

I Am Keenly Aware of The Importance of Voicing Up

- Interview with Yuko Oyakawa



The fourth person we feature is Yuko Oyakawa, born and raised in Ginowan City, located in southern-central Okinawa. Okinawa prefecture holds many U.S. military bases. In particular, approximately 70% of the bases used exclusively by the U.S. military in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa¹. Her hometown, Ginowan City, has Futenma Air Base. It is said that the Futenma base was originally built for attacks on the Japanese mainland during the Battle of Okinawa².

(Photo taken when Oyakawa-san joined the CEDAW session in NY)

- What is the most memorable thing in your student life?

“I was raised close to the Futenma military base, so I got used to loud noise. Since U.S. military helicopters flew regardless of classes at school, the classes were interrupted regularly. For instance, in Japanese class when a teacher told me to read one sentence written in the textbook, the teacher told me to wait for the helicopter to go over the school so that other students could hear my voice. I heard that the classes delivered near the base were interrupted by loud noise, which might amount to children losing approximately one year of their classes in 12 years of their education. It is often said that children in Okinawa have lower academic attainments, but I think such loud noise impacts children’s academic performance. When I moved to Nago City in the northern part of Okinawa for university, I was surprised at how quiet it was without military helicopters. My university life was full of intercultural communication within Okinawa prefecture. For example, each school I used to go to had air conditioners and double-glazed windows. Also, a swimming pool was established at my elementary school. However, people from other areas of Okinawa did not have those facilities. Later, I realised that these facilities were from the budget for the improvement of areas surrounding the base, which put us in a mindset where we cannot see damage as damage. Furthermore, people from Naha City and the southern part of Okinawa did not know how loud the military sounds were. So, I was so surprised that they did not have experiences as did I when I met them. Since these things, such as loud noises, were in my everyday life, it took me a long time to notice they were not right and were discrimination.”

¹ <https://www.pref.okinawa.jp/kyoiku/kodomo/1002657/1002668.html> (Accessed on 19 April 2024)

² <https://www.city.ginowan.lg.jp/shisei/kichi/4/4277.html>

The sounds of U.S. military helicopters could not be muted by double-glazed windows and were heard even during the online interview. Yuko-san told me that these helicopters were created to make very loud noise without any mute functions.

- What made you involved in activism?

“In 1995 when I was a sophomore at university, a rape case where a girl was attacked by three U.S. military men occurred. I was not interested in politics at that time, and I did not discuss this issue with my friends though I did consider it not right. In the following month, a prefectural convention happened, in which approximately 85,000 people in Okinawa gathered. It was the largest protest rally since 1972. When I read the news, I regretted not to participate. Until then, I had thought it was inevitable that there would be harm because of the presence of the U.S. military base. Yet, the news made me realise that it was okay to be angry. At the same time, it made me intensely aware of the fact that I was unconsciously giving up. Looking back, the incident was a turning point for me in various ways.”

- Have you been involved ever since?

“No, I once stopped involving in issues related to the U.S. military base in Okinawa when a mayor accepted relocation of the Futenma base to Nago City. In 1997, a local referendum in Nago City resulted in more than half of the citizens refusing the replacement of the U.S. military base. This attitude was also manifested in the 1996 prefectural referendum, in which approximately 90% of Okinawans voted to reduce the base's size. Even though we always had to make our decisions between economics or military bases, we expressed our collective opinions. Yet, a few days after the referendum in Nago City, the mayor declared to accept the relocation of the base and that he was going to quit. In other words, he prioritised economic stimulation measures over citizens' opinions. Our voices were completely ignored. Then I got sick of such politics and went back to my hometown after graduating from university. After that, I worked as a sales at a company.”

- What made you decide to get involved again?

“It was a workshop on international human rights that a friend of mine asked me to go about two years after I started to work. There, speakers talked about the rights of indigenous peoples. And I learned that issues in Okinawa, including military bases, can be accused of at the UN from perspectives of international human rights law, and that such issues were human rights violations of people in Okinawa. Before that, the issues were mostly considered issues of economic stimulation measures rather than their harmful effect. After coming across these new insights and reflecting on Okinawa's history, I strongly thought that we had to rethink these issues as human rights issues. I also decided to use an international human rights framework due to the limitations of domestic laws. In the following workshop, I was asked to join the UN working group on indigenous populations in 2000. Then I learned that issues related to Okinawa, which are often considered peculiar in Japan, were universal issues of indigenous peoples. There, I learned that the problems Okinawa was forced to have, which feel unique in Japan, are universal problems of indigenous peoples.”

- What was the most memorable activity so far?

“I strongly remember the session of the state report of Japan reviewed by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2009. Among other things, lobbying Zohra Rasekh, Afghanistan Commissioner, was an unforgettable experience. I told her about the influence of loud noise on pregnant people, referring to the fact that the percentage of low birth-weight infants in Okinawa was twice the national average. Particularly, where the U.S. military base was located had the highest percentage of low birth weight infants even within Okinawa. I also told her that though there might be many causes for low birth weight infants, the government should have investigated the causal relationship between low birth weight infants and loud noise. Then, Commissioner Rasekh asked the Japanese government about the health risks caused by noise and how national and local governments responded to it. I found the examination of the treaty implementation interesting. Also, I realised the importance of making a statement in international society.”

