the needs of the community. Kominkan centers are used for disaster prevention activities, but they are now also used to strengthen women's management skills. We analyze a typical program provided by gender equality promotion centers and kominkan centers. These programs train women who can learn from one another and take action by recruiting women and then continuously responding to their everyday lives.

Keywords: Community learning centers, promotion of gender equality, disaster prevention activities

In this paper, we introduce initiatives taken by communities for women's empowerment. The concept of community is a basic unit for engaging in everyday life and refers to a regional scope that is restricted to being within a municipality. For example, this unit would include an area structured by a neighborhood council organized autonomously by residents for local self-governance, as well as school districts, to which elementary and middle schools are allotted for each residential area. Even a simple term such as community can have an extremely varied definition in terms of the area it signifies.

How many women leaders are there in a community? Here, we will use members of the local government assembly as an example. Of the total 2,668 assembly members in

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Metropolis and districts, each of which is a wide area, the number of women assembly members is merely 303, only 11.4% of the total number of members (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2020). In a municipal assembly, which represents a basic community, the number of women among the total 29,762 members is 4,337(14.6%). Moreover, the neighborhood council, which is organized autonomously by residents, is an organization that is closely connected to everyday life. Of the 237,309 neighborhood council presidents across Japan, only 14,408 are women, a surprisingly low 6.1% (Cabinet Office, 2020).

Women represent more than half of the Japanese population. Despite this, however, the basic statistics provided that not enough women are in community leadership roles. To increase the number of women leaders in communities, a bottom-up approach, that is, women's empowerment seems to be needed instead of simply promoting the leadership of a few outstanding women. Thus far, Japanese women have not been expected to speak out actively in front of others and take action. The approval of others could support women and enhance their confidence. By gaining confidence, more women will speak up and take action in their daily lives to assert themselves. This will then provide opportunities in which women can actively speak up and take action to bring about change.

1 Where Do Women Empower Themselves in Communities?

As mentioned previously, Japanese communities make it difficult for women to attain leadership positions. Women not only have difficulty in finding opportunities but also have longer working hours, along with housework and childcare, than do men. In addition, they are limited by being perceived as unfeminine when they actively speak out in front of others and by the perceptions that it is a women's role to support men, women have difficulties assuming responsibility, and an organization's leadership should be assumed by the oldest man. These biases are commonly shared by both women and men in Japan (Ehara, 2001). Therefore, it is difficult for women to become leaders without an intentional intervention to help women gain experience and attain confidence, that is, women's empowerment. Examples of such opportunities for women's empowerment could be found from the programs as intentional intervention provided by the government and private organizations.

(1) Center for the Promotion of Gender Equality

The Center for the Promotion of Gender Equality is a general term given to facilities that have been historically established by government measures and programs. The names of individual centers differ depending on the region and facility. However, these centers are fundamentally understood to be comprehensive facilities established for the realization of a

gender-equal society (Shimomura et al., 2005).

According to the Cabinet Office (2020) that controls these centers, as of April 1, 2020, 45 of these facilities had been established by the prefectural government, 20 facilities by metropolitan governments (government-ordinance designated cities), and 296 facilities have been established by other municipalities. In total, 361 facilities have been established as centers for the promotion of gender equality (Cabinet Office, 2020).

Centers for the Promotion of Gender Equality carry out a comprehensive agenda related to gender issues. In general, these centers have various functions including providing individual consultations (i.e., domestic violence and life counseling/assistance), establishing designated libraries on gender and providing information, providing facilities for citizens' groups and assisting organizations autonomously, and hosting sponsored lectures on gender equality (Cabinet Office, 2015).

The fields of business in which centers for the promotion of gender equality engage vary widely. For example, in the Japan Nationwide Centers for Promotion of Gender Program Database, constructed by the National Women's Education Center of Japan (NVEC), the programs in which centers engage are categorized into 17 fields (e.g., family issues, women's rights, mind and body health, assistance with employment/career/challenges, and self-expression/cultural activities [Tominaga & Ikegaya, 2017]). Regarding leadership development, there were 92 sponsored programs held in FY2017 according to Women's Facilities Database by NVEC. Specifically, these programs included holding courses for developing community leaders, seminars that encouraged women's participation in politics, and re-employment and company startup programs for women.

