

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

SITE: Japan

**Transcript of Reiko Masai
Interviewer: Mieko Yoshihama**

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Reiko Masai, founder and Executive Director of NPO Women's Net Kobe, Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture, the first group in Japan to call attention to disaster-related gender-based violence and published reports documenting women's experiences, including Women talk about the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (English translation available at <https://wn-kobe.or.jp/bosai/eng/index.html>). For over thirty years, Ms. Masai has worked to promote women's rights and gender equality in Japan. In 2007, she launched Disaster & Gender Information Network, the first initiative of its kind in Japan, and co-founded Women's Network for East Japan Disaster in 2011 (<http://risetogetherjp.org/?cat=46>), also the first of its kind, advocating for more inclusive disaster response. For her tenacious activism, she has received numerous awards, including Kato Shizue Award in 2003 and the Champion of Change Japan Award from the Fish Family Foundation in 2018.

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

Mieko Yoshihama: Today, as part of the University of Michigan Global Feminisms Project, it is my pleasure to interview Ms. Reiko Masai, director of Women's Net Kobe¹. With that, let's get started. Thank you for your time today.

Reiko Masai: Thank you for having me.

MY: Your work spans quite a long time, but could you start with a brief explanation of the work you're currently doing? We will go into more detail, but for now, what is your current position and work? Then we'll discuss your career path, trajectory, and what has brought you where you are today. If you could summarize your work in a few words, what would they be?

RM: I work to support women and children affected by domestic violence. I direct a private shelter, and we aim to provide continuous support after they leave to rebuild their lives.

MY: How long has that shelter been operating?

RM: 17 years now. It was established in 2004.

MY: And even before you established the shelter, you had been always working to support women, correct?

RM: Yes, starting back in 1991, we published books for women readers. Then, in March of 1994 — a year before the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake² — we pooled our money together and rented a house and started "Women's House." Rather than hold events, all we did there was to create space for women to talk about their partners, work, children, divorce, things like that. So many women came to that house. That following August, we received a call from someone who was being severely beaten by her husband. Back then in 1994, none of us had any idea of domestic violence. Similar calls started pouring in around that time, and we felt we had to do something. We announced in our monthly Women's Network newsletter in December that anyone could stay at the shelter for 500 yen. At that time, we had about 240 members, and one after another people sought refuge at our Women's House. We ended that year thinking that our work would be operating a so-called *kakekomidera*, that is safehouse. That following January 22nd was scheduled to be our opening day for the year. But then the earthquake struck on the 17th. The surrounding area was reduced to rubble, and Women's House was forced to close.

MY: I see, so Women's House was destroyed in the earthquake. Yet even that didn't stop your work, did it? This was the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995. Could you tell us

¹ Women's Net Kobe was established after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. It provides relief goods and telephone counseling to women affected by disasters. (Matsuoka, Yuki. "Japanese experts call for gender equality" ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/japanese-experts-call-gender-equality>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

² Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, also known as the Kobe Earthquake, took place on January 17th, 1995. It was one of the strongest and most deadly earthquakes in Japan to date. (Pletcher, Kenneth. "Kobe earthquake of 1995" Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kobe-earthquake-of-1995>. Accessed 14 June 2022)

about women's situation after the earthquake, and the post-disaster violence against women?

RM: Having operated Women's House, on some level we knew that women were experiencing violence. After the earthquake, initiatives for supporting the elderly, children, disabled, and foreigners launched immediately. The women of our group had to take care of their own homes and children, so we couldn't meet until February 24th. We had been working on women's issues and holding study groups since 1991. We have listened to stories of violence against women. We realized there was no support network for women at that time and decided to act. We established our own Women's Support Network³ and dedicated ourselves to supporting women in need. We developed a phone counseling program. As we held all-women discussion groups, we realized that women needed a safe space to talk about their experience of abuse, so we held women's support seminars — that is, seminars limited to women only — with themes like "spirit," "work," "body," "partner," etc. These are things we learned from the first year of opening Women's House.

MY: I see. This is how your work has continued, building on the previous work. Though the earthquake caused all sorts of hardship, you understood and responded to women's needs. You shared that it is incredibly important for women to have a space to speak with only other women. Would you say that these activities made you who you are today? What was a big event or turning point in your life?

RM: I was recently asked to share my personal history, and I realized that the person I am today was greatly influenced by my upbringing. I grew up in a home with extreme domestic violence. My father was what we call in Japan a man of the Meiji era⁴, and my mother of the Taisho era⁵. If my mother objected to my father even in the slightest, he'd yell at her to "shut up." If there were any "buts," he would beat her. That was the kind of home I was raised in. I was in elementary school at that time, and since I was a relatively good student, I served as the student committee chair, and took on various leadership roles. The education our generation received taught us to take gender equality as given. But when I got home, my father's shout was enough to scare me stiff. I could not say anything and couldn't protect my mother. I became something like a counselor for her. All of her relatives died in the war, and she always told me, "If I had a home to return to, I'd leave this house in a heartbeat." She would always cry when we were in the bath together. She did this ever since I was 5 or 6.... I'm sorry.

MY: No, please.

³ The Women's Support Network operates in Japan to establish support for the survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake. This includes not only physical safety but also the psychological safety of women. ("About Us" 東日本大震災女性支援ネットワーク. http://risetogetherjp.org/?page_id=2#lang_en. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁴ The Meiji Era was from around 1868 to 1912 in Japan. It contained the Meiji Restoration which ended the Edo Period and the Tokugawa shogunate. ("Meiji (era)" Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meiji_era. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁵ The Taisho Era directly followed the Meiji era from 1912 to 1926. It included the increase in liberalism known as "Taisho Democracy" and World War One. ("Taishō period." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Taisho-period>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

RM: That was...

MY: I imagine the bath was the only place she could cry.

RM: That's right. As a girl in leadership positions in school, I thought it was all just unreasonable. Why should she be so oppressed just because she was his wife? I was just a child and didn't understand words like "oppression" or "domination," but it did not make sense to me that she would be yelled at whenever she tried to speak her mind. I was a child with a strong sense of justice. At that time, when I was in elementary school, people were spouting things like "Go Home, Koreans!" and so on. But when I got home, I couldn't say anything. So I grew up, all the while thinking how unfair it all was. My problems at home was one. Besides that, it wasn't until after I graduated college and started working that I experienced discrimination. I've been in leadership positions outside home for a long time. From when I started at a company and until I got married, I was a happy employee, was well taken care of and appreciated. My husband was going back to college and was in his first year back when he married me. He was going into medical school. It was expected that I'd "resign upon marriage." Do you know that phrase?

MY: I do, yes.

