

GENDER ISSUES IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Alternative Movement Against the Kobe City Artery Project, Post-Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to define the characteristics of women's activities, and that of gender hierarchy within community, and to consider strategies for gender-balanced community. As an example, I have used the case of the alternative movement against the post-Hanshin-Awaji earthquake artery project, Nishisuma District, Kobe City. This paper focuses on the activities of "the Housewives Group." After the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, the Kobe City government decided to construct three traffic arteries in the Nishisuma District. A number of Resident Groups took swift action for an alternative plan to rebuild the community after the disaster, but negotiations with the city government broke down. It was too challenging to succeed with mass community organization and action because so many residents had been displaced and there were differing opinions amongst the groups' leaders. The Housewives Group, though they had no previous experience of community action, started their movement belatedly, in 1996. They first had to overcome Japanese patriarchal gender bias, which denied women the ability to speak with their own voice or to take political action. Despite the challenges, they succeeded in forming a community organization. In the year 2000, riding on the back of their actions in the late 90s, the residents established an ongoing research project. Despite their hard work, members continue to be suppressed and barred by the state of patriarchal social conditioning in Japan. They have been forced to channel their aims into subcontracted work in the community. However, in evaluating their new roles within the community, they are pleased to find new vigor in their lives, vigor and meaning, which differs from traditional gender role assignment. In conclusion, this case suggests the importance of empowering both men and women to practice equally within community, both localized and extended.

INTRODUCTION

In Japan, mainstream citizen participation has been increasing since the 1960s. A number of important laws were passed in the 1990s. For example, the "NPO Action Law" and the "Free Access to Information Law." In 1995, the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake showed that community development systems needed to be established. It is common knowledge that the earthquake caused severe damage over a large area. Public services ceased to operate, and a lot of communities couldn't cope with residents' needs. As a result, numerous volunteer organizations gathered to support and resurrect people's lives.

Kobe City is now one of the most advanced cities, in terms of citizen participation in Japan. In 1981, before the earthquake, Kobe City established the Machizukuri Municipal Bylaw. This states that the mayor can approve a community movement as a Machizukuri association, so long as it has residents' approval and funding support. It also requires deployment of planners or designers, and materialization. Kobe City is also famous for land development. During the modernization process, Kobe developed trading ports, and has been transferring earth and sand from the mountains to the bays since the 1950s. There were some conflicts between residents and the Kobe City government before the earthquake. You may be aware that the post-earthquake reconstruction process had enormous problems in terms of citizen participation.

Regarding the relationship between women and community development, it seems that some studies have emphasized the domestically focused gender role and characteristics of female-initiated community movements. Other studies have defined gender hierarchy in the community. Women are forced to engage in unpaid or low-wage work, particularly because



Figure 1. The suburbs are located in North, West and Tarumi ward, and the north of Suma ward.

Japan's government leaves welfare work to the community. It does not provide funding or support for social welfare. Japan is in 32nd place on the GEM index, though it holds 9th place on the HDI index, and 11th place on the GDI index.

Considering these contrary but interrelated characteristics of gender role and socio-political hierarchy, it is important to define the relationship between these characteristics from the viewpoint of gender dichotomy. What here follows is an example using the case of the Nishisuma District, post-Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, focusing on the actions of the Housewives Group.

NISHISUMA DISTRICT AND RECONSTRUCTION PLAN AFTER THE HANSHIN-AWAJI EARTHQUAKE: ARTERY PROJECTS

Nishisuma District is located southwest of Kobe City, in Hyogo Prefecture. Nishisuma was developed as a suburb before WWII and is a middle-class residential area. This area features low wooden houses and narrow streets which ambulances are unable to enter. There are also a few parks. The destructive effect of the earthquake was enormous, though fortunately fires did not break out.

The government's reconstruction plan comprised three traffic arteries: Suma-Tamon Road 36m wide (six lanes, including elevated lanes), Chuo Artery 27 to 36m wide, and Chimori Road 22m wide. These arteries now connect the inner area with the new town, and were passed by law, by 1968: prior

to citizen participation in municipal issues being approved. Residents are concerned about the environmental impact: air and noise pollution, the landscape, and their community lives.