(2) *Kominkan* (Community Learning Centers)

The other public institution that encourages women's empowerment is the *kominkan*, which is a community learning center (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and the Technology and Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, 2008), social education facility refers to an education field that includes adult education, community education, and non-formal education held outside of schools and aimed at all ages according to the Social Education Law (1947). Social education is "a systematic educational activity (including physical education and recreational activities) conducted mainly among teenagers and adults and based on the school education method, excluding the educational activities conducted as part of the school curriculum" (The Social Education Law, 1947, Article 2).

The *kominkan*, which plays a central role in social education, is a facility established by the municipality. It encourages residents to gather, learn, and make connections, and make contributions to human and community development (National *Kominkan* Association, 2017). The *kominkan*'s objective is "to perform various duties related to education,

academics, and culture in line with actual everyday life for the residents of the municipality and other specified regions,” and “to improve the culture and education of residents, promote their health, and refine their tastes to promote civilized life and make advancement in social welfare” (The Social Education Law, 1947, Article 20). One characteristic of the *kominkan* is the comprehensiveness in which the issues people experience in their daily lives are targeted.

The statistics associated with community centers underscore their ubiquity. Nationwide, there are approximately 14,281 centers, which is fewer than the nation's approximately 19,892 elementary schools, but more than the approximately 10,270 middle schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2018a; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2018b). As the *kominkan* is within the living sphere of local residents, it has become part of people's lives as a facility that is close by and easy to access (National *Kominkan* Association, 2017). Community-based *kominkans* have approximately 70 years of history. Recently, they have become known as the Community Learning Centers model, which is the basis of non-formal education as advocated by UNESCO. As such, many parties involved in social education, mainly from Asia, have visited *kominkans* for exchanges.

To sum up, communities have several facilities that support women's empowerment. The centers for the promotion of gender equality play a significant role as they offer specialized support to women. In addition, there are 46 times more *kominkan* than centers for the promotion of gender equality, which makes them much more available to deal with issues that women encounter in their daily lives. However, some areas have only a center for the promotion of gender equality without a *kominkan*, and some areas have *kominkans* and no centers for the promotion of gender equality. Although there are differences among programs depending on the communities in which they are based, these facilities are rooted in these communities, contribute to women's empowerment within the community, and create a community in which women can engage actively.

2 How Do Women Empower Themselves in the Community?

Two learning programs are presented as case examples of how women's empowerment is set as a learning topic.

(1) Community Disaster Prevention Learning Program Intended to Empower Women

The first case example is a community disaster prevention program. Japan is a country in which natural disasters frequently occur, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, and cyclones. As such, reaction training for natural disasters is a significant issue for

communities in Japan. However, neighborhood council leaders are men-centric, making women's empowerment a pressing issue in community disaster prevention. Here, the creation of a secure evacuation shelter program, sponsored by Aomori Prefecture, incorporating the perspectives of gender equality, will be discussed.

The impetus for designing this program was the Great Tohoku Earthquake that occurred on March 11, 2011. Over 15,000 people died, making it the worst natural disaster in post-war Japan. Moreover, the number of deaths post-disaster reached 3,700 people (Reconstruction Agency, 2018), and many of them were seemingly caused by mental and physical illnesses at the evacuation shelters (Reconstruction Agency, 2012).

Why did so many people die after evacuating due to the earthquakes and tsunami waves? Many were forced to endure inferior evacuation shelters that did not provide for individual needs (Arai, 2012). Physical, economic, and social reasons were viewed as trivial, and because the evacuation shelters were managed solely from men's perspectives, they did not consider diversity (Arai, 2012). In a major disaster, living in an evacuation shelter can be for the long term. As both administrative organs and their employees were affected by the disaster, and as the issues to tackle accumulated, the shelter residents were asked to manage the evacuation shelters. The big questions that arose were how the evacuation shelters were to be managed so that everyone could feel safe and the most vulnerable were cared for (i.e., children, older people, disabled people, foreigners, and women). This became an issue directly related to the life and death of the people affected by the disaster.

