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WOMEN'S AGENCY AND THE HISTORICAL RECORD:

Reflections on Female Activists in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Marnie S. Anderson

This article examines the small body of Japanese-language historiography on women's activism in late nineteenth-century Japan. The era saw a sharp rise in the number of female activists, and yet the activities of these women have usually been interpreted as the result of male initiative. Only women who left a clear record in their own hand—demonstrating what I call “literacy agency”—are seen as full agents. I suggest that such understandings are insufficient by presenting four cases of women's activism, including local women's groups, geisha activists, a petitioner, and several writers. It turns out that female activists who displayed “literary agency” had important connections with male activists; at the same time, women who did not leave historical records were not necessarily passive appendages of men. I conclude by reflecting on some of the alternate ways we might conceptualize of women's activism and its relationship to larger social networks.

The late nineteenth century saw a major debate on the woman question in Japan. At this time, the Japanese were trying to rapidly modernize in order to attain parity with the western imperialist powers. As Japan's leaders confronted a hostile world, they encountered an idea with great currency in the West: that the social position of women reflected a country's level of civilization. Although elites initiated dialogue out of concern for their country's reputation *vis-à-vis* the outside world, the conversation soon moved to an emerging public sphere where it sparked a wide-ranging debate about women's roles and rights. Japanese women joined the discussion primarily in the context of a series of movements known to scholars as the Freedom and People's Rights Movement (*Jiyū minken ūndo*). Advocates of “people's rights” promoted the establishment of a parliamentary system as well as a wider distribution of power in the new government.¹ As women formed organizations and contemplated their strategies, some activists expressed concerns over how they should relate to men—did relying on or involving men in their organizations and activities in any way compromise them?

One woman, using the penname Suie, took up the issue in a letter to the editor of the *Shinonome shimbun* in 1889; she argued that in order to enact equal rights for men and women (*danjo dōken*), “it is paramount that women develop an independent spirit.” Suie was reacting against

what she saw as the trend for men to initiate and direct women's activities and organizations. Many women's groups, she observed, were founded by men. As a result, women were involved in a paradoxical situation: "they want to escape oppression but end up multiplying it. They want to expand [rights] but end up harming their prospects."² At the same time, and perhaps as a result, she accused Japanese women of superficiality, for advocating women's rights but "only on a surface level." Unlike women in the West "who have a high level of education, considerable wealth, and stand independently," Japanese women "may have a little education, but their spirits and bodies are still not independent." After declaring that all oppression "goes against heaven," she proposes a solution: "If we want women to break out of male oppression and expand women's rights, we must nurture gentle female virtues (*futoku*), provide women with an excellent education, good employment, and enable them to accumulate capital as well as to attain spiritual and bodily independence."³ She insisted that women needed to identify and follow their own path without the help of men in order to secure their rights.

In a rebuttal, activist Yamazaki Take commenced by agreeing with Suie that the situation of Japanese women was indeed lamentable: "The existence of honoring men, despising women (*danson jōhi*) not only goes against heaven and human principles but is also tied to the honor of our empire."⁴ However, Yamazaki opposed a solution that deliberately excluded men. In her view, men and women needed to cooperate and work together to reform women's status. Why view men as the enemy? The task of rectifying women's situation was formidable enough; how could one possibly awaken so many uneducated women without the help of women's organizations? There was no need to put additional obstacles in the way by declining help from men or making it necessary for women to obtain an education and accumulate capital prior to working to "expand women's rights." More pragmatic than her opponent, Yamazaki maintained that it should not matter who initiates women's groups so long as they are formed. Overall, Yamazaki was less concerned than Suie with the concrete measures necessary to raise women's status and more interested in how women might contribute to national strength. At the end of her letter, Yamazaki called upon women to "form organizations, spark public debates, and wash away old customs" in order to "heal the paralysis of half of the Japanese empire."⁵

In these letters, writers debated a pressing concern—the appropriate relationship between female activists and their male counterparts. However, historians have for the most part left the issue unexplored, perhaps because of the reigning paradigms that have dominated the field of women's history since the early-twentieth century. From restoring women to the historical

record, to understanding women's work before and after industrialization, to teasing out the details of women's "daily lives," scholarship on women's history has surely not aimed to erase women's organizational relationships with men, but that has often been the unintended consequence.⁶ As a result, we know little about interactions between women and men. I do not intend to criticize this trend so much as to call attention to how it has limited our understanding of Japanese women's political activism and its relationship to larger social networks.