COMMUNITY MOVEMENT AGAINST THE ARTERY PROJECTS

There are ten community groups in negotiations with the government concerning this artery project. Six groups belong to the Jichikai, which is the smallest unit of administrative organization in Japan. Four groups are non-administrative. One group acts for Machizukuri, which translates as community development. The other three groups are types of opposition to the artery projects. Before the earthquake, Nishisuma District was zoned into only three Jichikai. After the earthquake, one Jichikai was subdivided. From a gender perspective, the leaders of these community groups are all men, except for the Housewives Group.

The community movement process in Nishisuma can be divided into four periods.

Period One: Before the Earthquake

In 1992, the Kobe City government planned readjustment of town-lots in Nishisuma District, including plans for seven arteries. They also set up the "Nishisuma Machizukuri gathering" which was composed of Jichikai and other units of the administration (for example, the Women's Conference", and the "Elderly meeting"). In early 1994, the government made a proposal to set this gathering to the Nishisuma Machizukuri

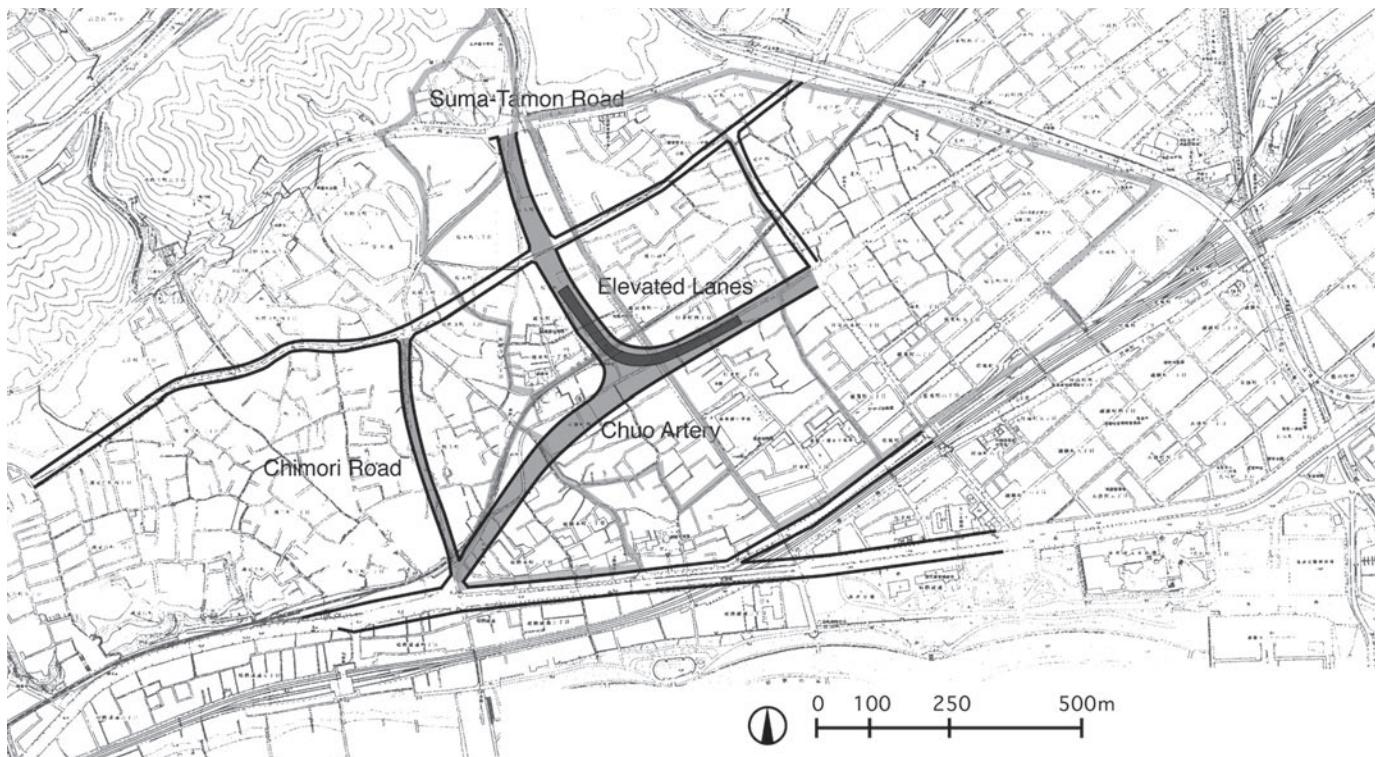


Figure 2. The artery projects.

association in order to actualize their plan, but some members opposed, and the gathering was dissolved. Some of the Jichikai were then reorganized to enable the government to withdraw the plan. However, in June of that same year, the government publicly announced the plan. Three Jichikai requested that the government reconsider. The government then set the council, excluding Nishisuma residents, and terminated the deliberation that December.

