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Japan Gender Conflict Sparks Censorship Debate

By [Tony McNicol](#)

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government is accused of censorship after the forced cancellation of a lecture by gender-rights advocate Ueno Chizuko.

Speaking at the [Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan](#) this January, Tokyo University professor and well-known gender-rights advocate [Chizuko Ueno](#) accused the Tokyo Metropolitan Government of censorship.



Last July, Professor Ueno was chosen by a citizens' group in the Greater Tokyo district of [Kokubunji](#) as the first speaker in a series of lectures on human rights; the events were to be sponsored by the [Tokyo Metropolitan Government](#). "But according to the group, Tokyo officials objected to the choice of Ueno because she might use the phrase "gender-free" – a poorly defined term originally intended to mean free from sexual bias. The citizen's group refused to find another speaker and instead cancelled the series of events.

Ueno lambasted what she termed a repression of free speech: "I have strong objections to any official agencies banning the use of any words in public, unless they are discriminatory expressions or hate speech." She also claimed that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's (TMG) move was part of a pattern of similar actions. "I am afraid it may be part of an ongoing backlash by neo-nationalists."

"Gender-free" is an imported English phrase that has been used in Japan since the mid-1990s. Some progressive teachers and local education authorities have used the phrase to promote liberal sex education, and the mixed listing of boys and girls on school roll calls. The latter is contentious in Japan where traditionally boys' names are read out first.

Originally a near synonym to gender equality, it has become highly controversial. Ueno accused conservatives of deliberately hijacking the phrase and distorting its meaning. She noted that the ruling [Liberal Democratic Party](#) (LDP) has a special body set up to oppose gender-free education. The "Extreme Sex-Education Gender-Free Education Survey Project Team" was set up in March last year and is chaired by [Shinzo Abe](#), Chief Cabinet Secretary. The grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, a class A war criminal and later prime minister, Abe is widely predicted by political commentators to be the next premier.

The project team's [Web page](#) criticizes "out of control education" that "denies differences between the sexes." It cites examples of older elementary school pupils forced to stay overnight in the same room, and includes photos of anatomically correct dolls the site says were used in Tokyo schools "to teach sex acts." A fax number is given at the bottom of the page with request: "Everyone, please send us examples of inappropriate education taking place near you." The project team says it has produced a 100-page report put together from 3,500 messages it has received.

In Tokyo, the phrase "gender-free" has been officially banned by the Metropolitan Board of Education since August 2004 and cannot be used by instructors in schools. "The phrase gender-free is not properly defined, so it is likely to cause confusion," explained the board's Shinichi Egami. He added that the board could not support Ueno as a speaker for the Kokubunji lectures in case she used the phrase. "We can't support a lecture that conflicts with the policy of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government."

The term gender-free is also criticized in the [Office of Gender Equality's](#) recent revision to the "Basic Plan for Gender Equality." The document includes examples of "extreme" education similar to those on the LDP's Web site. Professor Ueno suggests there is a clash between progressives and conservatives in the party, pointing out that the current Minister for Gender Equality, Kuniko Inoguchi, is known as a progressive advocate of gender equality, while her deputy, Eriko Yamatani, is a much more conservative politician.

Sophia University [Professor Inoguchi](#) herself hinted at conflict within the LDP when she spoke at a briefing for foreign journalists this January. She first praised reform of Japan's economic structure, then went on: "Now it is time for social structure. This is more complicated, more delicate; I have to listen to many traditional voices. And if you go too far, you lose everything."

One of the loudest traditional voices is Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, ex-novelist and a right-wing firebrand. He is known abroad also for his 1989 book "The Japan that Can Say No," co-written with then Sony Chairman Akio Morita. In a 2001 interview with women's magazine Shukan Josei he described "old

women" as "the worst evil and malignant being that civilization has produced," adding that "it is said that old women who live after their reproductive function are useless and are committing a sin."