In writing about nineteenth-century women's history, historians of Japan have tended to interpret female subjects in one of the following ways: as pioneering feminists who acted on their own, as women who were largely dependent on their husbands or other male family members, or, in the case of geisha (female entertainers whose services were available for hire), as mostly incapable of autonomous action.⁷ In this essay, I explore four cases of women's activism in late nineteenth-century Japan in order to show how these conceptualizations are insufficient. In each instance, I am interested in women's relationships with male activists and how historians, primarily those based in Japan, have written about these interactions. I suggest that the ways that scholars have implicitly perceived the relationship between women's groups and male activists has impacted how they have evaluated the significance of women's activities. Intertwined with this issue is the nature of the historical record. I propose that in cases where women left a record, displaying what I shall call "literary agency," historians have been more likely to downplay a group or individual's interactions with men. (Indeed, as we shall see, in the current historiography, evidence of literary ability has often been the determining factor in evaluating women's activism.) Yet when the record is sparse and women's voices are more difficult to hear, scholars have tended to assume that men played a more significant role in fostering women's activism. In a curious way, historians have followed Suie in interpreting male involvement in women's organizations as a sign that women played a subordinate role.

My goal is neither to privilege male involvement nor to minimize it. I seek to highlight misconceptions about women activists' relations with men and to enrich our understanding of the texture and content of women's activism. It turns out that women and men frequently cooperated with one another, and both female and male activists relied on social networks. I suggest that women activists participated in—but were never completely absorbed in or defined by—the larger male-dominated networks of the late-nineteenth century. By beginning to unravel their stories, I hope to complicate our understanding of the nature of women's agency.

Women's Groups: How Women Express Political Identities

A number of women's groups appeared on the scene in the 1870s and 1880s during an era known as the early Meiji period (1868–1912), a time when liberal activism was at its height in the form of the Freedom and People's Rights movements. While men's involvement in these movements has long been known to scholars—particularly the activities of wealthy farmers, who formed organizations, read western political theory, and drew up constitutions during the heady period of the 1870s and 1880s—women's participation in people's rights activism has been left unexplored, with the exception of the few women who went on to become famous at the national level. In fact, the historical record reveals that in the 1870s and 1880s, local women throughout the country formed organizations, founded schools, sponsored debates and speeches, and in some cases, founded their own political parties. Still, we lack a systematic portrait of women's political activism in Japan. In the existing scholarship, scholars proceed from the assumption that most women's activism was an extension of their wifely role. Women, in short, “assisted” men's activism.⁸

For years, some scholars have been calling attention to the need to study local women's groups.⁹ Such study seems all the more necessary given that the interpretation of women as primarily “passive” still holds sway. The most startling example can be found in the *Miyagi kenshi* (Miyagi Prefectural History), which highlights the role of Fukamauchi Motoi in “guiding” local women in the formation the Sendai Women's Freedom Party (Sendai joshi jiyūtō) in spite of a lack of evidence.¹⁰ Fukamauchi was the Japanese translator of John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* in 1877. An educator and activist, he traveled widely and no doubt inspired some of the women who were the primary movers and shakers of this group. However, to credit him for the group's formation ignores the women's efforts. Given the debate I sketched out at the beginning of this essay, it seems that men did play a role in forming some women's groups. What I wish to draw attention to here is the assumption that a man's role was central and decisive, an assertion that is not only unfounded, but also one that has prevented us from considering women's contributions. In other words, there is a kind of “either/or” logic at work: if men played a role, women must have been passive.

Other local women's groups have received more attention: a group in Aichi prefecture (the Toyohashi fujo kyōkai or “Toyohashi Women's Cooperative Association”), a group in Kanagawa prefecture (the Aikō fujinkai or “The Aikō Women's Association”), and the most famous group in Okayama prefecture (the Okayama joshi konshinkai or “The Okayama Women's Friendship Society”).¹¹ With the exception of the Okayama association, the commentary on these groups tends to emphasize the members' relationship

to male activists as the defining characteristic of their activism. One publication calls them "organizations for the wives of people's rights activists."¹² I do not question men's involvement in raising women's consciousness since relationships with men, especially male relatives, were important in exposing women to people's rights thought and providing support for women's activities. Rather, I am concerned that this is a case where due to a lack of records, the literature has portrayed these women as less than full actors in their own right.

We know the most about the Okayama Friendship Society owing to the efforts of a group of local amateur historians, the Okayama joseishi kenkyūkai (Okayama Women's History Association, hereafter OWHA). Seemingly the first women's group to be founded in Japan, the Okayama Society coalesced around the visit of the famous female speaker Kishida Toshiko (1861–1901) in 1882. After serving as a tutor to the Japanese empress, Kishida had embarked on a series of lecture tours around Japan where she called for rights and respect for women. She attracted a number of female followers and gained national attention.¹³

Okayama was one stop on Kishida's tour. The Okayama Friendship Society seems to have greeted her speech with enthusiasm. The Okayama group, which numbered between thirty and forty members, would go on to meet for the next two years to carry out its goals of promoting education for underprivileged girls (they founded a school) and social improvement.¹⁴ Members ranged in age from their late teens to early fifties and included women who were highly skilled in Chinese-style discourse (*kambun*). Some were wives of people's rights activists. As with so many of these organizations, the group seems to have disbanded after a few years—perhaps the consequence of widespread government repression of people's rights activities—and we are left to wonder what became of it.