Period Two: Post Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (17 January 1995. Winter)

The Kobe City government ultimately decided to construct only three of the seven previously proposed arteries. Then they altered the manner of the project from readjustment of town lots to buying-up the ownership of the lands and dwellings obstructing the construction areas. This determination resulted in the landowners losing their right to reconstruct buildings on their lots even though many of them had lost their houses by the earthquake. Furthermore, the government became able to negotiate only with the landowners.

Residents formed the “Nishisuma Machizukuri Conference”, demanding that the government reconsider the artery project, and approach the city’s reconstruction from a completely different angle. They collected more than 8,000 signatures, assessed the impact of potential air and noise pollution from the arteries, and tried to establish the Machizukuri association on the same network as the Jichikai. The government ignored their actions for two years.

This deadlocked situation stagnated community movement. Subsequently, the wider community was dealing with organizational issues; the residents had scattered and leaders’ opinions clashed. By December, the Machizukuri Conference showed compromise regarding the artery proposals, and lost centripetal force within the community. On the other hand, some of the Jichikai were gradually reorganized, and the Housewives Group and the Meetings against the Artery Projects materialized in 1996.

Period Three: Negotiations Regarding Environmental Assessments by Six Jichikai

In December 1996, the Head of the Kobe Bar Association published the opinion that the government should carry out environmental assessments before constructing the arteries. The following year, six of the Jichikai published the same opinion, and requested that the government make their investigation plan available to view. Kobe City government evaded the request and claiming a “temporary step”, they provocatively announced the upcoming schedule for the arteries’ construction.

Following the announcement, the same six Jichikai opposed the planned schedule. The Housewives Group petitioned

residents’ opinions and collected signatures to appeal to the City Assembly. By December 1997, they had collected more than 13,000 signatures, although it appeared that over the course of the year, people’s attention to the issue had declined. The Meeting against the Artery Project formed The Network against the Artery Project. This new network’s members consisted of people from community groups; its purpose being to refer to the arbitration of environmental assessment. More than 2,500 residents applied for the arbitration on the same day that the Housewives Group appealed. The arbitration was accepted.

These networked community actions forced the government to release the investigation plan to the six Jichikai. The plan revealed that the government had no plans whatsoever for the welfare of environmental conservation. The six Jichikai published that the investigation plan was not solid enough to practice.

Period Four: Progress of Negotiations and Risk Factors

The arbitration committee recommended that the government execute an environmental assessment in conjunction with residents. The government agreed to cooperate. Additionally, the government suggested that one artery plan could be partially changed from four lanes to two lanes in the year 2000. However the two sides, government and residents, were still in dispute over the elevated road. The complexities and pressures both of the negotiations, and of all six Jichikai attempting to put forward a collective opinion, became so severe that it almost caused dissolution of all six groups.

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE HOUSEWIVES GROUP

The Housewives Group is a horizontal and loose network of women. The core comprises about fifteen women, all of whom are over the age of fifty. It was formed in March 1996. The founder said, “I participated in a community meeting as soon as I came back home in fall, after the earthquake. However this meeting concerned making an alternative reconstruction plan, which was amazingly just a readjustment of town lots. When I queried why they were merely considering a readjustment plan, the leaders became angry. I was then excluded from the discussion ... It was not only housewives but also the elderly and displaced citizens who were not given voice to express their opinions. I was sure that housewives (women) were entitled to state their opinions. In any case, we need a network of women beyond the Jichikai area because the opinions of each Jichikai are different.”

Step One: Group Work

It took seven months to form the organization in 1996. A monthly women-only meeting was held. They attempted to facilitate communication with each other on the back of their policy that everyone has the right to free speech. An average of ten to fifteen housewives participated at each meeting, though

