New Religions and the Realization of Gender Equality

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The conditions of modern society reflect ongoing changes in the social, cultural, economic, political, and spiritual environments surrounding people's lives. Such changes include "urbanization, industrialization, and accompanying transformations in the lifestyles of local communities; change in family structure from extended families to nuclear families," as well as "the advent of mass media, the development of transportation, and the spread of education," resulting in significant changes in "the lifestyles of ordinary people as well as the overall intellectual and information environment" (Inoue 2009, 22). Amidst these societal transformations, the position of "religion" in various fields has also shifted significantly, and topics such as secularization/privatization, religious decline, or religious revival—based on modernization theory—have been topics of discussion.

Some have argued that "new religions are more susceptible to environmental influences than traditional religions" (Inoue 2019, 289). Considering changes in social conditions and research perspectives, previous research on new religions has raised six key points. First, new religions can help create mutual relationships apart from geographical, blood, and social ties (Inoue 2004, 34–35). This function of new religions can be seen as a response to many people seeking new connections with others amid social transformations such as the higher mobility of the population associated with changes in industrial structure. Second, a new debate emerged regarding the boundary between politics and religion in postwar Japanese society, in which the separation of religion and state and freedom of religion became the established norms. Third, research has clarified the social factors that

draw people to new religions, introducing reference group theory with regard to economic factors and pointing out the importance of various forms of information dissemination, such as church publications, given the spread of secondary and higher education. In recent years research has focused on the changes in the information environment due to the spread of the Internet. Fourth, there are regional differences even within a single religious organization. Fifth, research has revealed the extremely close and complex relationship between new religions and religions that were already established in Japan before modernization. Finally, scholars have begun to focus on the "negative aspects" of religion, such as the so-called "cult" problem, and are reconsidering the assumption that "religiosity is inherently good" that had long been implicit in religious studies.[1]

Based on the above points, the "challenge for research on new religions in the twenty-first century" (Inoue 2019, 287–289) is to examine new religions as "niche adaptations" to various environments and to accumulate comparative research from a global perspective. Such research should consider the "social and cultural environment" as the combination of "factors in social change"—changes in livelihood patterns, urbanization, changes in family structures, changes in education, globalization, informationization, etc.—and "sociocultural factors"—regions, social classes, age groups, etc., each with their own history and structure—brought about by modernization.

Previous scholarship on new religions has insufficiently addressed the "changes in the framework of gender." The framework of gender in Japanese society was reorganized to support modernization and the maintenance of such changes. The framework of gender in Japan is intertwined with sociocultural factors, such as changes to livelihood patterns, family dynamics, education, and social class structures. If this point is not regarded as an important axis of analysis, scholars will overlook a vital aspect of the "challenge for research on new religions in the twenty-first century." Over the course of this process of change to the gender order up to the present, Japanese society had the potential to move toward "gender equality." However, society has moved in a different direction. Scholars have pointed out that the speed of change in the gender order of Japanese society is significantly slower when compared with that of other societies, and it is most likely that we can ascertain the characteristics of modern Japanese society within this reality (Ōgoshi 1997; Igeta 2000; Muta 2006; Katō 2014; Ochiai and Tachibanaki 2015).

In this article, I interrogate the question of whether existing new religions contribute to gender equality in society. I consider "new religions" as "religions

1. While critical points have been raised against the activities of new religions from the perspective of gender studies (Yamaguchi, Saitō, and Ogiue 2012), there also exist complex elements within the relationship between religion and gender that cannot be simply summed up one-sidedly as negative aspects (Kawahashi and Kuroki 2004).

with new characteristics emerging under the influence of the conditions of modern society" (Inoue 2009, 22), in other words, "modern new religions."[2] I view such modern new religions as "mirrors of society" (Inose 2007), as they allow us to analyze new religions as reflections of "the new conditions emerging in response to major social changes collectively known as modernization" (Inoue 2009, 21). While recognizing their diversity, I find that new religions fail to achieve the goal of gender equality. Rather, new religions continue to reproduce, in one form or another, the framework of "gender inequality" in modern Japanese society.