RM: It was the norm in those days for women to resign after they marry, but I didn't quit. I had two daughters on top of that, but even then I didn't quit. For the first three months of my maternity leave, I didn't have much trouble. Then 1-year maternity leave became tenable, which I took. But when I came back, there was no work for me, no desk, and no chair. This continued for several months. I don't know why, but I never told this to a union. I never told a lawyer. No one told me that this was unfair, or how to deal with it.

MY: Right, of course not.

RM: There was a union, but I, not knowing what to do. At my original desk sat a male junior employee. Beside that desk, I'd serve tea or read a book because I wasn't given any work to do. Eventually, the young man told me, "Ms. Masai, could you stop making a long sigh? It affects our morale." "Oh, was I sighing?" I said. "Yes, a long sigh over and over again." I apologized and didn't even realize I was sighing. I was also collecting dependent benefits. This was unheard of at this company. It was natural that a man would have these benefits if he was raising a child and the wife was not working. But because I was a woman, it was a huge ordeal and took me 8 months of negotiation and struggles to get approved. But I got it.

I then became the top earning woman in that company. The management began pestering me to resign, saying things like, "Has your husband not graduated yet?" "Why don't you just quit already?" I was 32 when my husband graduated. But then my mother, who had been watching the children for us, had fallen ill. At that time, I felt I had to quit. So, I did, after nearly ten years at the company at age 32.

Through these experiences, I realized just how much discrimination women had to go through in order to keep working. [previously] the problem was just something happening at home [but now...]. So, since in my thirties, I kept a journal and repeatedly wrote about my vision for a society where women could be themselves and live freely. I'd always write that I wanted to make this my life's work. This started with me attending a planning meeting for the Hyogo Prefecture Women's

Center⁶ in 1991, and then the publishing of our newsletter, “Women’s Network 91.” Because it was 1991. Posted at the bottom of the front page of each of our newsletters was Women’s Net Kobe’s mission: to build a society where women can be themselves and live freely. I feel this very strongly.

MY: And that dedication hasn’t wavered — not since 1991, or even before that. You’ve been dedicated to your life’s work and vision to build a new kind of society all this time. This was true after the earthquake, too. You spoke up about violence against women. What was the response like at that time? That is, in 1995 — already 26 years ago!

RM: Almost 27 years now. We established the Women’s Support Network then, and many women contacted our phone counseling services to discuss violence such as domestic violence. Really, these cases were almost exclusively about violence. The majority centered on abuse by their husbands, but some talked about sexual violence, too. We also visited evacuation shelters. For example, there was an incident of sexual assault at one evacuation shelter. Government officials were called in to speak with a male leader of the shelter, who said, “Give ‘em a break! The assailant’s a disaster victim, too.” This greatly surprised the official, as they told me directly. Four or five months later, one woman left her child at the shelter so she could tend to their home or go to city hall for some paperwork. That was about five months since the earthquake, and three or four households were living in a classroom rather than a gymnasium. Mass media called it “like the olden days when extended families would live together and support each other.” But when that woman returned from their home, she found that her child had been sexually assaulted. She went to a public health nurse there and said, “What am I supposed to do?” That nurse also told me what happened, and that she too wasn’t sure what to do.

I heard stories like this fairly often. We held women’s support seminars regularly. One woman came to a seminar from temporary housing that had been built that April. She was holding a small baby in her arms and told us she was a single mother. “There’s only women here, so can I say anything I want?” she said. We told her, “Of course, please feel free to share anything you’d like.” She went on to tell us that she couldn’t leave their housing to go grocery shopping because her baby was too young to be left alone. Some of the temporary housing complexes were built in remote areas. She said one older man in her complex offered to go shopping with her and was always incredibly kind. One night, she invited him over for dinner to thank him for his kindness. He then forced himself on her and assaulted her. She told this story with no sign of emotion. She said she felt powerless, without a single tear. Another woman with us asked if she took this to the police. Her tone was a bit accusatory, almost blaming. Shedding only one tear, the woman said, “Who could I have talked to when I had nowhere else to go?” . We were stunned silent. I was determined then to never let something like this happen again, and to do all I could.

I often heard stories like this. Then, in March of 1996, we held a rally for “No More Sexual Violence!” Just that previous September, a young girl in Okinawa⁷ had been raped.

⁶ The Hyogo Prefecture Women’s Center provides resources including a hotline to women and victims of domestic violence in Hyogo Prefecture. (“兵庫県女性家庭センター (配偶者暴力相談支援センター).”

Hyogo Prefecture. https://web.pref.hyogo.lg.jp/kf23/hw37_000000002.html. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁷ Okinawa is an Island that historically has been heavily populated by the United States Armed Forces. (“Okinawa Island.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okinawa_Island. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

MY: That's right.

RM: Perpetrated by US servicemen. We invited members of the Rape Emergency Intervention Counseling Center of Okinawa (REIKO)⁸ and organized a rally under the theme of "Connecting Hearts of Women in Disaster areas and Okinawa" and "No More Sexual Assault!" It was an all-women event, with only women reporters, and only women allowed in. The reason it wasn't held until March of the following year is because it was very difficult to talk about sexual assault in disaster-affected areas. For example, there was a caravan traveling the country to disaster-affected areas around that time. In Tokyo⁹, a friend of mine asked, "I heard that sexual assault was happening in disaster-affected areas — is that true?" I had told her that the assailant apparently seemed like a volunteer, wearing a towel around their neck, but I never said it was a volunteer who did it, just someone who looked like one. A man from an organization making a presentation about their activities in the disaster-affected area heard this and got incredibly angry. "So you're saying we did it?! That's like the oppression of the Koreans after the Great Kanto Quake!"¹⁰ He was apparently outraged. The atmosphere there completely changed, and my friend couldn't take it anymore and left.

There was also a magazine called AERA¹¹ back then. They ran a story that women were being sexually assaulted in disaster-affected areas. Suddenly hundreds of angry postcards came flooding in across the country. "How dare you defame these disaster areas!" "You're making these areas look bad!" I heard things like this every now and then. We were very careful in planning this rally as a result. The event would be women-only, in a closed space. We invited author Keiko Ochiai¹² and held the rally.

