

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: Japan

**Transcript of Etsuko Yahata
Interviewer: Mieko Yoshihama**

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**University of Michigan
Institute for Research on Women and Gender
1136 Lane Hall Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1290
Tel: (734) 764-9537**

**E-mail: um.gfp@umich.edu
Website: <http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem>**

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Etsuko Yahata, founder and Executive Director of NPO Hearty Sendai, Sendai City Miyagi Prefecture (<https://www.hearty-sendai.com/>). She spearheaded grassroots initiatives to assist women affected by the 2011 Great East Japan Disaster, on top of running a domestic violence shelter and many assistance programs. Originally trained as a midwife, she has since worked over 30 years in fighting against gender-based violence and promoting reproductive health and justice, human rights, and nonviolence. In addition to serving as the Director of the Miyagi Regional Center of Yorisoi Hotline (a nation-wide free 24-hour telephone assistance program), she serves on the board of director of Sendai Gender Equal Opportunity Foundation, Child Line Miyagi, and many others.

Mieko Yoshihama, Ph.D., LMSW, professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work, Ann Arbor, MI, USA; a licensed clinical and community social worker. Her research focuses on the prevention of gender-based violence and discrimination and the promotion of women's safety. Her long history of feminist action research efforts in Japan include co-founding the Domestic Violence Research & Action Group (1991) and conducting the nation's first study of domestic violence; developing and co-facilitating support groups for survivors of domestic violence following a series of focus group research (1998~); and co-founding the Women's Network for East Japan Disaster (2011) and conducting the first study of gender-based violence in disasters (<http://risetogetherjp.org/?p=4879#more-4879>) and launching the PhotoVoice Project with disaster-affected women (<https://photovoice.home.blog/>).

Keywords: Community Activism, Gender and Health, Gender-Based Violence

Mieko Yoshihama: I am going to interview Ms. Etsuko Yahata. This is as part of the Global Feminisms Project. As part of the Global Feminisms Project, today it is my pleasure to interview Etsuko Yahata from Japan. Thank you for your time today, Ms. Yahata.

Etsuko Yahata: Yes, thank you for having me.

MY: Let's jump right into it. I'd like to ask you a bit about your work. Could you share with us your background, or what made you who you are today? Or, what brought you to your current line of work?

EY: Sure. I worked as a registered nurse and midwife at a general hospital for 10 years. I got divorced around this time. Back then, I had absolutely no information about divorce. I resigned from the hospital and moved to Sendai.¹ There, I got involved in grassroots efforts to assist women going through divorce, and finally realized that what I had experienced was domestic violence. I also got involved in supporting those affected by sexual violence. I've observed many sexual harassment trials and met with victims of sexual violence. I was shocked to learn that there was no education on sexual violence at all. I realized that I was raised in patriarchal system and ideologies upholding male domination and female subordination. I started working in sex education in Sendai, where I came to understand the importance of gender equality, respect for human rights, and sexual violence prevention education. These are things I tried to emphasize in my work.

MY: I see. So your personal experience is made part of what made you who you are today. That served as an entry point to various work you have been doing.

EY: Yes.

MY: [You said] You've worked with an NPO², NGO, rather, women's group, and started assisting women going through divorce in Sendai. Was that group established in Sendai at that time, or did you create it?

EY: Well, at the suggestion of a woman who was a lawyer, 15 or so women got together and organized a divorce hotline for women. It's still running now after 33 years.

¹ Sendai is the capital city of Miyagi Prefecture, which is located in Honshu, the largest island in Japan. Sendai is the largest city in northern Honshu, also known as Tōhoku. (Pletcher, Kenneth. "Sendai." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sendai-Miyagi-prefecture-Japan>. Accessed 23 May 2022.)

² An NPO is a non-profit organization; an NGO is a non-governmental organization. Both terms are used to describe community-based organizations that provide services without aiming for profit.

MY: That's amazing.

EY: Until then, there were hardly any divorce-related volunteer actions available.

MY: No?

EY: Phone calls and [requests for] consultations were pouring in.

MY: Oh, really?

EY: Yes. The individual consultations were like a field hospital with no partition screens or anything, and the phone was ringing off the hook. Around that time, I heard about a program called "Divorce Course with a Smile" (*Nikoniko Rikon Kouza*)³ which started up in Tokyo.⁴

MY: Ah, that's right.

EY: But that was targeted at men as well as women. That woman lawyer suggested a divorce hotline for women only, and we scrambled to pull it together.

MY: Mhm.

EY: After nine and half years of being a single mother, I had gone through a lot of things that I didn't know how to process. So I joined the effort [to establish a divorce hotline for women].

MY: I see.

EY: I knew I was in over my head with a lot of this. The response we got was tremendous. Even though a lot of laws and public consultation programs had been established since then, we are still continuing with women's divorce hotlines twice a year. It closed once in response to the COVID-19⁵ pandemic, but as we realized how necessary the service was, we

³ "Divorce Course with a Smile" was established in 1979 by Yoriko Madoka and is associated with the "Hand in Hand" association of Japan. Madoka saw divorce as a social problem and wanted to give people resources about the divorce process and support along the way. ("円より子からのご挨拶" ハンド・イン・ハンド." <http://www.gendai-kazoku.jp/profile.htm>. Accessed 28 May 2022.)

⁴ Tokyo is the capital of Japan and the most populous metropolitan area in the world. ("Tokyo." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokyo>. Accessed 19 June 2022.)

⁵ COVID-19 is an easily transmittable contagious disease that often causes flu or cold like symptoms. After the first case was discovered in 2019, the disease has spread to most of the world resulting in a pandemic. ("COVID-19". Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19>. Accessed 23 May 2022.)

started it up again this past year. We held it only for a day with limited hours from morning to early evening. Although a lot of counseling programs have been established, many are coming to us by referral from them, some without an appointment. That was the starting point, and I've learned a lot from it. Then, necessity drove us to establish a space for discussion and a shelter, and before I knew it, I was the director of an NPO.

