

Gender Relations in the Age of Violence

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In the mid-fourteenth through the sixteenth century, evolving social, economic, and military conditions and emerging ideas and ideals shaped gender relations in ways that differed significantly from those of earlier centuries. Historical investigation is made difficult by the contemporaneous decline in writing by and about women, a factor that reflects the highly decentralized and increasingly violent conditions that tended to obscure women's activities behind masculine endeavors. The evidence we do find typically appears in scattered fragments and challenges us to decipher meanings and weave them together into perceivable patterns of changing gender relations. This chapter considers the broad trends for three groups: warriors (*buke*), courtiers (*kuge*), and commoners.

WARRIORS

The historical sources produced by warriors after the fourteenth century loudly announce that this was becoming a masculine age. Women-related sources were eclipsed, and while women continued to play significant roles in warrior affairs, they increasingly worked behind the scenes, supporting the goals and strategies of their houses to survive and thrive in turbulent times. This contrasts with the Kamakura period, when women had property, taxation, and military duties just like men. How did this change occur? The answer highlights the effects of war-prone conditions and the impact of violence on gender relations.

Transformation in Landed Rights

During the Kamakura period, women wrote and received documents because they held titles, especially the *jitō-shiki* (see chapter 18), which they could inherit, transmit to their heirs, or make the subject of disputes. Historians call this the Golden Age of Women, a unique time in Japanese history when the warrior government granted a military and landholding title (*jitō*), which vested in its holder the privilege to extract profits from the land and the requirement to serve in the shogunate's guard and pay land fees. Initially granted to meritorious vassals or their kin, the *jitō* title was transmitted to the next generation in accordance with the custom of divided inheritance. Importantly, the *jitō* title was ungendered. Husbands and wives, who held property separately, conferred their property—secured in the form of titles such as *jitō*—to sons and daughters. In some cases husbands left land and titles to widows.

Attached to most wills that conveyed property was the prescription, “For the service duty levied by the Kamakura Shogunate, follow the leadership of the main heir (*sōryō*), and fulfill it in accordance with the land portion received,” which articulates the nongendered nature of the military and economic obligations that *jitō* titleholders owed to the shogunate. One owed service commensurate with the size of one's landholdings for as long as one held them, and the responsibilities attached to the land were to be carried out, either in person or by proxy, regardless of the holder's gender. We have evidence of women serving guard and routine sentinel duty. But the Kamakura period was mostly peaceful, with no major battles until the Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281. This first ferocious military exigency from outside Japan tested the balance between rights and responsibilities in a gendered way.

How did the *jitō* fight in this war? While many fought bravely and some lost their lives, others, men and women alike, sent their children, husbands, or other—paid—proxies. But the shogunate condemned women for not fighting in person—targeting *only* women in this regard. In 1286 it issued an edict prohibiting the future conveyance of *jitō* property to daughters of warriors living in Kyushu, where the invasions took place, as long as the threat continued. Families without sons were to adopt one from a kinsman or kinswoman. Because Kamakura law was not strictly enforced and often served largely as guidance, warrior families for the most part ignored the edict, continuing to ensure the transmission of property to children of both genders. Nevertheless, this legal measure fueled the certain, albeit gradual, transformation that was already under way. Divided inheritance over generations was shrinking each landholder's income and, by the end of the thirteenth century, families were attempting to consolidate all of their lands under a single, male heir. The subsequent political instability accompanying the fall of the Kamakura regime, and the increase in population due to rising productivity, compounded the

difficulty each warrior family faced.¹ Not only women but also secondary sons experienced the diminution or loss of land rights. But sons and daughters were different; the subsequent opportunities life offered would not be the same for men as for women.²

Land and Male Honor

The consolidation of family resources under one man was both a defensive and a potentially aggressive measure. The form of landholding also began to change, from the *shōen* system, under which multiple holders enjoyed segmented rights (including *jitō*) over the same land unit, to a territorial system under which a single lord controlled the entire unit.

The main heir was responsible for keeping or promoting the strength of the corporate family unit associated with its ancestral territory. For him, the land itself was both real and symbolic in the power it authorized. The family's *name*—its history, honor, prestige, and strength—was closely tied to the land it possessed, and the heir was charged with the defense and promotion of the economic and human resources that defined the land's military capacity. If the heir lacked strength, he could subordinate himself and his resources to a more powerful lord. Secondary sons, who held little or no land independently, had little choice but to become vassals of the heir or of another territorial lord. And female family members, like younger sons, were subordinated to the authority of the main heir—although daughters were different from sons because they could not be integrated into the vassal corps. This does not mean that women never wielded weapons; rather, women were not part of the regular army, which was part of the multilayered, two-way exchange of service and reward in the personalized relationship between lord and vassal.