Aomori Prefecture is located in the northern end of Tohoku region. Interviews on the situation at the evacuation shelter were conducted with the municipalities that were affected within Aomori Prefecture, and they revealed that there were differences in the needs between genders. Considerations that encompassed both men and women did not take place (Aomori Affected Area Local Community Regeneration Assistance Program Execution Committee, 2016). The specific issues discovered there included men who were strangers changing and sleeping next to women without a partition; a mother who was unable to stay in the evacuation shelter due to her children crying at night; families that had a pet or small children who had to sleep in a car; women and children who could not go to the bathroom on their own because they were too afraid and refused to consume liquid; women who felt they needed to change their clothes underneath a blanket in the evacuation shelter due to the lack of changing rooms; women not being able to change their underwear as often as they would have liked due to lack of a private place to dry their underwear; women who encountered former abusive husbands at the evacuation shelter; a dearth of items that women needed (e.g., sanitary products, underwear, and baby food) and women finding it difficult to receive these items in front of other people; and the roles related to food distribution (e.g., preparing meals) were fixed as women's roles in the community. In various

scenes from the evacuation shelter, which could become long term, many women were exposed to anxiety, threats, and low self-esteem. The reason these situations occurred was attributed to the lack of women's perspectives and that the evacuation shelters were managed only from men's perspectives.

Based on this experience, after the earthquake disaster, the Aomori prefectural government and the Aomori Center for the Promotion of Gender Equality engaged in practical training for creating evacuation shelters in which people could feel safe, encompassing the perspective of gender equality for three years from 2013 to 2016. An evacuation shelter in which people can feel safe aims to reduce the number of future deaths related to natural disasters. Subsequently, this training focused on managing the evacuation shelter in accordance with the manual and involving participating residents in imagining a disaster situation. They also shared their wisdom concerning the needs and problems with no correct answers using limited material resources. They experienced the creation of an evacuation shelter through collaborative practice (Ojima, 2016). We will explore the practice sessions conducted in two municipalities within Aomori Prefecture in 2013, particularly the specific structure of the learning programs based on the publication by Aomori Affected Area Local Community Regeneration Assistance Program Execution Committee, consisting of public servants including the staff at Center for the Promotion of Gender Equality, members from the neighborhood council, and voluntary associations (Aomori Affected Area Local Community Regeneration Assistance Program Execution Committee, 2016).

The primary characteristic of this learning program was that, instead of residents participating in the program provided by the government, residential leaders from different positions organized an execution committee and participated as program providers. More specifically, the execution committee was organized with approximately 20 members, consisting of firefighters, nurses, midwives, dietary improvement instructors, welfare commissioners, parents still raising children, government employees from various agencies, and neighborhood council members. The local government and the Centers for the Promotion of Gender Equality repeatedly recruited as many women members as possible.

Once the execution committee was determined, the learning program was developed and conducted in three stages: 1) A preliminary workshop, 2) events in which residents could experience evacuation shelters, and 3) a post-event workshop to evaluate the experience (Aomori Affected Area Local Community Regeneration Assistance Program Execution Committee, 2016). The execution committee conducted some sessions of the preliminary workshop. At the workshop, the participants first learned how disaster-related deaths occur by learning about issues in the evacuation shelters during past disasters. Next, there was a group workshop to identify the resources that committee members could request from

their communities (e.g., human resources, organizations, activities, services, information, and financial/material resources) and weaknesses (things that became issues) in the community during the disaster. The participants discussed their request and weakness, and sought solutions with which they thought they could engage. Based on these outcomes, the execution committee planned for and prepared the evacuation experience event, which they held for local residents. Considerations were made during these workshops so that women committee members could participate easily, such as by providing daycare.

The event, at which local residents could experience the evacuation shelter, was conducted in conjunction with the annual disaster prevention training. Disaster prevention training involved residents engaging in evacuation behavior, presuming that an earthquake or tsunami waves had occurred, and this training is regularly held in many regions across Japan. In this learning program, the participants not only engaged in evacuation behavior training but also simulated life at the evacuation shelter, which would later become their living base. By doing so, this event aimed at discovering the assistance and needs required for managing evacuation shelters and encouraging residents to find ways to communicate better.

