Internationalisms and the Women's Movement in Japan, Early Twentieth Century to the End of the Second World War

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Histories of Japan's role in the Second World War often begin in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the Meiji Restoration. The Meiji Restoration was primarily a political transition; in 1868 the Tokugawa shogunate–a feudal system–ended and was replaced by direct imperial rule under the Meiji emperor. This political transition, though, marked profound economic and social change for Japan as well. The country opened its borders to global capitalism and began a process of adaptation to the Western-dominated international order.[1] Japan "entered the race," so to speak, the race for modernity, industrial capacity, and the consolidation of power on the global stage. Increasing literacy and access to higher education for both men and women quickly became a part of the Meiji agenda in this race toward modernity, so Japanese women were first sent abroad for higher education in 1871.[2] It was Japanese women educated in the United States and Europe who became leaders of the country's women's organizations formed in the twentieth century, which made strides in the movements for women's suffrage, labouring women's rights, women's access to birth control, and international peace in the period between the two world wars.[3] Japanese women had very limited access to political participation within Japan, but engaging in worldwide women's movements meant they could have political leverage in spaces outside of Japan. In this way, the modern Japanese feminist movement was founded on an international consciousness. Internationalist movements are built on networks which transcend national borders; these networks serve as a means to create power through solidarity and collaboration of similarly affected peoples the world over. Strong race-based and class-based international networks parallel to the international women's movement existed in the interwar period too, but these networks were disrupted by rising nationalism and militarism in the years up to and during the Second World War. Japanese feminist leaders, for instance, had to reconcile the interests of their internationally-connected movements with their sense of national duty. The women's movement in Japan was muted through the war years because of its special dependency on international cooperation, particularly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, but in the meantime Japanese feminists engaged in social work and played active roles in maintaining the home front.[4] The Japanese state only minimally mobilized the nation's women for industrial labour, unlike other major belligerents, but women in Japan supported the war effort in numerous other ways, maintaining their agency and public role. After the war's end in 1945, notions of internationalism had changed, but the networks Japanese feminists worked to build before the war could be revisited to secure suffrage and other movement aims.

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[1] Britannica, "Meiji Restoration," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 29, 2021.
[2] Ann M. Harrington, "Women and Higher Education in the Japanese Empire (1895-1945)," *Journal of Asian History,* 21, no. 2 (1987): 169-170.
[3] Taeko Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 23.
[4] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II,* 104.

At the start of the Meiji period and into the early twentieth century, Japanese women were generally limited to roles within the home. Some women were employed as low-wage labourers and participated in labour organizing, but until contact was established with women's movements around the world the prevailing notion of the ideal Japanese woman remained the "good wife and wise mother." This traditional ideology concerning the role of women likely developed from Confucian teachings, which advanced supporting one's husband through domestic work as a wife's most important duty.[5] The domestic role of women was also entrenched in law. Japanese women were unable to vote and Article 5 of the 1900 Public Order Police Law made it illegal for women to join political parties, speak at rallies, and even attend rallies.[6] Because political structures were closed to Japanese women within the country, a need arose for alternative methods outside the country for influencing Japanese policy. This need for outside, alternative methods to change ruling structures was felt elsewhere too, by subjugated peoples and minorities all around the world, and internationalisms presented an answer. The First World War was a catalyst as it was largely fought by peoples living under colonial rule, and though many of them fought under the guise of Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of "self-determination," self-determination was not extended to colonial peoples at the war's end.[7] Also important, the First World War made the world smaller by connecting peoples from across the globe who would not have otherwise crossed paths. With these combined factors, international consciousness and solidarities blossomed in the interwar period. Various iterations of Pan-Africanism, for example, were particularly strong at this time. Based on the idea that all people of the African diaspora possess a shared history, a shared homeland, and a shared struggle, Pan-African movements connected Black Americans (a minority population) with hundreds of millions of Black peoples worldwide. Further, Pan-African conferences and media publications served as a political outlet for many Black Americans, who remained effectively disenfranchised in the first half of the twentieth century and faced constant threats of violence.[8]

Broader internationalisms of the "darker races" grew in the 1920s and 1930s as well. For instance, the Chicago-based Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) was led by Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, a former member of the Black nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In her role as founder and president of the PME, Gordon led hundreds of thousands of members and pursued connections with Japanese and Filipino leaders to forge Afro-Asian solidarity in the 1930s. Japan's status as the world's foremost non-white, economically and militarily powerful state in the early twentieth century made Afro-Japanese solidarity appear especially strategic to African Americans. [9] Several other movements linking the struggles of people of "darker races" around the world existed in the interwar period, including Afro-Indian solidarity movements and international anticolonial