Yuko-san has been researching issues related to Okinawa not only from international human rights perspectives but also from gender and intersectional perspectives.

What made you interested in gender issues?

“I got interested in women’s issues when the media featured Domestic Violence (DV) for the enactment of the Act on the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection Victims. This made me curious about what DV was or what gender issues were. At that time, I was asked to become a part-time staff to support gender equality administration in Chatan Town which had Kadena Air Base. This work experience also got me more curious about gender issues.”

- How did you get involved in research on intersecting forms of discrimination?

“When I was working at gender equality administration in Chatan Town, a rape incident committed by the U.S. army happened again there. I thought ‘It occurred again’. Yet, it was local women who got furious and started protesting before anyone else. Seeing this, I felt that the promotion of gender equality administration alone could not fully cover issues in Okinawa, especially sexual violence by the U.S. armies. Due to criminal law and the agreement between the U.S. and Japan³, the police do not start investigations before allegations are filed and they cannot arrest suspects who are army without any permission from the U.S. military. In other words, women in Okinawa were doubly and triply disadvantaged by domestic laws and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. I was encouraged to see local women strongly outraged by these issues and take the initiative to speak out. Then I had an opportunity to participate in a study group on intersecting forms of discrimination held in Tokyo. When I heard the intersecting forms of discrimination for the first time, I felt certain that this would become a crucial keyword for women in Okinawa. Even though we say minority women in a word, there are both similarities and differences. So, interacting with them gave me new insights.”

³ Agreement Under Article VI of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/usa/sfa/pdfs/fulltext.pdf>

Yuko-san is currently doing her PhD.

- What is your current research about?

“I am currently researching international welfare and the ‘international welfare counselling centre’ established under the U.S. occupation of Okinawa in the 1950s. For instance, the former nationality law did not allow mothers to pass on their nationality to their children before its revision in 1985. So, if fathers have U.S. nationality, they cannot gain Japanese nationality. Also, women who dated or got married to the U.S. armies were exposed to prejudice since the U.S. was considered a strong state. It was said that since wives of the U.S. armies could access its rich resources, they became targets of discrimination or jealousy. Such attitudes alienated and marginalised gender issues which I think are perceived as issues on intersecting forms of discrimination.”

- Do you think such prejudice still exists?

“I think such stereotyped prejudice towards women who got married or had a child with the U.S. military remains till now. These prejudices are reflected in the lack of counselling bodies. Japan, including Okinawa, does not have adequate counselling mechanisms on privacy issues such as divorce, DV, and child-rearing expenses. This, I feel, alienates and marginalises these issues, marking them as ‘their issues’ that are different from ours. Of course, the U.S.-Japan Security Agreement put the U.S. military in a unique position, which makes it difficult to address the issues related to privacy, such as marriage or divorce. However, that does not justify that people working on gender issues alienate and marginalise the situations based on prejudice. I must confront these prejudices with self-reflection as a researcher of intersectionality and intersecting forms of discrimination.

- Do you notice any changes between when you started and now?

“Yes, I did. In terms of international human rights, the Okinawan mayor made a statement at the Human Rights Council (HRC)⁴. And, using the international human rights framework is attracting more attention in Okinawa. I strongly feel these changes. At the same time, concerning gender, I feel women are extremely empowered. When I embarked on my journey of social movements, people committing to gender issues were considered overly conscious. But I think the older generation is gradually changing as the younger generation gets involved. Particularly in Okinawa, I strongly realise the power of the women who have been working continuously till now behind these changes. Especially women who organised the Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence (OWAAMV)⁵ have been leading the movements on sexual violence and gender issues in Okinawa. Thanks to their efforts, the rape myth, which is all about the ‘victim’s fault’ argument, was overturned. The perception that ‘you are not to be blamed, it is the perpetrators who are at fault’ is spreading. Given that the 2017 amendment to the Penal Code was an extension of these various women’s activities, and this April 2024 saw the enactment of the New Act on Support for Women (Act

⁴ Governor Onaga in 2015 and Governor Denny Tamaki in 2023 read statements at the HRC on Okinawa’s right to self-determination.

⁵ OWAAMV’s HP: <https://space-yui.com/> (in Japanese)

on Support for Women with Difficult Problems)⁶, I am keenly aware of the importance of voicing up.”

- **How can people who have not been to or lived in Okinawa get involved?**

“I think being interested is important among other things. I also think that making one’s hometown better leads to supporting Okinawa since it is the government composed of members of parliament that makes decisions as a nation in the end. It is easier said than done, but I believe that we can bring about changes to problems related to Okinawa by changing the politics of our neighbourhood such as local parliaments and mayoral elections. That is why I truly and strongly think it is salient to pay attention and not ignore issues that where you live have.”

⁶ <https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=504AC0100000052>