

**Join us in our Fight for Gender Equality and against the Backlash!
Fight a Gender Equality Center Director's Dismissal in Osaka, Japan**

Mariko Mitsui, a renowned Japanese women's rights activist and journalist was the founding director of STEP, a city-sponsored Gender Equality Center in Toyonaka City, which is in Osaka, the second-largest metropolitan region in Japan. She was dismissed from her position as a result of intense backlash from a far right-wing political group and far right-wing politicians. To appeal this injustice to society and to win an order for compensation, Mitsui filed a lawsuit against the city in the Osaka District court on December 17, 2004. Seven women lawyers based in the Osaka region have formed a strong team for the plaintiff.

In order to support this highly significant trial for women's rights in Japan and against right-wing intimidation, we formed an organization, "Fight Back," to support the plaintiff, Mitsui, and to fight this backlash against gender equality. Since the Gender Equality Law was enacted in 1999, local municipalities have been expected to make gender equality ordinances, gender equality action plans and gender equality centers. STEP was created as a result of this law. Many right-wing groups are opposed to this law and are fighting both to overturn it and to prevent its enactment. In addition, they are even fighting to overturn the items in the Japanese constitution that guarantee Japanese women equal status with men under the law.

Founding Director selected by nationwide public advertisement

STEP is a facility established by Toyonaka City to promoting gender equality, which was planned and developed in cooperation with many residents of the city who were eager to form a women's center. In this spirit of collaboration, applications for the position of director of STEP were open to the public, a rare practice in Japan. Mariko Mitsui was then selected from a field of many candidates, based on a competitive and rigorous examination and interview process—the only time a director of a center like this in Japan was so chosen. After Mitsui assumed the position in the fall of 2000, she worked on numerous original and ground-breaking projects in order that gender equality take root and spread in the community. As Director, she planned and organized very popular events and seminars. Many guests from foreign countries visited the center, and her events with foreign visitors were successful and inspired large audiences. A dynamic organizer, she herself found outside funding for these events. Her events were often covered by the media, and she was very visible in the media not only in the Osaka area but all over Japan. As a result, she received high evaluations and praise not only from the many women who used the Center, but also from the Toyonaka City government. But her high profile made her a special target of right wing politicians in Toyonaka City.

Backlash in Toyonaka City

Persistent attacks against both STEP and Mitsui came to prominence around the fall of 2002, as the right-wing groups formulated a cohesive challenge to the gender equity law. While right wing politicians asked questions attacking gender equality at the city council sessions, groups associated with them also tried to make it impossible for STEP to function through enacting a pattern of harassment and intimidation: certain city politicians asked obstructive questions about STEP during city council meetings; groups formed of right wing agents made disruptive visits to STEP, handed out critical flyers in front of City Hall, posed irrelevant questions to interrupt Mitsui's lectures, circulated false rumors about Mitsui, et cetera. The agenda of these groups is to oppose gender equality and make women subservient to men socially and legally. Using their nationwide organization, these forces are attacking city administrations in their legally mandated efforts to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. Such a phenomenon is a backlash against gender equality, and is increasingly seen elsewhere in the world today.

Although the city seemed to challenge such backlash efforts at first, the city administration changed their course and maneuvered Mitsui's dismissal in the fall of 2003.

The City wanted the working conditions of STEP to deteriorate

There was another issue. According to the labor regulations of STEP, contract employees, which included the director, were to have their contracts automatically renewed barring serious wrongdoings or failure in the job, even though each contract was for a one-year fixed-term. Contract employment, also known as temporary or part-time employment (even though the job may be full-time) is a common practice in Japan, enabling a more flexible work force by creating a lower tier of employees whose jobs have fewer benefits and are more vulnerable to loss. Nationwide, women hold by far the majority of such positions. In order to circumvent the regulation that employment contracts were to be automatically renewed, the city proposed a plan that clearly demonstrated their efforts to disrupt working conditions. The new plan states: "the annual contract can be renewed a maximum of four times." Almost all of the women at STEP are contract employees; indeed, all the contract employees there are women. Therefore the policy was specifically designed to discriminate against women, who already occupy the most vulnerable segment of the work force. It was clear that if the city was determined to force the policy, Mitsui, as the director of STEP, would oppose it. In addition, as a contract employee herself, her own position would be in peril.

Unfair hiring examination

The city held a special meeting of the STEP Board of Directors on February 1, 2004, and decided that “the contract-employee director position is abolished, and the director position shall become a full-time, permanent employee position and the director will serve concurrently as the secretary-general” in the name of “strengthening the organization.” They also decided the next director’s employment search would not be publicly advertised, and would be chosen by a selection committee appointed by the city.

Mitsui applied for the position and had an interview on February 22, and subsequently received a rejection letter. In reality, in the fall of 2003, the city secretly made a list of possible candidates to succeed Mitsui, and had already made their hiring decision in December, 2003, two months before the examination. The job interview was simply for show.

This is a fight against women’s discrimination

Toyonaka City “dismissed” Mitsui in a makeshift way in which they both abolished her contract worker’s position and made it impossible for her to be anything but rejected for the new non-contract director’s position. Although Toyonaka City was legally mandated to improve the status of women and fight against the backlash against gender equality, Toyonaka City fired Mitsui, yielding to the backlash. Mitsui decided to fight back by suing the city and the STEP Foundation for compensation for damages caused by their not renewing her contract and rejecting her employment as director without any reasonable grounds. This trial by Mitsui is a fight against gender discrimination and unfair treatment of contract employees. It is a trial to counter-attack the backlash that is gaining in influence and boldness throughout Japan.

Join us and support Mariko Mitsui!

Send your protest mail to the Mayor of Toyonaka City:

koe@city.toyonaka.osaka.jp

Send your message to “Fight Back” and encourage Mariko Mitsui :

fightback@hh.fem.jp

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