MY: Before you knew it.

EY: Yes.

MY: For 33 years — that's impressive.

EY: Yes, we've been doing this for a long time.

MY: Listening to your story, there sure exist needs [for such program].

EY: Yes.

MY: When you start up something, people actually say they had been waiting for it, that the need for it was pressing. You listen to those needs, determine what sort of program is needed, and continue to develop new solutions.

EY: Yes.

MY: Could we talk about that a bit more? You mentioned starting up a shelter, for example, but you and Hearty Sendai⁶ also continue to create all sorts of new projects. What kinds of projects are there?

EY: Right. First, when we established our legal consultation, I mean divorce hotline, many women who came to speak to a lawyer had no idea what to ask of lawyers. So we started recruiting and about 50 women came. So we split them into groups of 10, and formed discussion groups with staff members. We were asked to continue this, and called the new project "Breather Time."⁷

⁶ Hearty Sendai is an NPO that was founded by Etsuko Yahata. Hearty Sendai strives to support women who have been victim to domestic violence. ("Hearty Sendai." Hearty Sendai. <https://www.hearty-sendai.com>. Accessed 28 May 2022.)

⁷ "Breather Time" is a discussion group for victims of domestic violence and people who have gotten divorced. Support is given as are resources by the staff of Hearty Sendai. ("話し合いの会." Hearty Sendai. <https://www.hearty-sendai.com/group>. Accessed 28 May 2022.)

MY: I see.

EY: That runs once a month. Then we started offering it twice a month as some could only come on weekdays or weekends, or couldn't come on weekends because their husbands were home. This is the project I've devoted most of my energy to. And it's the project where we feel the effect/impact the most.

MY: Mm.

EY: And of course, we have been running a shelter, which previously made up of four rooms. With the Domestic Violence Prevention Act enacted in 2011, we didn't have the funds to pay full-time staff, so our stance/focus is to encourage women to use public shelter facilities. We thus downsized to two rooms. We also devoted ourselves to expanding the space for discussion and a telephone counseling program, as well as group meetings for divorcees. The road after you leave the shelter is a long one, after all.

MY: Indeed.

EY: You have mediation, trial, and then when that's over, you live alone and may feel isolated. So we also started group meetings for survivors of domestic violence.

MY: Mm.

EY: Then, the children of those who came to Breather Time and our Survivors' Group wanted a place to play together. There are very energetic, and we felt it was difficult. After the [Great East Japan] Disaster⁸, in addition to Group Lila.⁹

MY: Mhm, right.

⁸ The Great East Japan Disaster refers to the Tōhoku earthquake and resulting tsunami that caused a nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Pletcher, Kenneth. ("Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Japan-earthquake-and-tsunami-of-2011>. Accessed 21 May 2022.)

⁹ Group Lila is a project within Hearty Sendai that provides space for women who have escaped domestic violence situations but are still needing support in gaining confidence and finding friendships. ("話し合いの会." Hearty Sendai. <https://www.hearty-sendai.com/group>. Accessed 28 May 2022.)

EY: We created a group meeting for elementary school kids called “Lila Kids.”¹⁰ It’s not running anymore today, however.

MY: Mhm.

EY: And for the past three years, we’ve worked with children, from puberty to young adults, children of battered women who had left home. These are boys who could not participate in society, shut themselves away at home, haven’t gone to school since they were children.

MY: Mhm.

EY: These kinds of people came to us. It was fairly difficult to create opportunities to interact with men within Hearty Sendai, so we collaborated with other organizations, included some male staff members, and developed the Gobou Project.

MY: Ah yes, the Gobou Project.

EY: Yes, we thought we’d try it out for a year or so and see how it went. It turns out Sendai is home to a number of universities, vocational schools, and workplaces for young people. So younger folks were coming from all over— including those who grew up in households with domestic violence. Some had developed mental disorders, and some couldn’t work. Others started college or graduate school or began working, but had no place to get help. Some were seeing a psychiatrist, but were looking for something different. There are NPOs that focus on counseling and discussion with abusive parents. But those who grew up in abusive households came to us looking for connection/belonging. What was only going to run for one year turned into three years now. Those first three boys were just the tip of the iceberg, and we quickly realized just how many of them there were. Those three are starting to see change, too, albeit slowly.

MY: Mhm.

EY: In my work in sex education, I’ve met and taught so many children, like those in juvenile correctional facilities and in group homes for children. I still do. I also meet a lot of middle and high school students, to whom I give sex education lectures. I meet college students, too. Some come from extremely abusive environments, be it mentally, financially, physically, or sexually abusive. Those growing up in such an environment often need

¹⁰ “Lila Kids” was intended for children whose mothers were attending Group Lila. “Lila Kids” also offered education on human rights. (“リラ・キッズ.” Hearty Sendai. <https://www.hearty-sendai.com/rel-kids>. Accessed 28 May 2022.)

medical care and other things, but they also need support in recognizing their self-worth. I realized such support can be difficult to come by.

That is why we continue on with the Gobou Project. And now at Hearty Sendai, we can offer not just phone counseling, but with funds from the national Cabinet Office in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have social media counseling.

MY: Right, right.

EY: That experience made us realize the importance of delivering assistance online. We learned a lot of new skills, too. So in November of last year, we at Hearty Sendai started email counseling services. In doing so, we got some messages from those in Tohoku at large, but keep getting them from those in Miyagi Prefecture.¹¹ We take the time to respond, in as early as in two days and in four days by the latest.

MY: Mhm.

