

## **Panel: Diverse Identities**

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The panel discussion at the WELL retreat this year featured guests Hwa Mi Park, Rachna Singh, Kris Mizutani, Naeko Wakabayashi and Keiko Higuchi. Each speaker gave her own perspective on the topic of “Identity.”

### **Naeko Wakabayashi, lesbian activist**

Naeko became active in the women’s movement in 1970 after seeing a newspaper report on a women’s liberation demonstration in Ginza in which there was a banner saying, “Mother, is marriage really happiness?” She contacted the newspaper for further information and this began her 32 years of activism. She felt sympathy with the women’s movement because she saw her own mother suffer as a daughter-in-law. Naeko thought that her mother would have divorced if it hadn’t been for the children.

When she was 1, Naeko caught childhood polio and her parents spent two years taking her back and forth to the hospital. Fortunately, she has had relatively few physical problems. Her parents, however, were overprotective of her and thought of her as a weak child. Naeko wanted to become independent. There were women’s cooperatives forming in the early 70s and at 24 she joined one of these groups.

At 27, Naeko spent a year in Oakland, working at the Feminist Women’s Health Center. In the Self-Help Center, women learned to do self-exams with a speculum, breast self-exams, and so on. Many women on the staff there were lesbians, as was Naeko’s roommate. She said that at the time, she was going through some great changes. Before working at the Self-Help Center, she didn’t know her own body, was afraid to use a tampon, and held homophobic views. In Japan, the image of lesbians was something from pornography. But gradually she came to see lesbians as normal people. And she, herself, fell in love with a woman. “She broke my heart, but I was happy to have that relationship,” she said. It was a good experience that helped

her to recognize her own sexuality.

When Naeko came back to Japan, lesbians were beginning to organize and she got involved with the movement here. She also started *Onna no karada Teaching* and taught women to do self exams. She has been active in the group for six years. “My identity developed and I became aware of how strong and beautiful women are,” she said.

In the U.S. she experienced racism. She also realized that if she had been in the U.S. during the war, she would have been interred in the camps, even though she thought of herself as white. Living in the U.S., she came to identify herself as Asian and a lesbian.

Her most recent concern is about aging. Since her 40s she has had some trouble walking as a result of the aftereffects of polio. She is reflecting more and more about what it means to get older. Even though aging is natural, it is dealt with in a negative way. She wants to move forward with confidence, but in reality this is often difficult.

### **Keiko Higuchi, Differently abled activist**

From the time she was young, Keiko always wondered where she belonged, and who her friends really were. She grew up thinking that being disabled was something that was really terrible. People often told her, “Wow, even though you are disabled you can do all these things!” Before being a woman, before being a person, she was seen as someone who was disabled.

When she was middle school age, Keiko entered a facility for the treatment of illnesses, something like a school. But from the beginning she didn't feel she belonged there. She felt she always had to explain herself, and she was always self-conscious. In that facility, standing out was considered bad. The patients had a low status and had to listen to others, follow the rules, and obey orders. “I just learned to say, ‘Excuse me, Thank you, and I'm sorry,’” she said. “I wanted to find a place where I did belong.”

In 1981, designated as the Year of the Disabled by the United Nations, the “Social Participation and Equality” movement started for disabled people to become a more active part of the community. This movement consisted of various groups. Keiko

attended the Disabled Peoples International conference, held in Singapore, which opened her eyes to a new world. There, she talked with disabled people from all over the world and realized her identity as disabled and as a woman.

This conference is held every four years. At one conference, a fashion show with disabled women models was held. Many women attending the conference were angry and made an official claim to the Disabled Peoples International that women should be treated seriously and with respect within the movement. Women comprised only 10% of attendees at DPI meetings in Japan, and were usually the ones who worked backstage, served tea, did clerical work, and so on. Deciding that women should be participating more, a Disabled Women's Network was formed in 1986.

One of the goals of the Disabled Women's Network was to make disabled women more independent, to help women lead the lives they wanted to lead, and to offer peer counseling to empower disabled women. The Network also joined forces with the women's movement to protest the Eugenic Protection Act. In 1996 the maternal protection law came into effect, ending a law that existed since before the war which said "being disabled is bad and must be corrected." Keiko feels she has lived according to this law.