Service under the Kamakura Shogunate, a formal government with a countrywide network of retainers, had been more bureaucratic than personal, and therefore open to women *jitō*. In the new age, the name of the reward land, an embodiment of masculine pride, was linked to a man's lineage, which followed patrilineal descent. War tales, beginning with the fourteenth-century *Taiheiki* (*Record of the Grand Pacification*) and followed by many others, glorified masculine courage in killing and dying, often expressed in phrases such as "Let us embellish our *name* by being the first to charge into the enemy." Women were outside this rhetoric. The exigencies of the war-prone society, restructured military units, and an evolving consciousness of masculinity left women no opportunity to hold land with military value.

Battles and Women

As wars escalated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, women received no rewards for meritorious deeds. Or rather, if they did, we have no reliable records of it. One court diary mentions a "female cavalry" with no further explanation,

but this could be more metaphor than real, meant to degrade the army by feminizing it. Nevertheless, women did fight, but outside the context of documented action that led to rewards. Women were fully embedded in the violence of the time, as they typically stayed in the fortresses or castle towns with their husbands. Oda Nobunaga even punished vassals who refused to move their entire families to a castle area. Sengoku battles often took the form of sieges wherein the entire family would fight to defend the castle. In 1589 the Jesuit missionary Louis Frois observed that women defended Amakusa Hondo Castle against Konishi Yukinaga's attack so bravely that "they filled the moat with the bodies they slew."³

"The Memoir of Oan" is a unique, secondhand recollection of a woman's experience during the battle of Sekigahara (1600).⁴ In it we read of women supporting the army by casting bullets for muskets. They also enhanced the appearance of severed enemy heads brought back as trophies, blackening the teeth and restyling the hair to elevate the apparent rank of the enemy and increase the reward their men would receive from their lord for capturing it. Nights spent in a room with a pile of bloody heads apparently left a strong impression on Oan.

MARRIAGE, ADOPTION, AND SEX

Warlords (daimyo) of the Warring States period were innovative, implementing increasingly sophisticated techniques for gaining strategic advantage. Their methods touched on every aspect of life, from deciphering weather, refining weapons, and constructing fortresses to extracting taxes and enhancing ritual and cultural capital such as tea wares, Noh dances, and poetic accomplishments. Consolidation of alliances through marriage ties was another such technique.

Marriage in late medieval Japan was thoroughly patrilocal (in contrast to the matrilineal practice more typical of classical times), and the typical husband had one primary wife, identified as such, as well as a number of concubines. Under this arrangement, the wife distanced herself from the network of support she had had in her natal house and thoroughly integrated herself in her new home. She took on the administrative requirements of the military household, including arranging ceremonies and rituals, hosting visitors, managing vassalage relationships and her husband's concubines—in addition, of course, to bearing and educating children. There was little division between what we might call public and domestic; the entire household was devoted to the promotion of its business. The wife had her tasks to perform, and the husband his. Many women came to be known as powerful wives or mothers, well informed and well enough versed in military affairs to counsel vassals on strategic matters.⁵ Even so, wives were ultimately outsiders, whose ties to their natal families never broke

completely. They did not change their names to those of their husbands, and according to some daimyo laws, their trousseau land was to be administered according to testaments written by their natal families. A wife's position, moreover, did not necessarily assure a peaceful relationship between the two families. She also could become a target of suspicion from her husband and his retinue.

Marriage also had a symbolic meaning. For major warlords, the splendid procession that carried the woman's body, trousseau, and entourage to the man's house visually and symbolically declared the military might of the two houses. In general, brides were some warlord's daughter or sister but, given the limited supply of those women, daimyo also adopted girls from other families, called them daughters, and married them to vassals to assure allegiance.

By far the most famous "trafficked woman" is Oda Nobunaga's sister Oichi (1547?–1583). Nobunaga wedded her first to Azai Nagamasa, whom he destroyed in 1573, whereupon Oichi and her children were released. Then Nobunaga's successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, forced her to marry Shibata Katsue. The following year, Hideyoshi destroyed Shibata Katsue, and this time Oichi chose death over yet another forced marriage. From her first marriage, Oichi had three daughters, who survived her. Hideyoshi took one as his concubine, and the two other sisters each became the wife of an important lord, Kyōgoku Tametsugu and Tokugawa Hidetada (the second Tokugawa shōgun). Oichi's main son was killed and another took the tonsure. Trafficked women were victims and lacked the freedom to choose their mates. On the other hand, so did most husbands, upon whom wives were often imposed for potentially dangerous political purposes.