EY: We say we'll respond within 5 days, but it's usually within 2-3 days. These women are either living with their husbands, working, or busy raising children. They can write at their own pace. Even if the response is slower, we've found that option is sorely needed.

MY: Right.

EY: We're still doing email counseling. There are young people who have gone through trauma, and among them young women. To help those young women heal, we thought it was important for them to have more opportunities to spend time with us. We refer them to a feminist counseling program, but those services aren't always feasible as they cost money. We refer those who suffered long-term sexual violence to the free counseling program at the Sendai Gender Equality Foundation.¹² But rather than just counseling, we thought working with us in our support activities would be effective. So this June, we asked women in their 20s and 30s that we met through the Gobou Project to help with data entry for the chat message counseling that we will start in October. They'll come and learn in their own time in preparation for the launch of the chat counseling in October. We will pay wages albeit small. We applied for a grant which was accepted, so we have funding for the

¹¹ Miyagi Prefecture is located in northern Honshu, Japan. (Pletcher, Kenneth. "Sendai." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sendai-Miyagi-prefecture-Japan>. Accessed 23 May 2022.)

¹² The Sendai Gender Equality Foundation, established in 2001, focuses on promoting gender equality in Sendai. They not only support events in the community that promote gender equality, but Sendai Gender Equality Foundation also conducts research and subsequent policy proposals. ("About US." Sendai City Gender Equality Promotion Center. https://www.sendai-l.jp/shushi_e/. Accessed 28 May 2022.)

next two years. I want these young people to develop confidence in themselves by working together, and we're working hard to launch the project.

MY: Right, and it's almost October already!

EY: Yes, we're almost there. We've been creating business cards and working with IT support through the night to develop the landing page for the website.

MY: I see. Hearing all this, you really are taking these needs and turning them into new projects. Because there are real needs, those in need come in large numbers. To respond to them, you need to create another new project, find more people to work on it, and get busier and busier all the time, no?

EY: That's very true.

MY: And you never slow down. I'd like to go into this further, but, let's talk about Sendai, which was hit by the Great East Japan Disaster 10 years ago on March 11, 2011. Could you talk about that time? What was it like then? What did your work look like, and what was the situation like?

EY: In my eyes, before the disaster, Sendai seemed like it had its own way of doing things while following some places in Japan. But when the disaster struck, it was like a third of Miyagi Prefecture had been swept away. Cities across the coastal area had been wiped out and so many people had died, and several of my relatives never returned. Back then, I felt so powerless and didn't know what all I could do. But part of me wanted to reach out to the world for help — at the very least send messages throughout Japan for help. But thanks to you, we could also share that message with the world. Then, so many people reached out, sent funds and supplies, traveled here and around the [disaster areas] with us. I was so touched. I was working to support women. Women were sending in supplies and coming in to support other women. Of course there were men doing so as well, but I could tell how empowering it was for women affected by the disaster to have other women supporting them. I felt that having women be the point of contact was very meaningful.

MY: And at the NPO Hearty Sendai, where you're the director, the doorway was jammed from the earthquake and members were trapped inside. That must have been terrifying.

EY: Yes.

MY: The Hearty Sendai's members themselves were affected by the disaster, and many lost their homes. You also lost several family members But still, you all kept working. Looking back on this now, what compelled you all to keep going?

EY: Yes, well....[Hearty Sendai] members were working on a 24-hour hotline for domestic and sexual violence in a counseling room of an old building. [When the earthquake hit], the door jammed. We thought the building might collapse, too, but it didn't. We had the door broken through from the outside and we were able to escape. Then, with the ongoing aftershocks, we of course had to put a hold on counseling and prioritize our safety. But still....

MY: You reopened right away, right?

EY: Yes, we reopened. The building was inspected, and it was determined that it wouldn't collapse. We knew there must have been so many people who were in a tough spot, so we reopened counseling. The Sendai Gender Equality Foundation added extra telephone lines and expanded counseling services in the wake of the disaster. At that time, buses were running at reducing schedules, taxi was not available, and gasoline for our cars was hard to come by.

MY: Right, no gasoline anywhere.

EY: Truly. It took me a month to visit my family in disaster-affected areas because there was no gasoline. Colleagues who were able to walk or bike to Sendai City Center readily joined in the Center's hotline program. Hearty Sendai, too.

MY: And while you reopened the counseling service and were busy with it, you also went around delivering relief supplies to disaster-affected coastal areas. Could you talk about that a bit?

EY: Yes, [before the disaster] I really was working myself thin all the time, mostly in the field of education. And after the disaster, I spent more time at home because there were no work for me. It was through social network service I was able to stay connected and communicate. I was able to find out online that my relatives had survived and made it to an evacuation shelter. I wanted to go see them, and when the buses resumed service I thought I could. But my son reminded me that I may not be able to ride them back, so I had to wait until early April when I could get gasoline. I had to see with my own eyes what I'd heard on the TV and radio — whole cities that had been washed away, roads that were destroyed, the only cars on the road being self-defense force and police, and people that had lost everything. I visited my best friend and also went to an emergency shelter to see niece, who

miraculously survived. Members of Hearty Sendai said they would go too if I led the way, so we bought food and other supplies with our own money and travelled [to disaster-affected coastal areas].

MY: Mhm.

EY: And when we shared this online, people offered us gas money and items for us to deliver. We said that women would be delivering these goods to other women, and many people sent in donations to distribute as we saw fit. We rented out a warehouse, and with people visiting from across the nation, visited various disaster-affected areas, traveling in four or five cars.

MY: I remember. I visited [the warehouse] several times. A mountain's worth of goods stacked up there. And the trip [to the coastal areas] took all day, didn't it?

EY: Yes.

