The collaboration between historians of Japanese women and those who focused on women’s and gender history in other areas of the world has been crucial for changing the conservative nature of historical studies in Japanese academia. The main focus of this article is on two benefits that the collaborative relationships of historians of women and gender as well as scholars in other disciplines have made possible: the establishment of the Gender History Association of Japan in 2004, and the project to effect change in secondary history education and textbooks. In spite of the bleak picture in Japan’s gender gap, as the Global Gender Gap Index of Japan demonstrates, it is important for one to understand the efforts made by historians of women and gender in Japan in making a difference in the field of history, and to promote a gender-equal society through collaborative activities nationally and internationally.

Japan is in a state of flux concerning women and their roles in society. To grasp the current social situation for Japanese women in general, and to compare it to other countries, the Global Gender Gap Report 2012 issued by the World Economic Forum, is a good place to begin. According to the Global Gender Gap Index, Japan is ranked 101st among 135 countries (The top five countries are Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Ireland, with the United States ranked twenty-second). The Global Gender Gap Index measures women’s participation in the following four areas: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment.

With one as the highest score, the Index takes the average of four scores from the above four areas. Japan’s average score is 0.6530 and the four scores of each area are 0.5756, 0.9869, 0.9791, and 0.0705, respectively. These scores indicate that Japanese women are doing fairly well in the categories of education and health, but doing poorly in the economic and political arenas.

Japanese women do seem to have fair entrance to education, but if we look deeper at the share of Japanese women in research fields and academic positions, one finds a totally different picture. According to the White Paper issued by Japan’s Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office in 2012, the ratio of women researchers to the total number of researchers still remains 13.8
percent and this number includes not only natural and engineering sciences but also social sciences and humanities. In 2007 the ratios of Japanese university women in the social sciences and humanities were 14.9 percent and 26.2 percent, according to the report titled “Analysis on Ratio of Women in Science in Japan.” In other words, the number of women who engage in higher education as teachers and produce knowledge as researchers in academia and research institutes, including those of private industry, is still low compared to the world standard: for example, in Latvia women make up 52.4 percent of researchers, in Russia 41.7 percent, in Iceland 41.0 percent, in the United Kingdom 37.9 percent, in the United States 34.3 percent, in Finland 31.4 percent, in France 26.9 percent, and in Korea 15.6 percent.

In spite of this bleak picture, I would like to illustrate the recent collaborative endeavors by historians of women and gender in Japan. I will include some of their organizational activities and look at some of the predicaments they face today. Although I do not know the exact number of women historians in Japan today, the historiographical discussion by an early modern historian of Japan, Hiroko Nagano, who is the founding member of the Gender History Association of Japan, is quite revealing in terms of historicizing the recent trend, so I would like to introduce some of her main discussion points.

Historical studies of Japanese women in Japan took quite a different path from historians in the United States. Before the second-wave feminist movement, women scholars from outside academia in Japan had already compiled a relatively rich tradition of historical study of Japanese women. The leading feminist sociologist Chizuko Ueno wrote, “The encounter of Japanese women’s history and feminism (i.e., the second-wave feminist movement) was an incompatible one,” because women’s history pre-existed second-wave feminism in the 1970s. Whereas the second wave was heavily influenced by women in the United States and Europe, independent Japanese scholars of women’s history, who tended to be Marxist-oriented with an emphasis on liberation, were rather indifferent to the second wave. Historical studies of Japanese women therefore did not flourish in Japanese academia along with the second-wave feminist movement as much as in U.S. academia. Sociology was instead the discipline in Japan that absorbed the impact of the second-wave feminist movement most in academia, not the history of women.