But I said "We will march afterwards." I myself made four signs that read things like, "Her No Means No!", "We want to feel safe going out at night!" etc. But the executive committee said that no one would march with us. Nonetheless, we obtained a permit from the police and marched from the rally site to the Sannomiya shopping district.¹³ By the end, not one of the 24[0] participants had left. Everyone stayed for the march. Everyone marched and chanted, "Her No Means No," and

⁸ REIKO provides support to victims of sexual assault including legal counseling and hotline support. ("ホー△" REICO. <https://reico.okinawa>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁹ Tokyo is the largest city of Japan and is also its capital. ("Tokyo." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokyo>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹⁰ The Great Kanto Earthquake, also known as the Tokyo-Yokohama Earthquake took place on September 1st 1923. The earthquake destroyed thousands of houses and it resulted in a tsunami that destroyed many more homes. (Pletcher, Kenneth. "Toyko-Yokohama earthquake of 1923." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tokyo-Yokohama-earthquake-of-1923>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹¹ AERA is a weekly magazine that produces news stories and photography. ("Aera (magazine)." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aera_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aera_(magazine)). Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹² Keiko Ochiai is an author who explores feminist ideas in her writing and is a strong anti-rape advocate. ("Keiko Ochiai." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keiko_Ochiai. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹³ A covered shopping area in Kobe, with many shops. (<https://en.kobe-sc.jp/>. Accessed 15 December 2023.)

"We want to feel safe going out at night!" I think this was the first and only time Kobe¹⁴¹⁵ had seen a gender-based violence protest of that magnitude, with that many women marching. Sometime later when I went to the US, I heard that similar women-led rallies called "Get Back The Night"¹⁶ were gaining traction. I remember the joy I felt connected to women across the world. It was said to be a great rally, and many women were able to talk about their experiences. It was similar to the Flower Demos¹⁷ we're seeing nowadays.

MY: That's true.

RM: They all shared their experiences, and things ended on a good note. That was in March, but just two months later in May, various reporters visited, but one article stated that even though the reporter stayed in Kobe for one week to write about the plight of victims of rape, but "not a single person knew of anyone victimized in that way. No one." The reporter stayed for only one week! But the article stated that a year had passed since the earthquake, and people would say that while there were stories of incidents in the Nagata Ward¹⁸ of Kobe, none of them were true. They were all a hoax, false rumors. That I, Masai, only said those things to promote her own organization. My own name came up more than 18 times in that article, and I just couldn't understand why.... Just saying my name once is enough, but they went on to describe me as that woman who lost an election. I just....

MY: There were personal attacks at every turn.

RM: That article was published and denounced everything about me. I was so shocked by all of it. Everyone told me that this article was published in the July issue, it would be off the shelves and forgotten about by August. Just forget it. At times I thought I'd be better just to let it go. But I was totally shocked. I thought I'd let go. Then, January or February of the following year, a friend in Tokyo informed me early that the feature that defamed us went on to win the Editors' Choice Magazine Journalism Award.¹⁹ "It's just an award for weekly magazines Yellow Pages²⁰, so don't worry about it too much. But I wanted to let you know in advance since it might come as a shock."

¹⁵ Kobe is located in West-Central Hoshu and is the large capital city of Hyōgo Prefecture. (Augustyn, Adam. "Kōbe" Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Kobe>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹⁶ Take Back the Night events take place in the evening, when historically women have felt unsafe. These events are a protest against the sexual violence women face in day-to-day life and especially at night. ("Take Back the Night March." Montana State University. <https://www.montana.edu/women/takebackmarch.html>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹⁷ Flower Demos are a recent social movement in Japan to protest sexual violence and the frequent "not guilty" verdicts in Japan. ("About Flower Demo." Flower Demo. <https://www.flowerdemo.org/about-us-in-english>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹⁸ Nagata Ward is one of the 9 wards of Kobe in Japan. Nagata Ward suffered the largest number of casualties as a result of the Great Hanshin Earthquake. ("Nagata-ku, Kobe." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagata-ku,_Kobe. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

¹⁹ Editors' Choice Magazine Journalism Award is a yearly award for journalism in Japan. ("Editors' Choice Magazine Journalism Award." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Editors%27_Choice_Magazine_Journalism_Award. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

²⁰ Yellow Pages are a directory of phone numbers of businesses. ("Yellow Pages." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_pages. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

That came through via fax. The moment I read it, I got chills and couldn't stop trembling. It was as if people across Japan were saying, "What you did was wrong." I don't know why, but I just couldn't stop shaking with that fear. After that, everyone's perception of me changed. Someone really said to me, "I believed it because you said so, but it was a lie, wasn't it?"

That was the first time I ever went to a lawyer. We sent a written a letter of protest and demanded suspension of publication. But Shogakukan²¹, which published the article, replied that since I didn't object when the article was first published, they assumed I had no objection and that this was the truth. I went back to my lawyer, who said, "You have a claim for defamation here. However, such a trial for libel takes a great deal of time and energy, and I'm not sure you will get much out of it. That aside, there are also ways to clear your name by continuing your work in women's movements. Whichever of these two you decide to pursue, I will support you." He was a lawyer greatly committed to human rights issues.

I then decided not to file a lawsuit and devote my energy back to supporting women who needed it. That decision was also met with a great deal of backlash. "How can you claim to be involved in women's movements when you give up without a fight?!" "Everyone looks to you and you're acting like a coward!" Harsh words like this were being said from women inside our movement. For a while, I could not go outside at all. All the while I was criticized for not fighting back. I started getting letters.... It was all so painful.

The one who saved me during that time was Keiko Kondo²² of an organization called "On"²³ in Hokkaido.²⁴ "We've been through this, too." she said. "We've been denounced by the same magazine [that published the article that defamed you]. We understand what you're going through. We believe you. Come here to Hokkaido and give a talk on sexual assault in and after disasters. Talk about whatever you would like, however much you would like." I was so happy to receive that message. Then, the group, Women Against Sexual Violence, which was formed following what is called the Midosuji subway incident in Osaka²⁵; a woman was molested, and another woman trying to help her was raped. This organization exposed this incident and continues to support survivors of sexual violence. They called me and said, "If you want to fight this, then we're here for you. If you're too tired and don't want to fight anymore, then you don't have to. We will think about (and do) what we can do for you."

I was overjoyed. I still had friends who believed me, who were willing to help me. Around that time, a book review in Asahi Shimbun²⁶ called that article that defamed me a "wonderful work." To have that article that chastised me win an award and be called "wonderful" When the article

²¹ Shogakukan was founded in 1922 and produces children's books, general literature, and dictionaries. ("Company Profile." Shogakukan. <https://www.shogakukan.co.jp/en/company/>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

²² Keiko Kondo started "On" in 1993. She was also involved with the "National Women's Shelter Network" and the enactment of the Domestic Violence Prevention Law. ("講演・研修・事業企画" 女のスペース・おん. <https://www.onnano-space-on.or.jp/活動内容/講演-研修-事業企画/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

²³ On was established by women for women in 1993 and in 1997 they established the first private shelter for DV victims in Hokkaido. ("女のスペース・おんについて" 女のスペース・おん. <https://www.onnano-space-on.or.jp/私たちについて-1/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

²⁴ Hokkaido is the northernmost island of Japan. ("Hokkaido." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hokkaido>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

²⁵ Osaka is a city in the Kansai region of Japan. ("Osaka." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Osaka-Japan>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

²⁶ The Asahi Shimbun is a newspaper publication company that first started in 1879. ("About Us." The Asahi Shimbun. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/help/about.html>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

won the Editors' Choice Magazine Journalism Award, so-called human-rights writers, both men and women, said, "We don't blame this woman who lost many things in the earthquake, who felt so empty inside that she needed to fabricate this lie to propel herself to fame."