On the day of the evacuation training, over 100 residents congregated. Upon entry, the residents were instructed to fill out an evacuation shelter card on the basic details about gender and age of those evacuating, as well as details about those who would require assistance. After that, in a state of confusion, the following program was held in the place where many residents had gathered. We can introduce three examples here: the residents assembled a living space with cardboard boxes; another role-playing program involved dividing members between those who assisted older people and disabled people and those who received it; another program established a space for dealing with issues related to women (e.g., pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, periods, and menopause) and created a play area for children. Furthermore, an organization for managing the evacuation shelter was established, and roles were assigned.

After managing this event, the execution committee held several workshops to reflect on their experiences. In these sessions, the execution committee members presented their opinions based on their observations throughout the event, discussing how they would use the experiences in the community. Women execution committee members voiced their opinions, which included, “I noticed that I can feel more confident in being a woman,” “I realized that it was important to use the experience I had and that I could be more proactive without holding myself back,” and “I learned that it was important to think about the evacuation shelter from the perspective of women, who have accumulated experience in their daily lives, and to share my opinions.” (Ojima, 2016). In other words, the women learned through the program to be confident and express their opinions. As a result, these

experiences encouraged the women to empower themselves within the community.

Since 2013, the learning program focused on the evacuation shelter has been conducted by making improvements in line with the regional situation of various areas within Aomori Prefecture (Aomori Affected Area Local Community Regeneration Assistance Program Execution Committee, 2016). It has developed into different formats depending on the region, including programs that conduct evacuation shelter management run by local middle school students and residents working together, and events designed for experiencing evacuation shelters in which all leadership roles of evacuation shelter management, which are usually assigned to men, were assigned to women. Furthermore, we have two examples of the program: the food preparation team, which is usually assigned to women, was assigned only to men; a disaster prevention leader training course were held only for women.

From the perspective of women's empowerment in a community, this case suggests that women's empowerment could be a support for women's voicing their opinions within their community. That is because it is usually difficult for Japanese women to voice their opinions, and this is more difficult in rural communities (Fujii, 2011). Women voicing their opinions and increasing their confidence is deeply related to each other. Women's empowerment is, however, not limited to women only but is an issue of developing a community in which all of the people, including men, can express their opinions.

(2) Women's Courses at *Kominkans*

The next case example is a learning course only for women and focuses on the careers of individual women. In the following, we will examine the structure of learning program for women at *kominkan* with the clue of previous study by Ikegaya & Tominaga (Ikegaya & Tominaga, 2018).

The occupational careers of women in Japan are characterized by a temporary absence from work during childbirth and childcare. The number of co-working households increased to surpass that of women homemaker households by the early 1990s; currently, there are 11.29 million co-working households, while there are only 6.64 million women homemaker households, making this an irreversible situation (Cabinet Office, 2017) because of the economic situation, women's aspiration for paid-work, and changes in gender-role. Homemakers, who used to be synonymous with Japanese women, are on a continuous decline. On the other hand, the M-shaped curve, which represents women's labor force rate by age, has not yet been resolved, with about half of working women leaving their jobs after giving birth to their child according to the Annual Report on the State of the Formation of a Gender Equal Society and Policies to be Implemented to Promote the Formation of a Gender Equal Society (Cabinet Office, 2017).

Women who pose their occupational careers usually leave their workplaces and return to their community to raise their child (or children). These women experience a vague sense of concern and uncertainty about how to live their hectic, day-to-day lives. These concerns and uncertainties, for example, can include issues characteristic of women's lives and careers, such as whether to work again, what kind of household and child-caring one desires, and how to live as a person and as a woman (Kunitachi City *Kominkan* Citizen's University Seminar, 1973). Women's meeting other women in a similar situation within the community and discussing their opinions and future perspectives about ways of living are necessary for them to re-think how to live and cultivate their lives autonomously.