Keiko thinks she has had to give up many things as a disabled person, including marriage and relationships. "Everything is decided for us," she explained, "including those who care for us." She told the story of a friend who had a helper who would come to do housework, but refused to wash the friend's underwear, even though the "helper" was supposed to help. The friend didn't think she was strong enough to speak up. Overcoming self-denial is the main thing the Women's Network is concerned with.

In Independent Life Centers they have created, the Network tries to join up with various governmental organizations, not to be bossed by them, but to work with them in order to help disabled people become more independent. Disabled people want to be at the center of policies rather than being told what to do. More and more disabled women are very active, which is good, but unless local governments support them there will be problems.

Keiko works in the Machida City government. She recently ran for office, but was not elected. She believes environmental and political barriers have to be torn down. “Those who are clever, or who have lots of money, are highly rated, but others are not. These barriers must be broken down as well,” Keiko said.

The project she and others are working on now is to create a law banning discrimination toward disabled people.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Disabled Peoples International conference will be held October 15-18 in Sapporo.

### **Hwa Mi Park, Korean activist, born and raised in Japan**

Hwa Mi began her part of the discussion by noting that, in listening to the previous two speakers, she realized it is important to create and listen to individual stories. Sometimes, though, those stories are created for us; who we are, etc.

Hwa Mi addressed the panel session title “Diverse Identities” and raised the question of whether those present shared a common understanding of those terms. Starting with “Identity”, she made the point that often before asking the question, “Who am I?” someone will ask, “Who are you?” As Ms. Wakabayashi stated earlier, it wasn’t until she encountered racism that she started to think about it. Until asked, you don’t think about it. This is “positionality”; where are we speaking from? To whom? We need to question these concepts.

#### Diverse Identities

Japan is in the process of diversifying. 1.2% of the population is made up of foreign nationals. Japanese society is facing a declining birth rate. The government will be forced to accept foreign workers to take up the slack in the workforce. Hwa Mi is suspicious about the way bureaucrats use language, importing “workers,” not “people.” “Why doubt the government? Look at Japan’s historical background,” she said.

Hwa Mi stated it is important to consider the difference between “identity” and “identity politics.” Identity should be a verb, or should be plural, not singular. One positive point of “identity” is that identity can be changed. It is easier to think about and link it to the concept of diversity. But this is rather meaningless. If we hold a world conference and celebrate our differences, we’re not really dealing with it at all.

An “Identity Politics” perspective deals with power relations. Normally, society divides into the majority and the minority, “regular” Japanese and “not normal” Japanese. Ms. Higuchi said earlier that identity is a conception people have, “identity” gives a name to feeling.

In terms of “normal” and “not normal”, there is a stigma. The group that sees itself as normal believes that it must feel sad to be different. Japanese Koreans hide. When we come out to people, those people say, “Well, you’re normal just like us.” Why should they think she is “normal” like them? The important point is not to see everyone as normal but to look at how these “normal” categories are constructed in society. In Japanese history, “normalness” — one race, one culture, one language — is a myth created over

the last 100 years. When you see yourself as normal you become unable to see these categorical constructions.

“In fact,” Hwa Mi explained, “even though I’m speaking as a Japanese Korean, I’m also resisting this *because* I’ve been asked to speak as a Japanese Korean.”

### **Kris Mizutani, Japanese American teacher**

“Everyone is part of a minority group. Everyone is part of a majority group.”

At the age of 4 1/2, Kris emigrated to the U.S. She returned to Japan 4 months ago to pursue her passion of teaching and learning, critical thinking, identity politics, social justice, diversity training, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Japanese, sexuality and gender issues, and to learn more about Okinawan history and culture (her step mother is Okinawan).

Kris came back to Japan with dreams of being accepted as Japanese. She dreamed that somehow her authenticity could be validated here in Japan. She described it, “like a trap, with problematic assumptions of real and imagined identities.” Within herself, she was questioning ideas of racial purity. She has tried various identities—Japanese, American, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, returnee—but is not comfortable with any one of them. The only identity she says she is comfortable with is her last name, Mizutani, and perhaps “J.A.” (a member of the Japanese American community), only child, and Asian American.