Japanese women scholars who studied abroad in Europe and the United States in the 1980s, including myself, had access to women’s studies and women’s history and brought back its fruits to Japanese academia. Their research topics related to U.S. and European history of women were more or less fairly received in Japanese academia and, generally speaking, they did not have to experience what women historians of Japan went through
especially in terms of academic employment. In other words, it seems that those scholars who specialize in European and U.S. history had a gateway to women’s history as a formal academic discipline under university conditions earlier than historians of Japanese women, partly because it is necessary and even mandatory for European and U.S. historians in Japan—both female and male—to keep up with European and U.S. academic trends, including women’s and gender history. It still is important to note that not only such distinguished independent scholars as Itsue Takamure produced substantial work on the history of Japanese women long before the end of World War II; laywomen also energetically engaged in local histories of Japanese women in the 1970s.8

According to Nagano, women historians in Japan who specialized in the history of Japanese women took more time to get into academia in the late twentieth century because in the field of Japanese history most scholars (the bulk of whom were men) were completely indifferent to research related to women’s history. Japanese sociologists and historians who specialized in women’s studies and women’s history of the United States and Europe were more likely to be able to get academic posts in the 1980s and 1990s. Nagano suggested that while historians who specialized in women’s history of the United States and Europe entered academia and started introducing international trends of women’s and gender history, historians of Japanese women had to contend with obstacles entering academia under a more disadvantageous environment.9

Those historians who concentrated on Japanese history had a more difficult time to gaining recognition for the study of women’s history as a legitimate topic in a formal academic setting, but interestingly enough they were the ones who played the leading role in organizing the Gender History Association of Japan (GHAJ). Some Japanese historians of women, including Nagano, actively initiated collaborative academic activities with historians of other such areas as Asia, Europe, and the United States. One activity was forming panels for the Berkshire Conferences by adopting transnational perspectives in their presentations. In fact, I was able to meet numerous Japanese historians of women outside the university at such international meetings as the Berkshire Conference, the International Federation for Research in Women’s History, and through the Fulbright Program and other scholarly exchanges, and to network with them in the United States and Europe. Although they faced obstacles in Japan, both independent historians and historians of standard disciplines within the university had been conducting research on Japanese women’s and gender-related issues and were quite active internationally. As a result, they were able to get to know those Japanese women scholars who specialized in European, U.S., Asian, African, and Latin American history, which, in fact, helped to collaborate in founding the GHAJ in later years.
The collaboration between historians of Japanese women and those who focused on women’s and gender history in other areas of the world has been extremely crucial for all involved in terms of making a difference and helping to change the conservative nature of historical studies in Japanese academia as a whole. The first example is the establishment of the Gender History Association of Japan in 2004. Its initial members counted around 330 women and men whose disciplines covered diverse fields. The part of its charter which articulated the purpose of the association, reads as follows:

As an interdisciplinary research organization, our members include scholars in various fields, including history, literature, linguistics, education, religion, thought, art, music, theater, economics, sociology, folklore, politics, law, and natural sciences, and our goal is to conduct comprehensive studies of gender in history by cooperating with one another across disciplinary boundaries. In other words, we, view gender as a key variable in history, attempting to understand the flexibility and characteristics of gender, including its mechanisms, from various disciplinary perspectives. At the same time, we consider it an important agenda to understand the structural relation between gender and other key concepts such as race, ethnicity, and class. \(^{10}\)

The association took the name of gender history but was open to all disciplines. By including diverse disciplines, it sought to “release gender history from the discipline called history” as well as to be “free from the constraints placed on the study of women’s history.” \(^{11}\) One of the constraints could simply mean that if a member’s historical research focused on topics too close to women’s history, she or he might have a difficult time obtaining an academic post and getting research funding, as well as appropriate recognition for one’s research. In other words, traditional scholars would not take them seriously or value their scholarship.

After the GHAJ was organized in 2004, it became much easier for women’s and gender historians across research areas to meet with each other and plan the interdisciplinary symposiums and panels for academic conferences. Those networking outcomes were diverse, but one example is the eight volumes of *The Series of Gender History* published in 2009–2011. \(^{12}\) The first of its kind in Japan, this eight-volume series covers gender history in most areas in the world and contains numerous chapters that can be categorized as women’s history. Most of the editors were quite active in the GHAJ, especially in its founding stage as board members, and they all shared the prime concern of making gender and women’s history legitimate fields. This became particularly important around 2005 when a so-called “gender-bashing” discourse became prevalent among the mass media and
some conservative politicians. Critics even advocated not using the term “gender” because they, oddly, argued that its definition was too ambiguous. At that time, the Japanese English term “gender-free” was commonly understood to mean “gender-bias free,” but the “gender-bashing” advocates twisted its meaning to imply that people are genderless, that is, people would be deprived of gender-specific cultures and spaces. For example, one fear they spread about the “gender-free” notion was that bathrooms would no longer be separate for women and men. Another unfounded fear they spread was that the Japanese cultural tradition celebrating girls’ and boys’ days would disappear.