MY: And with the roads damaged, you had to take detours, taking more time than usual. You were all running around delivering goods at many places until you returned, exhausted. But still you said, "We have to keep going. We have to go." What carried you through that work? Where did you find the energy for it?

EY: Right, for example, some of us were staying in a partially destroyed apartment complex, or had their home damaged. But going to disaster areas, there were those who were in shock, having lost their family, their home, their job — they lost everything. Seeing that, I felt I couldn't call myself a disaster victim on the same level. There were times that I felt powerless, but when we told them, "We came here to help. Here is something for you though not much" and when we delivered messages and supplies from people across the nation and the world, some of whom accompanied us, people receiving them shed tears of joy. So we kept working, and couldn't bring ourselves to stop traveling there. We had to work but we travelled there on our days off.

MY: When you went to these disaster-affected areas and saw all of their hardship, but you were affected, too. You too were living and working in the disaster area. But you felt others were struggling much more, and it became more difficult to talk about your own hardships. Right?

EY: That's right. That's when you came, and we had PhotoVoice¹³ meetings. That was in May.

MY: Right, that's right! I went there once sometime after the 20th of April, and we started planning. That's right.

EY: That's when we tried out PhotoVoice, taking pictures, and sharing our emotions with each other. We all were able to take the time to talk, some of whom were visiting Fukushima¹⁴ and talked about the evacuation and consequences of the nuclear accident. As we all started sharing, we'd cry as the words came out. Finally, we had a place where we could acknowledge what had happened to us, and we could talk about it. The level of hardship was still vastly different in comparison. So we wanted to do all that we could.

MY: True, it's hard not to compare, but each and everyone of you had gone through so much hardship and kept working. You said yourself that when we started PhotoVoice, the tears just started flowing. I remember some of them saying, "This is the first time I've cried — I can finally talk about it." That's so important. Of course others were struggling, so you try suppress your own needs. But through this, you were able to recognize that it is ok to admit your own hardships, too. Right?

EY: That's right. It's the same with domestic and sexual violence. To be able to face it and talk about it, about domestic violence, and that domestic violence itself is rooted in gender-based violence — it's not easy to talk about these things out in the open.

MY: No, it's not.

EY: [When they speak out] they encounter backlash, so most people do not speak out because they are fearful of being attacked. That's when advocacy becomes so important. We've been working for a long time to validate their experiences. That's why disaster survivors can talk about their trauma and sense of loss... loss of family members... only with other survivors. And then there's the additional layer of being a woman on top of this. That's also hard to talk about. That is why we go there and listen to what they have to say. And if they don't talk about it then and there, we establish a connection, and reach out again. We felt this was the only way, so we kept going.

¹³ PhotoVoice is a method used to capture grassroots problems with cameras, to practice describing them in small groups, and then to make appeals to policy-makers and those with the power to make decisions (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photovoice>. Accessed on 14 December 2023).

¹⁴ Fukushima is a prefecture in northeastern Honshu, Japan. It is the location of the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster which was the most severe nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. (Pletcher, Kenneth. "Fukushima." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Fukushima-prefecture-Japan>. Accessed 23 May 2022.)

MY: I see. Would you say cases of violence against women increased after the disaster? And/or did it become more visible?

EY: Well, first off, temporary telephone lines were set up for counseling. But they were told that they could talk only for 3 minutes, and telephones were placed in places without a lot of privacy.

MY: This was at the evacuation shelters, right? Ah yes, people lost their cell phones in the tsunami, or they had no electricity.

EY: Right. Even though hotlines were set up by public/governmental centers, it was almost impossible to access them. A lawyer accompanied us, of course, and we announced that we provide legal consultation. But if someone sought legal consultation from us who [were known to] have been assisting women affected by domestic and sexual violence, others [at the shelter] would gossip and say, “Just what would she need counseling for? She must be talking to them about family matters” Everyone could tell. So we tried to protect their privacy. The lawyer wore the same T-shirt and posed as just another woman at the shelter, talking with other women offering advice. They all lived in full view of each other in the same gymnasium for more than half a year — not just a few days.

MY: They were packed like sardines, with no privacy.

EY: That’s right. They eventually set up partition screens and separate rooms. On the other hand, before that when everything was out in the open, there was little visible domestic violence to speak of. But when they moved to temporary housing complexes, people lived in individual units, even though they were separated only by thin walls. This seemed like ample opportunity for domestic violence to surface. So as people moved to temporary housing units bit by bit over two or three months, more avenues became available to access domestic violence counseling. Indeed, we received many requests for counseling.

MY: Right.

EY: Anyway, domestic violence is not something people can talk about when local people are around. The walls are thin in temporary housing. If you cough, or turn on your TV, people will hear it.

MY: Right.

EY: So they'd go out to a vacant lot, and call us from a cell phone they finally got ahold of. Things like that.

MY: I see. After the disaster, everyone was really in survival mode, weren't they? People tended to put up with their personal and family matters, and were pressured to do so by those around them, wouldn't you say?

EY: Yes, a public pressure. When you meet people in evacuation, who were affected by the disaster, who lost family and met with unbearable tragedy, it's hard to talk about yourself — as it was for me. Apart from that, I sometimes wondered if the supplies we delivered to male representatives of the evacuation shelters would get distributed to everyone. Public facilities had to divide supplies evenly, so there were times where shelters couldn't accept donations unless they came in bundles of 100, 200 or so items. They called it "fairness," yet goods would first go to the head of the household. Typically shelter leaders were male. So, women were not likely to receive supplies intended to them or to feel that they were being cared for as individuals. Our organization support women, so we made sure to present supplies directly to women, and we continued to do so.

MY: I see.

EY: And with sexual and domestic violence being a difficult subject to talk about close to home, since we didn't have an email counseling service back then, we increased and enhanced toll-free phone counseling lines.