On Jan. 27, six women's groups presented a petition with more than 1,800 signatures to both Ishihara and the Metropolitan Bureau of Education protesting the cancellation of Ueno's speech. But speaking at his regular press briefing, the governor denied that Ueno was censored. "The city government has no recollection of making such a rule," he said. He also criticized the phrase gender-free. "The phrase itself is sloppy and vague. We are Japanese, so we don't use English."

Ueno, however, is adamant that the Tokyo government's actions amounted to censorship. "If it were any private organization, it is perfectly all right to have any particular criteria to choose a speaker," she said. "But the TMG is a public body supported by tax payers . . . [this] is a political intervention by power, which is to be called censorship."

Lawrence Repeta, a professor at [Omiya Law School](#), compared Ueno's case to more than 200 teachers in Japan who have been disciplined for refusing to stand for the flag and sing Japan's national anthem during graduation ceremonies. "The government is forcing them to stand even though it conflicts with [the teachers'] personal beliefs and causes them personal anguish," said Repeta. "This is worse than censorship. It is a form of behavior control."

Authorities have also targeted NGO activists. In February 2004, three anti-war activists were arrested and imprisoned for 75 days after distributing pamphlets at a residential complex for Self-Defense Force personnel in the Tokyo suburb of Tachikawa. [Amnesty International](#) took up their case, calling them "prisoners of conscience." Eventually the charges against them were rejected by the Tokyo High Court.

The fringes of the Japanese press are feeling the heat too. In July last year, the editor of a small Kobe scandal magazine, Kami no Bakudan (Paper Bomb), [was arrested](#). After being charged with defamation against Aruze Corp., a manufacturer of Pachinko gambling machines, editor Toshiyasu Matsuoka was held in custody for 6 months and released on bail Jan. 20.

These apparent attacks on free speech coincide with a rightward shift in the Japanese political climate. Koizumi's controversial visits to the [Yasukuni shrine](#), which honors 14 class A war criminals along with Japan's other war dead, have angered Japan's neighbors. Tokyo Gov. Ishihara and Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe have also been to pay their respects at the shrine, and Foreign Minister Taro Aso recently called for the Japanese emperor to visit. Relations with Korea and China have been further strained by the publication of revisionist history textbooks that gloss over Japan's wartime actions in Asia. "Yet even a political shift shouldn't change constitutional rights, stressed Repeta. "Maybe you have political leaders who are very nationalistic, and they are popular, they are elected . . . but that doesn't change the constitution," he said. "The constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and it guarantees the freedom to hold personal beliefs to all people."



The gender-free censorship controversy comes at a time when gender issues are already in the spotlight. In the government's revision to the 2000 Basic Plan for Gender Equality, work-place equality was a prominent topic -- the lack of which is being blamed for Japan's extremely low birthrate and shrinking population. If the baby bust continues, the UN has predicted there could be 20 million fewer people in Japan by 2050.

Japanese women are being forced to choose between starting a family and pursuing their careers -- and many plump for the latter. Although Japan has a law saying that firms are obliged to give one year of maternity leave, according to the Gender Equality Bureau, 70 percent of women are effectively forced to resign from work when they get pregnant. Barely 1 in 5 women take maternity leave, and despite being legally entitled to paternity leave, virtually no men (0.56 percent) take time off.

Many women report being told to quit or being bullied into leaving when they become pregnant. One young mother, Miyako (who asked that we not use her last name), took maternity leave from her job at a trading company shortly before her son was born, but she doesn't know yet if she will go back to work or not. "My boss told me, 'Your position might not still be available when you come back.'" Despite that, she says that her company is relatively considerate to female employees. She said she has heard of expectant mothers made ill by the stress at other companies.

The controversy over the term "gender-free" seems to have become a distraction from the real issues of discrimination Japanese women face. If so, perhaps some of the controversy could be avoided by a change in terminology. Professor Ueno herself has said that despite Tokyo officials' fears, she doesn't generally use the term gender-free because it is not in currency outside Japan. "I have an alternative suggestion," said Ueno, "to substitute the words 'gender free' with 'gender equality'. What's wrong with that?"

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