MY: That's terrible.

RM: Someone who works in children's rights wrote something like "we can't blame women for being so empty inside as to lie their way to fame...." I don't see how anyone would want to make a name for themselves by claiming that sexual assault has happened.

MY: That, and the audacity to say they "didn't blame you" for it. That doesn't make any sense, frankly speaking.

RM: You'd see arguments like that written fairly often. And as I was flipping through the magazine, I encountered more criticism in the reader's column, such as "I can't believe I was stupid enough to believe there was sexual violence happening in disaster areas. It was all a lie." "That moron of a woman made me believe the lies she told." That kind of comments was very painful, and carried with me for ten whole years.... I mean, all I said was that sexual violence should never be tolerated. I didn't claim there were 100 cases or anything like that, yet their title was something like "The Fake Rumor, How Urban Legend of Proliferating Rape Cases Was Crafted." I just don't understand how speaking out against sexual violence could be met with this much animosity. All this made me start to doubt myself. Why was I being attacked so much? For nearly ten years, I resigned myself to not talking about the earthquake disaster anymore.

But I lived in a disaster-affected area, every year on January 17th, a forum on disasters was held, and only male representatives were lined up on the panel. They'd discuss active fault lines, post-disaster support, and so on, but there was no mention of challenges faced by women, not of sexual violence or otherwise. No one said a single thing about women. And then the earthquake struck. That year, in July of 1995, the Kinki Federation of Bar Associations²⁷ held a big symposium in Kobe on human rights in disaster-affected areas. So I went to listen. They distributed a phone book's worth of reports on the rights of children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and of foreigners. Looking at the contents, there was first of all no section for addressing the rights of women. In looking for any mention of women, I found this single line: "There was a rumor of sexual violence, but police denied it and called it a hoax." I became keenly aware then that women were assigned to a caretaking role, not as the objects of care themselves. That was partly why I decided to hold that rally the following year. It certainly wasn't to get famous. I greatly considered the risks beforehand, but survivors/victims would not likely be able to speak up. I felt then that if we didn't speak up for them, who would?

MY: It's difficult enough for survivors to speak out on what they've been through, and when women try to create a space where they can, they're shut down. There's an incredible force of society. But the reason they don't want women to speak up is because what they're

²⁷ The Kinki Federation of Bar Associations is a subsection of the larger Japan Bar Association which operates in legal studies and education along with judiciary investigations. ("English: Purpose." Japan Bar Association. <https://www.jpnbba.or.jp/english.html#purpose>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

saying is true. They called it a hoax they didn't want women to speak. That says a lot about how truthful women's claims are. I visited you in Kobe, did we not?

RM: In 1996, a year later. Or was it 1997? Sometime around there. But it was in the early days.

MY: I think so. I remember you saying back then just how vexing all the backlash was. Earlier you said you most distinctly remember the drop of tears from a woman who was sexually assaulted in a temporary housing unit. But what I remember is you saying, "It's not fair... Why am I being attacked for simply sharing the truth? It's just not fair." It was like the words were being squeezed out of you. Then, you were forced to keep quiet for ten years. But what made you eventually resume your activities?

RM: That was the Sumatra-Andaman Earthquake²⁸ that struck in December of 2004. In January, I saw a small article (originally written by a reporter in Colombo²⁹) in the Local News Section, which reported that women were being sexually assaulted in evacuation shelters following the earthquake. The disaster occurred in December, and by January, five women's organizations had launched investigations into shelters of nearly 2000 people. They uncovered a shocking amount of sexual harassment by shelter management. Women then raised their voices to their national Ministry of Women's Affairs³⁰, advocating for protection of women's privacy and women's participation in shelter management.

But government officials refused to take on these issues in the midst of all the chaos. When I read that small article, I remembered how shocked I was when I learned that shelter management in Kobe excused perpetrators (of sexual assault) because "they were disaster victims!" I saw similar things were happening in shelters overseas, but also how quickly women investigated and addressed it to their government. That February, I then read a newspaper article that the United Nations held the Beijing+10, Ten Year Review and Appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action³¹, in New York and that women brought a report on the Sumatra-Andaman Earthquake and advocated for addressing violence against women in disasters and conflict-stricken areas. I saw this highlighted story published in a major newspaper, and I —

MY: Just to clarify, the UN session.... The Beijing conference was in 1995, so Beijing+10 was at the 2005 Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, yes? They presented their report [of the disaster in December 2004] already!

²⁸ The Sumatra-Andaman Earthquake and resulting tsunami struck in December of 2004 and was located in the Indian Ocean. India, Indonesia, the Maldives, and Thailand were impacted most significantly. ("Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Indian-Ocean-tsunami-of-2004>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

²⁹ Major city in Sri Lanka. ("Colombo." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colombo>. Accessed 15 December 2023.)

³⁰ National Ministry of Women's Affairs exists in many countries, including Japan, with the goal of improving the lived experiences of women. ("女性省." Wikipedia. <https://ja.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/女性省>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

³¹ The Beijing Ten Year Review took place in February and March of 2005. The main theme was "Achieving Gender Equality, Development and Peace." This was part of a series of meetings with the first being in 1995. ("Beijing +10." United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. <https://archive.unescwa.org/sub-site/beijing-10>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

RM: Yes, and having gone to their government was already impressive enough, but for those women to not get discouraged and then take it to New York, I was so impressed by their quick and tenacious action. I felt so empowered. I then spoke with some women.... Well, actually I also talked to a man involved in disaster prevention. He said, "You will be bashed again." Even all the men knew this. "If you keep speaking on sexual violence, you will be criticized. We hold a large disaster forum every year. You can speak there at one of the breakout sessions of a subcommittee. We'll protect you." They were an influential group. So that happened, but I didn't need to be protected. I wanted to create a symposium to discuss the effects of the disaster on women, for women only. After Kobe, [there was a major earthquake] also in Niigata³² and elsewhere. We wanted to examine the previous disasters from women's perspectives.

We presented the idea of organizing an all-women symposium to various women, who were all really enthusiastic about helping out. We held it in November of 2005, having started planning in February. That November marked ten years from Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, and the symposium was called "Women and Disaster - Promoting Women's Participation in Disaster Prevention and Reconstruction." That greatly changed the course of things. I feel the symposium changed participants' perspectives, not only about gender-based violence but also examining the disaster from women's point of view. Then, the UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction³³ was held in Kobe that year, but I had no idea...

