

Deaf Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights: Learning from the Experiences of Deaf Women in Japan

Deaf Studies Conference Transformations Proceedings

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Abstract

The transformation of the deaf community in Japan during the late 20th century is one of the most rapid and profound social changes in the community's history. Over time, government institutions have adopted resolutions and policies on several issues such as education, labor, and access to information. These events enabled the establishment of the first university for deaf and hard of hearing people, National University Corporation Tsukuba University of Technology (NTUT) in 1987. NTUT recently conducted a unique project, the "Deaf Studies Project," which included producing a video; disseminating educational materials; raising awareness of deaf community issues at local, regional, and national levels; collecting deaf people's life histories; and documenting and analyzing successful and failed deaf movements for promoting deaf people's empowerment. However, little has been done to document the situation of deaf women in Japan. Generally, deaf women around the world struggle with barriers related to social class, culture, legal rights, labor force participation, family structure, and power. Recently, deaf women may access a variety of services, such as education, employment, childcare, health care, and mental health services. However, little is known about their experiences as deaf women.

This presentation will explore the realities of, and critical issues related to, deaf women in Japan. We will begin by summarizing the "Deaf Studies Project" and explain the project's current approach. We will follow this with a broad empirical description of the "Deaf Women Studies" project, and a review of educational, research, documentation, and networking strategies for empowering deaf women. We also describe the life history of a deaf woman who lived through the late 20th century and present a study of deaf women's views on opportunities, career prospects, and work-family conflicts. Following this, we summarize selected approaches to deaf women centered development to promote their self-esteem and self-confidence development, effective community and social participation, and awareness of their social and political rights. We will conclude this presentation with a discussion about using these findings to progressively expand the public policy dialog about funding for and development of services to adequately meet deaf women's needs, not only in Japan but worldwide.

Keywords

Deaf Studies, Japan, Deaf women, employment, social participation, political rights

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1)

I am very honored to be presenting at this conference. However, know that ASL is not my first language. If at times I am not clear, please bear that in mind and be patient with my signing, all right? Hello, my name is Yoko and this is my sign name. When I lived in America a while ago, my name sign was this. You can see that the movement is a little different. It moves horizontally now instead of downward. It has changed to match the Japanese style of signing. I am from Japan and I flew in to be here. In Japan, I teach at the National University Corporation Tsukuba University of Technology (NTUT). This is how the university's name is signed. Please remember this sign. That is where I have been teaching for about the past three or four years. NTUT has approximately 200 deaf and hard of hearing students who come from very diverse backgrounds. Some grew up at deaf schools while others were mainstreamed; it's really varied. How they communicate also varies greatly. I teach different subjects, such as sign language, and topics related to Deaf Studies, and I've taught over the past four years. Additionally, I have been involved in some research. I'm the presenter today, and I have a co-presenter, Yukata Osugi [demonstrates name sign] who will be presenting tomorrow morning. He is allowing me to present alone today. Thank you.

(Slide 2)

I am here today to talk about gender equality; do men and women have the same experiences or are they different? Are men and women equal or not? We have some data here on the PowerPoint that I'll share. This data shows the gender equality ranking throughout the world and which countries are the best and worst in terms of gender equality. On the left side, you'll see that first place is Iceland, which is the best country for gender equality. In second place is Norway, third is Finland, fourth we have Rwanda, and fifth is Sweden. When we look at the Group of 7, or G7 — As I'm sure you know, the G7 consists of seven countries that typically are leaders in the world. Countries like France, Germany, Italy, and the United States, too. When we look at the G7 data here, France ranks the best. You can see that Japan is in last place in the G7 group. This means that Japan has not yet attained full gender equality and is still behind the other countries. Here, you can see the breakdown into four specific groupings. We have economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, and political empowerment. In these three categories, Japan is consistently ranked lower than the other G7 countries. But, in terms of health and survival, Japan is the best compared to the other countries.

(Slide 3)

This shows the labor force ratio and compares several of the largest countries. First, notice that in Japan, there are more men in the workforce compared to the other countries. However, in contrast, there are far fewer women in the workforce when compared to other countries. And take note of the age range. From age 20 to 25, the number of women who work is very low; the question is why? Perhaps some of you understand because you are married or have children and are unable to continue working. So you have to quit working. So that is why that number is so much lower. Then, around age 40 or so, there is an increase in the number of women working. Usually by now their kids have grown and the women are ready to get back to work, so to speak. That data can show at what ages women tend to work and what that looks like.

