

CLOSE-UP

CHIZUKO UENO

## Speaking up for her sex

By ERIC PRIDEAUX

Staff writer

*In the United States today, it is no longer radical to suggest that the next president could be a woman. In Nordic countries, no husband would rail at a pregnant wife who expected him to share child-raising duties. And female heads of state are now found the world over.*



Chizuko Ueno, a University of Tokyo professor of sociology, is one of Japan's most celebrated women's studies scholars. She is also, in some quarters, one of its most notorious because of her unrelenting criticism of many of the country's "discriminatory" social mores.

*But in Japan, despite significant advances in gender equality in recent decades, such terms as "women's lib" and "feminism" are still almost as taboo among women as men.*

*Unless, that is, the woman in question is Chizuko Ueno, a University of Tokyo professor and one of Japan's most celebrated women's studies scholars who, thanks to her very un-Japanese passion for bluntness and public debate, is also easily the most controversial. Or, as 57-year-old Ueno says of herself: "I'm critical. I'm assertive. I'm disobedient."*

*Ever since her days as a student radical in the 1960s, Ueno has been a thorn in the side of Japanese patriarchy, firing off fusillades of books and newspaper commentary against social constructs she regards as inhibiting gender equality.*

*Her rejection of marriage as being sexually oppressive, for instance, marks this childless, never-married woman as a dangerous gadfly in the eyes of conservatives who worry about Japan's declining birthrate. It also even troubles some moderate feminists, who may admire her pluck but question the need to forswear matrimony.*

*But though her views rankle in many quarters, that perturbs the outspoken sociologist not a jot. Indeed, the twinkle in her eye suggests that she relishes a good scrap.*

*As an impeccable speaker of English with considerable overseas teaching experience, including at Columbia University in New York in 1996, few would dispute Ueno's credentials to interpret foreign feminist theory for her Japanese audiences and to explain Japanese feminism abroad.*

*So, as part of Timeout's coverage for International Women's Day on March 8, and to try to gauge how far Japanese women have come from the prewar days when wives walked three paces behind their husbands (at traditional wedding ceremonies, many new brides still do), The Japan Times recently interviewed Ueno at her university office.*

*At that time, Ueno was embroiled in a standoff with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government who, she believes, may have pressured a citizens' group to withdraw a speaking invitation to her due to fears she would use the expression "gender free" -- a term that conservative Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara has described as promoting "grotesque" forms of sex education. Ishihara has denied that his administration leaned on the citizens' group; paradoxically, Ueno says she avoids using the term "gender free" -- "as there is no consensus among women's studies researchers on how it should be used."*

*Despite such distractions, Ueno was generous with her time for our interview, and touched on topics ranging from her own upbringing to the current state of women's activism in Japan.*



Sexual harassment, or the fear of it, remains part of daily life for Japanese women. Women-only subway cars may keep gropers away, but trouble often awaits at school or in the office.

**When did you first start thinking about women's rights, and why?**

I was raised in a Christian family, which was very unusual considering that Christians represent only 1 percent of the Japanese population.

My father was a complete sexist. He and my mother didn't have a good relationship. So, being raised in the midst of marital conflict was enough to make me a feminist! (Laughs.)

My mother's married life was not happy, from my point of view as a child. She served as a counter-model for what I *didn't* want to become.

**Did your father abuse your mother?**

It was a total power relationship between one male patriarch and a woman married with the first-born son of a family, and living together with a very powerful mother-in-law -- my grandma.

I was a beloved child of my father, but it didn't excuse him. I was a pet girl, only a pet girl. I have two brothers of whom he had expectations, and on whom he placed great pressure. He didn't do that with me. He didn't have any expectations of me.

That actually gave me great freedom to do whatever I wanted to do, which meant I could become a sociologist. That was useless to my father. He is a medical doctor who thought becoming a natural scientist or medical doctor would be useful to society. But sociology is nothing for him. But how good for me! (Laughs.)

How did you become involved in social activism?



Although most Japanese women would still rankle at being labeled "feminists," many across the country are engaged in political activism such as campaigns against nuclear power, unsafe food or, as in this 2003 photo taken in Tokyo, demonstrations against the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

I belonged to the student-power generation, which took place all over the world. Through that experience, my respect for universities, scholars and academic disciplines entirely collapsed. In addition, I was disappointed with my sexist male colleagues in student activism, which in itself gave me enough reason to be a feminist.