Warrior society maintained a pragmatic and flexible concept of kinship, adjusting nomenclature as needed. Warrior families often adopted boys and even adult men to carry on the family line. Adoptees, male or female, were socially recognized as members of the adopting line. One extraordinary warlord, Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578), who himself had two adopted fathers, never had a wife or biological sons, but adopted four sons, one his older sister's son and another a son of the Hōjō, a rival house. Although adoption was as viable a method for obtaining an heir as impregnating wives, neither option completely preempted a dispute over control after the lord's death, as exemplified by the war Kenshin's two adopted sons started after his demise.

The institution of marriage operated as a part of a larger organizational unit, the family, lineage, and the army corps, with the goal of promoting their human and material resources. For reproduction, marriage predicated sexual relationships between the man and the woman, but love and sexual desire only partially defined a family. To be sure, affection underpinned some husband-wife relationships, such as the one between Hideyoshi and Oné, who married in 1561, long before Hideyoshi's rise to prominence. But male sexual desire was wide-ranging.

Polygamy being the norm for warlords, and a husband's desire for his main wife was easily diverted to concubines. Hideyoshi's passion for his mistress Yodo, one of Oichi's daughters, is also legendary. It was the male seed that counted, though the mother's identity also mattered.

In addition, a husband's sexuality was often directed toward other males, especially boys. All sexual relationships, male or female, influenced the strength and well-being of the fighting unit. Common among warriors and priests, male-male sex horrified the Jesuits who visited Japan in the sixteenth century. Alessandro Valignano lamented: "They are much addicted to sensual vices and sins, a thing which has always been true of pagans, . . . [and] their great dissipation in the sin that does not bear mentioning [is] regarded so lightly that both the boys and the men who consort with them brag and talk about it openly without trying to cover the matter up."⁶ Yet this was a society and a time with no classificatory categories for sexual choice; desire ran across a continuum, without the participants making moral judgments. The culture of the time freely applied the vocabulary of aesthetics, especially to young men. Oda Nobunaga's younger brother, "who was no more than fifteen or sixteen years old," for example, is described as having possessed "skin white as powder, exquisite lips red as a peony," while "his countenance so surpassed any beauty's that no metaphor could express it."⁷

ARISTOCRATS AND THE IMPERIAL FAMILY

Gender relations in aristocratic society changed greatly between classical and medieval times, but the shape of that transformation was not the same as that experienced by the warrior class, except for one feature: Female aristocrats received less and less inheritance after the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, among aristocrats, the reduced economic prerogatives of women occurred as part of the broader dissolution of the courtiers' landed wealth into the hands of the rising warriors—a major loss that affected the entire class.

Penury was not the only hardship courtiers experienced. As a class, they had lived for centuries rooted in one location, Kyoto, but the Ōnin War (1467–1477) destroyed many of their residences, forcing them to move elsewhere. In the late fifteenth century, many returned to Kyoto, but during the Sengoku period, the court had to make ends meet with much-reduced human and economic resources. The poverty of this class determined the course many of its members took.

Women Around the Emperors

Whereas the Heian and Kamakura periods produced abundant literary masterpieces written by aristocratic women, changing circumstances in the four-

teenth century and thereafter gave educated women fewer reasons to write—and little of what they did write survives. A gendered comparison is useful. From the period between 1350 and 1600 more than one hundred journals by aristocratic men have survived, but the last journal we have by an aristocratic woman dates from the mid-fourteenth century.⁸ Instead of writing diaries, female administrators served as personal scribes for emperors and transmitted imperial messages. They also maintained a remarkable record, the *Oyudono no ue no nikki* (*Imperial Housekeeping Record*; literally, “Journal from the [room called] Oyudono no ue”), which logs continuously from 1477 to 1826 the emperors’ personal and ceremonial affairs, including sutra reading; visitors and gifts received; attendance at Noh, dance, and music performances; food and sake consumed; and bathing and hair grooming, along with select incidents, such as the theft of clothes in the palace. As this record reveals, women filled indispensable functions in managing the details of imperial affairs.

In considering changes in gender relations, we must also remember that between 592 and 770, eight out of sixteen emperors were female.⁹ Yet between the reigns of Emperor Go-Daigo (1318–1339) and Emperor Go-Mizunoo (1618–1629), the court produced no prominent female figures, or even women holding the title of imperial wife. For nearly three hundred years—until Hidetada (ruled 1605–1623), the second Tokugawa shogun, married his fifth daughter, Masako (1607–1678), to Emperor Go-Mizunoo in 1620—Japan’s male emperors remained formally unmarried and had sex with the women around them.¹⁰ The major reason for this astounding state of affairs was the lack of funds to support the formal Office of Empress and its requisite architectural space, officials, serving personnel, and ceremonies.