(Slide 4)

This slide shows international events related to gender equality. It shows two types of data: first, on the top, is what has taken place on an international level. I know that many of these events took place here in America, while the remaining events are international. The second, bottom line shows events that occurred in Japan, my country. It is possible that some information is missing from this timeline; if anything comes to mind that should be added, please let me know after this presentation. First, I'd like us to look at international events. In 1848, in America, in New York, women came together to talk about their rights at a conference. I think the first one was in New York. That then served as the beginning of other events, like the 1960s women's liberation movement and the civil rights movement. That event impacted the Deaf community as well. In 1985, Deaf Women United, a national group for Deaf women in America came together and was founded. Then, in 1993, in Rochester, NTID hosted the first Deaf Women Studies curriculum, which taught topics related to Deaf Women Studies. Then here at Gallaudet University and at CSUN, they began teaching the same topics and have done so since then. You can see, at the bottom of the screen, what events took place in Japan. In 1946, women finally gained the right to vote, which changed everything. More women could access education, enter the workforce, and a host of other changes. Again, these events impacted the Deaf community as well. In 1971, the First National Deaf Women's Assembly was hosted and in 1975, the first national Deaf women's association was founded under Japanese Federation for the Deaf. Time went on and just recently, in 2011, NTUT, where I teach, established a Deaf Studies program. This program has many different fields of study, including history, art, education, sign language, and human rights among others. Each of these different fields created videos that serve as part of the curriculum. The videos were then moved online and made available to the public so others could view the lectures and learn from them. Then in 2016, NTUT added the Deaf Women Studies Project, which is housed under the Deaf Studies program. That is where I am involved at NTUT; I run several different activities.

(Slide 5)

Now I want to explain the experiences of Deaf women in Japan. The experiences of men and women are different. Women encounter more barriers; most women get married and are responsible for caring for children and elderly individuals. There are additional obstacles that women face when compared to men. However, there is not much known about this topic. It is a topic that is discussed in private among women, and there are a number of personal accounts. However, there is not much that is documented or available for people to examine. I think that it is critical to document the experiences of Deaf women and disseminate them so that people can examine the information.

(Slide 6)

I have been involved in several research studies. Today I would like to introduce one such study that used the life history interview approach, which you can see here. The life history interview approach allows the researcher to ask more questions to obtain an in-depth understanding of what transpired and about the participant, of the participant, from a young age to the present. I have selected one Deaf woman. She was born during World War 2, lived through the late twentieth century, and has had a wealth of experiences in relation to numerous activities. That is why I selected her. Also, I think that this woman's experiences can be widely applicable to any

person, whether they are a woman, Deaf, or hearing. Again, that is what led me to pick her. We met ten times over the course of about six months. What we did was we sat and chatted. It was important to, first, build trust as opposed to launching right into questioning her and gathering data. It was important for us to build mutual trust with one another to establish an understanding and rapport through our chats. I filmed our interactions and then watched the tapes again. I then transcribed and analyzed the data.

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The woman's name is Riuko Oikawa and this is her name sign. Please remember her name sign. Riuko was born in 1942; at that time, World War 2 had not yet ended and was still ongoing. Immediately after her birth, her family moved to another country, Manchuria, which is near China. They moved because Japan was dangerous and it was possible that, due to the war, there would be bombing there. To avoid that danger, the family moved to that other country. Then, in 1945, when the war ended, her family decided to move back to Japan. During the family's boat ride back to Japan, her sister tragically passed away. Later, at age 10, Riuko contracted an illness and was unable to attend school; she had to remain in the hospital for many years. Finally, at age 20, she could leave the hospital and entered school, albeit a little late. Nonetheless, she attended school because she wanted to study. When she completed school, she became involved with advocacy in the Deaf community and has been involved there for many years. She has been a leading force within Deaf women activism. Just recently, about two years ago, she received a prestigious award from the government for her contributions back to the community. The government wanted to recognize that important achievement.

(Slide 8)

I previously mentioned that I recorded our interviews in order to collect data. This resulted in transcripts that were many pages long and contained a wealth of information, all of which was vital. However, I solely focused on the information pertaining to Deaf women; once I compiled that specific data, I divided it into three categories. The first of these categories, which can be seen on the PowerPoint, was how to build a career. However, "career" in this instance is more than having a job or a means to earn an income. It includes working while raising children into adulthood, being married, and caring for elders. All that encompasses what is defined as a career. Now, the second category shown here was the local pioneers performing small-scale activism. This led to a larger-scale activism. The third category was the Deaf Woman Movement, and that is what I want to discuss today.

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The first category is where she first began to build her career. I recently discussed how Ms. Oikawa became seriously ill at about age 10; she was unable to go to school and remained at the hospital for many years. At that time, she met many people with disabilities, not just Deaf people. She also met many doctors and nurses and built relationships with them. She also remained in contact with people who lived outside of the hospital through letters. They shared information and she would visit her home and then return to the hospital. Additionally, Ms. Oikawa received information related to the Deaf community by reading newspapers and magazines. By reading these publications and corresponding via letters, she stayed informed. At age 20, she finally left the hospital. She left with the feeling that she needed additional education

because for so many years she couldn't go to school. She decided to enroll in a center for Deaf people where she could continue to study several different disciplines, such as technology and printing. Back in that time, many Deaf people worked in the factories and with technology, which is why that center offered curricula for these disciplines. She enrolled at the National Center for Deaf People, and that changed her life. The reason was many Deaf people from other countries congregated at that center, bringing with them their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Also, there was a significant number of Deaf women there who Ms. Oikawa met. She learned about their myriad of life experiences and that shifted her self-perception. After one year, she completed her studies, graduated, and entered the workforce.