Concerned about the growth of this kind of reactionary atmosphere, the board of the GHAJ issued the extremely timely position statement on August 15, 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II. It expressed the opinion as follows: “The GHAJ will not submit to some people who oppose the realization of a gender-equal society and attack the concept of gender and gender studies. By cooperating with gender studies-related academic organizations and institutions, the GHAJ will make further contributions to the promotion of scientific research and the future of human society.”

The second example of a collaborative endeavor that deserves special mention is the project to effect change in secondary history education and textbooks. Historians of women and gender are trying to grasp the deep-seated problems of history textbooks used in junior and senior high schools today from a perspective of women’s and gender history. Women are still invisible in history textbooks even in the twenty-first century, in spite of the substantial body of historical studies on women and gender. Understanding the deeply entrenched policies and their outcomes is indispensable to make changes in education. There are two cultural factors we need to take into consideration. One is that history is one of the subjects for the entrance examinations for university, and another is that the government maintains official curriculum guidelines and a textbook authorization system.

A controversy in 2006 revealed that quite a few competitive high schools did not offer some subjects, including world history, as required by the official curriculum guidelines. They instead focused on specific subjects that were more advantageous for university entrance examinations. A group of leading historians, including Daizaburo Yui, formed the Subcommittee for Education of Geography and History for High School in the Science Council of Japan. The subcommittee looked specifically at the ways in which history was taught in high schools. Japanese university entrance examinations emphasize the recall and regurgitation of facts, which has led to history being taught as a memorization-oriented subject for which high school students are forced to cram a lot of facts. They suggested that historians who teach at the university level work together to make guidelines for limiting key terms
necessary for university entrance examinations and to change the nature of history education from cramming to thinking. The members emphasized the significance of teaching what is interesting about history by cultivating students’ abilities to think for themselves, instead of memorizing a massive amount of historical dates and events.\(^{14}\)

Although this subcommittee had a couple of women scholars out of seventeen members and its “Opinions” included the terms women and gender two or three times in the sixty-five-page report, it did not point to the lack of women in history textbooks as historical figures nor the absence of female authors, both of which should have been seen as a deficit in the high school curriculum.

After World War II numerous controversies occurred over the way certain incidents were perceived and covered, or not covered, in history textbooks and this led to some international diplomatic issues as well as internal political problems.\(^{15}\) But there has been little groundswell in mainstream thought to question the present history textbooks from the perspective of gender and women’s history until 2009 when the symposium titled “Education of History from a Gender Perspective—From Textbooks to Subculture” was held by the Subcommittee on History Education and Gender, which was also under the auspices of the Science Council of Japan.\(^{16}\) Its panelists were all women historians and scholars from across many areas and disciplines and most of them were members or associate members of the Science Council of Japan. According to Nagano, the symposium was well received by the audience in hopes of making a difference in history education at the high school level. Some members of the subcommittee examined the present textbooks of world history and Japanese history, and others investigated history textbooks used in the United States and Germany today. They also looked at numerous subcultures including historical Manga for girls compared with that for boys, as well as museums and television period dramas.

