

## “I AM HERE TOO”

— Interview with Sumire-san (pseudonym)

The new series “Intersectional Feminism”. The fourth person we interviewed is Sumire-san (pseudonym) from Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. She was born to a mother from the Republic of Korea and a father from the *Buraku* community.

In Japan, being from an area known as a *Buraku* (*dowa area*) can lead to discrimination in marriage, employment and daily life<sup>1</sup>. Such discrimination formed throughout the history of Japanese society continues to this day, with marriage discrimination, shunning of residence in Buraku areas and discriminatory language and behaviour occurring in Hyogo Prefecture. Such discrimination formed throughout the history of Japanese society continues to this day, with marriage discrimination, shunning of residence in discriminated Buraku areas and discriminatory language and behaviour occurring in Hyogo Prefecture<sup>2</sup>.

Sumire-san was born and raised in Hyogo Prefecture. When she was a student, she was a member of the broadcasting and dance club.

### **What are some of the most memorable things in your student life?**

“I hate sporting events but I liked the school festivals very much. One of the most memorable lectures was the annual human rights study, where someone outside came to deliver a lecture. Also, when we were in junior high, we all went to watch the performance of Korean art groups once. Despite recent attention to it, at that time, I thought that Korean pop culture was not perceived as good because I had been told from a very young age that Koreans are to be discriminated against. That is why I was impressed and pleased that we were told that the whole class would watch it.”

Currently, Sumire-san researches while engaging in social movements.

### **What made you interested in social issues?**

“It was my first year at high school when the 9.11 attack occurred. I saw the World Trade Centre collapsing over the TV, and I wondered why wars and things like this happen. Then I became a bit interested in social issues. Additionally, when I went to Okinawa on a school excursion, we visited a church overlooking a US military base, where the sister told us how military activities worked. I realised that Japan was involved in it, and I started to pay more attention to social issues.”

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<https://www.hyogo-jinken.or.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/1c460df9e64c531c8ff7c49f0fb87c04.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Please find details here: <https://web.pref.hyogo.lg.jp/kf06/documents/r5houkokugaiyouban.pdf> (JPN).

### **How did you get into research?**

“My parents never pushed me to go into companies. Rather, they wanted me to acquire expertise, such as being a doctor, lawyer, etc. Looking back, it was because they wanted me to follow a career path that was considered less vulnerable to discrimination in employment. So, I was struggling to find a way because of the differences between my academic grades, my parent's expectations, and what I wanted to do. Fortunately, I got into university and studied international development, agrarian issues, and disparities between urban and rural areas. When I got to go to Laos on a study tour, I learned specifically about the Vietnam War, which made me curious about Vietnam. Then I realised that I had many acquaintances coming from Vietnam. My father is from *Buraku* and works in a factory whose largest population comes from Vietnam. When I was little, I wondered why they worked here. Finally, I learned that they came to Japan in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and subsequent social changes. At the same time, I encountered student movements of Korean Residents in Japan which made me realise that Japan continued to have problems with colonialism and discrimination. Then I decided to start a research journey focusing on Vietnamese Residents in Japan because I felt that my life had been supported by a structure of exploitation that violated the human rights of others and that I was woven into that structure, being a perpetrator and a victim.”

### **Do you feel any discomfort about being called Japanese?**

“It was not so in the past, but I do feel a lot now. It might be because I encountered the movement of Korean Residents in Japan. The movement made me realise that I thought I was Japanese, but apparently, sometimes I do not fit into the category of Japanese assumed by society and government. Then I started to question it.”

### **I would like to know more about the movement of Korean Residents in Japan. How did you get involved in the movement?**

“I came across the movement through my engagement in fair trade. During the activity, I met a senior student at the university who also did activities with Korean Residents in Japan. The senior informed me of a forum related to the relationship between Japan and the Korean Peninsula. When I went there, I remember being shocked to see many people introducing themselves as Koreans or using their real names. I used to think that “Korean” was a discriminatory term. However, I realised that I had been drawn to the word “Korean (*Chosen*)”, uttered in a derogatory way, and thought that even the word “Korean” was bad, which itself was an evasion created by Japanese society. Since then, I gradually participated in activities, and I got acquainted with more people. I am still working on issues of gender discrimination as a member of a human rights organisation for Korean Residents in Japan. No matter how successful individuals are in business or other areas, they might encounter discrimination. The movements of Korean Residents in Japan taught me that if discrimination is a product of social structures and history, we need to share historical understandings and eliminate discrimination. ”

As mentioned before, Sumire-san is currently working on the issue of gender discrimination too.

