

# BLOOD TIES: INTIMATE VIOLENCE IN SHINZÔ ABE'S JAPAN

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I first met Keiko Kondo in Tokyo in spring 2012. Like all of us, she was struggling to comprehend, a year on, what Japan's triple disaster—earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor meltdown—meant. The crisis stirred social activism as citizens began to question government and industry's handling of the worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl, but it also galvanized a conservative push for national unity. At that moment, it was clear that March 11, 2011—"3/11"—marked a turning point for Japanese society and politics. But it was unclear which direction that turn would take.

Kondo stands on the front lines of intimate violence in Japan as director of the All Japan Women's Shelter Network (ShelterNet), a non-profit organization that coordinates 67 privately run women's shelters in the country, and in 2011, she and her colleagues found themselves overwhelmed with calls from the worst-hit areas. It was from that vantage point that she made a critique of the post-disaster rally-around-the-flag rhetoric that stuck with me.

*Kizuna*, the bonds between people, emerged as a buzzword after 3/11. Entertainers promoted events to raise money for the affected areas in the name of *kizuna*; government officials organized programs to bolster *kizuna*; a new center-left political party formed as the Kizuna Party. Kondo noted that calls to strengthen *kizuna* put victims of domestic violence in a precarious position. In regions affected by the tsunami and nuclear meltdown, legal definitions of families often threw women back into cramped temporary housing developments with their abusive husbands. Those, like Kondo, working to support women extricating themselves from violent households understood that there are cases when *kizuna* kills—when the bonds that link families become bondage.

Five years later, the situation regarding intimate violence has worsened. The events known as 3/11 represented a critical moment, Kondo told me in June. In a time of insecurity, the nation looked to the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had been in power almost continuously from 1955 to 2009. Shinzō Abe, after an unsuccessful first term from 2006 to 2007, returned as prime minister in 2012 and renewed his assault on citizens' rights.

This time around, Abe has softened his reactionary tone, and relies instead on the rhetoric of economic growth to maintain political

popularity. Abe played a key role in attacks on gender-equality policies in 2005, portraying feminist scholars and bureaucrats who sought to create a “gender-free” curriculum in schools as radical, destructive, and even “reminiscent of Pol Pot’s faction.” In his second term, Abe has co-opted the language of female empowerment to push for economic reform. He seeks deregulation of labor markets, in part to tap into the potential of Japan’s highly educated women to stimulate the lagging national economy. But for Abe, neoliberal policies work together with a conservative, sexist vision of society. In his attempts to revise the postwar Constitution to bolster supposedly traditional notions of family, Abe is reinforcing the understanding that women belong to their spouses—an idea that leads to abuse and can trap women in unsafe relationships. Citing government programs such as matchmaking events and a women’s health bill that critics attack as focused on the fitness of wombs rather than that of women, Kondo questions the substance of Abe’s calls for women to be more active in Japanese society: “Behind slogans about empowerment are policies that actually say [to women], ‘give birth, increase [the population], work, throw away your individual identity, and devote yourself to your families and your nation.’”

## THE SCOPE OF VIOLENCE

Kondo speaks with the authority of decades of experience. An assertive but welcoming person, she began her activism in the far north of Japan, in Hokkaido, working in grass-roots advocacy for women’s rights in the 1980s. Kondo co-founded ShelterNet in 1998 after participating in the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, organizing the first international symposium on women’s shelters in

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Japan in 1996, and opening the first private women's shelter in Hokkaido in 1997. Three years later, Japan's legislature passed a law that Kondo and other activists had long lobbied for: the 2001 Act on the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims. Civic groups and shelters had supported women who faced intimate violence, but until the Act, government did not recognize domestic violence as a social problem. After decades of silence on the pervasive nature of partner abuse, the 2001 law marked a moment of official acknowledgement of the need for protection against intimate violence.

Attorney Yukiko Tsunoda recalled the difficulties she faced in the late 1980s while constructing a case of self-defense for a client, a woman who had killed her abusive husband while he was asleep. Writing retrospectively in a 1995 article in *The Journal of the International Institute*, she said that she lacked the language with which she could build an argument. Tsunoda could find only one book in Japanese about domestic violence: a translation of a volume about the building of a women's shelter in England. There was no acknowledgment in the literature that women confronted violence in the home, and there were no empirical studies on the scope and characteristics of that abuse.

Tsunoda was involved in forming the Research and Study Group on Domestic Violence in the early 1990s to ascertain the extent of the problem in Japan. The profile of the abuser that emerged from the group's investigation surprised those who wanted to believe that domestic violence was limited to scenarios involving poverty and working-class masculinity. As Tsunoda wrote, "Almost all the professions were represented in the batterer class, from national university professors, to doctors, lawyers, executives, and even a religious minister. These results refute the myth that domestic violence in Japan exists solely in a working-class environment." That abuse afflicted a diverse range

of households suggested a more insidious and widespread attitude about the rights of a man over his wife in contemporary Japan.