Gender Equality in New Religions: The Case of Sōka Gakkai

In the statement of purpose and principles for the Sōka Gakkai Charter established on 18 November 2021, the seventh article states: "The Sōka Gakkai will safeguard and promote human rights. It will not discriminate against any individual and will oppose all forms of discrimination. It will contribute to the achievement of gender equality and promote the empowerment of women."[3] In line with this declaration, the organization's goals for 2023—enumerated under the category of "Peace, Culture, and Education Movement"—also includes "striving to build a 'human-rights culture' and to promote gender equality and women's empowerment."[4] In other words, Sōka Gakkai clearly—and publicly—advocates for "gender equality" as one of its organizational goals.

On the other hand, as of December 2022 the organization of Sōka Gakkai is divided by age and gender into the "men's division," "women's division," and "youth division." The youth division is further divided into the "young men's division," "student division," and "future division." For the leaders of local groups, the district leader is a man and the district married women's division leader is a woman. This system of assigning leaders in pairs—one man and one woman—in each region and block is maintained across the country. Although the local group leaders are evenly distributed in terms of gender, the main leader of each regional organization is de facto a man. Thus, the current organizational structure does not allow for the possibility of a woman becoming the local group's main leader.

In November 2021, Sōka Gakkai's "married women's division" and "young women's division" were officially merged to become the "women's division." Prior

2. Inoue (2009, 2019) uses the terms "post-new religions" and "hyper religions" to refer to new religions that emerged after the 1970s and 1990s, respectively, to distinguish these groups from the "modern new religions" that preceded them. In this article, I focus on "modern new religions" and their relationship to gender in modern society. Although some use the term "post-modern" to refer to the current era, and gender policy has increasingly become a political issue, the framework of gender in contemporary Japanese society has not fundamentally changed from that of the earlier modern era.

3. For an English translation of the charter, see https://www.sokagakkai.jp/about-us/charter-eng.html.

4. See "Regarding the activities of 2023," https://www.sokagakkai.jp/practice/activities.html.

to this change, the term "four parties" referred collectively to 1) the men's division, 2) the married women's division, 3) the young men's division, and 4) the young women's division, with the latter two making up the youth division. These four groups were regarded as the collective that would serve as the base for Sōka Gakkai activities in each region. In general, married women belonged to the married women's division and unmarried women to the young women's division.[5] This point also differed from the men, since the transition from the young men's division to the men's division was determined solely by age, regardless of marital status.

Previously (Inose 2023), I considered how these four parties served as a symbolic device to represent the Sōka Gakkai organization as the "Sōka family" and the "Gakkai family." I also examined the overlap between the image presented by the religious organization and the image perceived by Sōka Gakkai members. In this article, I would like to reexamine this issue by focusing on how the framework of gender is related to the expression of "family."

I performed a correspondence analysis on selected Sōka Gakkai texts using KHCoder3 (Higuchi 2020). The first group of texts focus on the different kinds of guidance provided by the religious organization regarding gender and age. I entered all the text of speeches that Honorary President Ikeda Daisaku gave to the young women's division, young men's division, married women's division, and men's division included under the "Guidelines for Each Division" published in Sōka Gakkai shidōshū hensan iinkai (1976) and Ikeda (1995).

In FIGURE 1, the squares □ identify each of the four groups: young women's division 女子部, young men's division 男子部, married women's division 婦人部, and men's division 壮年部. The circles ○ surrounding the squares represent frequently used words and phrases in the content of the guidance given to each section. The greater the frequency with which the word/phrase appears, the larger the circle. Consequently, FIGURE 1 helps us intuitively understand the characteristics of the messages for each group.

Near the young women's division square □, we find that words such as "marriage" 結婚, "good fortune" 福運, and "education" 教育 are used frequently. The guidance given to this group, mainly consisting of unmarried women, is to acquire—while young and unmarried—the faith to bring them the "good fortune" to find happiness in the future through "marriage" and becoming members of the married women's division.

5. For members of the young women's division, there were many cases in which women who remained single were transferred to the married women's division when they got older. After the reorganization into the women's division, young members who would have belonged to the young women's division now belong to the Ikeda Kayōkai 池田華陽会.

