

Rethinking the Debate over Motherhood Protection During the Taisho Period

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Abstract: Motherhood protection means that the government provides protective measures to help mothers during pregnancy and childbirth. During Taisho period, there was a heated discussion over motherhood protection among feminists. The leading feminists in this discussion, Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko, held totally opposed ideas towards motherhood protection. It is worth noting that the differences in their views are mainly due to their different life experiences. This heated debate lasted for several years, although it did not reach a concrete conclusion, it left a valuable legacy for later generations of feminists. Analyzing the reasons for their different attitudes and exploring the theoretical logic behind their different attitudes can provide lessons for solving the problems of low fertility and motherhood protection in Japan and the world today. To truly protect women's interest and promote gender equality, motherhood protection should focus more on the plight of women due to childbirth than national interest, making becoming a mother no longer be an obstacle to women's self-achievement and personal independence.

1. Introduction

For decades, there has been a heated discussion on whether motherhood protection would be a wise choice for the government to take to protect women. Some feminists believe motherhood protection can benefit women, offering them the protection of the state. However, others hold the opposed idea that depending on states is fairly equal to depending on men and women can only be genuinely dependent by standing on their own feet. Thus, there is a further problem: Should feminists argue for equality based on what they share with men as human beings, or should they instead argue for equality based on the special traits of women. During 1916-1919, the Taisho period in Japan, a debate over motherhood protection happened among various feminists. They argued intensely about the advantages and disadvantages of motherhood protection and left a significant legacy for the feminist movement for the later ages.

Many scholars have been working on the debate and a lot of valuable conclusions have been drawn. In the article [1], Hiroko Tomida interpreted the main ideas of four feminists (Hiratsuka Raicho, Yosano Akiko, Yamada Waka, Yamakawa Kikue) and the impact of western feminists on them. She mentioned the economic and political context to answer the question of why this debate happened at

that time. Also, she argued it is worth noting that the achievements and limitations of this debate. On the one hand, this debate was merely a theoretical dispute in print, lacking practical dimensions and it was only within the female middle-class intelligentsia. On the other hand, this debate left a significant legacy for the feminist movement in the future and inspired us to think about the way to the problem [1]. Dina Lowy analyzed this debate from another angle, in her article [2], she explored Ellen Key's ideas on love, marriage, and motherhood and the impact these ideas had on feminist Hiratsuka Raicho. She also stressed that Hiratsuka redefined Key's idea, adapting it into the Japanese context. In the article [3], Hillary Maxson referred to the opening of Japan's first Mothers' Congress and mentioned how feminists reflected on motherhood protection after World War Two. She finally came to the conclusion that the nature of Japanese motherhood protection during the war was a male-dominated institution that controlled women's bodies. Vera Mackie, in her book [4], mentioned the expansion of patriotism among women after the Russo-Japanese War. And she also emphasized the gendered relationship between individual and state [4].

However, these scholars have ignored the mobility and variability of the concept of motherhood protection and have rarely examined the relationship between motherhood and womanhood. Also, few studies have explored the reasons behind their differences of opinion.

This article focuses on two main feminists-- Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko in this debate because they are the main figures in the debate and they have opposing views on motherhood protection. First, this article pays attention to the political and economic context at that period in order to explain the emergence of New Women and the timing of this debate. Second, this article analyzes the arguments of Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko, showing their differences of ideas from all aspects. Third, this article explores the reason for their different ideas from their family background, education experiences, and so on. Fourth, this article argues the nature and theoretical logic behind their argument and the limitations of their respective arguments. Last but not least, this article concludes that this debate failed to reach an agreement because Hiratsuka and Yosano were both limited in their own personal experiences and stance, not taking both similarities between women and men and gender-based differences, short term and long term benefits into account.