When I sat down with Kondo this summer, she pulled out page after page of graphed data illustrating the scope of the violence. According to ShelterNet's current estimates, based on government surveys, one in four women has experienced intimate violence. This rate is similar to other nations designated "high income" by the World Health Organization, which stated in a 2016 fact sheet that one third of women worldwide who have been in a relationship reported experiences of violence—physical and/or sexual—at the hands of a partner. Unfortunately, intimate abuse is common the world over. Compared with other nations, however, Japan, while enjoying a relatively low homicide rate, has an extraordinarily high proportion of women victims. According to a 2014 report by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, Japan and Hong Kong share the highest rates of female homicide victims at 52.9 percent. The worldwide average is 21.3 percent. Intimate violence contributes to this ratio. Every four days in Japan, on average, a husband kills his wife.

Rape and spousal abuse is always underreported, but the numbers suggest that more women are in danger than ever before. According to statistics released by the Gender Equality Bureau in its 2017 report "Women and Men in Japan," visits to spousal violence counseling centers more than tripled between 2002 and 2015 (from 35,943 to 111,630), and consultations with the police during that period quadrupled (from 14,140 to 63,141). Although anyone can become a victim of partner abuse, 99.4 percent of those who sought help between 2002 and 2007 were women.

Yet, even as reports of gendered violence rise, the Gender Equality Bureau's data show that the number of women who obtained temporary protection has hovered between 11,000

and 12,000 a year since 2002, when the Act on the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims first came into effect. A complex set of deterrents women face when attempting to escape abuse may explain this gap between the rise in the number of women seeking counseling and the relatively stable number of women who find shelter from their abuser outside the home. The current legal framework also may extend protections to women but still does not penalize abusers, and even a June 2017 revision to the country's 1907 rape law fails to recognize spousal rape as a crime. On a more intimate level, definitions of family and women's place within that institution can hinder enforcement of existing laws.

### PATRIARCHAL LOGIC OF THE FAMILY

The misogyny that contributes to this violence is embedded in Japanese bureaucratic structures. Each time I teach my Introduction to Sociology course to a class of almost 50 Japanese students, I ask them to identify the *setainushi*—literally “household master”—in their family. Every family is required to list one member as the *setainushi* when they register their domicile with city officials. Technically, any legally competent adult can be “master,” but in practice the family's most senior male occupies this position. Important administrative documents concerning pensions and health coverage for all members of the family, including other adult members, are addressed to the *setainushi*. My informal polls of students have found that only divorced households are headed by women.

My own anecdotal experience demonstrated to me how gendered understandings of the position of “household master” influence administrative staff; in spite of being the only fluent Japanese language speaker in my household, it was not easy to persuade my local bureaucrats that I understood what I was asking for when I put myself down as “master.” Even now, when I show up to take care of government tasks, I face

confusion based on assumptions about how families ought to be structured. If my household has an adult male in it, why is there a woman acting as *setainushi*?

The very language of belonging to family in casual conversation describes women “going as brides” to their husband's family, or a man “receiving a bride.” These terms indicate the patrilocal logic of the family registry (*koseki*) system, which survived radical postwar reforms designed to protect individuals—particularly women's—rights within marriage. The *koseki* system is based on the 1872 Civil Code,

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which universalized the patriarchal samurai household (*ie*) model and defined women and children as legal incompetents. The *ie* system created under the Civil Code gave the head of the household, nearly always a man, enormous power, making all other family members vulnerable to his control. The logic of the patriarchal Civil Code lives on in ostensibly democratic Japan. When a woman marries, she exits her family of birth and becomes part of her husband's family paperwork.

Current family law also requires that both members of a married couple adopt the same surname. While members of a heterosexual union can choose to use either the man or woman's surname (same-sex marriage remains

illegal in Japan), 96 percent go with the husband's family name. Much like the position of the "household master," there is technical gender neutrality but strong social pressure to follow precedent at the expense of female autonomy and individual identity. Indeed, a case that came before the Supreme Court in 2015 challenged this law. The claimants argued that the civil code had a negative impact almost exclusively on women and was therefore counter to constitutional mandates on gender equality. The Court upheld the law, basing its judgment on arguments that surnames indicate to society that individuals belong to the same family, and "a family is a natural and fundamental unit of persons in society." All three of the Court's female judges dissented in the 10-5 ruling against the claim.