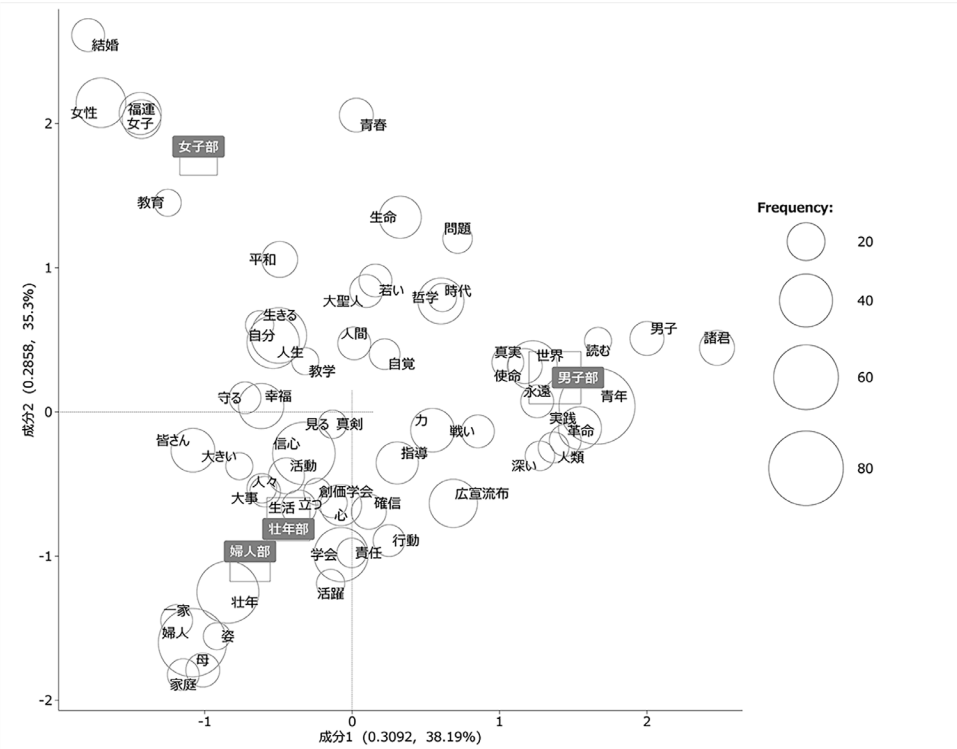

FIGURE 1: KHCORDER3 correspondence analysis of the top 60 frequent words from the "Guidelines for Each Division" (Sōka Gakkai shidōshū hensan iinkai 1976; Ikeda 1995).

For the young men's division, we find words such as "youth" 青年, "world" 世界, "eternity" 永遠, practice" 実践, "mission" 使命, "truth" 真実, "humanity" 人類, and "fight" 戦い. Furthermore, in the texts analyzed here, the young men's division is addressed using the distinctive term "lads" 諸君. These terms of address and frequently occurring words demonstrate how the young men's division often receives guidance under the assumption, or expectation, that they will become leaders of Sōka Gakkai in the future. At the same time, the young men's division is expected to "fight" for the "mission" to contribute to the good of "humanity" and "the world."

Between the young women's division and the young men's division, we find words such as "young" 若い, "peace" 平和, "philosophy" 哲学, "youth" 青春, "learning" 教学, "self" 自分, "to live" 生きる, and "(Nichiren) Daishōnin" 大聖人. The young men and women within the youth division are instructed to strive for "learning"—for example, through study of the teachings and life of Nichiren Daishōnin—in order to acquire a "philosophy" needed for "living" their lives.