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[5] Woman's Suffrage League of Japan, *Japanese Women,* 3, no. 3 (May 1940): 3.
[6] Andrew Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Pre-War Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 36.
[7] Gerald Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun: African Americans, Japan, and the Rise of Afro-Asian Solidarity* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 37-38.
[8] Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 7-8.
[9] Keisha N. Blain, "Confraternity of All Dark Races." *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 5, no. 2 (2016): 163.

movements.[10] Similarly, international communism, represented by the Comintern, strove to connect all of the working-class people of the world who shared an experience of subjugation under capitalist systems.[11]

In each of the above-mentioned cases, oppressed peoples sought larger communities to increase their power against their oppressors. Women's suffrage organizations in the United States and four European countries formed the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1904 with this same idea in mind. By 1914 the IWSA had member associations from twenty-six different countries, including China.[12] The IWSA's transcultural unity and sheer number of members made it a force on the international stage; the organization frequently engaged the League of Nations after it was established in 1919.[13] Japanese women's organizations, however, were slow to agitate for suffrage because of a belief widely-held through the 1910s–articulated by Bryn Mawr College (Pennsylvania, U.S.) graduate and Japanese educator Gauntlett Tsune–that Japan was "'not ready'" for it.[14] As more women from countries around the world won the right to vote and correspondence between Japanese and Western feminists increased, though, suffrage entered the agenda of women's organizations in Japan. In 1921, Gauntlett Tsune herself and her fellow educator Kubushiro Ochimi led the creation of Japan's first suffrage organization, the Japan Woman Suffrage Council, which became a member association of the IWSA that same year.[15]

Despite the establishment of the Japan Woman Suffrage Council, Japanese women's organizations remained focused primarily on social issues rather than political issues, until the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923. The destruction caused by the earthquake, which killed about one hundred thousand people and destroyed or damaged the majority of buildings in Tokyo, served as a catalyst for a period of increased action by Japanese women's organizations and increased work in and with Japan by Western women's organizations.[16] Japanese women mobilized to improve daily life and help with cleanup and repair efforts as an immediate reaction to the catastrophe. Opening new transnational relations and lines of dialogue, Western feminists advised Japanese women leaders on relief work to help make their efforts more effective. Racist attitudes held by Western women towards their counterparts in Asia certainly did not disappear after the earthquake, but the collaboration it brought about did do much to demystify cultural differences between the "West" and the "East." Within Japan, it was publicly clear that women could be useful, effective members of society after the earthquake. Further, in 1922 (before the earthquake), the Japanese government legalized women's participation in political meetings and rallies.[17] These changes increased support for the pursuit of Japanese women's suffrage, and in 1922 the enduring Women's Suffrage League (WSL) was established under the leadership of Ichikawa Fusae, a journalist and activist for the working class.[18]

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[10] Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.
[11] Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 10.
[12] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 26-27.
[13] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 32.
[14] Quoted in Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 33.
[15] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 39.
[16] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 25.
[17] "Women of Japan Play Their Part," *New York Times,* August 15, 1937.
[18] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 26.

The 1920s was an exciting time for women's rights movements in Japan. Socialist Japanese women such as Ishimoto Shidzue called for an alliance of women across class boundaries, access to birth control for all women, and the establishment of a Women's Bureau within the government.[19] Ishimoto is thought of as the Margaret Sanger of Japan for her work in improving access to contraception, especially for working-class women. Margaret Sanger is credited as the founder of the birth control movement in the United States. In 1919, Ishimoto traveled to New York City and met Sanger. The two developed a transnational working relationship.[20] Both women had a strong international consciousness and an understanding of the potential their collaboration held for women's sexual liberation around the world. In March 1938, Sanger wrote to Ishimoto, "Birth control is not a national problem only, but an international one, and we who belong to this civilization must all help each other."[21] Before the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Ishimoto's work was fairly successful. By the early 1930s, she ran multiple birth control clinics which distributed diaphragms and contraceptive jelly, and she held trainings on contraceptive use as well.[22] Radical feminist writings also proliferated in the 1920s. Yamakawa Kikue, a socialist feminist and labour organizer, published her list of "Women's Special Demands" in 1925. The "Demands" pertained mostly to women's rights in the workplace, but Yamakawa also called for "equal rights and responsibility between men and women in marriage and divorce" and "abolition of the patriarchal household system."[23] Finally, in the 1920s the fight for women's suffrage was a major focus, and Japanese feminist intellectuals increasingly understood suffrage as the key to securing various other rights for women. Japanese women participated in numerous international conferences, including the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in 1928. At events like these, Japanese women voiced their grievances and helped draft resolutions that ultimately put international pressure on the "modernizing" Japanese state. In fact, this pressure, in combination with the domestic efforts of the WSL, was so effective that in March 1931 a resolution for female suffrage in Japan passed the lower house of the National Diet (the Japanese legislature).[24] This was as far as the fight for Japanese women's suffrage got, though, until after the war, as imperialism was becoming the Japanese state's primary objective.