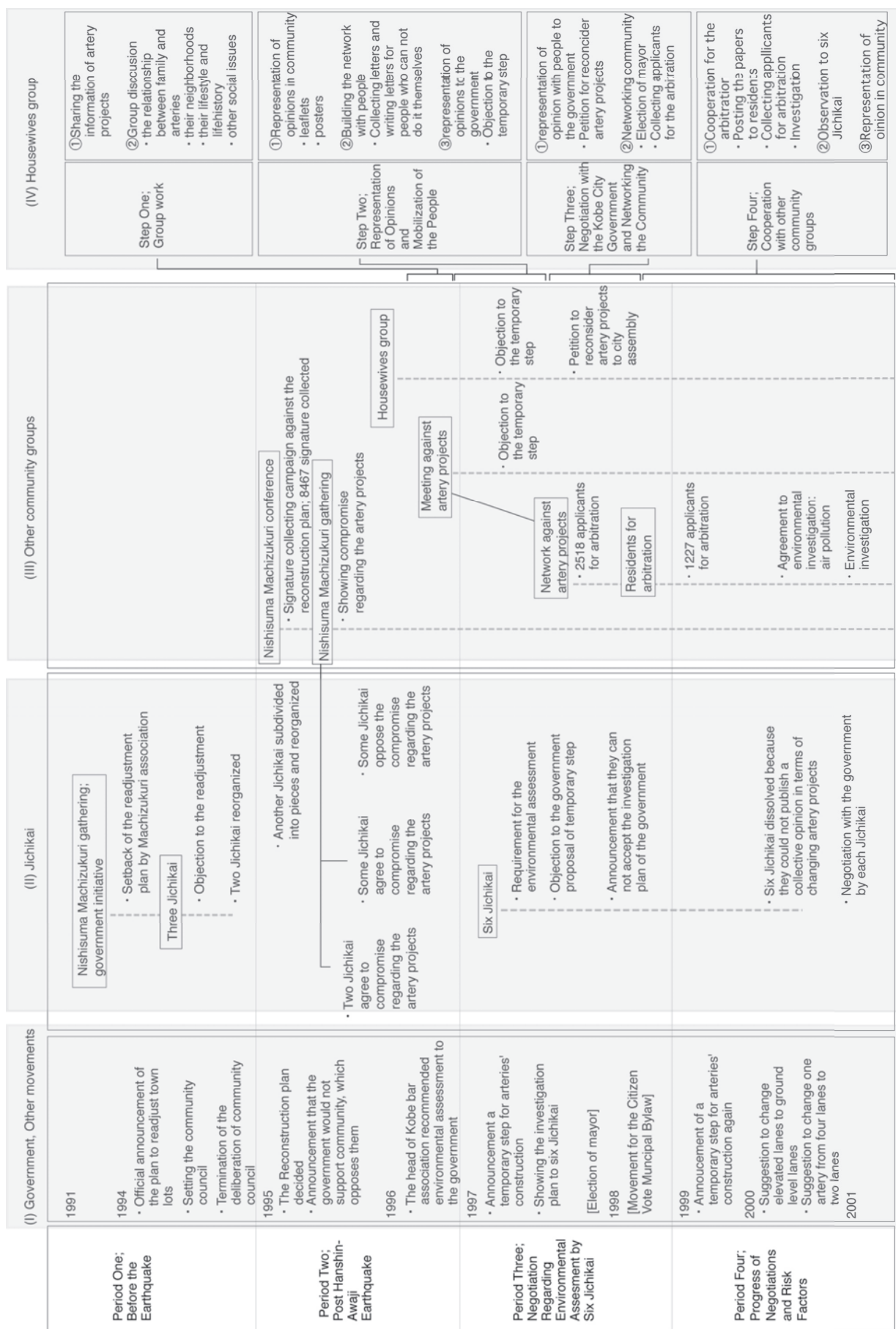


Figure 3. Community movement process in Nishisuma.

the total number was about thirty. They discussed the artery projects from a homemaker's point of view. It also gave them a forum to discuss their neighborhoods, their life histories, and other various social issues of concern. These other issues broached the environmental pollution of another region, and the impact of the United States' Naval Base in Okinawa. Through this process, they were able to more fully understand the impending influence of the artery projects, as well as the interests and viewpoints of their group's members.

Step Two: Representation of Opinions and Mobilization of the People

The Housewives Group succeeded in bringing the peoples' attention to the artery projects. They posted leaflets and simple pamphlets to each house in the area, and made large posters to represent their opinions and arrest the people's attention. The posters said such things as "Do you know about the highway artery project? We are very anxious about our health. Please consider this project and call us."

They then built a network of residents by publishing pamphlets of letters they wished to lobby. During this process they were also able to manage residents' post-earthquake needs. Following the destruction and havoc the tremor had caused, these women had become extremely sensitive to diversity and were weak subjects as people. When the first twenty-odd letters of the group were collected, it was found that the contents differed vastly. The group believed that various ideas and opinions must be represented, and so collected more letters. Following this action, they were then asked to write letters on behalf of citizens who were unable to do it for themselves, for example, aged people. Consequently, about two hundred letters were collected.