Near the center of the diagram, we find the frequently occurring words common to all four groups, that is, the guidance shared to all groups. All members are "guided" 指導 to maintain their "faith" 信心 in "Sōka Gakkai" 創価学会 and become "happy" 幸福. The married women's division and the men's division are located close to one another on the graph, meaning that these two divisions tend to receive overlapping or similar kinds of guidance. Near the married women's division, we see words such as "maturity" 壮年, "mother" 母, "one family" 一家, and "household" 家庭. The guidance given here suggests that the members of the Married Women's Division are expected to assist and support the men's division within the context of "one family" and the "household." For the men's division, we find words such as "Gakkai" 学会, "Sōka Gakkai" 創価学会, "activity" 活動, "engagement" 活躍, "responsibility" 責任, "to stand" 立つ, "dissemination" 広宣流布, "guidance" 指導, and "faith" 信心. This shows how members of the men's division are instructed to "stand" as leaders in Sōka Gakkai and have the "responsibility" to "engage" in "activities" for the "dissemination" of the teachings. In contrast with the term "lads" used to address the young men's division, the term "everyone" 皆さん was used to address the young women's division, married women's division, and men's division.

Expanding on this previous analysis of official guidance from Sōka Gakkai leadership, I demonstrate in FIGURE 2 how Sōka Gakkai members themselves perceive each division. These data are based on a 2001 questionnaire of Sōka Gakkai members in taken in Sapporo, which resulted in 656 responses to an open-ended question regarding the mental image respondents had of each of the four divisions. This survey was attached to a separate open-ended questionnaire regarding faith inheritance that I conducted in Sapporo in 2001 (Inose 2011). Using the NVIVO word cloud, FIGURE 2 illustrates the top thirty most frequently used words (exact matches) in responses to the questionnaire.

Respondents perceived the members of the young women's division as "people" 人 who are "active" 活動 in the "Gakkai" 学会 as "refreshing" さわやか, "bright" 明るい "women" 女性, likened to "flowers" 花·華. Respondents "wish" ほしい that the members of the young women's division will become the married women's division of the "future" 未来. Meanwhile, participants regarded the members of the young men's division as "youths" 青年 and "young" 若い "individuals" 人 who are "energetic" 元気 and engage in "activities" 活動 within the "Gakkai" 学会. They see these members as capable individuals who will lead Sōka Gakkai in the "future" 未来. The members of the married women's division are "people" 人 who are engage in "activities" 活動 in the "Gakkai" 学会, "household" 家庭, and "local community" 地域 as a "bright" 明るい "presence" 存在, like the "sun" 太陽. They are the "mothers" お母さん of the "organization" 組織. The members of the men's division are the "presence" 存在 that engages in "activities" 活動 as the "pillar" 柱 of the "Gakkai" 学会

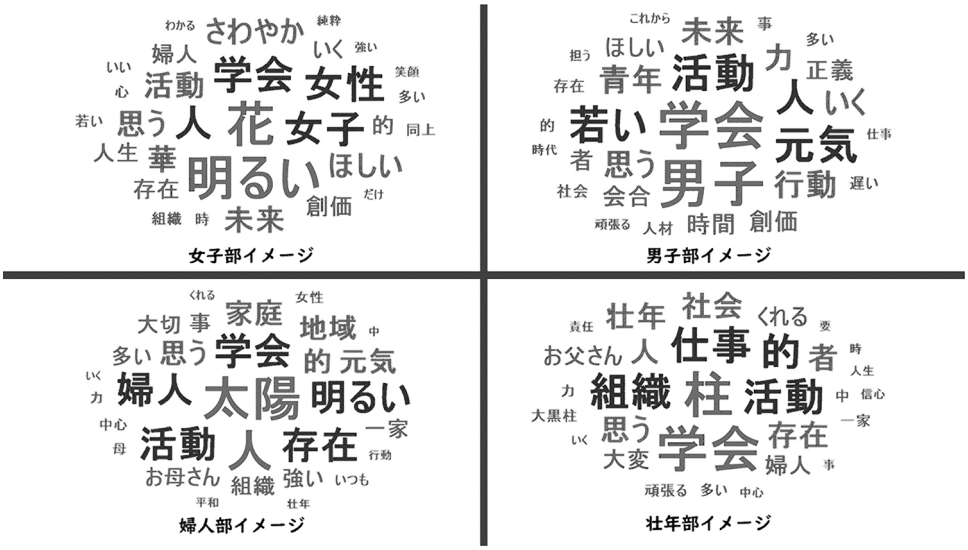

FIGURE 2: Word clouds created with NVIVO depicting Sōka Gakkai members' impressions of each of the four divisions of the organization: young women's (top left), young men's (top right), married women's (bottom left), and men's (bottom right).