When Japan invaded Manchuria, an ethnically Chinese territory, beginning in 1931, Japanese women's leaders had to grapple with changing national priorities. Japan became more nationalist and militarist throughout the 1930s as it mobilized for war, and as a result certain pillars of the Japanese women's movement up until that point– namely peace, reproductive freedom, and international cooperation–came into direct conflict with the new national agenda. Ichikawa Fusae, WSL president, and others were forced to reconcile their commitment to peace and suffrage with their sense of duty to Japan. These leaders struggled to maintain their connections to the international women's movement, particularly contacts in China, and later contacts in the U.S. In 1933, Japan withdrew from the

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[19] Michiko Takeuchi, "At the Crossroads of Equality versus Protection: American Occupationnaire Women and Socialist Feminism in US Occupied Japan, 1945–1952," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 38, no. 2, ERA (2017): 133.
[20] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 85.
[21] Quoted in Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 82.
[22] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 99.
[23] Takeuchi, "At the Crossroads of Equality versus Protection,"121-122.
[24] Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Pre-War Japan*, 25.

League of Nations, contributing further to these women's difficulties.[25] Advancing women's rights domestically also became increasingly challenging as Japan mobilized for war; the Japanese state put added pressure on Japanese women to have children to add to the nation's population of soldiers and labourers.[26] Ishimoto Shidzue's efforts to make birth control accessible to women of all classes were defeated when the Japanese government effectively outlawed contraception with measures implemented from 1935-1941.[27] With these mounting challenges, Japanese feminists developed new strategies for staying organized in their domestic efforts and maintaining international connections. One such strategy was the bimonthly publication of *Japanese Women*, an English-language newsletter on the state of the women's movement in Japan distributed to subscribers around the world. *Japanese Women* was published from 1938 to 1940, and Ichikawa was its editor. The newsletter aimed to counteract increasingly negative perceptions of Japan on the world stage with accounts of daily Japanese life, brief histories of Japanese women, and updates on the contemporary obstacles to the Japanese women's movement. In the words of the newsletter's publishers themselves, "We ardently hope at this juncture, when international relations are getting more and more delicate and complicated, that women of different nations may get to know each other better, so that they may be able to cooperate towards the end of establishing a better world order."[28] This mission statement was included in the May 1940 edition of *Japanese Women* and demonstrates a continued international consciousness among Japanese feminists, even as the prospect of war with the United States became more and more probable. Another strategy for moving forward was to shift the bulk of Japanese women's organizations' efforts to social work. In the early 1930s Ichikawa wrote, "'Even if we do not gain suffrage legally, we plan to exercise a de facto political power.'"[29] "De facto political power" would come from continuing to work in the public sphere: working to maintain a constant standard of living for those on the home front and to advocate for protective policies for women and children.[30] This strategy became particularly important when the WSL disbanded in August 1940 and gave up its independence from the Japanese state. At this point, Ichikawa and many other members of the organizations of the 1920s let go of the international women's project for the duration of the war.

Another reminder that Japan had isolated itself from international pressures and tendencies: the Japanese state took an approach to its women in wartime that was markedly different from that of other major belligerents. Like the German and Italian fascist regimes, Japan too encouraged women to use their reproductive capacities and have large families during the war years. However, the Japanese state did very little to mobilize women for their labour in war industry; in fact, women were strongly discouraged from working once they were married–as was the case before the war began.[31] The state sponsored numerous "official" women's organizations under various government departments for traditional wartime activities, including organizing departures for soldiers and sewing

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[25] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II*, 103-104.
[26] Thomas R.H. Havens, "Women and War in Japan, 1937-45," *The American Historical Review* 80, no. 4 (October 1975): 920.
[27] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II,* 101-102.
[28] Woman's Suffrage League of Japan, *Japanese Women,* 3, no. 3 (May 1940): 4.
[29] Quoted in Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II,* 106.
[30] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II,* 106.
[31] Havens, "Women and War in Japan, 1937-45," 917.