A sense of local pride suffuses the writings of the OWHA on the Okayama Friendship Society (hereafter the Okayama Society).¹⁵ Highlighting the society's progressive and pioneering character, the OWHA emphasizes that the Okayama Society was the first women's group to appear in Japan, suggesting that members were more independent than other local women's groups that emerged later. Referring to the Aichi and Kanagawa associations, the OWHA explains: "In other groups, women were indirectly connected to the nation through their husbands, whereas the women [in the Okayama Society] acted as individual citizens and cooperated with men to directly serve the nation-state."¹⁶ The OWHA concedes that the Okayama Society may initially have adopted a "passive" attitude toward activism, but with time "they overcame women's roles within the home and eventually realized a position equal with men *vis-à-vis* the nation; they

moved from the passive role of understanding men's activism to taking on active roles themselves."¹⁷ While the Okayama women did become more active over time, we might question whether this formulation does justice to their initial period of activism. Forming an organization was hardly a "passive" act. Nor does it seem that they were limited to "understanding men's activism" at first. The record instead suggests that the women were engaged in giving speeches and exchanging ideas.

The main documentation available about the other two groups from Kanagawa and Aichi comes in the form of a set of guidelines or statutes (*yakusoku* or *kiyaku*) for membership, which the Okayama group also drafted.¹⁸ These texts, which emphasize service to the nation (a common feature in the charters of men's groups as well) and include pledges to protect chastity, shed light on how the women understood their political identities.¹⁹ The Aichi and Kanagawa groups constructed their roles primarily in terms of their roles as wives and mothers. The Aichi charter (on which the Kanagawa charter would seem to have been based) opened by vowing, "We will protect our chastity and devote all of our energies to the country." Subsequent articles included calls to "instill the path of learning and seek knowledge widely" and to "console husbands" and raise "superior sons and modest daughters who will become the pillars of the country."²⁰ The Kanagawa charter stresses education and makes a point of emphasizing how important it is for members to attend men's speeches and societies "as a shortcut to becoming educated."²¹ As an aside, we might note that such calls for women to attend men's groups highlight the connections between female and male societies.

Other themes run through all three charters. Significantly, all three groups stress their femininity. The crucial difference is that whereas the Aichi and Kanagawa groups positioned themselves primarily as wives and mothers, the Okayama group focused on the specific goals members hoped to achieve *as* women. We should bear in mind that the embrace of a feminine role does not correspond to a lack of agency. This way of carving out a space in public *as women* was effective and consistent with the ways that subsequent women activists in Japan and elsewhere secured a public role for themselves.²² In addition, it is worth mentioning that none of the women's groups explicitly articulated political goals. This is hardly surprising given the context, where male societies were also loath to be too explicit lest they face government censure, especially after 1882.²³

The OWA bases its interpretation of the Aichi and Kanagawa groups as "wives of people's rights activists" on the content of these guidelines, interpreting pledges to behave in ways that accorded with gender norms as evidence of the less-than-independent nature of the other groups. At the

same time, the OWHA largely ignores the ways that the Okayama Society promised to uphold gender norms, leading to a view of this society as distinct from other women's groups. The interpretation of other groups as "passive" and the Okayama Society as active or independent has been repeated in subsequent publications by other scholars. For instance, in the introduction to her outstanding collection of women's history sources, Suzuki Yūko divides women's groups into two types: the "independent model" (*jiritsukei*) and the "inner assistance model" (*naijokei*), even as she emphasizes that local women's groups represent "an undeveloped area of study."²⁴ Suzuki implies that the Okayama Society fits the former "independent" model; she comments that members were young and single, and that "they desired to join the movement and threw themselves into it."²⁵ However, Suzuki overlooks the fact that a number of the members were older and married to male activists.

If we modify Suzuki's typology and view it as a model describing individuals rather than groups, it is clear that the Okayama Society included both types of women—young and single and older and married. Surely this was the case for other groups as well.²⁶ But the model must be further modified, for Suzuki's description implies that the young single women who joined the movement were disconnected from it to begin with, and yet it turns out that many had male relatives (often siblings) who were activists. In addition, even while family connections may have sparked women's initial interest, such relationships do not define nor negate the significance of women's activism. We might also consider the possibility that some women were involved in helping their family members and at the same time, developing and holding their own interests and commitments.²⁷

In general, the ways that women's groups have been understood deserves rethinking. While the available documentation reveals differences in approach and style among them, we simply do not know enough to draw conclusions about the activities of Aichi or Kanagawa activists or the trajectory of their activism (indeed, we still have much to learn about the Okayama Society). The women have a rather anonymous quality about them; their seeming ordinariness is what is most striking. Such groups did not include women who went on to become famous in their ranks, whereas the Okayama group can boast Fukuda (Kageyama) Hideko (1865–1927) and Sumiya Koume (1850–1920).²⁸

In the face of a lack of evidence concerning who many of these other women were, we are left to speculate on what prompted them to become activists. Contemporary records reveal that a number of women around the country provided services for male people's rights activists—housing them, feeding them, and doing their laundry.²⁹ Such roles fell within the

bounds of acceptable gender behavior and did not require assuming an explicit "political identity." Others went beyond this role. What compelled them to attend political speeches, found schools, and debate political ideas? Surely in some instances, having a male relation was a motivating factor. Exposure to new ideas through education or encounters with Christian missionaries also seems to have been transformational. More research is needed, but it seems clear that there were multiple motivations present among the members of local women's groups.