MY: Right. With the shelter leaders being mostly men, it was difficult to ask for help. This was true before the disaster. It gets more challenging because pre-disaster problems become enlarged post-disaster. The Great East Japan Disaster was in 2011. Then, what changes do you see in terms of violence against women and circumstances surrounding women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

EY: With the disaster as well as the pandemic, women who lived in poverty slipped further into poverty. And for those in tight living spaces, men are also suffering from extreme anxiety, poverty, and stress, which they then turn against women and children. This is happening continuously.

MY: And those in more vulnerable positions in society are targeted.

EY: Exactly. And they're not told enough that there are ways to escape it. At the very least, 24-hour counseling services started to spread a bit after the disaster. And with the

pandemic, there has been a great number of murder cases in Tokyo. In Miyagi Prefecture, 2019 was the only year without a single murder case.

MY: Oh, really?

EY: Yes. With the world being ravaged by the pandemic, with the help of the All Japan Women's Shelter Network¹⁵, we petitioned the government to respond to increased violence against vulnerable populations. A 24-hour phone counseling service "Domestic Violence Counseling Plus"¹⁶ was established over four lines, as well as a chat counseling service. The government publicized it in every city with a lot of media attention. People realized that this was something that they could talk about, and the permeation of this led to lots of requests for counseling. Calls are still coming in today. Counseling Plus was only planned to last one year, but as calls were pouring in, it was extended, both phone and chat counseling.

MY: Mhm.

EY: It all started with the group Support Hotline (*Yoriso Hotline*)¹⁷ after the disaster, and we continue that work today.

MY: Yes, the disaster happened to have started it all.

EY: We got many calls from men as well as women on our general line. Aside from that, there were dedicated lines for sexual minorities, foreigners, women suffering from domestic violence, and those contemplating suicide. Of these, it has been the women's helpline that got more traffic. Because of that, it is possible that people needing for domestic violence-specific assistance might have been less visible. But with the government advertising domestic violence counseling specifically over mass media, more and more people realized they could get help for this. Especially those who didn't realize they had the option before, like older adults.

¹⁵ All Japan Women's Shelter Network was established in 1998 and is a coalition of women's shelters across Japan. ("All Japan Women's Shelter Network." <https://nwsnet.or.jp/ja/>. Accessed 23 May 2022.)

¹⁶ "Domestic Violence Counseling Plus" is a 24 hour service that provides, phone, email, and chat based support to victims. ("Domestic Violence Hotline Plus." Social Inclusion Support Center. <https://soudanplus.jp/en/index.html>. Accessed 1 June 2022.)

¹⁷ "Yoriso Hotline" provides support not only for domestic violence victims but also for LGBT people and those effected by various disasters. This is done through phone calls, Facebook, and text-based services. ("よりそいホットライン" よりそいホットライン." <https://www.since2011.net/yoriso/>. Accessed 28 May 2022.)

MY: Yes.

EY: They are calling in about their own issues or sometimes seniors were calling because they were worried about their children. And people in what is referred to as the “underworld community” those in the sex industry and prostitution, which themselves are a form of gender-based violence, reach out to this new program, especially via chats, instead of public counseling programs. Those who have been involved in adult chatrooms lost their income due to the pandemic. These women felt they had no choice but just to die. But when they were given information on this new counseling program, they called us.

MY: Jumping around a bit, I meant to ask this question earlier — could you share with us your current job title, and the work you’re currently doing?

EY: I’m the Director of the NPO Hearty Sendai, focused on domestic and sexual violence.

MY: How long have you been working there? Several decades?

EY: We actually became incorporated as an NPO in 2011, the year of the Great East Japan Disaster.

MY: Ah, that’s right.

EY: Before that, we’d been working under the name of Hearty Sendai for a long time. But when you register as an NPO, you have to provide an address.

MY: Ah, right, that’s how it works in Japan. Your home address.

EY: You have to make it public, not just your name. And in the release of public records, you need to release addresses of three members of the board of directors, including a vice president though currently only I, as the director, have to make home address public. At the time we registered as a NPO, we needed to provide addresses of our doctors and lawyers acting as consultants. We’d been working with the city of Sendai for 33 years, so we didn’t see the benefits of becoming an NPO.

MY: Mhm, mhm.

EY: But the year before the 2011 disaster, it was decided to hold a (next annual) national symposium on domestic violence in Sendai. To do so, we had to request grants from public sources such as prefectural governments. Seeking co-sponsorship, too. Those who review the applications place a lot of weight on whether an organization is a registered NPO. So,

reluctantly we decided to register as an NPO, so we did in 2011 under my address. That's how it's set up today, with just my address being made public.

MY: Is that so?

EY: We once removed the lawyer and gynecologist as consultants. Since then, the concerning NPOs have changed a bit, and we listed the doctor and lawyer back as consultants. These consultants do not get paid. They make donations and pay membership dues. I don't get paid, either.

MY: Right.

EY: I have other jobs, too. But I realized that we'd have more legitimacy from the media if we use the name of an NPO. Because it was listed under my address, people have come to visit there, but I sent them away and told them this was my home. Right... I lost my train of thought.

MY: Right, let's see, you're involved in a lot of other work besides your current role as director of this NPO, correct?

EY: That's right.

MY: You said you got your start as a midwife?

EY: Right. When I stopped working at the hospital, I opened a private consulting center in Sendai, which I ran for 2-3 years. I worked to promote breastfeeding, which I realized can be done through scientific explanation and encouragement. I vacillated between quitting that and returning to the hospital. Then I got involved in sex education, and ended up doing that a great deal, having worked as a sex-ed counselor for adolescents. I found this work quite interesting, and decided to stay freelance for a while. This led to me giving more lectures at nursing and midwifery schools, as well as at group homes for children and juvenile correctional facilities.