MY: A UN world conference, right?

RM: Yes, a UN world conference. But nobody called me, and I had no involvement in it so I had no idea. I heard about it later, when Prime Minister Koizumi³⁴ said they would incorporate women's perspectives into disaster policy from now on.

MY: Right, right. Global momentum has slowly but surely been pushing forward since then.

RM: That's right. Then we had our symposium in November of 2005...

MY: Right.

RM: That's when we established our website. On the homepage, I put just the words "gender disaster" in English, and the rest [in Japanese]. Then, the book we published in 1996, "Women Talk about the Great Hanshin Earthquake,³⁵" was translated into English with the help of a reporter

³² Niigata is the capital city of Niigata Prefecture which is located in the north central part of Honshu. ("Niigata." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Niigata-Japan>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

³³ The UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction met in January of 2005 in Kobe Japan. States, NGOs and Journalists came together to discuss and to report on the effects of natural disasters on all aspects of life. ("World Conference on Disaster Reduction: proceedings of the conference." United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. <https://www.undrr.org/publication/world-conference-disaster-reduction-proceedings-conference>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

³⁴ Prime Minister Koizumi was the Prime Minister of Japan from 2001 to 2006. He is a member of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Japan. (Tikkanen, Amy. "Koizumi Junichiro." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Koizumi-Junichiro>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

³⁵ A book published in 1936. (<https://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/2340/1/207-aoki-en.pdf>. Accessed 15 December 2023.)

from the English newspaper Asahi Daily News, Ms. Matsumoto, and other women across the country. All that work was uploaded to the website, called the “Disaster & Women Information Network in Japan,” or something like that. Then the earthquake disaster in Tohoku³⁶ occurred in 2011. The website’s English phrase “gender disaster” attracted offers of help from people in Sweden³⁷ and elsewhere, expressing their interest in assisting women. They asked if there were any cases of human trafficking occurring here, and if they could send resources to those areas. And from Haiti³⁸, I think, people from an association of women lawyers in the USA said they’d visit and support women from the legal side. Just by using the phrase “gender disaster,” suddenly a flood of messages came pouring in.

MY: Not just that, but your website was full of useful information.

RM: Sure, but it was all in Japanese.

MY: True. But yours was the only organization that addressed “gender and disaster” at that time. It was truly groundbreaking. Then one day, Oxfam³⁹ [Japan] offered their support.

RM: Yes, that was after you called me, really just after the disaster struck. You said, “Let’s do research that can’t be written off as a hoax.” I really wanted to, but Tohoku was far, and it [research] would cost money. It was then that we were contacted by Ms. Takahashi of Oxfam Japan. She called and said, “If there’s a project that Women’s Net Kobe wants to take on, Oxfam will support you.” I told her I wanted to conduct a study of violence. “Why do you want to do that?” she said. “So that study can be used to change public policy, of course,” I answered. “If that’s the case,” she said, “it’d be more effective to go beyond Women’s Net Kobe and create networks of organizations, and use them to lobby with the national government.”

I then asked her what work she had been doing thus far. She said, “I was in Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War.⁴⁰ While I didn’t directly support women there, I helped establish a women’s network, which worked to support the women’s movement.” She was truly amazing. I told her I’d do it. When she asked if I had anyone to work with, I replied, “Ah, I just spoke with Prof. Yoshihama⁴¹ of the University of Michigan the other day about working together!” And she said, “Very well, then let’s start planning for the study.” They provided 15 million yen for the network for three years, part of which covered expenses for the study of gender-based violence. So the fact that you

³⁶ Tohoku is a region of Japan which includes Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi and Yamagata prefectures. It is the northeastern part of Honshu. (“Tohoku Region.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tōhoku_region. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

³⁷ A European country in Scandinavia. (Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweden>. Accessed 15 December 2023.)

³⁸ Haiti is a country located in the Caribbean Sea and is made up of several islands and shares a border with The Dominican Republic. (“Haiti.” Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Haiti>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

³⁹ Oxfam Japan is a NPO that strives to help people escape poverty in regions around the world. (“What we believe.” OXFAM International. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/about/what-we-believe>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁴⁰ The Kosovo War was a conflict between primarily Yugoslav forces (Montenegro and Serbia) and Kosovo Albanians. The conflict came to a close when NATO intervened and Yugoslav forces left Kosovo. (“Kosovo Conflict.” Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kosovo-conflict>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁴¹ Professor Mieko Yoshihama, interviewer.

contacted me so quickly was huge. I was like, “Oh yeah!” That study also led to a documentary by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, Japan's only public media organization). The producer was able to get approval because there was our research to back it. That NHK documentary was so well received, and I think it made a difference in how issues of gender in disaster are addressed.

MY: Agreed. After the Kumamoto earthquake⁴², too, a women's center used the report of our study, highlighting and addressing the key points. It speaks to not only the power of research, but also the act of researching and collecting data to influence public policy.

RM: It is very powerful.

MY: Though the research wasn't always smooth sailing, was it?

RM: No, the research itself was difficult. When I said I wanted to conduct surveys in Miyagi Prefecture⁴³, I was told they could not issue such an order as the prefecture because shelters were run by local officials. They told me if I wanted to do it, I had to do it myself. I called several evacuation shelters, but all were answered by men in leadership. “You want to study disaster victims?!” they'd say. I was vehemently rejected everywhere, and I couldn't get to the shelters.

MY: Indeed, you face a great deal of opposition when you try to uncover the truth. They won't let you talk about it. If you do, you'll get backlash. First, they don't let women talk. They'll say it's a privacy issue, or some other excuse, and women won't talk about themselves. And if they do, no one believes you. That mechanism hasn't changed a bit.

RM: Right. Both with the Great Hanshin Earthquake, and then the Great East Japan Disaster⁴⁴ 16 years later. One thing that has changed in between and since those disasters is the women's movement against domestic violence. At evacuation shelters, flyers were posted, informing the availability of counseling on domestic violence, as well as sexual violence. That was one difference. But still, shelter leadership was male-dominated. Like the shelters I visited. As long as that didn't change, women couldn't speak out. That's what I thought.

When I went to Tohoku, I recalled one woman in Kobe who had said, “Who could I talk to when I had nowhere else to go?” How true is it?! There was a rape incident in Tohoku, and after the perpetrator and victim were questioned by police, they were both sent back to the same evacuation shelter. I therefore recommended there be a safe counseling service, as well as the option for victims and their families to safely relocate if desired. If they didn't create such a system and make it known to them, no one would speak out. It was a shame that we didn't get any reply after that.