protective charms for them. These organizations were run by men and were a frustration for leaders of the actual women-led organizations who wanted to do real social work.[32] Japan did not begin full-scale mobilization of its economy for war production until 1942, but even then high-ranking officials such as prime minister Tojo Hideki balked at the idea of drafting women to alleviate shortages of civilian manpower.[33] During the war years, Britain, Germany, the USSR, and the United States each saw a percentage increase of women in their national workforces several times that of the percentage increase for Japan. In Japan, the size of the female labour force only increased by ten percent from 1940 to 1944, while in the United States, for example, the female labour force increased by fifty percent from 1940 to 1944.[34] In the final two years of the war, Japan was in a more desperate situation. The volunteer corps for unmarried women labourers grew to become very large, and there was immense cultural pressure on young women to join and serve their country–but still many women never served and some never even had to enlist.[35] The Japanese state stuck with the traditional ideology of women as "good wives and wise mothers," encouraging them to stay home to maintain the nation's households and family structures in the absence of men.

As feminist leaders searched for the best ways possible to maintain the women's movement through the war years and young, unmarried women laboured in war industry, many women lived their lives as best they could from home–even as they were deeply affected by the horrors of the war. Especially in towns and rural areas, women engaged in cleanup and repair efforts and did their best to take care of the injured in their communities after firebombings. Mothers were often left alone to be community caretakers as their older sons and partners departed for war.[36] American occupation of Japan began after Japan surrendered in August/September of 1945, and lasted until 1952. The U.S. military was the largest presence in the occupation, but women leaders from the U.S. came as well to assist in the "liberation of Japanese women" ordered by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) on October 11, 1945 as part of the post-war "democratization of Japan" project.[37] Just before the occupiers arrived, Gauntlett Tsune, Ichikawa Fusae, and other Japanese women's leaders organized the Women's Committee on Postwar Countermeasures, to get an immediate start on addressing women's issues in the aftermath of the war. In this way, Japanese feminists sought to preserve their independence and agency, and ensure that change for women in Japan was not externally imposed or "granted." When American feminists arrived, they formed a policy alliance with Japanese women's leaders, many of whom they already had relationships with from pre-war transnational collaboration. Suffrage for Japanese women came quickly out of this alliance. By December 1945, women's right to vote in Japan was officially approved.[38] This rapidity was only possible because of the years of work Japanese feminists had put in before the war to build networks with Western feminists and agitate within Japan for suffrage. In the next few years, Japanese and American women worked well together to draft parts of the new Japanese

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[32] Woman's Suffrage League of Japan, *Japanese Women,* 3, no. 3 (May 1940): 3-4.
[33] Havens, "Women and War in Japan, 1937-45," 919-920.
[34] Havens, "Women and War in Japan, 1937-45," 918.
[35] Havens, "Women and War in Japan, 1937-45," 922-923.
[36] Edgar A. Porter and Ran Ying Porter, *Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2017), 110.
[37] Takeuchi, "At the Crossroads of Equality versus Protection," 114.
[38] Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement before World War II,* 126.

Constitution and institute protections for women, but there was without a doubt a power imbalance between the American occupiers and the Japanese occupied, not to mention continued racial prejudice. An example of one manifestation of this power imbalance: Ichikawa was barred from running for the National Diet and holding public office because she had been so active in supporting the Japanese state during the war years. Other women's leaders did assume leadership roles, though. Yamakawa Kikue became the first director of the newly established Women's Bureau in 1947.[39] Ishimoto Shidzue, whose name became Katō Shidzue after she remarried in 1944, was elected to the upper house of the National Diet in 1946.[40]

Like the First World War, the Second World War created new transnational networks and a newly fashioned world order. The lines of Cold War solidarities were drawn very quickly after the end of the war, and though they formed solidarities, these lines also affirmed the primacy of the nation-state, because each country was meant to pick one of two sides for its people. In the United States and countries which aligned with it, it became difficult for radical international movements–especially class-based internationalisms–to thrive in the years after the war because they could be so easily persecuted as adjacent to communism. In American-occupied Japan, the SCAP after 1947 began proposing laws which were meant to enforce "American Cold War family ideology," or a model of the ideal family as heterosexual and nuclear, "with a male breadwinner and a female homemaker."[41] Despite all these pressures, the Japanese and American women policymakers in alliance in Japan from 1945-1952 were able to work together to successfully resist many of these proposals, and that success can be explained by the enduring strength of their international feminist collaboration before the war.

[39] Takeuchi, "At the Crossroads of Equality versus Protection," 126-127.
[40] Takeuchi, "At the Crossroads of Equality versus Protection," 135.
[41] Takeuchi, "At the Crossroads of Equality versus Protection," 114.

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