"organization" 組織. They are the "fathers" お父さん who work hard in the Gakkai organization while doing "work" 仕事 in "society" 社会.

From the above results, we can see that even if the guidance from President Ikeda and the Sōka Gakkai leadership does not explicitly use words such as "father" and "mother," gender roles are presumed. That is, Sōka Gakkai members themselves accept the organization as a "pseudo-family." Regarding the gender roles of the "Sōka family," older men are the "pillars" and leaders, while older women serve a supportive and nurturing role in the organization/family as its "sun." These women are also expected to produce and rear young people who will become their successors. The young men are expected to take on leadership roles as future successors, while the young women are seen as "flowers" who will blossom as the future married women's division. We can interpret this gender framework as one in which men are at the center of decision-making and women are expected to serve as caretakers of the organization/households.

Gender is at the core of the organizational structure of Sōka Gakkai's community activities, a structure that overlaps that of the "modern family" (Usui 1995). The fact that the married women's and the young women's divisions were merged

into the women's division in 2021 reflects how shifts in the social framework of gender brought about changes in the structure of the organization.

According to Morioka Kiyomi (1989, 311–318), "the parent-child model" is "the original structure of religious movements in Japan." According to this theory of religious organization, the hierarchy of the parent-child model, or "household model," tends to be expressed using the metaphor of "family." However, the egalitarian "fellowship model," or "bureaucratic model," found in organizations such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai, departs from the metaphor of "family." I question whether Morioka's theory of the parent-child model fully accounts for the contradiction between the egalitarian ideals and the gender framework that underlies the structure of religious organizations.

From the late nineteenth century to the postwar era, the center of the family structure in Japanese society has shifted from that of a hierarchal household model to that of the "modern family," which is premised on the separation of public and private life and the gendered division of labor in the husband-wife relationship. The modern family differs from the household model because it is a "family" centered on the relationship between the "husband and wife"—defined as one man and one woman—and the resulting "parent-child" relations. In contrast to the hierarchal household model, the husband-wife relationship within the modern family is based on the idea of an "equal" or egalitarian relationship in which the men and women each have a role. In reality, however, this relationship is not equal, because it also assumes a hierarchal relationship in the roles of men and women in which the husband plays the central role whereas the women serves in a supporting capacity.

As mentioned above, the structure of the Sōka Gakkai organization lacks a formal route for women to become the leaders. This means that the Sōka Gakkai structure is based on the principles of the modern family in which the father/husband is the leader, the mother/wife supports him, and the son—the future father/husband—and the daughter—the future mother/wife—follow the father. Such principles do not constitute being "friends" or "comrades," or even a "bureaucracy." In fact, before the establishment of the women's division, the organization had a clearly delineated structure based on the modern family model: men's division as "fathers," the married women's division as "mothers," the young men's division as "sons," the young women's division as "daughters," and the future division as "children." In the past, there also existed a system in which the "older sisters" of the young women's division and the "older brothers" of the young men's division would take care of the "children" of the future division (Inose 2011). Here again we find the combination of hierarchal and egalitarian relationships.

The image of the modern family in which hierarchal and egalitarian relationships coexist was applied to the organization of Sōka Gakkai. This most likely

played an important role in attracting new members, especially women, to Sōka Gakkai activities as well as stabilizing the management of the organization. Furthermore, in a section of the religious organization's newspaper, (*Seikyō Shinbun* 2021), Sōka Gakkai is described as a "gathering of families united by the Wondrous Law," demonstrating the continued use of the metaphor of "family" in the management of the organization. Thus, the organizational structure of Sōka Gakkai is best expressed through the metaphor of the "family" in what we could call the "family model."