As a corollary to these understandings about the structure of the family, gendered divisions of labor within the household often keep women economically dependent, particularly those who give up work after marrying or having children, as many relatives and employers expect them to do. This limits the options of many women who need to get out of abusive situations but lack the income that would make them self-sufficient.

Kondo shared many instances of women who had consulted the hotlines and centers associated with ShelterNet. She described the case of one woman who came to ShelterNet seeking advice on how to make her husband "more gentle." Kondo said the woman explained, "At this point, I can't get a divorce. I quit my work [when I married], and I don't think I can raise my children alone." She felt regret about marrying him, having "entered his family registry," after succumbing to societal pressure to marry in her early 30s.

But the woman also noted her own ambivalence: "Since it isn't bad enough for me to be hospitalized, since my friends also say they get hit sometimes, since my father also hit me,

I thought that it just was what it was." At the same time, her husband terrified her. She said he would throw plates of food if he deemed them too cold, drag her off the couch if he found her napping, or demand sex regardless of how she felt.

ShelterNet told her, "There's no way to make him more gentle" and "You are not a thing that belongs to your husband." The group's staff warned that she should take the danger of escalation seriously and leave with her children. They have crafted this advice based on nearly two decades of experience protecting women from their partners.

Yet many local police agencies and administrative entities often try to persuade women to seek solutions within their families. Another woman, who consulted a hotline associated with ShelterNet, said that when she called the police, they told her to "talk this over and resolve it as husband and wife." Women who do seek refuge in their parents' homes often find that their families urge them to return to their partners. One woman reported that her mother told her: "It's not good when a wife leaves the home [*ie*]." Kondo worries that the Abe administration's insistence on family ties will further discourage civil servants from intervening in domestic conflict.

She also pointed to cases in which administrative entities leaked information about women who had managed to escape abusive spouses. Police have revealed the locations of women living at shelters to their husbands; public daycare notices with victims' new addresses have been sent to abusive fathers; local governments have conveyed private details to the "household master." But whether accidental or on purpose, disclosures can have deadly consequences; abusive men who find women attempting to flee often react with intensified violence.

This kind of handling, or mishandling, of cases by many local officials persuades Kondo and others that, while government support is

critical, shelters must operate autonomously. Strict rules at government-run women's shelters also deter women from staying there. In 2015, 10 of the nation's 48 public shelters were barely used: Three were empty and seven housed only one person. Kondo noted that, in the same time period, many private shelters were at capacity. Kondo would prefer better public-sector solutions for women seeking shelter. She laments that this is not a priority for the current administration, which seems more interested in utilizing female labor than in protecting individual women.

### PATRIARCHAL LOGIC OF CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION

Kondo pins much of the blame for increasing domestic violence on Abe, especially what the prime minister describes as his drive "to fortify" the family. This is apparent in his attempts to revise the Constitution.

Japan's postwar Constitution was drafted by a group of Americans working under the Allied Occupation, but was widely embraced in the years that followed. Some Japanese progressives even lamented that the document did not make even more radical changes, noting that it retains the emperor, albeit as a "symbol." Significantly, the document both forbade Japan from maintaining "land, sea, and air force as well as other war potential" (Article 9), and promised equality between men and women (Articles 14 and 24).

Conservative forces in Japanese politics have proposed alterations to Article 9, the clause that makes Japan's postwar Constitution a "peace constitution." And Kondo argues that this push to further militarize Japan is creating a sense of the right of might—a formulation now extending to the dynamics of intimate relationships.

But the other, lesser-known article in Abe's crosshairs is Article 24, which defines individual rights in marriage. Although the retention of the family registration (*koseki*) system already undermines the spirit of the law, conservatives

in Japan now are working to change the language of the Constitution itself.

Currently, Article 24 states that marriage should be based "only" on the agreement of the two spouses. A current LDP draft proposes to remove "only," making space for family members to intervene in how individuals choose partners. The draft also includes a new section, which would read, "Family should be respected as the national and basic unit of society. Family members must help each other."

Tomomi Yamaguchi, an anthropologist at Montana State University who specializes in Japanese conservative activism, writes that, in a political environment in which the right cannot openly attack gender equality, advocating the "protection of family" is framed as a critique of rampant

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## THE UNDERLYING LOGIC OF ABE'S POLICIES PRIVILEGES NATIONAL POWER OVER CIVIL LIBERTIES.

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individualism. The conservative arguments for revising Article 24 insist that the article as it stands now encourages selfishness. Such "selfishness" includes not marrying and not reproducing.

The image of the excessive and self-involved individualism of contemporary youth borrows from the arguments of sociologist Masahiro Yamada, who, in 1999, described what he saw as "parasite singles," who lived off their parents well into adulthood and chose to live as free-wheeling consumers rather than save up to start their own families. The image of the parasite single has stuck, prompting discussions about how an irresponsible and individualist younger generation is failing to replenish the dwindling Japanese population.