2. The emergence of new women and the historical background

After the Meiji Restoration, the introduction of Western thoughts, technology, and economic model had brought enormous change to Japanese society. Japan was going through a transformation from a semi-feudal country to a modern state. This had made every aspect of Japanese society undergo earth-shaking changes, which also had far-reaching effects on Japanese woman's life.

First, the reform of the education system became the consensus of all walks of life. In order to catch up with the West, the Japanese government was committed to building a modern education system and had carried out a series of reforms, including increasing the enrollment rate of compulsory education and co-education between men and women. These reforms have cultivated a large number of talents for Japan's modernization and also led to the emergence of a group of intellectual women in modern Japan. Second, the Industrial Revolution also brought striking changes to Japan's economic structure, and fundamentally changed the traditional way of production. The emergence of a large number of factories requires extra labor, contributing to the mass migration from the countryside to the cities. As a result, many Japanese women began to work in factories. The women who were well-educated also had the opportunities to try other occupations such as telephone operations, clerks in banks, and school teachers. Third, the translation of western thinkers, coupled with the changes in the field of education and economy, had made a profound impact on people's way of thinking. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a famous thinker in Japan at that time, was the first one to put forward the idea of equality between men and women. The so-called new Japanese woman also appeared at that time. They have

received a certain degree of modern education, and have their own sources of income, which makes them begin to realize the importance of women's self-consciousness.

However, despite the spread of western culture, Confucian culture, which had a great influence on Japan for thousands of years, was still deeply entrenched in Japanese society [5].

First, the modern education reform that Japan had carried proved to be a less thoroughgoing approach. In the remote region, female enrollment in compulsory education was still low. In developed areas, a large number of schools were still implementing gender-based education. In other words, women who attended the school were aimed at being educated to be a "good wife and wise mother". Although some schools might offer some general education courses like English for girls to learn, housekeeping was still the main subject for most girls [6].

Second, while the rapid development of industry has brought job opportunities for women, it also threatens women's health in many regards. In the textile section, women working there were often forced to endure long hours of the night and shift work. What makes things worse is that the working conditions were bad, which did great harmed to their physical and mental health. The survey had shown that the babies of working mothers had higher mortality at that time because their physical condition was not good and they had less time to look after their babies [1]. This situation had aroused concern from the whole society, which also laid a foundation for the later motherhood protection debate.

Third, while experiencing the transformation to a modern state, Japan was also turning itself into a militaristic country. Nationalism was expanding rapidly in Japanese society. In 1895, after the Sino-Japanese War, Russia, Germany, and France compelled Japan to return the Liaodong peninsula to the Qing government of China. That is called the Triple Intervention in history. This event made many Japanese feel a great sense of shame and speeded up the expansion of patriotism all over Japan. Japanese women had also engaged in this patriotic wave. The patriotic Women's Association (Aikoku Fujin Kai), the largest women's organization in the Meiji period, was founded in 1901 and it expanded rapidly during the Russo-Japanese War. By the end of this war, its membership had a drastic rise from 45000 to 463000. Other women's organizations were involved in activities to support the war. Many women were organized to do some logistics work, such as helping prepare packages for soldiers and fundraising. Thus, the concept of "good wife and wise mother" had been strengthened to a certain extent and had been endowed with a new connotation, which emphasized "a wealthy country and a strong army" supported by "good wife and wise mother" [4].

All in all, although the emergence of new women gives women more possibilities and choices, the traditional thought of being a "good wife and wise mother" still fettered women's self-consciousness and self-development.

3. The debate over motherhood protection between Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko

With the development of the capitalist economy and the rapid change of social culture, there was an urgent problem for women: how to balance married life and work. The situation is that many women indeed had a source of income but their income is not enough to afford the costs of bearing and raising the child. And the wave of gender equality and women's self-awareness had made some well-educated women reluctant to rely on their husbands as in the past. That is why the debate of motherhood protection arose at that time. The motherhood protection at that time meant that the state should take protective measures and financial assistance to protect the women during pregnancy and child-rearing. Nevertheless, whether motherhood protection should be adopted was controversial and thus triggered a heated debate.