The regent and ministerial families having sufficient rank to supply imperial wives also were too poor to contribute to the upkeep of the empress’s quarters. Court women thus became mothers of crown princes without being wives of emperors. These women came from the third or fourth tier of the aristocratic hierarchy and were too low in rank to take the title of imperial wife. As functionaries, female officials sustained the weakened imperial office with their crucial, multitasking contributions, both administrative and sexual. But, in contrast to the Heian period, when wives’ natal families put enormous pressure on the behavior of emperors, the late medieval era provided few opportunities for a woman’s male kin to exert influence.

Courtier Families

Precise divisions marked the strict hierarchy of prestige among aristocratic families. Bureaucratic ranks and titles, held across generations, roughly coincided with the family’s social status. At the top were the regent families, followed by those that rose to the positions of Minister of the Left and Minister of the

Right. Marriage for these elites was complicated in the Sengoku period. In the past, regent families had married daughters to princes and emperors and never married down. Now that emperors were not marrying, their family members intermarried within their peer group and leftover sons and daughters were sent to monasteries and nunneries. Some daughters became wives of the Ashikaga shoguns.

As with warriors, marriage became a more public affair than ever before, made visible by formalized ceremonies. In contrast to the imperial family, in aristocratic households the position of primary wife grew in importance. Each aristocratic family in the Sengoku period became identified with a house-specific profession or talent: shrine affairs for the Yoshida; poetry for the Nijō, Reizei, Asukai, and Sanjōnishi; *biwa* lute for the Fushimi, Saionji, Imadegawa, Ayanokōji, and Sono; yin-yang divination for the Tsuchimikado; and so on. With this development, the primary wife became responsible for promoting these family professions, and the practical techniques for guarding them passed from senior to junior wives. The new patrilocal residential arrangements, wherein two (or more) generations increasingly lived together, facilitated this mode of transmission. Another change, and a tell-tale sign of the significance of the male line, was that primary wives were buried in the cemeteries of their husbands, in contrast to the Heian period, when a wife's tombstone was separate from that of her husband's family. This signaled the consolidation of the patrilineal structure and a more complete transfer of married women into the husbands' line, but it did not necessarily mean that the authority of the individual female as wife and mother was weakened within the household.

COMMONERS

Sources for understanding gender relations among commoners are scarce for all periods. But compared to earlier times, improved productivity and increasing commercialization, on the one side, and the warfare, rebellions, and other hardships, on the other, generated written and pictorial materials that allow us to imagine medieval commoners' lives in cities and villages.

In highly commercialized cities, especially Kyoto, artisans and merchants from near and far set up shops and congregated at markets. Women headed a number of merchant guilds. The most renowned were guilds for indigo dye, salt, fans, and brocade sashes made of Nishijin silk, some of which were important export items to Ming China. These guild proprietors' names appeared in disputes over trade or when the Muromachi Shogunate confirmed rights to it. The *Shokunin uta awase* (*Pictorial and Poetic Representations of Artisans and Merchants*), from 1500, mentions 142 artisans and traders. Although the figures represented are imagined caricatures by artists and not necessarily precise por-

trayals of real commoners, they suggest a general range of gendered ideal job types. Of the 142, 108 are male and 34 female. Interestingly, female-gendered jobs are of the sort modern society associates with the domestic sphere, female aesthetics, and sexuality: weaving textiles and sewing; making dye and cosmetics; brewing and selling sake; selling cotton, *tatami* mat paper, fans, *obi* sashes, and food; and performing as blind female singers, stand-up solicitors for prostitution, dancers, and various types of priestesses and shamans. In contrast, the male-gendered trades include a wider array of tasks: making and selling clothing for men; making bows, arrows, rafts, and Buddha statues; making pots; making papers; and crafting gold and silver items. Yin-yang artists, Zen and Ritsu Buddhists, mountain ascetics, doctors, *biwa* players, *sarugaku* dancers, *renga* poets, and kitchen knife wielders were also professions portrayed as male.