These actions made it clear that other community groups were unable to organize residents effectively, and were not allowing across-the-board freedom of speech. Some other groups questioned the right of the Housewives Group to act only through women's voices, and often criticized their actions.

Step Three: Negotiating with the Kobe City Government and Networking the Community

After the Kobe City government suggested the construction of the arteries as a "temporary step," the Housewives Group began to lobby and prepared to petition the city assembly. They made best use of the abundant network of residents, and collected more than 13,000 signatures in only three months. At the same time, they were asked to participate in the mayoral election campaign and in arbitration action with other community groups. They were accepted as part of the movement and contributed enormously.

Step Four: The Importance of Community Movement in regard to Gender Role Assignment Risks

As negotiations with the government through the arbitration and the six Jichikai advanced, the Housewives Group supported their actions. They did such things as posting leaflets, measuring air pollution, and observing meetings. For example, the number of applicants for additional application of arbitration was 1,227, and they rallied about 1,000. They came to play an important role in the community movement, but they couldn't decide on negotiation or publicity strategies as a stand-alone group. As a result of this situation, they were unable to prevent the dissolution of six Jichikai. In addition, they pointed out that they could not fully act as they wished without the cooperation of other groups. As a result, the number of participants to arbitration declined.

To summarize from a gender perspective, in regards to these alternative motions against the artery projects, we must divide the movements into two groups: community movements, and the Housewives Group's movements. Firstly, after the earthquake, men orchestrated alternative movements, and women were excluded, therefore finding it difficult to participate. Secondly, the Housewives Group organized citizens, making use of their network, and their instinctual sense of caring for families and the neighborhood. They contributed towards community actions during difficult times, and were accepted for their efforts. Thirdly, the Housewives group played the role of arousing people's attention, but they were excluded from negotiation decisions. This situation was due to vertical and impenetrable patriarchal conditioning within the movements, and society as a whole.

RECOGNITION AND EVALUATION OF THE HOUSEWIVES GROUP'S MEMBERS

I examined the recognition of gender stereotypes and the evaluation to community movement of the Housewives Group. I headed twelve members and analyzed with the KJ method.

Lifestyles and Recognition of Gender Stereotypes

All members of the group have almost finished raising their children, and don't have full time jobs. This enables them to spend a lot of time in community interaction and to have decent networking opportunities with residents. Many of the members highly value community, and as homemakers, they fear the impact of artery projects in relation to their families. On the other hand, prior to women's participation and action, many of the members believed that women were disempowered regarding anti-government actions. They also believed that the overarching patriarchal image of the housewife was "useless." Some women said that these social constructs stemmed from their social conditioning as children by Japan's gender-biased education system. One of the women interviewed stated, "My

parents educated me to believe that the most important role for women was to be obedient to others, and never to talk back or disagree." Another said, "My parents said that women must be engaged in housekeeping and did not need higher education."

The Relationship between the Evaluation of the Movement and the Characteristics of The Housewives Group

Concerning the excellent results of the community movement, the Housewives Group members respected:

- To negotiate with the government, and to allow the government to approve the mediation of environmental assessment, thus altering part of the artery project.
- At the community level, the factors of negotiation are to organize large numbers of residents and to network community groups with each other.
- At the Housewives Group level, to acknowledge each members' point of view, and to then act collaboratively.
- At the family level, to be understood by family in terms of the relationship of family and community movement and to members' activities.
- At the members' personal level, to put forth their beliefs to others, including their family members, the other Housewives Group members, residents, community groups and the government.

They suggested that the primary factor for their success was their lifestyle, which included allowing time for activities and networking with residents, as well as their flexible behavior toward others. One member stated, "Men are stubborn to others, but women think a lot about each other. Our flexibility is an important factor in our approach to them." These characteristics of housewives are especially beneficial to community organization.

In addition, it is most significant that so many members admired their understanding of government and community so much. They said things like, "It was a special experience, my first in being given a chance to share my beliefs with others, to collect signatures and to participate in the demonstration march in front of the government offices. These kinds of actions are traditionally viewed as unladylike." And another, "When I looked down the townscape from the municipal assembly on the 24th floor of the government office building, I could understand how this architectural viewpoint gives the city planners increased power; so distant from our lives on the ground level." These comments suggest that they were previously quite estranged with the givens of the public spheres of government and community, but that they have since developed motivation to try and overcome their oppressed state in regard to the representation of women, and negotiation practices. The strong realism of participating in public movements and of being engaged in the public sphere, give them their incentive to act.