Geisha and Political Agency

The question of geisha's political activism is thorny.³⁰ Historians have long assumed that geisha became involved in people's rights activism as the companions of male activists.³¹ But the historical record complicates the question of geisha and their involvement in public speaking and organizing, a subject that some scholars have begun to address, albeit largely in passing.³² For instance, in October 1883, geisha in Kyoto formed an organization called the Jiyūkō (Freedom Association); they planned to raise money and hold meetings twice a year to which they would invite women speakers such as Kishida Toshiko and other "women who advocate freedom (*jiyin*)."³³ Historian Sekiguchi Sumiko speculates that some geisha must have given public speeches; a number of geisha speakers appear in contemporary political novels and Sekiguchi believes they must have been based on real-life models.³⁴

Additionally, geisha make frequent appearances in newspaper accounts and not merely as spectators or companions of male activists. Kōchi newspapers record geisha performing the "people's rights dance" (*minken odori*), which they apparently learned from activist Ueki Emori. They flocked to the mock "funerals" held for people's rights newspapers which had been shut down by the government and they donated food and drink to those who had been imprisoned in people's rights-related incidents.³⁵ One Kōchi-based geisha named Aikichi attended the prefectural assembly and later wrote a letter that was serialized in the *Doyō shimbun*, complaining that geisha were self-sufficient and should therefore be considered equal to all others; why then did the people's rights newspapers feel free to use disparaging terms such as "cat" (*neko*) and "fox" (*kitsune*) when referring to geisha, in essence "viewing them as slaves" (*doreishi*)?³⁶ (The newspaper ignored her query.)³⁷ Aikichi related the recent political activities of Western women to her readers and stated her own goals: even if she did not advocate "equal rights for men and women" or women's political rights, at the very least she and other geisha wanted "to be equal and have the same rights as other

women."³⁸ Aikichi went on to found a society called the Geisha Friendship Society (*Geigi konshinkai*). At meetings, members read newspapers and listened to speeches. They also greeted Liberal Party leader Itagaki Taisuke upon his return from a trip abroad, and contributed to relief efforts for impoverished farmers.³⁹ By positioning themselves as loyal subjects who rendered service to the nation, they, like other women, strove to raise their status and command respect.

Other examples of activism include cases where geisha attended prefectural assemblies to protest increases in the geisha tax in the early 1880s.⁴⁰ Such acts attracted media attention: a reporter wrote of the Kōchi geisha, "for women to attend [the legislature] is surely unprecedented in Asia."⁴¹ In 1889, the geisha of Tottori successfully petitioned the prefectural assembly for a reduction in their taxes.⁴² Still, in spite of these examples, it has been hard for most observers, both in the past and present, to view geisha as possessing political agency.

Geisha do not fit within the traditional categories of women's history. Hypersexualized both at the time and in retrospect, the idea that they may have been involved in political life beyond having affairs with politicians and activists may be difficult to imagine. It has perhaps been challenging to view them as historical actors when many were in a form of debt bondage.⁴³ Scholarship on women's history has been inclined to see geisha as the enemy of—or at least in competition with—more mainstream Meiji activists.⁴⁴ But the evidence suggests that at least some geisha were active politically in ways that went beyond serving the men around them, and that they struggled even more than other women to gain recognition. The fragmentary record points to a broad degree of interest among some geisha in politics and contemporary ideas about freedom and rights. Their stories matter in part because they suggest that political engagement extended beyond educated members of the emerging middle class and former samurai (the latter were the elite status group during the previous Tokugawa period and continued to enjoy a degree of prestige in the Meiji period)—precisely the kinds of women who joined the local women's groups that were discussed in the previous section.

The sparse historical record combined with the assumptions discussed above has made writing about geisha even more difficult than other women. In my own quest to highlight examples of agency on the part of geisha, I have relied heavily on the case of Aikichi and her letter to the newspaper (again, finding evidence of agency through literary ability!) even as the documentary record contains other examples of geisha activism. What kinds of motivations did geisha possess for becoming involved in political activity? The evidence is sparse but it seems clear that some geisha were clearly

committed to the ideas of rights and liberty. So much about the experiences of geisha may never be known, but it is no longer possible to assume that geisha lacked political agency or that their voices have been entirely lost.

Kusunose Kita and Male Activists

Sometimes the existence of a document can be misleading—revealing only part of a story. Such is the case with Kusunose Kita (1833–1892), one of the most famous women involved in people’s rights activism. Whereas members of local women’s groups have often been perceived as less than full actors, historians almost uniformly portray Kusunose as a strong-minded activist.⁴⁵ As proof, they point to a petition she wrote in 1878.