The debate over motherhood lasted from 1916 to 1919, while the most intense debate taking place in 1918 and 1919, between feminists Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko. In 1918, the March issue of the Fujin koron published an article by Yosano Akiko, entitled Women should be completely

independent [7]. In this article, Yosano argued that the raising of children was the joint responsibility of husband and wife, not the state. Women were equal to men in terms of making efforts to support married life and raise children. In addition, she emphasized that given the possibility of an outbreak of the war; both spouses should be prepared to raise the children on their own. Yosano also advocated that only when men and women have achieved financial independence should they get married. If not, women were just like a slave to depend on their owner. Yosano did not agree with the idea that the state should take special protection measures to help women during pregnancy and child-rearing. As she argued that if doing that, it seemed to see women as the disadvantaged groups like the disabled and the old, which went against the principle of equality between men and women. She thought that economic independence was the basis for women's emancipation.

In the May issue of *Fujin Koron*, Hiratsuka Raicho refuted Yosano's argument in an article entitled "Is motherhood protection dependent?" [8]. She argued that the birth and raising of a child was not only the responsibility of their parents but also the whole society. Motherhood was the source of life, and once a woman became a mother, she became a being detached from herself and become a social, national individual. The protection of motherhood is dispensable, not only for the well-being of the individual women but also for the well-being of society as a whole because the child is the future of all humanity. In response to Akiko's statement that women should be independent economically, she argued that given the current situation, even if women go to work, they could barely make ends meet and Yosano's opinion was a narrow and not practical view, ignoring the women's significant role in childbirth.

The debate between Hiratsuka and Yosano failed to reach an agreement and both of them insisted on their own opinion until the end of the debate. Other feminists like Yamada waka and Yamakawa kikue also joined the discussion after that, but they also failed to find out a realistic way to balance economic independence and child-rearing. It was worth noting that the feminists involved in this debate were all put forward the theory in a vague way, without concrete and feasible practical support, which was due to limitations of the age and class.

4. The reasons behind their different arguments

The reason why Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko have totally opposed attitudes towards motherhood protection lies in their personal life experience. The following section will analyze their personal experiences in order to explain the formation of their argument.

Hiratsuka was born in a typical middle-class family in 1886. Her father was a bureaucrat working in the government and her mother came from a medical family. Born in a hereditary family (*kuge*), his father was absolutely loyal to the emperor (the Mikado). With the deepening of the reform after Meiji Restoration, his father was also involved in a wave of learning from the West. His father had learned some basic knowledge of German and once visited Europe, which make her father have a chance to accept some new western ideas. Her mother, in order to better assist her husband, had participated in English lessons as a wife of an official. Due to this, her mother also got access to western culture. Thus, consistent with the trend of the era, Hiratsuka's family had become a blend of western culture and traditional Japanese culture. Such a family environment had an enormous impact on the formation of Hiratsuka's ideas. The acceptance of western thought gave her a new angle to pay attention to the plight of women in Japanese society, making her become a leader of the feminist movement. However, the traditional thought rooted in her heart made her inclined to accept the traditional social division of labor between men and women. That was why she emphasized the important role of women in the family rather than encouraging women to enter the workplace. She was also greatly influenced by her father's loyalty to the emperor which made her become a patriotic woman and always take the state's interest into account [9].