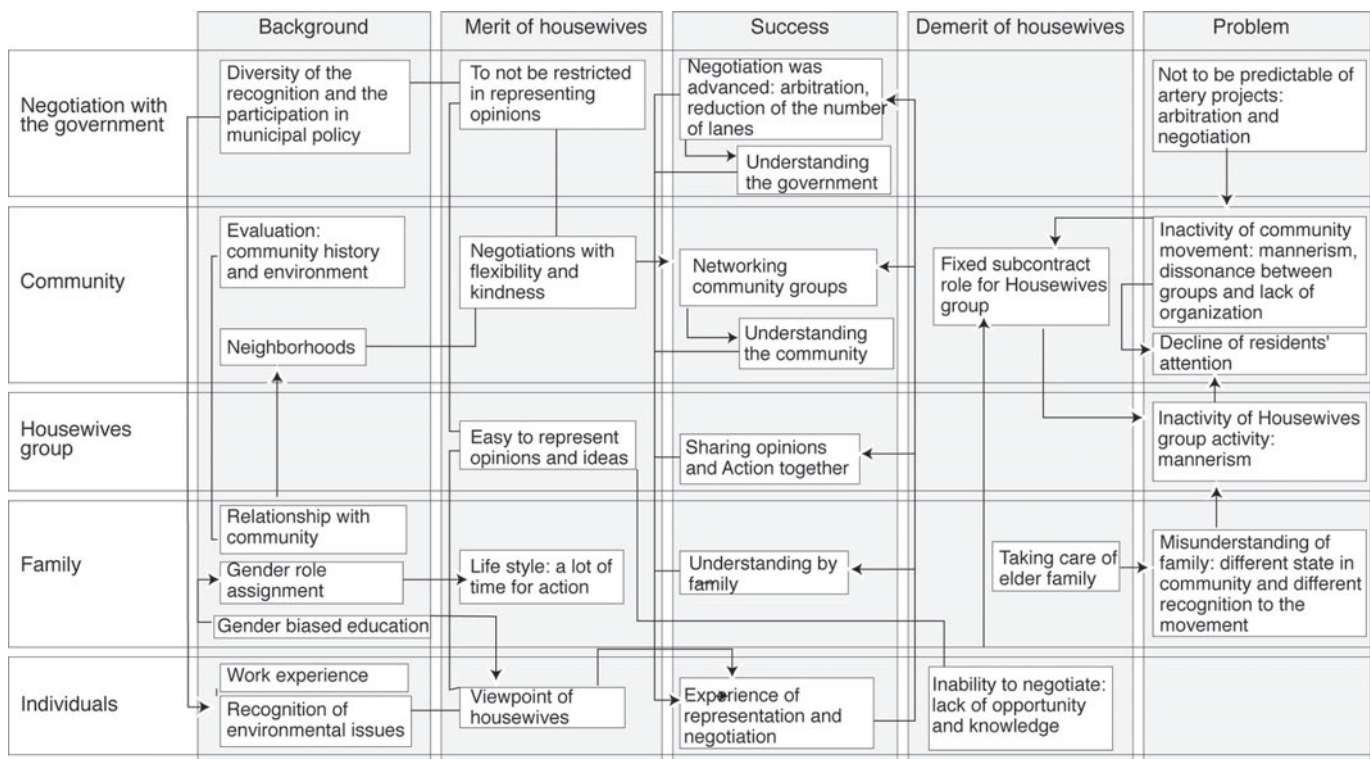


Figure 4. Recognition and evaluation of the housewives group members.

Regarding the problems concerning community movement, the Housewives Group indicated that:

- In negotiations with the government, they were far from optimistic about the arbitration and the reconstruction of community through partnership
- At the community level, that it is difficult to coordinate community groups and to rouse peoples' attention to arbitration because it takes such a long time, and community movements can become stereotyped.
- These situations are the same within the Housewives Group, but we cannot overlook that they regard it as a serious problem that they were forced to engage in fixed subcontract work and could not promote their own activity after their 1997 petition. They were anxious that they were unable to act as a mediator between residents and core members.
- At the family level, time management was hindered because they had to take care of elderly family members, causing difficulty in attending night meetings. They were also hindered by the misunderstandings of their family members.
- At a personal level, their sense of suppressed communication with people, other groups, and the government, coupled with their lack of knowledge about arbitration.