Sōka Gakkai continues to allocate different roles/powers to men and women. In other words, the religious organization is a mirror of modern Japanese society. Like Japanese society, which merely applauds "women's empowerment" while maintaining the existing gender framework with its built-in inequalities, Sōka Gakkai has not advanced toward the achievement of substantive gender equality.

New Religions as Mirrors of Society

In a prior publication, I reference Usui (1995) and describe Sōka Gakkai as an organization that aims to "harmonize into a single unite while utilizing the characteristics of men and women" (Inose 2011, 99). I wrote this passage to critique gender inequality within Sōka Gakkai. In response, a leader of the married women's division—one of the informants in my research—remarked, "That's right! That's exactly how our organization has been working!" She interpreted this passage as an affirmation and a "joy to have outsiders understand the work of our women's division." This response verified my analysis and revealed that women in the married women's division carried out their religious activities with this understanding. Nonetheless, her response caught me by surprise, and I was once again reminded that how one interprets this data depends on the perspective from which one views reality. Obviously, we should not—from the outside—easily deny nor affirm the lives of people who are proud to continue to be religious insiders or, at times, persevere to do so.

Gender is embedded in all social spheres, meaning that it is fundamental to the way each person views the world. For this reason, it is difficult to clearly see the social framework of gender without being influenced by one's own biases. How then should researchers approach the topic of gender in order to reveal the ways in which new religions function as "mirrors of society"?

One approach is exemplified by the meticulously researched sociological studies on family and women in new religions conducted by Watanabe Masako. Although Watanabe's specific research subjects are wide-ranging (Watanabe 2007), she has published many case studies that record in great detail the relationships between individuals and their families within religious organizations (Watanabe

1985, 1991, 1993, 1994, 2016a, 2016b), including a special focus on female believers and female founders of religious traditions (Watanabe 1986, 2001, 2019).

For example, Watanabe (1979) analyzes the theme of "family crisis" based on the results of a survey conducted in one community in which twenty-six out of a total of fifty-four households belonged to new religions (fourteen in Risshō Kōseikai, five in Sōka Gakkai, seven in Tenrikyō, and one household that refused to respond). Watanabe provides two reasons for focusing on the family, while maintaining that it is the individual [and not necessarily the entire household] that joins a new religion. First, the fact that most of the believers in the community are women who play the roles of mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law makes it more appropriate to consider the experience of deprivation from an analysis of the family to which these women belong, rather than as something that affects only the individual. Second, membership in new religions is often based on households, and therefore it is necessary to analyze the relationships within the families that constitute these households (Watanabe 1979, 201–202). Regarding the impact that new religions have on each household, Watanabe's analysis shows that the function of a new religion to create meaning affects the ability to cope with crises within the family. Moreover, new religions provide the household with a support network outside the family comprised of groups of fellow believers (Watanabe 1979, 224–225). Watanabe's insightful perspective toward the relationships between the new religions, families, and individuals belonging to each household, and in particular the women, offers a model for investigating how new religions mirror the framework of gender in Japanese society.

In a later work, Watanabe (1994) follows the lives of twenty-five male and female trainees at Konkōkyō's Airaku Church, describing how they decided to became trainees and the challenges they faced during their training.[6] In this study, Watanabe notes that there was not much difference between men and women in how they were drawn to their spiritual leader ("parent teacher" [male]) and consequently become trainees. However, after they entered into training, the way male and female trainees were taught completely differed. Specifically, Watanabe observes that, 1) the religious activities for female trainees are restricted based on several ideas like: "the kitchen is the (sacred) boundary for women"; 2) because they mainly work in the kitchen, the female trainees end up having "many relationship problems," making it difficult to concentrate purely on training; 3) in spite of this situation, the female trainees are told "if you accept everything as spiritual

6. Of the thirteen men and fourteen women (nine of whom were married couples), two women, ages 69 and 77, were hospitalized at the time of the study and thus not included in the research. The maximum training period for an individual trainee was twenty-three years, the minimum two years, with ages ranging from 27 to 66 years old. The training separates the trainees from secular society.