Hiratsuka's education experience also had a profound impact on her. Thanks to the education reform after Meiji Restoration and her parents' enlightened education approach, she got the chance to receive an education and even got to college. In the process of learning, Hiratsuka took an interest in religion, ethics, and philosophy, and was exposed to a large number of Western feminist ideas [6]. At that time, after the Sino-Japanese War, the policy orientation of Japanese militarism began to appear. The politics of the time influenced women's education, which was increasingly politicized. Girls in school were tasked with learning housekeeping knowledge for the family and for the service of their future husbands. Hiratsuka bitterly resented the "good wife and wise mother" education and refused to attend some housekeeping courses, which showed her dissatisfaction with the education system. When she decided to go to college to learn literature, although her father did not approve of her decision and thought she should be at home waiting to be married. Finally, she and her father reached a compromise that she could go to college but must choose homemaking as her major. After entering the college, Hiratsuka was disappointed to discover that college education still revolved around "a good wife and wise mother". It can be seen that thoroughly her education experience, she hated the gender-based education which taught women to be a "good wife and wise mother". What was worth noting is that although she hated traditional idea to be a "good wife and wise mother" for the good of the family, she did not oppose the modern idea of being a "good wife and wise mother" for the good of the nation. This can be proved by an event that happened during her was in elementary school, which had a great impact on her life. The event was called Triple Intervention and had brought a great sense of shame to many Japanese at that time. Hiratsuka's elementary teacher had taught this event in a tearful voice and hanged the map of the Liaodong peninsula in the classroom in order to make students remember this history with disgrace. Hiratsuka was really impressed with this event. At the age of 70, when she wrote her autobiography, she mentioned this event and said she still remembered the humiliation she felt at that time [9]. It can be known that the education she received and the influence of her father had made patriotism deeply rooted in her heart, which also laid the foundation for her view of motherhood protection. Hiratsuka indeed knew that motherhood protection was in the interest of the state at that time, and she could easily see the risk of motherhood protection being exploited by militarists during the wartime. Thus, she insisted on her idea partly because of her nationalist stance. This position also limited her feminist view to a certain extent. She opposed the idea of being a good wife and wise mother for the husband and family, but she agreed that women should be good mothers for the interest of the state.

Hiratsuka's religious belief also played an important role in her view of motherhood protection. After she felt disappointed with the college education, she turned to religion to find the answers to life. After reading a lot of philosophy books, she believed that she should explore the meaning of life by herself. Thus, she went to a temple to practice meditation and began to believe in Zen (a Japanese form of Buddhism). Her senior thesis was also focused on the history of religion. This thesis expressed her detached attitude towards the world, her yearning for loneliness, and her exploration of the meaning of life. The belief of Zen made her attach importance to spiritual strength, and also to some extent ignore the importance of material power. Later Hiratsuka suggested the root of women's liberation lies in women's spiritual freedom and self-awareness, which is also the manifestation of her idealist view in feminist thought [6]. In the debate of motherhood, Hiratsuka argued that economic independence was not the same as women's liberation and emphasized the importance of spiritual independence. Her idealistic view made her argument focus too much on mental power and ignore the other factors.

In 1911, Hiratsuka founded a feminist magazine she called *Seito*. The foundation of this women's magazine also played a vital role in her feminist views. In the beginning, she fiercely contradicted the traditional idea that women should be "a good wife and wise mother". It was his idea that had shaken the foundation of Japanese traditional society and draw negative media attention to the feminist

movement. This situation had made Hiratsuka reshape the definition of new women and turned it into a positive force. At that time, Hiratsuka translated some works of Swedish feminist Ellen Key and learned from her views about love and marriage. It should be noticed that when she first translated Ellen Key's books, she did not touch on motherhood protection but only focused on the freedom of love and marriage. Even when she decided to go to live with her boyfriend in 1914, she wrote a letter to her family, saying that "people who take themselves seriously and live for their work will not go to have children". After her own pregnancy and childbirth, her view changed a lot. Under the double pressure of society and family, she was caught in the conflict between herself and motherhood. Hiratsuka began to recognize her role as a mother and wife and agree with the modern idea of being a "good wife and wise mother" for the good of the nation. Through reading Ellen Key's work, she deepened her understanding of motherhood protection and began to consider how to realize motherhood protection in Japanese society. Thus, it was the Japanese context at that time and her own experience as a mother that promoted her to modify Ellen Key's idea into nationalist terms. Moreover, it was important to note that Hiratsuka did not embrace all ideas of motherhood from Ellen Key and there are also some divergences between them. For example, Ellen Key disapproved that mothers go to work but Hiratsuka argued that mothers should not go to work only during pregnancy and early stages of child-rearing.