⁴² Kumamoto Earthquakes were a series of earthquakes on April 16th of 2016. They took place in Kumamoto City in the Kyushu Region of Japan. (“2016 Kumamoto Earthquakes.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Kumamoto_earthquakes. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁴³ 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.)

⁴⁴ 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.)

MY: And when there's a disaster, any pre-existing lack of human rights and social conditions get magnified. In that sense, the COVID-19⁴⁵ pandemic is another disaster, right? [Although they might be very different], what issues would you say women are facing with the COVID-19 pandemic?

RM: Actually, this past April through August this year, we received about 200-300% more calls for counseling, including more women hoping to stay at our shelter. Starting in 2019, we've registered as a housing support corporation and are helping find new housing for single mothers and women thinking of divorce. We work with those who have no guarantor or little savings, free of charge.

MY: Right, that is one barrier to finding a home in Japan.

RM: We started making flyers. We were certified by the prefecture as a housing support corporation, so we could post our flyers everywhere. Then we received an inquiry from a woman who was severely abused, who said, "I didn't go anywhere for help until now. I thought even if I did, nothing would change." She saw our flyer that said, "We'll Go With You. No Charge," and thought this might be what she needed. So many people came in. It was difficult for them to rent a place without a guarantor, so we would try and rent it for them. We managed to pool our money together and also obtained a grant. Agencies would say, "I saw your website — it appears you support an indefinite number of women. We can't work with something like that." We were rejected by all the big guarantor associations in Japan, and we couldn't rent housing as a corporation. These women needed a place to escape from the violence quickly, but they were told to just return to their parents' homes.

But their husbands would of course still know where their parents live. Really, even if they say there is protection for women affected by violence in Japan, there is little support for them afterwards. In the UK⁴⁶ in 1994, if a woman experienced [domestic] violence and reported to the police, she would be given a place to stay. I wondered how they did it, and realized that Japan's homeless laws only applied to those living on the streets. Japan is finally starting to house their homeless population. But overseas, this is extended to those living in an unsafe home, such as those with violence or abuse. Those people too are treated as homeless and given a place to stay. Completely different than what we have here.

MY: Sure, it is a totally different framework. But the guarantee of basic human rights is a pillar of the Japanese constitution. This includes housing as a basic human right.

RM: That's so true. I often talk about Japan's place at 120th on the Gender Gap Index⁴⁷. A lot of people ask, "What is that figure? What does it mean?" The 119th place is held by the Republic of

⁴⁵ 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.)

⁴⁶ The UK refers to The United Kingdom which is an island located on the northwestern coast of Europe. ("United Kingdom." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁴⁷ The Gender Gap Index is an international method of identifying the gaps between the experiences of men and women in four areas: health, education, economy, and politics. ("Gender Gap Index." ResourceWatch.

Angola⁴⁸, with the capital of Luanda. In 121st place is Sierra Leone⁴⁹, a nation with tremendous conflict. Then there's Japan in the middle at 120th. Just ahead of this conflict-stricken nation in Africa. There are of course human rights violations, with perhaps violations against women being the most common. Japan is among these countries at 120th. That is, what can I say.... Women are divided on this, though there are a great number of women in Japan working hard to change it, others don't seem to be interested. It's still difficult to speak up to the Japanese government. People often tell me I'm changing society, that I have a strong conviction to do so. Really, those working so hard in the shelters are just so amazing and kind. But I think there are not enough people who can connect the problems they see at the shelters to government policy recommendations. Very few media outlets or organizations support this type of effort.

MY: Very few. That's not where the money is, right?

RM: Right. No budget for that.

MY: That's why it's really all volunteer work. You work without pay and spend your own time and money. The movement cannot thrive. People have to earn money to survive after all.

RM: And shelters are being closing down one after another. There were only a small number of shelters to begin with. They are closing down as our generation reaches their 70s. We have to be able to pay our younger hires properly, but many of our organizations are run by volunteers. That is a major problem. And when we explain the tough spot these women are in, other women will say it was their choice to get married, or that they don't want to donate to women like that. Well, those that do donate do it for the children. "The children are innocent," they'll say. I/we say "Was it her choice to get married? Who would choose to marry a man who was so violent?" I tell them it's very common for people to change after they marry, a pattern typical of domestic violence. Once she's his wife, he starts to abuse her. It's difficult to say this sort of thing in an educational setting.

MY: We cannot say it, even if we did, people would not understand it. It's a structural domination. They don't understand that and it's reduced to just a personal matter.

RM: Right, for women and marriage.... I often talk about housing with those in housing department [of a local government]. They'll say, "Ms. Masai, I'm sorry to say, and I cannot say this out loud (so between the two of us), but these women got married on their own, chose divorce on their own,

<https://resourcewatch.org/data/explore/Gender-Gap-Index-2?section=Discover&selectedCollection=&zoom=3&lat=0&lng=0&pitch=0&bearing=0&basemap=dark&labels=light&layers=%255B%257B%2522dataset%2522%253A%25220be2ce12-79b3-434b-b557-d6ea92d787fe%2522%252C%2522opacity%2522%253A1%252C%2522layer%2522%253A%25228f198af3-a9cc-4d22-b6ac-25a1d2baa7f3%2522%257D%255D&aoi=&page=1&sort=most-viewed&sortDirection=-1>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁴⁸ Angola is a country located in southwestern Africa. (Clarence-Smith, William. "Angola" Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Angola>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁴⁹ Sierra Leone is a country in western Africa. (Fyfe, Christopher. "Sierra Leone." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sierra-Leone>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

and now are looking for rent assistance and free housing. Isn't it a bit selfish? That's what most of the staff think."

MY: Right. And those people feel that something isn't right, but don't then go to change anything. Because they're not the ones suffering. It's not happening to me, not affecting me in any way. So even though something's off, I'll just leave it be. But by doing nothing, society never changes.

RM: But, you know, Japan at a glance is a major economic superpower. Yet for women — and of course for other groups like people with disabilities — there's no budget for their human rights. And within talks of human rights, like within movements for those with disabilities, women's issues remain unaddressed. Why is it that women are unable to raise their voices?

You referred to this as "structural." It's true that only 10% of Japanese National Diet⁵⁰ members are women. Among the worst ten of all countries. At rank 144th of 156 countries, Japan is at 10th from the bottom. There is no other developed country that ranks this low. These are mostly Middle Eastern countries with Japan thrown in. Japan is one of the only seven countries that require a woman to have her husband's permission to get an abortion. Japan is among these countries, mostly in the Middle East. This includes Indonesia⁵¹, the Middle East, and Japan. When it comes to women's rights, especially in this case as well as with violence, I desperately want to change this country.

All I can do is keep going, keep telling myself not to give up. Just keep doing what I can. If I think too much about the grand scale of things, I get discouraged. All I can do is to just keep doing what I can.