Revising Article 24 to displace individual rights with strengthened family bonds does more than just satisfy a conservative view of family values. It erodes a more civic-minded definition of society and the social contract, paving the way for a neoliberal overhaul of public services. Such alterations could legally enshrine ideas about the responsibilities of the “traditional” family to advance a gutting of public assistance for elder care and child care, increasing the burden of family-care work already disproportionately borne by women. In this way, proposed revisions to Article 24 also demonstrate a trend toward a kind of symbiotic alliance between right-wing visions for society and neoliberal economic reforms.

Of course, where Kondo and ShelterNet are concerned, diminishing the legal standing of the individual within the family would make it more difficult for women subjected to intimate violence to seek help. Victims already must face an array of institutional obstacles to escape abusive domestic situations. The idea that individuals have rights beyond the family is an important one to counter the assumption that men possess the women in their family. If a revised constitution were to state that it is the responsibility of relatives to take care of each other, that would undermine efforts by officials and activists to protect women from their families.

Although Abe pays lip service to a kind of women’s empowerment, his ideological convictions lie with the nationalist group Nippon Kaigi (The Japan Conference), to which he and 14 other members of his 18-person cabinet belong. Nippon Kaigi, formed in 1997, opposed allowing married individuals to retain their own surnames. The group demands a new and “more fitting” constitution because of what it perceives to be an “imbalance between rights and duties, the neglect of the family system, and a context in which a separation of the nation and religion has been taken too far.” Nippon Kaigi makes its views clear: The Japanese

family should have tighter bonds and greater patriarchal control in order to build a more muscular national identity.

In its 2016 fact sheet on violence against women, the World Health Organization identified three social factors “specifically associated with sexual violence perpetuation”: “beliefs in family honor and sexual purity, ideologies of male sexual entitlement, and weak legal sanctions for sexual violence.” All three of these—emphasis on the family over the individual, ideas about women belonging to men, and toothless laws about gendered violence—are present in Japan. Intimate violence toward women did not begin with Abe’s administration, but he is the current face of efforts to firmly anchor women in the family to stimulate their productive and reproductive labor.

### FAMILY OVER INDIVIDUAL

In 2014, Abe’s smiling face appeared on the banner of a new blog produced by the government’s Gender Equality Bureau alongside the English word “Shine!” The intent was to popularize a new slogan for his administration: “For a Japan in which all women shine.” Rendering “shine” in English, however, opened up the slogan to a second reading in Japanese: *Shiné* is the imperative “die!” Many cynical observers of Abe’s recent adoption of the language of female empowerment joked darkly about his “real” demand: Japanese women, die!

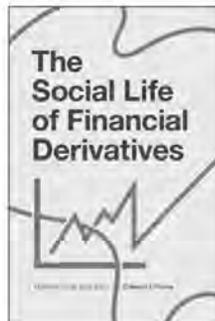
Indeed, Abe’s advocacy for women in the workplace comes from a nationalistic impulse that is unconcerned about the lived experiences of women. In one speech he noted that “a country that hires and promotes more women grows economically, and no less important, demographically as well.” This latest Abe-led LDP gambit to lure women to produce more wealth and babies is not qualitatively different from the reasoning of other men in the party. In 2007, Hakuo Yanagisawa, the health minister during Abe’s first term, infamously referred

to women as “birth-giving machines.” He told an audience of LDP members, “Because the number of birth-giving machines and devices is fixed, all we can ask for is for them to do their best per head.” While adding that it might not be “appropriate” to refer to women in such a way, Yanagisawa nonetheless revealed how women figure in the male-dominated, nationalist calculations of Abe’s party.

Abe is pushing for his proposed constitutional revisions to pass in time for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which plays a significant role in the “brand Japan” that Abe is selling. The outward face of this brand includes the high-profile sports event, for which Abe is willing to dress as a Nintendo character and cultivate Japan’s soft power of animé and video games,

Hello Kitty and Pokémon. But Abe’s vision also includes hard power, and he hopes to greet the world in 2020 with an amended Constitution that allows the nation to flex its military might abroad. His administration has already passed a state secrets law and an anti-conspiracy law that grant the state broad and extraordinary powers to conceal their investigations from the public. The underlying logic of Abe’s policies privileges national power over civil liberties. Rhetoric about “shining women” is tarnished by a general disregard for the rights of individuals, particularly the rights of the most vulnerable. As Kondo put it, “To place the family over the individual, the nation over the family, deprives each of us of our basic human rights and dignity.” ●

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