When I was in my late 20s, I came across so-called women's studies -- which opened me up a good deal. I thought, "Gee, with this discipline, I can deal with my own problems as an academic question." It was a great discovery -- very empowering.

What kind of glass ceilings, if any, have you experienced in the academic world?

Sexism is everywhere you go, just like gravity. It's part of nature.

At the very beginning, when I started my job hunting, I was turned down by one school after another. Twenty-three schools.

At the beginning, being turned down seemed quite reasonable because I didn't deserve the jobs. I was not motivated and I didn't have much achievement. I was just a beginner.

But one day, I happened to realize that my male colleagues, who were just as poor as I in academic achievement -- *they* could get jobs. But why not me? It was my first experience in discrimination -- in the job hunt.

But finally I managed to get work at a women's college [Heian Women's College] at age 30. That was my start.

And how did your move to the University of Tokyo come about?

Up until (my Heian Women's College job), partly because of my bad reputation for being a student activist, I had a hard time getting promoted or transferring to other universities.

That was OK with me. Based on my past experience, I didn't expect a promotion anyway. It was just part of the nature of this sexist society.

Then all of a sudden [in 1993] I received an invitation from Todai [the University of Tokyo]. People asked me how it happened, but I'm not in a position to answer. You may know that the recruitment system at prestigious universities is done in secret. I didn't apply for it.

Have you experienced any kind of institutionalized sexism in the almost 12 years you've been teaching at Todai?

Formally speaking, this is a merit-based society. So as long as you achieve, no one can deny it. And being known as a notorious feminist, I have the privilege of being spared any kind of sexual harassment. Such people just keep their distance, with respect, which is a very good thing for me. (Laughs.)

But I have listened to *so* many complaints from female colleagues and students here who have been subjected to discrimination and harassment. They have popped up at this office and asked me to listen to their stories. It has been shocking.

The harassment they've described has been both physical and psychological?

Yes. Once you are hired here, your position is secured because every job is tenured -- at least until recently. The situation is changing now.

But graduate students are in the most uncertain situation because they are under the supervision of mostly male supervisors, as well as in the process of job hunting.

Are you suggesting that if they express views that contravene male orthodoxy, they are harassed professionally? They won't receive recommendations?

There are many forms of harassment, from academic to sexual. Some are very stupid and almost laughable. Publicity about this problem has been widespread, so I hope most male scholars have become very conscious and careful.

But there is still a tendency among scholars within the natural sciences to commit this kind of sexual harassment. I could tell them how to hide it better! (Laughs.) They are naive enough to do it very openly.

*[When we asked the University of Tokyo for comment, a spokeswoman acknowledged the existence of sexual harassment there in the past, but noted that the school has established a consultation center to grapple with the problem.]*

Why don't such students -- or other victims of gender discrimination in Japan -- launch more legal cases? Some Western observers look at this and wonder whether Japanese women are indeed willing to fight for social parity.

That depends on historical context. Back in the 1950s, when labor conflict was rampant, Japanese women's labor activism was very strong.

But within the general decline of labor unionism itself, women's unionism also declined. Regarding women's activism specifically, back in the early 1970s, at the beginning of the Japanese women's liberation movement, it was very vocal.

But when you talk about waging legal battles, the cost of taking a case to court is very high in terms of time and energy, and usually in Japan it will take nearly 20 years to reach a final court decision.

But through this kind of struggle, Japanese women's labor unionism *has* achieved so many victories, for example in abolishing the compulsory female retirement age and dismissal of married women.

Based on these kinds of struggles, in 1985 the so-called Equal Opportunity Employment Law was passed. When the law was made, the content was just the ratification of what Japanese women had already acquired. So it wasn't much progress.

A woman writer made a very interesting observation about the social costs of confronting patriarchy. If you look at Japanese men individually, they seem very soft and tender and kind. But once they get organized, they become a kind of a big wall across which it is very hard to cross. So it is gender-biased rules and practices that protect male privileges.

There are actually many commonplace Japanese practices and systems which at a glance seem very neutral and non-sexist. But once you enter into this kind of tradition and system it works quite discriminatorily against women.

For example, if your company expects you to work long hours, it seems a neutral request. But if you're a woman with a family at home, you just cannot survive at the company. These kind of practices and traditions function as obstacles for women.

What remedy do you suggest?

In my own case -- and I keep telling my female colleagues and students -- if you come across such obstacles, protesting it will drive you to burnout. Think first about what you want to do. It's better to make a detour and just start doing whatever it is you're trying to do, since we all have limited time and energy. This is a survival skill for women. The cost is too high if you destroy your life.