I always had a sense that all of this was unfair. I had read a bit about Norway's⁵² equality education in elementary schools. Boys and girls had similar haircuts, all wearing pants. "The only difference between boys and girls is that girls will have the ability to bear children. There are no other differences." This was written right at the beginning. Secondly, there was the matter of women's history. Women being robbed of political power is not just Norway's history, but also that of France⁵³, where a woman was decapitated at the guillotine for asserting women's rights at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁵⁴ or something like that. Or the woman's suffrage

⁵⁰ The National Diet in Japan is a large part of the Japanese Government. It consists of a lower house known as the House of Representatives and an upper house named the House of Councillors. ("The National Diet." The House of Representatives, Japan.

https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_english.nsf/html/statics/guide/dietfun.htm. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁵¹ Indonesia is a country that consists of multiple islands located off the coast of Southeast Asia. (McDivitt, James. "Indonesia." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Indonesia>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁵² Norway is a country in Northern Europe. (Sandvik, Gudmund. "Norway." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Norway>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁵³ France is a country located in Northwestern Europe. (Fournier, Gabriel. "France" Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/France>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

⁵⁴ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a document that was adopted by the United Nations in December of 1948. The document outlines rights that belong to all people which is used as the basis for international human right related laws. ("What is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Why Was it Created?" Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.)

movement in England, where those women were severely oppressed. This sort of women's history in Europe is taught to children [in Norway].

Then there's the third issue of violence. There is surely a connection between gender and violence, and talking is always alternative to violence. When I read about these three pillars of Norway's gender equality education curriculum for children, I wondered how we might be able to introduce this to Japan's education. So long as gender inequality remains in Japan — be it in times of disaster or not — women will be placed in an incredibly precarious situation. They say disaster preparedness starts in times of peace, and our disaster prevention is limited by our lack of a gender equality. When all us women working in disaster prevention get together, we all say nothing has changed. When asked why, we grumble and say it's because Japan has no gender equality in normal times. Unless that is addressed, nothing will change.

MY: Yes. We have been talking about the importance of gender equality [today]. The main title for this project is the Global Feminisms Project — that is, feminism as a plural noun.

RM: Right, in plural form.

MY: What does the word "feminism" mean to you? Bit of an abstract subject, but feel free to approach it more concretely.

RM: For me, as a start, feminism is about respecting women. Being truly respected as a woman, or rather as a person. I've had the misfortune of being surrounded by men — like my father, brother, and husband — telling me to "Shut up!" To me, it's only natural that a person should be respected, and a woman's dignity protected. Feminism is really the liberation of women. By women being liberated, I mean a woman being seen as a human being, and treated with dignity as such. That is the way it should be. It's only natural, at least for me. But why....

MY: That's right. It's nothing special, is it?

RM: Not at all, it's not like demanding special treatment. It's just natural — that's the way it is/should be. The other day, I proposed a workshop on femininity and masculinity for an all-male group of public servants who are section chiefs. When I did, they said that we "already have gender equality in government." "The discrimination against women you describe doesn't exist anymore. Men and women are already equal." I asked, "Put aside your own views, then — how about Japan as a whole? Do you have any thoughts on how women are expected to be in Japan, or anything like that?" One responded, "Women shouldn't overstep." A chorus of "That's right!" resounded throughout the room. "Women shouldn't overstep." This is the (very) root of the problem, isn't it? It's saying things like this that keep women from becoming politicians, directors, and managers.

Recently, there was a gubernatorial election in Hyogo Prefecture⁵⁵, and our organization sent out inquiries. One item addressed increasing women representation to 30% — right now, only 1 of 10 section chiefs are women in the Hyogo Prefectural government. When asked for comment on this, we got this in reply: "I feel that positions should be filled not based on gender, but on ability." I

⁵⁵ Hyogo Prefecture is located in the Kansai region of Japan in Western Honshu. ("Hyogo" Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hyogo-prefecture-japan>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

hear this reply often. “We appoint by ability. Not gender.” But in doing so, you end up with only 1 woman out of 10 section chiefs? I struggle to think that women’s capabilities are so different than men’s to only represent 10%. That elected-governor just didn’t understand the structural factors at work here. But these sorts of people overwhelmingly make up the ruling class. I truly believe that women’s dignity should be protected. A long time ago, we held a symposium with the theme, “Women Want to Live without Violence.”

MY: How can something so obvious be so difficult, right?

RM: Truly. When we talk about what all we can do to change things, really it all comes down to education. Taiwan often comes up as an example for us these days. Taiwan is the top country in Asia on the index for gender equality, and ranks #6 in the world, I believe. In 2004, Taiwan⁵⁶ introduced a law for gender equality education, amounting to about 8 hours of gender equality education per year in compulsory education, from kindergarten through high school. Staff, students, everyone has 8 hours of gender equality education, 4 hours on sex education, and 4 hours on domestic violence. You are required to continue to learn about these three things. That’s compulsory education. In doing so, Taiwan has improved tremendously from having a much worse gender gap than Japan in 2004. That was in 2004, compared to now in 2021.

MY: [17] years now.

RM: They changed in that short amount of time. It really was through education, I think. But it’s difficult to introduce legislation on gender equality education in Japan, or even laws against gender-based violence.

MY: You see it with (not) allowing couple to have different surnames, too.

RM: Definitely. To give up your family name has become such a big deal. Particularly in stories or fairy tale fantasies, losing your name is almost like losing your humanity. Yet even though it isn’t necessarily forced, with nearly 90% of married couples taking the husband’s name when they marry, it practically is forced. I’m pretty sure that Japan is said to be the only country today that forces couples to pick [the same] surname. That area is not my expertise, but there are very few. In Japan, it is only women who are being kept to occupy such (marginalized) positions.

MY: Right. It’s like society has the power to suppress us everywhere, and it is relentless. . And then they justify it with some romanticized notion of family. As if having different surnames will destroy the family. I mean, come on... having the same surname won’t fix what’s already broken. But they impose such fantasies as if this is how things should be, and they try to protect what they consider ideal. With such force, too.... But it is so obvious — not just for women, but for men, too — all people deserve to live in a society where they have their dignity. It’s so simple, and yet....

⁵⁶ Taiwan is the Republic of China (different from the People’s Republic of China). It is a small island nation (composed of many islands, the largest of which is also named Taiwan) in the northwestern Pacific Ocean near the PRC, Japan and the Philippines. (Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiwan>. Accessed 15 December 2023.)

RM: It really is. I just don't understand how some people can't see something so simple. I'm more surprised that they don't get angry at how absurd it all is. It's not like I'm arguing for special privileges, or lean too heavily into talks of advancing women's status or women's rights. Just that naturally, men and women should both be treated with dignity as human beings. But I work in a field where that is not the case. I often wonder why I've been doing this for so long, but it's because I've been working with people directly. I hear what these women are saying, and their words are quite heavy. When they talk about their experience, it's like they are speaking from their soul. When I hear that, I can't help but keep going.