Many Americans here in Japan think she can identify with them so they say, “Hey, join our group.” Yet, when she’s in the U.S., people will say, “So, are you Chinese?”

A “NO sei” conference (English “no” and Japanese “sei” as in nisei “second generation Japanese”) was held recently in San Francisco between Japanese Americans and Japanese “shin-issei”, or Japanese who are new to the U.S. Kris said “it’s easy to deal with racism from non-Japanese or non-Japanese Americans, but it’s harder to deal with racism within one’s own group—by Japanese American toward Japanese or vice versa.”

### **Rachna Singh, Indian scholar**

Rachna opened by saying that she doesn’t fit into any identity, assumes she will not fit

in and walks in and let the world handle it!

As a child, she was almost taken from her mother. She was the fourth child, the third girl. Someone decided that one aunt who lived in Trinidad and who didn't have children of her own would adopt Rachna. Her ticket and passport were readied. Then a priest said that it was written in the star charts that the aunt would, indeed, have a child, so Rachna was able to stay in India with her mother.

Some time early in childhood, Rachna decided she would not follow in her mother's footsteps, that she would be different. She often played with her younger brothers, not her sisters, as they were more her own age. But when they played soccer they would tell her to be goal keeper, and then they wouldn't let her catch the ball. She was kept out of men's groups. Rachna has felt that her choices were questioned, but she followed her questionable choices until they were accepted.

Rachna believes we must form people who believe in themselves and who they are, because then they can believe in others. We must see each other as persons rather than as Asian / Korean / Indian, etc., we can still communicate. Despite the differences in language, culture and dress. In India a law can be interpreted in so many ways, "Lawyers will rip it to shreds," she explained. "Language is flexible and volatile. We must look beyond the language to be able to communicate."

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Workshop —Saturday afternoon

Naeko Wakabayashi

In the morning panel session, Naeko talked about her background. Here, she gave a few more details, and her reason for wanting to conduct this workshop. Around the age of 40 she developed some physical problems and thought she would have to have an operation. Later they decided the condition could be treated through acupuncture and a change of diet.

Now, as she is growing older, she notices so many images of young women in the media. She has thought that it is awful that there are no other images. “My own thought is that I’m ok, but images all around us are young. It’s hard to keep a positive self image of being a healthy person,” Naeko explained. She noted that there are few images of active older women such as The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata.

Members attending the workshops gave self-introductions and reasons for attending the workshop. From the discussion, a list of “negatives” about growing older was written on the board.

Some fears we have about growing old:

- senility
- taking care of daily living: cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.
- becoming far-sighted; less able to enjoy the pleasure of reading
- economics / living on a limited income
- working past 65: wanting to, but not being allowed to in most Japanese companies
- losing friends
- appearance

From this list we brainstormed solutions to each problem:

- appearance  don’t watch TV!; question what “beauty” is
- nearsightedness  look at green scenery (healing for the eyes)
- work past retirement age, limited income  on your own do some kind of work; create a network of people who are interested in the same things and share information about jobs, etc.
- losing friends  make a network of younger friends
- senility and everyday life  don’t be afraid or ashamed to ask for help

We then brainstormed the **POSITIVES** about growing older:

- wisdom and experience
- wider perspective
- deeper understanding of life, people, death, etc.



- ability to accept / be accepting
- easier to understand “Shoten” TV program jokes and stories
- time to pursue interests / do volunteer work, etc.
- concept of time changes as we grow older
- less desire for material goods (which is also good for the environment!)

Naeko told the story about a group of nomadic Inuit people who decided to leave two old women behind because they slowed the group down. The women complained, but they were left to fend for themselves. In order to do this, they relied on their experience and knowledge of how to fish, etc. It turned out that the younger group kept coming back to them for advice.

The important thing for us to do is concentrate on the positive things about growing older, make our own networks for support – start now! - and do what we can to pressure the government to provide assistance when we need care / helpers.