Kusunose drafted the petition based on her position as a female household head and a widow. Prior to writing it, Kusunose had gone to vote in local elections in Kōchi prefecture and had been denied the right to cast her ballot on the basis of her sex; consequently, she decided not to pay her taxes. In response to pressure from the local government to pay immediately, Kusunose drafted a petition to the prefectural governor and later to the Home Ministry. In the document, she claimed that because her right to vote had been denied, she was under no obligation to pay taxes. She asked whether the rights of men and women were the same or not. If men and women exercised the same rights (*danjo dōken*), they should carry out the same duties, and no difference should exist in the scope of their rights. Her petition, the first widely known document written by a woman during this period, was published in newspapers nationwide in 1879.⁴⁶ Her stubborn stance created a stir around the country, eliciting an array of reactions ranging from admiration and curiosity to disgust.

In the end, the Home Ministry issued a terse response to the petition. The government sidestepped Kusunose’s query as to whether the rights of men and women were the same. Instead, she was simply ordered to pay all back taxes immediately; the payment of taxes constituted the “duty of all citizens” (*ippan jinmin no gimu*) and was unrelated to the issue of rights. The Ministry, however, did make one small concession and permitted her to stand as a guarantor.

Kusunose’s bold act in the form of the petition has secured her reputation. Given her fame, it is rather startling to hear historian Ōki Motoko’s theory that Kusunose may not have written the petition for which she has become so famous. Rather, Ōki suspects that male people’s rights activists, probably associated with the *Risshisha* (Free Thinkers Society), composed the petition in Kusunose’s name and with her consent.⁴⁷ To be sure, Kusunose must have elected to withhold her taxes and to affix her seal to the petition.

Other than producing this famous document, her activism centered on being a loyal member of the audience at people's rights gatherings—there is no evidence, for instance, that she delivered speeches at these meetings.⁴⁸

Ōki bases her theory of the petition's origins on a number of concerns. First, she finds it strange that Kusunose never became involved in the various women's groups in Kōchi—which appeared around 1887—and never made another public pronouncement.⁴⁹ Moreover, it would have been unusual, though not impossible, for a woman to have the linguistic proficiency to create a *kambun* (Chinese-style) petition such as the 1878 document.⁵⁰

Ōki's theory raises a number of issues. For instance, does it matter whether Kusunose wrote the petition? The answer is complicated. The fact that the petition was issued in Kusunose's name is symbolically important. People both at the time and since have believed that she composed it. In this sense, it is not important who actually wrote the document because perception is everything. But in another sense, it does matter that there is doubt about the petition's origins. The existence of such doubt draws our attention to the importance of community support for individual acts. Regardless of who actually set brush to paper, Kusunose was supported by the network of male people's rights activists around her; they encouraged her and sent her petition on to the *Osaka nippo* where it was first published.⁵¹ At the same time, she supported local male activists and her support probably included financial assistance.⁵² To highlight these networks does not diminish the significance of her activism. All activists, male or female, relied on connections, a point that urges us to reconsider the meaning of agency in nineteenth-century Japan.

If my argument about literary agency is correct—that is, that in the current historiography, evidence of literary ability has been the determining factor in evaluating women's activism—the existence of a petition has made it easy for historians to highlight Kusunose's agency and to downplay the activities of the men who helped her. Ōki's interventions complicate the picture. They aim not to discredit Kusunose, but to provide a more complex view of her activism and the social networks in which she participated.

When Men Provide a Platform

No male activist during this era is better known as a supporter of women's rights than Ueki Emori (1857-1892), a people's rights leader and politician who is frequently likened to John Stuart Mill. Until his untimely death 1892, Ueki was devoted to the cause of women's rights beginning in the late 1870s. Scholars credit him for his concerted efforts to secure women's rights through his written work and political activism (even as they com-

ment on the supposed hypocrisy of his frequent trips to brothels).⁵³ We know that he inspired a number of women to become activists, especially in his native Kōchi prefecture.

Not only did Ueki encourage women's activism, but he also provided an important platform for women to communicate with a larger public by inviting them to contribute prefaces to his 1889 publication *Tōyō no fujo* (Women of the East). Nearly one third of the book consists of prefaces contributed by sixteen individual women and one women's organization.

In publishing this book, Ueki provided a discursive space for women activists both famous and obscure.⁵⁴ Yet the historiography unflinchingly treats these women as actors in their own right.⁵⁵ The women's ability to express themselves through the written word is taken as a sign of agency, and Ueki's role is not highlighted. In short, historians never seem to doubt the women's capacity for independent action, even though their inclusion in Ueki's volume attests to the importance of establishing networks and gaining support from others.⁵⁶

In a wonderful twist, the story of this book's publication reveals that Ueki himself relied on networks. It appears that Ueki wanted very much to have Iwamoto Yoshiharu, editor of *Jōgaku zasshi* (Women's Education Magazine), publish his book. He asked his friend Tokutomi Sohō, who was also a publisher, to intercede. It is unclear what happened next, but neither man published the book. (Scholar Kōno Shizuko speculates that Tokutomi likely declined, because he did not support the book's scathing critiques of old Japanese and "oriental" customs.)⁵⁷ In the end, *Women of the East* was published by the Tokyo Women's Reform Society member Sasaki Toyōju, a woman.⁵⁸ Here women's agency and capacity for independent action emerge clearly. Ueki supported women and they supported him, just as Kusunose had supported and been supported by the male activists around her. Even as men and women exercised different degrees of power within the gender order, networks were critical for all sides to achieve their goals.