### **How did you become involved in gender issues?**

“Having spent 6 years at a girls-only school, I rarely came across male representatives during my teenage years. At home, while my father was the most powerful, he did all the housework and everything, and my family had more females. So, to be honest, I did not understand the gender issues empirically. However, I realised that reality was different when I saw men dominating the top positions in various life situations, sometimes even in social movements. Just when I started to be involved in the movement, I heard gender issues and sexual harassment issues within the movement. At first, I was confused because I wanted to engage in gender issues but my sense of gender issues was not sharp. Initially, I was eager to reclaim the ethnicity that I had been deprived of, but I was quite troubled by the fact that while I wanted to value the ethnic community that affirmed and reclaimed my ethnicity, I also had to keep a critical eye on them in terms of gender discrimination. That is why I believe there would be no ethnic movement without solving gender issues. Sometimes I ask myself to what extent I can understand the pains and things like that though I am also a woman. That is why I want to keep learning and working.

### **Are you also engaging in gender issues within the Buraku community?**

“I have never lived in *Buraku*. However, since my father is from the *Buraku* community and has been engaging in the Burakuy industry, I never forget about *Buraku* and myself being *Burakumin*. Gradually engaging in social movements, I struggled to talk about my double roots, Buraku and Korea. After publicly saying my identity, I met more people. Through encounters with people working on gender issues, especially women, I came to strongly think that I wanted to do what I could on the issues related to Buraku, a part of my identity.”

### **How do you think the majority can work together with the minority in a true sense?**

“That is a huge thing. I use the word ‘majority’ to refer to a population that is not negatively affected by an issue. I think the most important thing is positionality. I think we cannot engage in social movements together if people do not understand their privilege correctly. It is crucial to study history and social structure to recognise what kind of privilege we have. On the other hand, I reflected that I sought positionality too much. Positionality is the departure to consider how people can work together. Yet, if we misuse positionality, it makes people shut up. It was wrong to put up my positionality and just said; “You do not still understand”, instead of having more conversations. It happened when I was hurt by what the majority said, but now I regret that I could have had better communication to work together. Some people in the majority try to relieve their pains or seek approval through the minority movement, but I hope that they will face their wounds and not be healed by the minorities but by themselves. Only then can we finally create a space where we can work together.”

### **How do you think the minority community can enhance solidarity within the community?**

“In both communities, I feel a sense of outsider. For example, the organisation I am engaging in has many Korean Residents in Japan who graduated from Korean schools and

have Korean nationality. Among them, I might not be a person supposed to be in the Korean community. However, people have told me that there is meaning and significance in my existence in this community and I believe so too. That is why I am engaging in the activities. For more than 10 years of my engagement, I have gotten a sort of privilege, so I pay attention to my positionality. I hold Japanese nationality. I cannot overlook my privilege while valuing our commonality as Korean ethnicity. Some people feel that being a graduate of a Japanese school, a Japanese national or having multiple roots is a barrier or a feeling of being isolated when committing to a community. I think it is very significant that when such people want to join the community but cannot, my presence allows them to say, "We are Koreans". I think it has meaning to say "I am here too". In terms of *Buraku*, I was not raised in *Buraku*, as I mentioned. So I do not know about the pains or struggles of living in *Buraku* and their rich human relationship. Where my family currently live is not the home village of my father. Therefore I feel that it is not my village and that I feel a sense of an outsider. Thankfully, like the movement of Korean Residents in Japan, some people asked me to work together because I am from *Buraku*, and may be subject to Buraku discrimination. I feel grateful to be able to work together with them."

### **Have you gone through any struggles?**

"Regarding Korean, I have been struggling with whether I am Korean. One of the biggest reasons is that I am not a Korean who is assumed to be in the movement. For instance, my Korean friends with double roots, who identify themselves as Korean, have either a Korean father and a Japanese mother or a Korean mother who divorced a Japanese father in most cases. I think this is related to gender issues. In the end, it is men who are the basis of an ethnic group. In other words, a person is Japanese if the father is Japanese so is Korean. Sometimes I feel as if my mother's ethnic group is considered to have too little basis to be an ethnic group. Also, my mother is from the Republic of Korea, and lived in Japan with a spouse visa instead of a special permanent residence, so the historical background is different from other Korean Residents in Japan. In the first place, Korean Residents in Japan refer to Korean people who came to Japan as a result of Japanese colonisation and their descendants, so I am out of that categorisation. However, looking into the details, it is not clear where the tie cut off. When I deepened this aspect, I realised that it was not strange for me to engage in the movements of Korean Residents in Japan, and some people also told me so. Of course, there are times when I feel empty wondering if this is the right thing to do, but quitting is not an option. So I am going to do what I can."

### **What about Buraku?**

"Conversely, I have never wondered whether I am *Burakumin*. There is a debate over the treatment of *Burakumin* who have never lived in *Buraku*, but I have never considered myself as not *Burakumin* nor had any struggles. I can accept that easily. Perhaps that is what it means to have a father from *the Buraku* community. However, I do not understand what *Burakumin* living in *Buraku* has felt and experienced. Therefore, I need to be aware that "I do not know everything" while listening to and respecting their voices. There are and have been persons of foreign roots in the *Buraku* community. I hope that by making such existence visible, I contribute to creating a society where we can embrace each person's multiple selves without diminishing them by making them visible."