Kunitachi City, located in the western part of Tokyo, has conducted annual learning courses for women. These courses held by Kunitachi *Kominkan* have a long history; for example, a daycare was established within the *kominkan* to enable women to study, and the facility publishes records made by women on what they have learned. Kunitachi *Kominkan* has created many practices that have come to be known nationally (Kunitachi City *Kominkan* Citizen's University Seminar, 1973; Kunitachi *Kominkan* Daycare Issue Liaison Conference, 2014).

The latest learning program for women are generally held for two hours on weekday mornings, consisting of around 15 sessions. The participants, approximately 20, are women in their 20s to 50s, and Table 1 details the contents of one course.

Table 1. The structure of a women's course (Tominaga et al., 2013, p. 73)

	Content	Detail
1	Guidance	Welcome to the course
2	Past	History of women's learning as seen from past women and videos
3		Looking back on one's life so far
4		Discussing one's life so far
5	Present	Introduction to gender
6		Discussing gender topics close to you
7		Women's mental and physical health and its changes
8	Future	Thinking of life here onward (working)
9		Thinking of life here onward (being active in the community)
10		Thinking of life here onward (summary)
11	Preparation for independent management	Planning & Design 1
12		Planning & Design 2
13		Planning & Design 3
14		Starting an independent management group

This course is composed of three broad categories: the past, the present, and the future. In the past category, the attendees watch a documentary about women leaders of the community as an example of how women have lived their lives in Kunitachi City and discuss the video while looking back on their own life experiences. In the present category, the attendees contemplate gender issues and learn about the initiatives taken by the local government. Building upon this, in the future category, the participants express their thoughts about their futures and how they picture them. They listen to the accounts of those who have attempted to reconstruct their occupational careers, those who have engaged in community civic activities while being aware of present issues, and those who have experienced new beginnings and roles by using the *kominkan*. The attendees learn about options for their own futures as well.

A characteristic of women's courses in terms of management is that a lot of time is allotted to discussion among the course attendees, instead of simply listening to the lecturer. The attendees take turns in typing up the stories as records. Through a series of these courses, the attendees learn that other attendees have the same concerns and anxieties about the future and that some concerns and anxieties can be reduced by sharing them. Furthermore, by meeting women who are older than them and have had similar experiences, they learn how their seniors have been active in the paths they have chosen.

The other characteristic of women's courses is that attendees set up an independent group after completing the course, attaining what they would like to know or continue through their own strengths. For example, in the independent group set up after the completion of the 2013 course, the attendees proposed the topic "my relationship as a daughter with my mother" as something they would like to know more about. They held a course open to the general public in hopes that other women with similar concerns would join the course (Tominaga et al., 2013). Forming and managing a group with only women, and designing and managing the project, served as an experience for these women to learn how to manage projects through experiential learning to empower themselves.

This course served as an opportunity for each woman to re-think the way that they lived. Moreover, they discovered their goals and issues within the community through this course, working in various fields, for example, managing a women's group, promoting women's health, and supporting women's re-employment in their community after completing the course (Ikegaya & Tominaga, 2018). Continuously, there were more women who would like to learn from the women's courses in this region; these women are motivated to take the course after feeling admiration toward women who are their seniors who attended the women's course, or after having been directly recommended for the course (Ikegaya & Tominaga, 2018). This may have been a model for creating a community environment that

supports the development of women's empowerment to the present.

3 Conclusion

To reveal the initiatives of women's empowerment in communities, this paper focused on some facilities and programs within the community that promote the women's empowerment. The specific case examples introduced in this paper were learning programs for 20 members, and similar programs that focus on learning in communities are necessary to women's empowerment.

A community is a place where various people live together by supporting each other. Leaders are necessary for all aspects of Japanese life, but the community, the focus of this chapter, requires leadership in various formats. Instead of increasing leadership with a portion of outstanding women, lifting all women by employing a bottom-up method is required. Advancing all women using a bottom-up method will require creating an environment in which women can empower themselves. This is an issue involving women's empowerment at all levels of Japanese life, including the regional level. Future research regarding this issue could study models of how women's empowerment affects community life.

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