In brief, Hiratsuka's idea of motherhood protection was shaped by the interplay of a complex series of her life experience. Nationalism, Idealism, and western feminism all played an important role in the formation of her ideas.

Yosano was born in a merchant family in Sakai. She was responsible for running the family business since she was 15. Her business experience impressed upon her view of financial independence. She emphasized the importance of work and believed that women's right to work was very important. Yosano also carried out her own proposition in real life. As a mother of 11 children, she continued to work while raising children and supporting her husband's career. Unlike Hiratsuka Raicho, her stance was stable and did not change even after she became a mother of 11 children. Although Yosano was a married woman, she argued that marriage need no longer be the norm for women. In addition, she stated that her identity as a mother was not the main part of her life. Also, she praised single women for she thought single women had done more than married women for women's liberation. One of her core ideas was women's right to choose. That is to say, a woman can choose to be a mother and wife and she can also choose not to be. This point was also one of her divergences with Hiratsuka because Hiratsuka insisted that the women who refused to be married and have children were incomplete. Yosano also paid attention to the co-education between men and women. On September 20, 1914, an education consultation meeting under the cabinet was held. At the temporary education meeting, Yosano was concerned about issues related to women's education and advocated the reform of the education system based on gender equality. In 1911, Yosano and her husband served as superintendent of a school. In this school, Yosano was able to put her education philosophy into practice [10]. Her goal was to educate women to have the same ability as men, and to cultivate their consciousness of independent thinking as human being. It should be noted that Yosano was a rare energetic and clever woman who was able to write prolifically while taking care of 11 children [5]. However, most women were not capable of doing that. This also leads to the main limitation in her view. That is her ignoring social reality and overestimating the ability of most women.

Looking at the thoughts of these two feminists, it can be concluded that their different views are largely determined by their respective life experiences. However, Hiratsuka's views are more influenced by personal experiences than Yosano's.

5. The theoretical logic and limitations behind their arguments

The deeper reason why Hiratsuka supports motherhood protection is that she believed that the difference in status between men and women is rooted in the fact that the value of motherhood is not fully recognized in a society constructed by male power. Women should emphasize their feminine identity and unique femininity, rather than being in the position of men and submitting to male rules. Therefore, she believed that in order to change the current social inequality between men and women, what needed to be changed was not the social division of labor, but the value judgment of the different social division of labor between men and women. In today's society, men's work outside the home is overrated, while women's role in the home, such as housework and childcare, is underestimated in society. Motherhood protection could make people realize that the role of women as mothers in society is the same important as men's military service. Hiratsuka's argument in favor of motherhood protection was based on emphasizing the gender differences between men and women. She believes that as a feminist, one should not ignore the existence of such differences and simply allow women to imitate men's work, but rather recognize that the value judgment behind such differences is the key to the matter.

Unlike Hiratsuka, Yosano opposed motherhood protection because she believes that the root cause of gender inequality lies in the unequal division of labor in society and the unequal economic status it created. Women were confined to the home, unable to participate in social work or create value in society, which ultimately resulted in the unequal status of men and women. Therefore, to change this inequality, women must be involved in work outside the home. She argued that motherhood protection fundamentally views women as a disadvantaged group, which lowers their social status. Yosano's logical starting point in opposing motherhood protection was to emphasize what men and women have in common as human beings, namely the ability to learn and create wealth through participation in social work. She argues that as feminists, women should see the potential that has been suppressed by society, and that women were not born weak, but lack equal opportunities to compete alongside men. Recognizing the similarities as human beings between men and women is the key to addressing the disparity in status between men and women.