In my work with the NPO to fight domestic and sexual violence, I felt it was important to include discussions of sexual violence as part of sex education, and start violence prevention as early as possible. Thus, my (paid) work and (volunteer) activism are linked together. And I feel strongly that it is important to share this with as many children and young people as possible. Before I knew it, I then became a member of the board of director of the Sendai Gender Equality Foundation. Sendai is a small city compared to Tokyo, though it has over a million people. So many NPOs know each other, like those working in drug

addiction, the ChildLine¹⁸, and those working in child abuse prevention. We all work to support each other. That's how I've also come to work on other projects, like advocacy for the rights of sexual minorities and AIDS¹⁹ counseling and support activities.

MY: What would you say has been your life's work?

EY: At the moment, I'd say my life's work is to continue finding ways to communicate to the next generation that the rights of women and children must be respected and that gender equality must be promoted. These are things I think I'll always be doing.

MY: Mhm, indeed. Women's rights, gender equality, and prevention of sexual violence — you mentioned how these things were linked before.

EY: Yes.

MY: In addition to your personal experiences, your work and activism has encompassed a wide range over the years, but it all comes down to human rights. Women supporting other women. This support can be one-to-one, but I also see in your work a drive to change society as a whole.

EY: Yes, well.... I've worked with a great number of colleagues in combating domestic and sexual violence in Sendai. I learned about the All Japan Women's Shelter Network. Because there were no other shelters operating in Tohoku then, I quickly became the Network's Tohoku representative.

MY: Mhm.

EY: I was invited to serve on the board of directors. I was like, "What? I'm not even working on this full-time." But through those connections, I came to learn about the movements happening across the country and the women blazing the trail for us. And through them, I came to know the women's rights and gender equality movements happening across the world. That network was raising the voices of those affected and working in that field. And in collecting and sharing them, I could see how laws were being created and changed.

MY: Mhm, mhm.

¹⁸ "ChildLine" is a hotline for anyone under the age of 18 in Japan. The NPO in Japan started after the success of a ChildLine in the United Kingdom. ("About." ChildLine. <https://childline.or.jp/en/>. Accessed 1 June 2022.)

¹⁹ AIDS is an infectious disease that is commonly transferred through sexual activities. ("HIV/AIDS." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HIV/AIDS>. Accessed 23 May 2022.)

EY: That's why I continue to support and devote my full attention to each person I meet. This may not be a lot of people, but I can say with confidence based on long years of experience that this kind of support can change people's lives, and thus change the lives of their children. This is the kind of message NPOs can share. By sharing the lived experiences [of people affected by the problem] through advocacy efforts, we can change policy. And doing this would then change the budget for support services, or welfare programs for disaster victims.

MY: Right, things have started to change little by little.

EY: Yes.

MY: Of course there are many problems to consider, institutional or otherwise. But new laws have been enacted, new programs created, and budgets allocated. The government was involved in organizing a training program for and a violence against women hotline, which were unheard of 20 or 10 years ago. Wait, it was 10 years ago! After the disaster, for the first time the Cabinet Office stepped up. Things are slowly changing. But behind the scenes, people pour their blood, sweat, and tears into this work every day. But little by little, things change. That's why we keep going, no? Yet we're getting older, and it's getting all the more important to pass this along to the next generation, don't you think?

EY: It is, yes. Well, you say bleeding and sweating, but I do think the work is fun.

MY: It is fun.

EY: It's fun. People won't follow you if the director doesn't think the work is fun. I find it to be the most interesting thing. Even though we deal with people's tragedies, it's fun. I say that because I see how people change. From the time you meet, you watch their lives change and their facial expressions become brighter. They'd reflect back and feel, though it was rough, they have got through. Working with the same individuals for several decades... only NPOs can do that!

MY: Right.

EY: That's the truth of it. Having observed changes over a long period of time, I've become more and more convinced that this type of support is effective.

MY: Mhm, mhm.

EY: And I say this because, if we don't, who will? I've shared this not only in Miyagi Prefecture, but through statements by the All Japan Shelter Network. For example, the Shelter Network would invite representatives from each ministry to a large room in the parliament building where they met with about 200 women from across Japan, including many who have been affected by domestic violence.

MY: Mm.

EY: We created a space where survivors could anonymously share their issues. People from the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, Cabinet Office, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and the Police Agency all gathered to hear what they had to say. By attending this meeting in Tokyo, I learned that it's not just through voting in elections, but by directly appealing to lawmakers, who could be moved, and policies can be changed.

MY: Wow.

EY: Even if I am not able to write eloquently, I have been so encouraged to witness people change over several decades. Those I knew in elementary school who had grown up and gotten married. Then I see those once gray-haired and wrinkled, now look younger even though they reached old age, and they are working as presenters in our workshops and counselors. Young people are slowly but surely getting involved, saying they want to be part of this movement and want to learn more. Seeing them, I feel connecting and working together can lead to changes in society bit by bit. It's just so amazing, and so fun.

MY: Can't help but continue!

EY: Right. How can you stay involved in something other than paid work if it isn't interesting and enjoyable?

MY: Indeed.

EY: Hearing information from people I trust, from around the country and around the world, I can't help but think there's more that we can do. We've done some great new things in Sendai, but we learned from trailblazing work people are doing across the country and the world, and have been encouraged to try what we think is needed.

MY: As you know, this interview is part of this Global Feminisms Project.

EY: Yes.

MY: On the topic of feminism, I'd like to ask what feminism means to you, and how it is connected with the activism you all have been involved in.

EY: Right.

MY: To start, what do you think feminism means to you?

EY: When I was working at the hospital, I really had no idea.

MY: Mm.