MY: Yes. Because what they're saying is true, isn't it? They're telling their truth with their own words. That's why it is so powerful.

RM: Also, I often work with single mothers, as I assist them after they left violent partners. These women tell me, "Ms. Masai, is our choice limited to violence or poverty?" When they said that, I realized it was true. In Japan, those who leave their marriage often end up in extreme poverty. That goes for not just women, but children, too. There's a vast disparity in education, health, and experience. These children hardly have any hopes or dreams. People say children are important, especially with the declining birth rate. So women have children, then the government should allocate budget. That is what I have been advocating. They allocate tremendous amount of national budget to infertility, and those are budgeted first this time. But there are so many children already living in extreme poverty. The mother is in poverty, too. This puts strain on the parent-child relationship, to the point that one mother broke down from exhaustion and wrung out the child's neck. She said, "all I do is to work, breathe, and sleep. Work, breathe, and sleep, every day." And then her child would cuddle up to her in the middle of the night. She had lived in this single cramped room with her 5-year-old for years. At times she would strangle them, she said, and the child would start wailing. I just thought, "Wow... I see." When she was able to move into an apartment with separate rooms, she said it was like living in a dream. This is what's going on in Japan. I still get angry at times, but hold onto the hope that there's something I can do to change things.

MY: Well, we're getting close to the end of our time. But can we talk about what you feel might be missing from movements in Japan?

RM: In the end, I think we all need to work together. I've been saying that for a long time, haven't I? Until we connect the dots that are these women into lines and surfaces, nothing will change. But still, creating such a network of connections is fairly difficult. That, and some women just aren't that political. I'm the kind of person who ran for office twice, and created a school/training program called "Women for Elected Office". The Gender Equality centers can call for "gender equality" or "consciousness raising" all they want, but changing individuals thinking is not enough as long as societal structures and systems don't change. Students will call for equal partnership, but so long as there is a stark wage gap between men and women, it's the woman who will be resigning if something happens. Those with money will inevitably dominate those without when it comes to economy and society. We ought to work together to think of ways to change these systems and laws, and work to include women in the conversation. They say it takes 30% of the population to mobilize in order to change things. So

even if it's only 30%, let's connect — make a network that will inspire change. I've been saying this since back then in 2011.

MY: You have. Back then, too, you said this network could be made of looser connections, not something so rigid.

RM: Yes, a loose network. But still... the women of Japan are divided. Enough to think that men had so skillfully divided them. What the hell is going on?

MY: Divide and conquer, as they say.

RM: But my hope is that with the big Flower Demos finally reaching Japan.... I didn't expect the Me Too⁵⁷ movement to get much traction here, but the Flower Demo is great — many women stand up for the cause. Sometimes, only one woman demonstrating all by herself. There were four cases in a row where children were sexually abused, and even with the perpetrators forcing victims to drinking alcohol and assaulting them, they were not convicted. Women then came out to march. I'm sure a great percentage of women in Japan have experienced sexual violence, but there are too few studies. Not enough fact-finding investigations. Then, women said they weren't going to stay silent anymore... I hear that just one woman in Nara⁵⁸ stepped up and and 4 women in Aomori⁵⁹. Really just a small number of women... three in Maebashi City⁶⁰ in Gunma⁶¹, etc. I was moved to see these women — especially young women standing up, thinking maybe things would change. The younger generation is starting to rise up now. This makes me really want to believe that things might change.

MY: Indeed. Sort of like passing the baton. Let's do our best until then.

Finally, is there anything you'd like to say to listeners out there, be it those working on feminist research, participating in movements, or students?

RM: I'll say that in the work we have been doing to combat post-disaster sexual violence, research is not my expertise. But as someone on the ground, I was surprised to see that conducting a study and disseminating findings was very effective in this patriarchal society. And in the US, I hear researchers have been working inside
s since 1970's to conduct research and share their recommendations based on it. It isn't so common for researchers in Japan to work with an NPO⁶² and make research-based

⁵⁷ Me Too, also recognized as #MeToo is a social movement started in the United States as a way for people to make their experiences with sexual assault public. The goal is to empower victims of assault to speak their truth and to make the frequency of assault known. ("MeToo Movement." Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MeToo_movement. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁵⁸ Nara is the capital city of Nara Prefecture. (Levy, Michael. "Nara." Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Nara-Japan>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁵⁹ Aomori is the capital city of Aomori Prefecture which is located in the Tōhoku region of Japan. ("Aomori." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Aomori-Japan>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

Maebashi City is the capital of Gunma Prefecture. ("Maebashi." Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Maebashi>. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁶¹ Gunma is a prefecture in Japan located in the Kantō region of Honshu. ("Gunma Prefecture." Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunma_Prefecture. Accessed 14 June 2022.)

⁶² Non-profit organization. (Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiwan>. Accessed 15 December 2023.)

recommendations. That is something I'd like to see happen in Japan. That's what you did – you came from overseas, right? There wasn't anyone in Japan who would say let's do this.

MY: Right. But also, because I did come from overseas to do this, I often heard things like "Oh, you can't do this in Japan." Or, "You're too Americanized to really understand Japan." I get that kind of criticism a lot. I can't do much about that. So I just do what I can...

RM: All one can, yes.

MY: And we do it and get results. Let's push ourselves one more time, shall we?

RM: Right. I've been asking people in the media to share what is going on in the world I feel this information could really help women in Japan. Like the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake, for example, or Hurricane Katrina.⁶³ When that kind of information comes in, it's so validating to know this sort of thing is happening elsewhere. But it's really difficult to get ahold of that information. I'm sure that sort of network exists among scholars. It's hard for NPOs to get that kind of information, though.

MY: I hear you. There's a language barrier, too.

RM: There is a language barrier, yes. But we do what we can, bit by bit.

MY: Yes, we do. But you gave us a lot of insight today. Let's keep pushing ourselves — and collaborate together again, too.

RM: Yes. I'm really glad we could do the study [of violence against women after the disaster], it was quite the project. I'm very grateful.

MY: As am I! I look forward to working with you again.

RM: Yes, me too, thank you.

MY: Goodbye for now.

RM: Goodbye.

MY: This is the end of our interview. Thank you.

⁶³ Hurricane Katrina was a destructive hurricane in the Bahamas, Cuba, the Eastern United States, and Eastern Canada, but also including Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Hurricane Katrina started out as a tropical depression in August of 2005 but quickly became a Category 5 hurricane. ("Hurricane Katrina." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina. Accessed 14 June 2022.)