As a result of the symposium, in terms of history textbooks for high schools, the historian Toshiko Himeoka, whose specialty is German history, argued that “Regarding gender we can certainly see signs of change in the writing of history textbooks,” specifically the inclusion of women from outside the circle of women rulers and we also observe some mention of research in new women’s and gender history. As a whole, however, there is a definite shortage of writings related to gender. Compared to history textbooks used in the United States we can see “a remarkable difference” between the two.\(^{17}\) Another important point Himeoka suggested is that the authors of history textbooks for high schools are predominantly male. We need to have more authors who could write history textbooks from the gender or women’s history perspective, and those historians are overwhelmingly female. As the historian Noriko Kurushima, whose specialty is Japa-
nese history, suggested in her chapter, the official guidelines for education need to be changed in order to revise history textbooks to include research in new women’s and gender history. More collaborative work with the former Subcommittee for Education of Geography and History for High School is expected to make the subject of history more meaningful as well as more interesting for high school students.

A Dilemma over Historicizing Women in Japan

I have been researching a pioneering educator, Umeko Tsuda, who established one of the historically significant women’s colleges in Japan. According to Noriko Kurushima, who surveyed Japanese history textbooks for high schools, Umeko Tsuda and Tsuda College (Joshi Eigaku Juku) are most frequently mentioned in the modern period section of Japanese history textbooks. The treatment of Umeko Tsuda in the social studies literature is revealing because it demonstrates some problematic issues.

In 1871, when the Japanese government sent fifty-eight students to the United States and Europe to study social, cultural, industrial, political, and religious conditions in the West to help build a modern Japan, there were five female students among them. Tsuda, the youngest at age six, was one of these first female students sent to the United States to study. After spending eleven years attending primary and secondary school and living with an American family, she returned to Japan in 1882 and taught English for several years. At the age of twenty-four she went back to the United States again to study at Bryn Mawr College for three years. In 1900, she founded Tsuda College as a private institution of higher education for women at a time when women were not allowed to enter universities.

I have noted that Umeko Tsuda was described not only in textbooks of Japanese history for high schools but also in textbooks for junior high and primary schools. She was chosen to be in the textbooks, basically, because she was the youngest government student sent abroad to absorb Western “civilization” and in later years she realized her own dream to found her own school. Some common characteristics of her coverage in the textbooks include the following: first, her description is extremely brief. Second, she is more likely to be introduced in a column and not in the body texts. Third, her picture is very frequently used to show how young and small she was. Finally, her most important idea, that higher education contributes to women’s economic independence, is rarely mentioned.

There is a dilemma when one writes about Umeko Tsuda in an easy-to-understand manner for such textbooks or even in biographical dictionaries. It is true that she had absorbed Western culture, learned the English language, and took advantage of what she gained while studying abroad to
start her own pioneering enterprise as a leading educator in Japan. By simply looking at her contributions, nonetheless, one might reach the erroneous conclusion that higher learning for women came from the West, specifically from the United States. This assumption overlooks the long tradition of women’s learning in Japan. As Nagano suggests, when formal higher education was linked with climbing social ladders in the modern Meiji era, women were completely excluded from the system of higher learning. But it is important to note that women did have access to learning before the modern period, because high culture “traditionally” shared feminine elements. In fact if you compare women’s informal and private education between Japan and the United States in the early nineteenth century, there was not a big gap. As the historian Martha Tocco suggested, “it is important to remember that in the early nineteenth century, the history of women’s education in both countries shared important common ground” although “in the Meiji period, Japanese women’s educational practices came more and more to be compared to American ones and to be measured against these in terms of the differences between the two systems.”

Referring to Orientalism by the theorist Edward Said, Tocco argued: “As Said noted of Western observers in a different context, many Americans resident in Japan in the late nineteenth century also ‘looked through’ Japanese women and men and saw in Japanese gender relations ‘problems to be solved.’ A number of late-nineteenth-century American observers diagnosed Japan, Japanese people, and Japan’s gender system as ‘backward, degenerate, and uncivilized,’ by which most meant that Japanese culture was ‘unequal’ to their own.”

Even in the tenth and eleventh century of the Heian period, women in Japan were actively engaged in the production of classical literature, such notably key works within the Japanese canon as The Tale of Genji (by Murasaki Shikibu) and The Pillow Book (by Sei Shonagon). In other words, it is extremely difficult to write about Umeko Tsuda without getting trapped in dichotomized “cultural hegemony,” that American women were advanced and Japanese women were backward, or that American women were saviors and Japanese women were victims to be rescued.