EY: Then when I went freelance in Sendai, all sorts of people came up to talk to me. Among them was a female physician, who was the first feminist counselor in Tohoku. I met her through my work in sex education. She was with me at the start of Hearty Sendai, and we conducted a survey on domestic violence in Sendai together. She's still a close colleague to this day. I asked her, "What is feminism, exactly?"

MY: Mm.

EY: In my schooling, I never learned anything about women's rights or gender equality.

MY: Nothing at all.

EY: Nothing. At the hospital, I worked in obstetrics, pediatrics, and midwifery, yet I doubt how much I consider myself as a supporter of women. Anyway, I asked her what it meant, and she said, "Oh, well it means gender equality." Those words struck a chord with me. "Ah, so that's what it means," I thought. "Things haven't been equal after all. I see, it's so simple."

MY: Right. The word "feminism" can come off as serious, but it's such a basic thing.

EY: Right. And I got involved in the Childline, I realized how important children's rights were, too. Various NPOs speak out from the perspective of children, and our NPO, from the perspective of women. NPOs like DARC²⁰ support those struggling with drug addiction and

²⁰ DARC (Drug Addiction Rehabilitation Center) is a half-way house agency for people facing drug addictions in Japan. Staff is comprised of people who have recovered from drug dependence themselves. (Morita Nobuaki, Shimane Takuya, Suetugu Sachiko, Okasaka Yoshiko. "How do self-help agencies work for recovery of drug dependence in Japan?" Nihon Arukoru Yakubutsu Igakki Zasshi. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17037343/#affiliation-1>. Accessed 28 May 2022)

dependency speak out from the perspective of those who are in a tight spot, suffering, and vulnerable.

MY: Mhm.

EY: Each organization supports those in need from their unique perspectives, but they're all connected. At the root of it all is the fact that women, even though they're the majority of the population, don't realize they're being discriminated against. The same goes for children.

MY: Mhm.

EY: That's a huge part of it. And the next generation is growing up there. So to change our future, supporting women will be all the more important. Simply put, promoting gender equality. That all people are equal. To not have this realized would be such a tragedy — for men as well as women, and the next generation. The simple words "gender equality" struck such a cord in me.

MY: Yes, we desperately want to realize gender equality. That's why you've been pushing yourself so much, right?

EY: Right. I wondered where we might find such a progressive place like that, and I was drawn by the things I saw happening in places like Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Sendai developed a friendly relationship with Norway, who offered post-disaster support. Delegates went to Norway for several years and learned a great deal from that exchange. I went there as part of the third delegation.

MY: Mm.

EY: And the young people there are so lively. Both young men and women are confident in who they are. I see them living so carefree, and I felt that it would be possible. I heard what's happening in Sweden and Norway, then went to Norway myself. The women there don't have to wear designer clothes or be on a diet and look pretty — they believe they are evaluated based on their own merits. And men say they enjoy working with women. Of course, those countries have their own host of problems. But seeing these young people so active and with so much energy gives me hope for the next generation. It really lifted my spirits.

MY: I see. You mentioned how much you've learned from your connections with these Scandinavian countries. How would you compare the approaches to the

prevention of gender-based violence and human rights in these countries to those in Japan, or those of your group's activities?

EY: Well, ultimately our goals are the same. The difference is that what we've learned and how best to approach it are still not being implemented in policy here. We need to have more people who value these things running for office. Young people don't realize that they can educate themselves, go to the polls, and choose their representatives.

MY: Right.

EY: I've spoken on this through my sex-ed teaching and elsewhere across the country since before the disaster. Ah, that's before the pandemic, I mean. In addition to discussing sex education and sexual violence, I'd tell them, during a post-dinner meeting, that the situation in Sweden and Norway was the same [as Japan now] 40 or 50 years ago and that changes are happening among young people. People [here] have no idea this is all happening.

MY: Mm.

EY: Right? There's nothing like that in their education. So, I have incorporated into my sexual education teaching a message that human rights are important, that is gender equality, and it is achievable, and that with your hope and aspiration, you can select your own representatives. Then, it's like these young folks' eyes light up. I can tell that my message is getting through to them. Be it with 300, 600, or 700 people. That is why I think educating our children is so important. "Those of us who go to college learn about these things, things like reproductive health and rights. But for those who don't go to college, where do they learn that? It's dreadful that some people grow up without learning these things," they say in their reflections. With the COVID-19 pandemic, private universities have been struggling. Financially, but in other ways, too. When that happens, courses on gender theories get cut.

MY: Oh, yes.

EY: There are some people pushing for it to continue, so hopefully it will return when the pandemic has settled down. In reflections students write, they wonder for those who don't go to those schools, where will they learn these things?

MY: Right.

EY: Right? We need to start sex education from an early age, yet even the teachers there haven't learned these things. And even if they become aware, they can't freely teach it.

Looking at it, it's really a question of whether the chicken or the egg came first. You'd need to make some big policy changes, which requires a budget. It's important to pass that message on to younger generations, steadily and continuously.

MY: Right. This Feminisms Project is a university-based project. Most of the people watching or listening to this interview will likely be researchers and university educators, who do not have practice experience in the field. What do you think about collaboration between researchers and activists? What do you think is needed?

EY: Yes. I've done many interviews with researchers. I've approached those interviews by researchers and those by mass media with care and respect. I'll even give them materials they didn't ask for. While people would listen to those in the field, they trust researchers who organize their data in a way that's easily understood, collect their data from multiple sources with an impartial eye, and present it logically. I think it's so important for those researchers to share their knowledge. When I am asked for comments on TV, I try not to show my face. Instead I ask them to include survivors with their identities hidden. I also a university professor speaks on our behalf. He is a male colleague of mine, of over 30 years. People will listen this way.

MY: Right.