Conclusion

I have considered four instances of nineteenth-century Japanese women's activism where there was a clear relationship between female and male activists. In the first two cases, I have suggested that women's agency has been largely overlooked due to the dearth of documents written by women or as a result of assumptions about women's capacities (the Okayama Society is a notable exception). In the latter two instances, I have proposed that women's agency has been taken for granted because of their ability to leave a written record while their connections with men have been

largely erased. In each account, it seems clear that the existence of a document written by a woman or group of women does not reveal the whole story of women's activism, their relationships with men, or the degree of agency they exercised.⁵⁹ Perhaps this point seems obvious, and yet in the current literature, we have given agency to the voices we have heard clearly but not to those whose voices have been more faint.

Reframing nineteenth-century women's activism and its gendered contours will be an important task for future scholarship. The "separate spheres" paradigm is not helpful here. Men were clearly involved to some degree in women's activism, just as women were involved in men's activities. What kinds of methods might allow us to appreciate the relationships between male and female activists without downplaying women's agency or, alternately, minimizing men's contributions? How can we read against the grain to appreciate the activism of those who were unable to write, and whose activism can only be glimpsed in newspaper articles where journalists may well have viewed women's activism as a curiosity? We need a framework that enables us to examine the interconnections between men and women while bearing in mind that gender was the primary axis of political and social classification in the modern period.⁶⁰ In other words, gender mattered, but it did not mean that people lived in isolated spheres. Nor, as we have seen, was it the case that all women were the same; class differences and social roles (single woman, wife, widow, or geisha) mattered too.

This call to highlight interactions between women and men is not a call to return to past historiography where all women are assumed to have been in a supporting role. Some women took on a caretaker role, but others were compelled to go beyond it. When they ventured out of familiar territory, they needed the help of a network, which often included men.⁶¹ The debate between the two female activists with which I began this essay surely suggests as much. And yet reliance on networks surely does not define women's activism or limit its significance any more than it does that of men.

In the end, there is no substitute for knowing the details of individual women's lives and the groups they participated in. Such details will only emerge from further research in local archives and will no doubt enrich our understanding of the range of types of activism and the networks that sustained them. Stories of female activists shed light on the possibilities and constraints of being a woman in nineteenth-century Japan. They also shatter the longstanding assumption that activism during this period was exclusively the prerogative of men.

NOTES

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¹This movement, in fact a series of loosely-connected movements, grew out of opposition to the dominance of men in the new government from two of the southwestern domains. It posed a significant challenge to the Japanese government, especially during the early 1880s. For a recent overview, see Inada Masahiro, *Jiyū minken undō no keifu* (Yoshikawa kobunkan, 2009).

²*Shinonome shimbun*, 15 March 1889; reprinted in Suzuki Yūko, *Nihon josei undō shiryō shusei* (Fuji shuppan, 1996), 1: 104–105. Hereafter abbreviated as *Shiryō*.

³*Shinonome shimbun*, 15 March 1889.

⁴*Shinonome shimbun*, 26 March 1889; reprinted in Suzuki Yūko, *Shiryō*, 1: 105–107.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶On these trends, primarily in western Europe and North America, see Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History* (London: Hoder Arnold, 2004). For Japan, see Wakita Haruko, Narita Ryūichi, Anne Walthall and Hitomi Tonomura, “Appendix: Past Developments and Future Issues in the Study of Women’s History in Japan,” in *Women and Class in Japanese History*, ed. Wakita Haruko, Anne Walthall, and Hitomi Tonomura (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1999), 299–310.

⁷A critical exception is found in the work of Sotozaki Mitsuhiko, one of the most prolific scholars of women’s activism in the late nineteenth century. Sotozaki does not appear to view female activists as subordinate to men. His scholarship centers on restoring women to the historical record but is not particularly analytical. For example, see Sotozaki, *Nihon fujinronshi*, vol. 1 (Domesu shuppan, 1986).

⁸Suzuki Shizuko, *Danjo dōkenron no otoko: Fukamauchi Motoi to jiyū minken no jidai* (Nihon keizai hyoronsha, 2007), 192.

⁹Suzuki Yūko, “Kaisetsu,” in *Kishida Toshiko hyōronshū* (Fuji shuppan, 1986), 9–28. Kano Masanao, “Kindai onna tachi no kiseki,” in *Shiryō joseishi ronsō*, ed. Koshō Yukiko (Domesu shuppan, 1987), 45–53.