Some members related the subcontract work to gender discrimination issues. They stated that it is difficult for them to attain the power to negotiate, despite struggling to overcome the barriers. It is challenging to break the stereotypical view that "the housewife is not good at discussion," particularly in a country that did not receive the greater benefits of the late twentieth century feminist movement. "When some community design experts came to Nishisuma, I talked about some critical issues concerning community action. I thought it was a chance to state my opinion that each group should communicate with the other groups. However, after the meeting my viewpoint was rejected. They told me that I had to speak in the role of resident, and that the members of the Housewives Group must be stupid." This comment implies a contradiction that "residents" are reasonable but "women" are unreasonable. Some members did however sympathize with the gender role assignment. They felt distressed about representing their opinions in public, and took a passive, rather than active, role. "When I forwarded my opinions in some forums with members, I felt that I was not adaptable to such a type of ceremony. I would like to do subcontract work." "I feel fearful of my activity, stepping into the public sphere so much."

I once suggested to the Housewives Group that if they stop their subcontract work, other community groups would recognize their crucial role. However they feared that if they were to cease their subcontracted work, they might also lose the power of arbitration. They queried, "If the government were

to announce that, would they close the arbitration at the same time?" In gender studies it is said, "the gender hierarchy in emergency times stems from the every day."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: the Possibilities and Risks of Gender Dichotomy

This case defines the relationship between women's activities and gender dichotomy in Japan in two instances. Firstly, women act as women, devoting their lives to a domestic role and taking care of their families. They are able to use their time and residential networks, as well as satisfying the needs of residents so kindly and elaborately, through their actions. These characteristics are the catch returns of being so heavily engaged in the private sphere, and hence provide the possibility of female-led community development. They therefore need group work before they can represent their opinions in the public sphere. They must overcome their socially conditioned gender stereotypes.

Secondly, some men and women globally, including Japanese, have become accustomed to the vertical relationship of men and women in patriarchal society. Women have been separated from community movements, especially from the anti-government lobbies in Japan. They need to bring themselves out of the private sphere, and into the public, so that they can negotiate with the government and coordinate community groups. Even if women do participate with political actions, they suffer the risk of being subcontracted by men, either compulsorily or spontaneously. These characteristics reflect their lifestyles and gender-biased conditioning through education and the system as a whole. This causes problems within community organization and is the inevitable limit of gender dichotomy.

Recommendation: How to Support the Community Development of Gender Equality

I must emphasize that this is but one case concerning gender inequalities, and it reflects the characteristics of only one suburb. Most of the residents are middle-class, and the lives of men and women are separated. Most men work outside of their community, while the women stay in their homes. There are numerous types of community movements, which are promoted by both men and women in Japan. But it remains fact that women, especially middle-aged women, work in bad conditions and positions in their communities, even though they play such an invisible but crucial role.

I also make sure that the role assignment in community itself is not a problem. Both the negotiation with government and the organizing community are important. I point out that if people challenge taking on new roles in community, we must approve of and support them.

The Nishisuma case suggests that we must make a program to empower women. It implies that we need a revised sense of community, in which the two sexes work together harmoniously, respecting and supporting each other. Of course, to be effective in Japan, this program must be established as official practice. If this remains as a custom in community, experts or NPO / NGO staff must support them unofficially.

As experts, we can respect their lives and characteristics. We can encourage them to be proud of themselves and their role within the family, and to speak their opinions as women. If the need arises, we can talk in semi-private or semi-public spheres together. We can also recommend they read literature pertaining to other women's actions, or invite experts to talk about the role of women in community movements.

We can encourage them to overcome their weaknesses and to develop a new empowered role in the community. In the case of Nishisuma, these women value their new role and their insight into understanding government and their community. The reality of overcoming gender-biased obstacles drives them towards new challenges. We can suggest that they partake in new and unique actions, and give them advice on how to build networks with various groups beyond the localized area.

Finally, for those who suffer from gender hierarchy, or any other type of vertical hierarchy, we need to constructively criticize the conditions of community movement, whilst maintaining some of the characteristics of community. The privilege of outsiders is that they can either be severely shocked by the situation, or ignore the traditional practice of gender role assignment.

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