training, it is the same no matter where you practice," and their problems tend to be ignored; 4) the spiritual leader's wife, despite her not being a teacher, is considered the model for their training; 5) married female trainees are expected to be subordinate to their husbands (who are male trainees); and 6) through these circumstances, evaluations result in comments like "male trainees are better than female trainees in terms of faith" (Watanabe 1994, 4, 88–89).[7]

From an outsider's perspective, this situation for female trainees certainly seems unreasonable. But, it is not the teachings of Konkōkyō, the new religion that the women themselves have accepted, that cause this situation. Rather, it is the ways in which the female trainees are expected to support the daily activities within the church, that is, because they are in charge of food—which is essential to daily life—their time is divided and limited (Watanabe 1994, 65). In other words, this situation results from the unequal and unbalanced "family model" of gender within which the teachings of Konkōkyō are situated.[8]

> In contrast with the case of men who have never thought about any other gender, female trainees express an ambivalent attitude about themselves being women. They are prompted to reflect on their own femininity in relation to their spouse, their missionary work, and other daily activities and events. When the female trainees get married, they are expected to obey their husbands, and their of activities also becomes restricted. This stands in stark contrast with men who have never denied their manhood. (Watanabe 1994, 82–83)

In such a manner, Watanabe describes in careful detail this situation in which the female trainees continue to work hard in their training despite being relegated to the background. But the unbalanced burden of essential labor such working in the kitchen and childcare negatively affects the quality and quantity of their religious activities.

Watanabe does not, however, deem this situation as unreasonable. Rather she concludes the study with her own observation that the female trainees' journey

7. From the descriptions of the survey interviews, we also get a glimpse of the suffering and hardships faced by the children of the trainees.

8. Watanabe (1994, 91 n. 9) notes that the Airaku Church "is a church that is considered unique in Konkōkyō. There is strong faith in the spiritual leader as a living god and as the model for others. The strongly defined gender roles may also reflect the local characteristics of the Kyushu region." Watanabe observes that, at the time of the study in 1990, women did take on some religious duties other than those in the kitchen, but since May 1993 the pattern became more noticeable for "men to serve in the center and front of religious spaces, while women serve in the background in areas of cooking, providing childcare, etc. (tasks centered on the kitchen)" (Watanabe 1994, 73). As a reason for this change, Watanabe (1994, 65–66) describes how three trainee couples successively left the church during this period, resulting in a labor shortage.

began with their faith in the spiritual leader (Watanabe 1994, 89–90). Their goal is to be like the spiritual leader; that is, the female trainees never aspired to be like the spiritual leader's wife. There are things in the spiritual leader's teachings that attract women to the faith. According to the teachings of the Airaku Church, there is a feminine side to the spiritual leader, represented by the "heart of earth," which is something that both men and women must practice.[9]

In the midst of the social changes that gave rise to the new religions, the founder, the founder's successors, the church leaders, the members, and the people surrounding them form and manage their religious organization through various interactions inside and outside the group according to their respective positions. In order to identify specific obstacles to achieving gender equality in society as a whole, it is important to carefully confirm each situation and to suspend our judgment for the time being as we encounter circumstances within religious groups that may be fraught with problems for the people involved. Similarly, the framework of gender that supports inequality arises—in various contexts—from a complex interplay of different, sometimes contradictory, elements.[10] For this reason, in order to achieve gender equality, we need to unravel the multiple layers of this framework one by one. As Watanabe's studies (1979, 1994) demonstrate, research and analysis that carefully depict the lived realities of believers and organizations have the potential to reveal—and not overlook—tangled threads and split seams that create differences and divisions.

Within the histories and circumstances of each religious organization, gender frameworks specific to that group are constructed, maintained, and changed over time. Rather than employing a perspective that tries to "discover" inequalities and imbalances, we should focus on the construction of specific kinds of relationships and examine what kinds of situations occur as a result in the relationships between various members of the group. I think this kind of work could help us clearly show the substantive "inequalities" that exist, not only to those outside the religious group, but also to those inside the group.