¹⁰*Miyagi kenshi* (Sendai: Miyagi kenshi kankōkai, 1982), 4:59. Scholar Suzuki Shizuko repeats this assertion; she seems to accept it even as she points out the lack of evidence for such a claim. Suzuki Shizuko, *Danjo dōkenron no otoko*, 190–191; 193.

¹¹In an attempt to minimize confusion, I have elected to refer to these groups by the prefecture (Aichi, Kangawa, and Okayama) in which they were active.

¹²Okayama joseishi kenkyūkai, ed., "Okayama joshi konshinkai ni tsuite," *Rekishi hyoron* 204, no. 10 (1983): 2–18, quotation on 9.

¹³On Kishida, see Marnie S. Anderson, "Kishida Toshiko and the Rise of the Female Speaker in Meiji Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 31 (December 2006): 36–59.

¹⁴Okayama joseishi kenkyūkai, ed., "Okayama joshi konshinkai ni tsuite," 7–11.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶Okayama joseishi kenkyūkai, *Kindai Okayama no onna tachi* (Sanseidō, 1987), 30.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸For other women's groups (about whom we know even less), see Suzuki Yūko, *Shiryō*, 1: 72–74.

¹⁹"Political identities" is not a concept that would have been familiar to the women, but I have found it helpful as an analytical tool. I have been inspired by Lori D. Ginzberg's work on how nineteenth-century American women crafted their own political identities in her *Untidy Origins: A Story of Women's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²⁰Suzuki Yūko, *Shiryō*, 1: 72–3.

²¹*Ibid.*, 74.

²²For examples, Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 277; Felicia Gordon, "Filles Publiques or Public Women" in *Women, Gender, and Enlightenment*, ed. Barbara Taylor and Sarah Knott (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 610–629. For the case of Japan, Anderson, *A Place in Public*.

²³On the absence of political goals: Okayama joseishi kenkyūkai, "Okayama joshi konshinkai ni tsuite," 10. On repression through a series of laws that cracked down on political speech, see Inada Masahiro, "Jiyū minken undō," *Iwanami kōza Nihon tsūshi*, ed. Asao Naohiro (Iwanami shoten, 1994), 17: 75–112. The government, for its part, was working to construct politics as a negative force, declaring it dirty and out of bounds. Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 60.

²⁴Suzuki Yūko, "Kaisetsu," in *Shiryō*, 1: 23. For a different view of the society: Ōki Motoko, *Jiyū minken undō to josei* (Domesu shuppan, 2003), 45.

²⁵Suzuki Yūko, "Kaisetsu," in *Shiryō*, 1:23. In the case of the second model, women "accompanied their husbands and followed the regional people's rights movement." See also Ohata Satoshi, "Meiji joseishi ni kansuru futatsu no shinshiryō," *Kanagawa kenshi kenkyū* (1975): 57–65.

²⁶For examples of other groups, see Ishihara Masae, *Shizuoka onna hyakunen* (Domesu shuppan, 1982), 14; Suzuki Shizuko, *Danjo dōkenron no otoko*, 1982.

²⁷Kano Masanao and Yoneda Sayoko both raise this possibility in their broader reflections on the era, but I have not seen this point raised in scholarship about women's groups. Yoneda, "Jiyū minken to fujin mondai," in *Jiyū minken hyakunen no kiroku*, ed. Jiyū minken hyakunen zenkoku jikkō iinkai (Sanseidō, 1982): 80–88, esp. 85. Kano, "Kindai onna tachi no kiseki," 51–52.

²⁸Fukuda Hideko went on to become famous for her involvement in the Osaka Incident, an abortive attempt to foment revolution in Korea in 1885. She was the only woman involved. Sumiya was well known within Okayama prefecture. A former geisha who had been redeemed by her patron to serve as his concubine, she eventually left her old life behind, joined the Okayama Society, and converted to Christianity. In her later years, she helped to run an orphanage in Okayama. Yoshizaki Shioko, "Sumiya Koume to Kageyama (Fukuda) Hideko" in *Jiyū minken to gendai*, ed. Jiyū minken hyakunen zenkoku jikkō iinkai (Sanseidō, 1985), 367–371.

²⁹Suzuki Shizuko, *Danjo dōkenron no otoko*, 192.

³⁰"Geisha" and "prostitutes" were conceptually distinct and governed by different regulations at the beginning of the Meiji period. Geisha were understood to sell their "arts" (that is, music or dance) whereas prostitutes sold sex. However, the formal distinction became blurry due to new regulations passed in 1880. Geisha were widely assumed to sell sex as well as their art, an understanding that is reflected in period newspapers. Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to jōsei*, 52–53. Ōki's discussion centers on Kōchi prefecture, but these local laws seem to have followed national trends.

³¹Ōki Motoko, personal communication, February 2003. This is certainly the portrayal of geisha in works such as Sotozaki Mitsuhiro's *Ueki Emori to onna tachi* (Domesu shuppan, 1976), 58–59. Male activists are known to have been frequent patrons of geisha establishments. One recent scholar suggests that geisha speakers were a form of entertainment. While some members of the audience may have seen it this way, such a formulation does not address how these women saw themselves or how other women may have seen them. See Kyu Hyun Kim, *The Age of Visions and Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 250.