EY: He is a feminist and of course very knowledgeable about both women's and men's issues. I reached out to him specifically because he is a researcher and a sociologist. And well-versed in men's issues. It's more impactful to have a professor, male, speaking on these issues. People will listen. Regardless of gender, I feel it's important to have researchers who are able to analyze their data logically, and share their research with college students in local communities.

MY: The current situation in Japan is troubling, but we are seeing some development of feminism, and gender equality movements, yes? They're progressing slowly but surely. What expectations do you have? What do you want to see in Japan's future?

EY: I want to see young people with aspirations running for office. A nation that takes elections seriously and votes by their beliefs. That's what I want.

MY: Indeed. And like you said, we want to create a society where young people can have these aspirations, where they can shine and be who they are, no?

EY: Exactly. Among developed countries, Japan has the highest proportion of people who are feeling gloomy, have low self-confidence, and have almost given up hope for changing

the society. That was on the Cabinet Office website. I think this is because the education they received has taught them that there is no choice but to despair and obey, to give up. That is why education is important.

MY: So important.

EY: Yes. Even if it's not for very long, if you talk to young people and children, we can get our message across to them. I've been convinced of this over these 33 years.

MY: That's right.

EY: If you communicate to them creatively, you can get through to them. So, I don't feel so hopeless.

MY: In your eyes... How should I put this? You've accomplished so much, but what would you say has been the greatest achievement in your activist work? Of course all of it is great, but what would you say?

EY: I would say the work we continue to do at Hearty Sendai. Well, this might seem a bit like I'm patting myself on the back, but I had been carrying the burden of serving as the director. These women all had the desire, but they were not trained to take the initiative [and make your involvement known] or serve as a director. So, I said at the beginning that I would do that and take the responsibility ultimately [no matter what]. Of course I was prepared to do so. Continuing with this work is something that I'm personally proud of. And I know the others can do it, too. I ask them, including those in my generation, if they'll ever take over for me. I'm 69 years old. Every time I ask, no one ever says yes. So, I'm afraid it won't happen. But I want young people in the next generation to take the leadership. There are college graduates who come to us with an interest in this work. Though they all likely have different jobs of their own, I think it would be neat if we could hire them on and pay them a salary. I would love to see something like that.

MY: I see.

EY: Really, the reason I have kept on doing this work is because children and young people have rights. And respecting those rights be mutually important [both our generation and children and young people]. I have continued to support those women and children in need whom I came into contact by forging network with various people. And that work still continues today. I can't help but tell myself that I did good, and continue to do good.

MY: You really did good! it's wonderful. People work together... It is not like people follow you. At Hearty Sendai, people work together. Of course, you are leading the charge as director. But the connections among Hearty Sendai members are very strong. It's like a collective effort, without much of a hierarchical structure. Yes, you are the director, but you also work the hotlines and night shifts, right? I believe Hearty Sendai is an organization that truly embodies equality.

EY: Right. There are always some colleagues who disagree with me and push me to think carefully. But as we speak with them, all of us come to an understanding, and eventually those who were in ey take the lead in the activity. And there are some things I'm just not good at. Some people are good with handicrafts, doing it almost daily. Some are good with taking care of older adults, some are good with childcare. I think it's so great that they all can step up and say, "I can help with that!"

I also work shifts on a 24-hour hotline. I'm the kind of person that has to be out there in the field working with those in need. If I didn't do this for something my name is attached to, and if I didn't understand what the trends were, what system we were using, what our goals were, I couldn't call myself a director. I think this was because I was in the medical field. I feel that people won't follow someone who isn't out there sweating in the field with them. It may be different from the sweat on the brows of university researchers, though I realized researchers certainly do work hard. We have fun together, cook together, eat together....

MY: And also dance together?

EY: We dance, yes! Often what I find interesting, they all find interesting, too. It's all connected, in my mind. Why we dance, or why we move. Right now we're all doing healing yoga developed by Ms. Yuri Morita — with older adults, younger folks, elementary school students, and children in group homes and juvenile correctional facilities. Doing these things together is so important, even if we can't do it every day. Being a director, you have to be working hard and sweating, otherwise people won't follow you.

MY: Very true.

EY: If I couldn't properly do the leg work behind the scenes, people wouldn't trust me. I think if the day came where I couldn't, I'd actually step down as director. And the work doesn't necessarily have to continue under the same name. As long as the mission is the same, it'd be fine if someone else wanted to go with a different name. However, it might be easier for the next generation if the organization has established collaboration with the government and other organizations, and has a system to obtain external grants. I think I would continue doing this a bit longer until then.

MY: Not just for a bit — keep going! I hope you and I can continue working together in a variety of different ways. There are still many things I want to talk to you about. Today, for a bit over an hour, we covered your beginnings all the way to your current work. We talked about your standpoint and vision, where you started, and what drove you in your activist work to this day, though one hour is not enough time. Do you have anything else about your work that you'd like to share?

EY: If we are able to respect gender equality and human rights, we can all live happily. I want to share this as much as possible, throughout the world.

MY: The world, indeed.

EY: Yes. That's all we can do, I think.

MY: It's gender equality, so not just a factor for women.

EY: Yes, men benefit from it, too.

MY: Right. And the young and old alike. Everyone gains energy.

EY: Yes. The world may not get there 100% right away, but there is a way, a path forward. I think there are so many people who understand this, if you share it with them.

MY: If you share it with them, yes. And even with the smallest of changes, you can see and feel them. Things change!

EY: That's right.

MY: Yes, yes. Thank you for such a meaningful talk today. I hope you'll continue to share your hard work out in the field and the knowledge and experience you've accumulated with young people, and not-so-young people around the world. I'm looking forward to working with you again.

EY: Yes, thank you so much for listening.

MY: Thank you very much.