Another similar example pertains to Japanese women’s suffrage. Although Japanese women in the early twentieth century had launched a significant bid for suffrage, the prevailing discourse argues that the U.S. occupying forces handed over women’s suffrage to a complacent population in the aftermath of World War II, supposedly through the effort of Beate Sirotka Gordon. Without giving enough credit to Japanese suffragists, these stories make the complexity of transnational women’s history extremely flat, simple, and even colonial as the feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty
suggested in her article three decades ago, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.”

The extreme gender gap in Japan was discussed at the start of this article. This “bad” news is often used by feminist scholars in Japan to demonstrate explicitly the “problems to be solved” in gender relations. As a strategy to promote gender equality they frequently utilize statistical international comparisons that could push the government to make certain policies; however, it is also important for those feminist scholars to share with others more widely the kinds of endeavors historians of women and gender in Japan today have been making. Although there are still numerous challenges, their work has not only helped to improve history education, but also aided in promoting a gender-equal society through collaborative activities nationally and internationally.

Notes


My major area of research is U.S. social history with an emphasis on women, family, and education. By training I am an Americanist, not a historian of Japan, although my major research is on a Japanese woman educator, Umeko Tsuda, who founded Tsuda College in Japan, which is one of the oldest women’s colleges. Hiroko Nagano, “Nihon no Jenda-shi Kenkyu—Beiei tono Hikaku nioite” [Studies of Gender History in Japan—From the Comparative Perspective of the U.S. and U.K.] in Keizai Kenkyujo Nenpo [Annual of the Institute of Economic Research] Chuo University no. 42 (2011):191–208.


Nagano, “Women’s History and Gender History,” 277.


For the full text, see “GHAJ Expression of Our Opinion” in the following web site, http://ghaj.jp/en/profile/iken.html [Accessed 30 April 2013]. Note that the statement explains the historical development of women in Japan as follows: “[From a gender perspective], modern Japanese history can be divided into the following periods: the pre-war period when Japanese women did not have the right to vote, a political right that people take for granted today, under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan; the period when women gained the right to vote under the [American occupation forces’] democratization policy after Japan’s defeat in the war; the high economic growth period of the 1960s, when women became aware of the persistence of gender discrimination [in society] and started organizing the [women’s rights] movement; and the period when women started new activities in tandem with international movements for women’s rights, including the declaration of 1975 as the International Women’s Year (IWY) by the United Nations and the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEADW) by the UN General Assembly in 1979. These women’s continuous efforts led to the ratification of CEADW in Japan in 1985 and the establishment of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (BLGES) of 1999, which encouraged men and women to respect the other’s rights and make efforts to form a peaceful and energetic society. The concept of gender and gender studies have made significant contributions to the passage of the BLGES and the formation of a gender-equal society.”

Among those, the cases of so-called “comfort women” and the colonization of neighboring countries are major examples.

About this symposium, see “Rekishi Kyoiku to Jenda—Kyokasho kara Sabukarucha made” [Education of History from a Gender Perspective—From Textbooks to Subculture], in Gakujutsu no Doko [Trends in the Sciences] 15, no. 5 (May 2010): 57–86. The results of the symposium was published as follows: Hiroko Nagano and Toshiko Himeoka ed., Rekishi Kyoiku to Jenda: Kyokasho kara Sabukarucha made [History Education and Gender: From Textbooks to Subculture] (Tokyo: Seikyusha, 2011).

Toshiko Himeoka, “Matome” [Summary], in Nagano and Himeoka ed., Rekishi Kyoiku to Jenda [History Education and Gender], 275–285, 275. The comparative research of U.S. history textbooks was conducted by Chizuko Tominaga.

Noriko Kurushima, “Koko no Nihonshi Kyokasho ni Miru Jenda” [Japanese History Textbooks for High Schools and Gender], in Nagano and Himeoka ed., Rekishi Kyoiku to Jenda [History Education and Gender], 121–148, 140–141.

Ibid., 133.


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