In an interview you once said, "Japanese women may not be as visible in the public sphere as their American counterparts, and this may lead observers to the conclusion that women are less liberated in Japan . . ." Were you suggesting there is another women's movement afoot in Japan that doesn't immediately meet the eye?

I tell my feminist colleagues from abroad, if they visit municipal offices or corporations and want to see women at the top, they may not see anyone. But in my point of view, they walk away with a superficial impression.

If you go to the informal sector, in grassroots activism, there are so many powerful women. I don't despise them because they are jobless or housewives. They have carried out very interesting movements in such areas as environmental protection and food safety.

For example, the Japanese and U.S. governments have recently clashed over importing American beef. Actually, there is so much strong ecological women's activism over safe food that the Japanese government cannot ignore their voice.

You're saying that the women's movement is behind the pressure we've seen on Japanese lawmakers over the U.S. beef issue?

Exactly. They are powerful even though they are not visible at the national level. Their causes may not be immediately identifiable as women's issues or equal participation. But, for instance, if you look at anti-nuclear power activism and so forth, they actually have made a shift in local politics. Without having the support of these women, no politician can gain victory in local elections.

How do you interpret the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's alleged resistance to your talk in Kokubunji City? You wrote the officials a letter of protest. What was the response?

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government office sent me a letter. You can see it (in Japanese) on our Web site [[www.cablenet.ne.jp/~miming/against\\_GFB.html](http://www.cablenet.ne.jp/~miming/against_GFB.html)]. It was just a short note saying they are not responsible for making a decision, that it was rather Kokubunji City that did so and TMG had only showed their concern (over use of the term "gender free.")

Will you take legal action?

I'm thinking about it.

Do you see this as a violation of your right to free speech?

Generally speaking yes, though no damage has been done to me. I have strong objections to any public body banning the use of any words unless they are discriminatory or hurtful to others.

Some women scholars describe a backlash against feminism that started in the 1990s. Do you regard this incident in that way?

I do think so, very much. Not only in terms of gender equality but, in a sense, there is a very dangerous trend of neo-nationalism, which makes all social minorities targets of bashing.

Examples include welfare underdogs and ethnic minorities like Korean residents. Tokyo Gov. Ishihara used the term "sangokujin" in a speech. [Literally, "people from third countries"; it generally refers to Taiwanese or Korean immigrants and their descendants, and is widely considered offensive.] Also, many people regard new migrants from Asia as a risk to public safety.

This kind of political climate is very defensive, rightwing, conservative, neo-nationalist and is being seen everywhere -- particularly among senior men and also among young men. If you look at rightwing demonstrations, they've recruited youngsters. It's quite similar to neo-Nazism in Germany and [far-right politician Jean-Marie] Le Pen in France, and maybe Bush supporters.

On the topic of your private life, may I ask if you have a significant other?

Of course! Why not? I have no reason to have a legal marriage, but that doesn't restrain me from having *any* kind of relationship with people individually.

I have no need to be registered with the state. Why, if you have some kind of intimate or sexual relationship, would you want to register your relationship with the state? It's absurd.

In your writings, I believe you've suggested that feminism represents freedom, and marriage is a contract that denies one's sexual freedom.

I would use the term "sexual autonomy of women." I believe it is the core of feminism. Marriage seems to me a contract to transfer this autonomy to someone else. Of course, everybody has their own reasons for choosing to stay married, and that's OK. But I have the right not to trust them.

Do you question the financial contract, in other words women's choice of financial stability over autonomy?

If you are a mother, you have a reason to participate in a legal marriage because it gives you more advantages for your children. So it is quite reasonable. But it is more important to provide single mothers with financial security.

But as for the sexual autonomy, to me, I cannot understand the marriage contract because it is a lifetime contract handing your sexual autonomy over to someone else to control. How can you tolerate that if you're a feminist seeking freedom or your sexual autonomy?

But what about a woman who has children with different fathers? If you deny monogamy, don't you start running into social and financial complexities pertaining to the fathers' rights and responsibilities?

Well, there are reconstructed families. Now, in this age of serial marriages, people marry, divorce and remarry. It's already happening. And what's wrong with it? It's happier for all parties, compared with forced marriage.

And I also don't like the idea of belonging to someone or having someone belong to me. I don't like the idea of possession when it comes to human beings.

*To mark International Women's Day on March 8, next week's Timeout will combine hard data, expert analysis and the voices of other leading Japanese women as it delves further into gender issues in Japan.*

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