Among female professions, the category of stand-up solicitors helps us to consider the way in which certain females lost independent agency over the centuries. In early medieval times, female entertainers (*yūjo*) who sang, danced, and also engaged in sex managed their own profession and enjoyed the patronage of emperors and aristocrats. By 1500, with the rise of the money economy, sex, too, became a commodity. In 1589, Toyotomi Hideyoshi authorized the establishment of a brothel quarter in Kyoto to place these women under the eyes of male political authority. Similarly, the depiction of female sake brewers and sellers in 1500 commands our attention. Until the mid-fifteenth century, sake brewing was a woman's profession. Then warrior and temple authorities began formally taxing sake. They created formal registers that listed names responsible for the tax, following an age-old convention of listing men's names regardless of who did the labor or who had actual authority over the trade. A temple register of 347 sake makers compiled in 1426 shows only three female names. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the sake-brewing profession was gendered male both on paper and in practice, and by the mid-Tokugawa period, women were barred even from entering the brewery, because of a developing notion, closely tied to religious rituals, of female-specific pollution that was, by then, believed to defile the sake. Prostitution and sake brewing came to be controlled by male authority in different ways and for different reasons, but those who took control were in a position to gain economically, and women's autonomy was, in turn, limited.

The late medieval period was, nonetheless, a vibrant time for women's creative expression. Female entertainers, shamans, priestesses, picture-explainers, and yin-yang specialists traversed the archipelago, narrated popular stories of hell and salvation, and collected payment from the audience. Some of these women became famous. A nineteen-year-old female *kusemai* dancer from Mino province, for example, was "so splendid as to defy speech," and more than four thousand people watched as she performed in Kyoto in 1466. Female

dancers flourished, but male entertainers such as the Noh performer Zeami who had the patronage of shogunal officials disparaged the art of itinerant female entertainers.

In rural areas self-governing villages (*sō*), such as Imabori and Sugaura in the Kinai provinces, emerged to protect community interests. Village records show the workings of a sophisticated, self-ruled community that imposed its will on authorities. When these villages had violent altercations with neighboring communities, both women and men picked up available tools and fought. But the formal decision-making process rested mostly with men, who were the formal members of the shrine organization that administered rituals and community affairs. Men in some villages, especially in the east, were conscripted by warlords to fight in battles. In the absence of men, women took over their tasks in the fields, and in this sense as well, women's undocumented labor helped to sustain the late medieval machinery of war and economy.

VICTIMIZATION

The news of approaching battles must have been ominous to villagers. Typically the enemy warlords' foot soldiers (*ashigaru*) stole horses and food, destroyed harvests, and abducted people. The abductees were overwhelmingly women and young boys and girls, and according to Frois, they endured "cruelty that cannot be stated"—that is, rape. Some were also sold into prostitution or slavery and sent to Macao, Manila, and Europe on Portuguese and Spanish ships. Apparently, female slaves had a higher cash value than males. The law code of the Chōsokabe daimyo house, *Jinkaishū*, stated that if an escaped slave were found, the rightful owner had to pay three hundred *hiki* cash for a male slave and five hundred *hiki* cash for a female slave.

An economy in transformation, dispersed political authority, and the stress from perpetual violence affected how men and women allocated resources and related to one another. These centuries saw attempts to stabilize family, lineage, and community through masculine principles, including marriage practice, village organization, and business operations. In this process the gendered allocation of power shifted, without necessarily benefiting men. Among aristocrats, the power of men grew precarious, while women solidified their personal authority within the masculinized framework. Warriors, the seeming guardians of masculine principles, developed those tenets to the point of self-suffocation and forced much suffering on others and themselves. The most vivacious group may have been the itinerant women who, outside that framework, relied on their own resources and built the foundation of an imaginative popular culture.

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

See the bibliography for complete publication data.

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Notes

1. The population doubled during that period, and famine and disease were less lethal.
2. The shogunate also prohibited women from adopting heirs of their own, previously a legal practice that had been common.
3. Fujiki Hisashi, *Kiga to sensō no sengoku o iku*, 201–2.
4. Oan died at the age of more than eighty sometime between 1661 and 1673, and the story, originally told to a child of nine, was in print by 1730.
5. Famous examples include Toyotomi Hideyoshi's wife, Oné (or Nene), and Uesugi Kenshin's sister Sentōin.
6. Cooper, *They Came to Japan*, p. 46. Valignano (1539–1606) was in Japan in 1579–82, 1590–92, and 1598–1603.
7. Okuno Takahiro and Iwasawa Yasuhiko, *Shinchō kōki*, 32, 39.
8. *Writing in View of the Bamboo (Takemukigaki)*, by Hino Meishi (d. 1358) Described in Tonomura, "Re-envisioning Women in the Post-Kamakura Age," 139–153.
9. More precisely six of fourteen imperial personages were women, because two women reigned twice.
10. Following the fashion of Heian and Kamakura times, Masako entered the palace in 1620 but did not receive the title of wife (*chūgū*) until 1624. She gave birth to two sons, both of whom died young, and five daughters. The second daughter succeeded to the throne as Emperor Meishō (ruled 1629–43) and became the first woman to reign in eight and a half centuries.