However, both of their views have some limitations. First, for Hiratsuka, her view of motherhood protection ignored the protection of the larger group of women. An overemphasis on motherhood values can, to a certain extent, bind women and obscure their value as human beings. Government subsidies for women would also make it hard to improve the status of women and tended to reinforce the stereotype that women are weak. Motherhood protection focuses on women's short-term practical interests, but to a certain extent ignores women's long-term interests. This is because motherhood protection confines women to the role of mothers and deprives them of the opportunity to freely choose what they want in life. The motherhood protection advocated by Hiratsuka comes from a male-dominated patriarchal society, which makes this so-called "protection" more for the sake of national interests and less for the sake of women themselves. Secondly, for Yosano, her idea of women's economic independence was not practical in Japanese society at that time. It was a typical elitist female viewpoint without taking into account the interests of women from all social strata. The motherhood protection debate itself was a discussion limited in its impact as it was confined within the elite middle-class women. Finally, the connotation of motherhood protection is limited in this debate. In fact, motherhood protection is supposed to be a form of womanhood protection. In Japanese society at that time, motherhood protection was appropriated by the state, and it became the duty of women to produce healthy soldiers for the state. However, the remarkable thing is that motherhood protection actually had a broader connotation. Other types of motherhood protection should be stressed, such as promoting job training for women, setting up child-care facilities, and helping

mothers return to work after giving birth. Motherhood protection should aim at making becoming a mother no longer is an obstacle to women's self-achievement and personal independence.

6. Conclusion

The debate of motherhood protection during the Taisho Period of Japan is fundamentally about the root of the difference in status between men and women and how to protect the interests of women. Although Hiratsuka and Yosano had opposing views on motherhood protection, they both wanted to promote Japanese women's liberation and improve women's status. Their differences are mainly reflected in two aspects: one is the root of the difference in status between men and women. Hiratsuka thought that the fact that society does not realize the importance of "Motherhood" was the main problem, the difference between men and women cannot be changed, what should be changed is the contempt for the importance of women's family role; in contrast, Yosano thought that the social division of labor between men and women was the main problem, and the inability to get the same economic source as men is the main reason for women's low status, so economic independence is the premise of women's liberation. Second, how to protect the interests of women. Hiratsuka believes that it should rely on the government. Through the government's economic assistance, women can get rid of their economic dependence on their husbands even if they don't work during pregnancy and child-rearing. However, Yosano believed that the protection of women's interests requires women's economic independence first, and economic independence could make women's spiritual independence possible, which requires women to fight for the right to work instead of waiting for the government's assistance. The difference between Hiratsuka's and Yosano's thoughts can be summarized as the difference between short-term practical interests and long-term strategic interests. Hiratsuka focused on the practical interests of women at present, while Yosano focused on the long-term interests of women. It is very similar to the situation in contemporary societies: extending maternity leave is beneficial for women to obtain practical benefits and have more time to take care of children, but it also makes enterprises more inclined to recruit male employees, which makes women more difficult in the job market. The shortening of maternity leave seems to hurt the interests of women at present, but in fact, it is more conducive to women's right to obtain employment, and in the long run, it is conducive to the equality of employment opportunities between men and women.

Nowadays, many countries including Japan are facing the problem of fertility decline. Many policies are introduced to encourage childbirth but most of them are not working well. Moreover, a big reason behind this is that while encouraging women to give birth, there is a lack of institutions to protect their rights. Women may lose their jobs as a result of childbirth and the loss of a source of income make women more independent on men, which consolidating the patriarchy. These situations make the controversy over motherhood still heated today. Thus, although the Taisho era debate did not reach a conclusion, it left a precious legacy for the future. When it comes to motherhood protection, taking both similarities between women and men and gender-based differences, short-term and long-term benefits into account is essential and significant. Obviously, it is very difficult to take all these factors into consideration, which is why there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality.

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