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She both worked and at the same time, remained involved in many Deaf activities. One of these events was the Sign Language Club, which is somewhat similar to Deaf clubs, but not quite. Sign language clubs are a staple in Japan and there still exist many to this day throughout the islands. She frequently went to sign language clubs and mingled with both Deaf and hearing people. She encountered many women there who had a variety of experiences, whether they worked or were famous actresses or famous teachers or lawyers. Meeting all these women had a profound impact on Ms. Oikawa and her view on life. Moving into driver license laws. Prior to that time, it was illegal for Deaf people to drive. However, one man, who you can see on the screen here, Mitsuo Toishita, disregarded the law. Back then, he would disregard the law, prohibiting Deaf people from driving, and ride his moped. The police would pull him over and ticket him repeatedly for his disregard of the law. As time went on, he decided it was time to fight the government. Many members of the Deaf community were thrilled by this and felt it was important to support him, so they rallied to support him. That helped change the law and Deaf people were finally granted the legal right to drive. During this time of the movement to change the driver license law, many of the leaders of the movement were men. However, there were numerous women who were behind the scenes who were also supporting the efforts to change the law. Most people are unaware of this and/or overlook their involvement. It is crucial that we know the reality of the situation.

(Slide 11)

Now we will discuss the remaining themes. Ms. Oikawa became president of a Deaf women's association in Tokyo. She hosted a meeting for Deaf women... And that first meeting just outside of Tokyo saw Deaf women from outside of the city come together. They invited a guest, a hearing woman who was a renowned leader within the Women's Movement and was the first female politician, to come and speak at their meeting. During the guest speaker's presentation, all of the Deaf women in attendance were inspired by what she had to say and it had a great impact on their lives. The first meeting was a local event, but then the following year, they hosted a convention in Kyoto, in the southeastern area of Japan. Over 600 people attended the meeting, which was called by another name, "The Meeting of Tears." It was given this name because until that meeting, Deaf women were not allowed to express themselves. As I think was common across the world, many of the Deaf women could not have children of their own due to forced sterilizations. Many women were unable to become pregnant or have children; they are now in their 70s and 80s, and many are childless. I'm sure some of you already know this; it was a common tragedy that occurred worldwide. So that meeting is known as the Meeting of Tears because many women had for years bottled up their sadness and emotions.

They were now finally able to express their experiences. That helped them build their self-esteem and take steps to move forward and change their lives.

(Slide 12)

We have focused on the Women's Movement. Now we will shift gears to another topic: health issues. I'll step back from the Women's Movement focus, and examine the local activities that took place. Now, older Deaf people are still advocates in Tokyo because Tokyo has no center for older Deaf people. Well, there is one that is open for one day a week and the older Deaf people can go there for that one day, but that is it. However, there is no place where the seniors can stay overnight or spend much of their time. There's nothing of that in Tokyo. There are such centers throughout the rest of Japan, but there is none in Tokyo. Ms. Oikawa wants to establish a center for older Deaf people. She is still working on this project and has been collaborating with the government. Just recently, two years ago, as I mentioned, Ms. Oikawa received a prestigious award for her work.

(Slide 13)

So now I'd like to talk about three stages that I just briefly discussed. First is how to start building a career. That helps increase understanding of who one is and who one is as a Deaf person. Next is how small, local actions can later translate into large-scale activism, which helps improve self-esteem. Finally, the Deaf Women's Movement helped create policy participation as Deaf parties.

(Slide 14)

Now, I will explain the Deaf life history approach, but I was also involved in another project as well. A quantitative questionnaire survey was used, and teaching materials, such as DVDs and a teaching curriculum, were developed. These applied to education and developing a website. Presentations were also provided to audiences, regardless of if they were Deaf or hearing and regardless of gender. It also applies to Regional Contribution, shown here. Data was collected, and then we gave that information back to the community by sharing what I had learned. Also, workshops and lectures, meetings, were held for the public. That's what I'm doing now. I hope to see this continuing expanded in the future. I'd like to show a little bit of the website for Deaf women. I'll show just a bit. That video shows the Deaf women's histories and what took place in Japan. I apologize that it is not available in English; it is only available in Japanese. I apologize for that. This shows the women who have served as president of the Deaf Women Association and helps people recognize them and learn about them.

(Slide 15)

I think time is just about to run out. That completes my presentation. Thank you all for your time and attention. Thank you.

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