³²For recent scholarly references to geisha: Sekiguchi Sumiko, "Enzetsu suru onna tachi, No. 5." *Mirai* 406 (July 2000): 20–26; Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to jōsei*, 52–56.

³³*Nihon rikken seitō shimbun*, 19 October 1883; reprinted in Suzuki Yūko, *Shiryō*, 1:53.

³⁴Sekiguchi, "Enzetsu suru onna tachi, No. 5," 26.

³⁵Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to jōsei*, 14.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 54.

³⁷Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to jōsei*, 55. For Aikichi's letter, *Doyō shimbun*, 4, 6, 7 June 1886. "Cat" and "fox" were derogatory terms for geisha.

³⁸*Doyō shimbun*, 7 June 1886.

³⁹Kōchi shiritsu jiyū minken kinenkan, ed., *Meiji no joseiten zuroku* (Kōchi-shi: Kōchi shiritsu jiyū minken kinenkan, 1996), 44.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.* In fact, there were precedents for geisha attending prefectural assemblies.

⁴²*Shinonome shimbun*, 28 November 1889, reprinted in Suzuki Yūko, *Shiryō*, 1:123.

⁴³Many Japanese women besides geisha during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were in a form of debt bondage, including prostitutes and others in the entertainment industry. The question of their involvement in political activism deserves examination. I thank an anonymous reader for the *Journal of Women's History* for pointing this out.

⁴⁴Rumi Yasutake, *Transnational Women's Activism: The United States, Japan, and Japanese Immigrant Communities in California, 1885–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 5. A number of prominent Meiji politicians were married to former geisha.

⁴⁵This is true of historians in and outside of Japan. In Japanese, see Sotozaki Mitsuhiro, *Kōchi-ken fujin undōshi* (Kōchi-shi: Kōchi shiritsu shimin toshokan, 1971), 13; Sotozaki, *Nihon fujinronshi* (Domesu shuppan, 1986), 1: 69–70. In English, Sharon Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 29–31; Hiroko Tomida, *Hiratsuka Raichō and Early Japanese Feminism* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 63–65; Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19; Yasutake, *Transnational Women's Activism*, 60. For a nuanced view that highlights how little we really know about Kusunose: Kōchi shiritsu jiyū minken kinenkan, ed., *Meiji no joseiten zuroku*, 26.

⁴⁶The petition, entitled “Zeinō no gi ni tsuki goshirei negai no koto” (A request for clarification regarding taxes), can be found in Suzuki Yūko, *Shiryō*, 1: 54–55. In some areas of the country, female household heads had exercised the vote at the end of the previous Tokugawa period and at the beginning of the Meiji period. Given this background, Kusunose's claim does not seem quite so unusual.

⁴⁷Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to josei*, 43, note 2.

⁴⁸The only extant document from her later years is the congratulatory letter Kusunose wrote to Kōno Hironaka upon his election to the Diet. Sotozaki declares that there is no evidence that Kusunose gave speeches in *Kōchi-ken fujin undōshi*, 16.

⁴⁹Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to josei*, 43, note 2.

⁵⁰Ōki, Personal Communication, February 2003.

⁵¹Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to josei*, 40. At the time, there were no local newspapers in Kōchi.

⁵²Ōki, Personal Communication, February 2003.

⁵³Ueki's fondness for brothels is mentioned in most of the scholarship in Japanese. For example, see Kōno Shizuko, "*Toyo no fujo shuppan ni matsuwaru Ueki, Sohō, Toyōju no kōyū*," *Ueki Emori shū geppō* 3, no. 2 (1990): 1–5. Yoneda seems eager to move beyond this issue in "*Jiyū minken to fujin mondai*," 85.

⁵⁴For a list of the contributors, along with brief biographies when such information is known, see Kōchi shiritsu jiyū minken kinenkan, ed., *Meiji no joseiten zuroku*, 60–61.

⁵⁵For one treatment of the prefaces, see Mara Patessio, "Women's Participation in the Popular Rights Movement during the Early Meiji Period," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 27 (2004): 3–26, esp. 19–20.

⁵⁶Ibid. See also Ōki, *Jiyū minken undō to josei*, 144–145; Sekiguchi, "Enzetsu suru onna tachi, No. 5," 22.

⁵⁷Kōno Shizuko, "*Toyo no fujo shuppan ni matsuwaru Ueki, Sohō, Toyōju no kōyū*," 2–3. The Reform Society was the Japanese chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

⁵⁸Ibid., 2. Women were prohibited by law from serving as publishers, and it is unclear to me why she was able to do this.

⁵⁹Due to space constraints, I have not addressed examples of women's public speaking. For a discussion, see Anderson, "Kishida Toshiko and the Rise of the Female Speaker."

⁶⁰See Anderson, *A Place in Public*.

⁶¹As I have already suggested, male activists also required networks. In cases where men have been credited with major achievements, such networks can be even harder to identify. I thank Anne Walthall for pointing this out to me.