Research on New Religions and Women (Gender)

In her work of exploring theoretical issues in new religions, Igeta Midori discusses the positions and roles of women from a feminist standpoint. In the foreword of

9. This reflects the philosophy of the Airaku Church concerning a heart like earth or soil that "turns everything into fertilizer," relating to teachings with practical and universal validity or teachings that can be experimented with and proven in real life (Watanabe 1994, 14).

10. For example, Igeta (1992, 198) uses expressions such as "the role of the housewife intertwined with the myth of motherhood."

to a 2000 edited volume on the topic of women and the state, Igeta questions and historicizes the modern Japanese nation-state from the perspective of gender:

> Gender as knowledge—as far as we know it—emerged from the unequal relationship between women and men—politically, economically, and culturally. Rarely has it been advocated in order to create an equal relationship between the sexes. When we employ a gender perspective, we revisit stories that have been told as part of the histories of societies and communities—as well as events that have never been publicly told—as processes of formation of power relations, or as histories on relations of domination. (Igeta 2000, 11)[11]

The themes in Igeta's work on new religions are also based on the recognition that gender in Japan—a "modern nation-state"—is organized through unequal relations of power and domination between men and women. She summarizes her view as follows:

> Since the late nineteenth century, the entire society and culture of Japan has been subject to external pressure and influence from Western countries. Japan's new religions could be thought of as a kind of rescue device that precipitated and structured itself in the midst of people striving to transform themselves during the modernization process. In order to overcome political and economic turmoil, changes in value systems, and crisis situations, they created a kind of "therapeutic culture" that has achieved positive results in the daily lives of ordinary people. In their doctrines, the new religions—as social organizations embodying a therapeutic culture—often regard the complete fulfillment of gender roles as a sacred duty inherent to human beings, pointing to the restoration of the "sacred order" of the universe through such practice as the perfected, supreme state of salvation. Moreover, the majority of the practitioners are women. (Igeta 1992, 187)

In this manner, Igeta presents her view of new religions as a type of "therapeutic culture" and finds the study of new religions effective for reconsidering the unequal framework of gender that has become a "sacred order" in modern Japan.

Igeta further examines "the question" for a "feminist approach to new religious movements" (Igeta 1989, 5), writing:

11. Although Igeta herself does not discuss new religions in this edited volume, new religions are examined in chapter seven "Female Founders of New Religions and the Modern Japanese State" by Kashimura Aiko.

> We ought to ask what makes social forces powerful: in the relationships between men and women, self and others, the power the self exercises over others, and the power that others exercise over the self. We must investigate the basis of power that defines the situation and society, and how and by what means that source of power is ultimately justified. (Igeta 1989, 20)

As an example, Igeta raises the idea of the spiritual "power of women" that has attracted the attention of scholars in fields such as folklore studies. Igeta proposes from where this "power" emanates:

> Women's efforts poured into areas of life that are closely related to women's gender roles, such as housework, childcare, and production labor (i.e., women's work) are considered secondary by historians, who focus mainly on political and economic history. It is not a power emanating from women's true nature or some quality that is "natural" to women, but rather a power made functional by society. (Igeta 1989, 15)

The source of the "power" acquired by female founders of new religions and active female believers is similar to Igeta's observation about the academic field of history. The study of new religions has not directly interrogated issues such as the "social meaning-making" imposed on female believers by those around them, by the religious organization, and by general society (Igeta 1989, 16).

Igeta's critical perspective is not directed toward the new religions or their members (often women); rather, she criticizes the perspective of researchers (often men) who conduct studies of religious communities that treat women as "invisible beings" (Igeta 1989, 11). New religious groups develop their activities through a mechanism in which the religious organization makes great use of the power of women as a source of vitality for the expansion of the group, while the women also gain "power" by becoming members and being active. Despite this reality, previous research on new religions rarely tried to examine and relate elements such as the growth of the new religious movements and the development process of these groups, the modes of social existence for women, the norms preached to (and about) women, and the ways in which women define themselves based on such ideas (Igeta 1992, 188).

Igeta's main concern is how male researchers in the study of new religions formulate their "questions." She asks repeatedly, "Are the realities of women included in the perspectives of researchers of new religions?"[12] Strangely, female members

12. Igeta (1993, 154–155) further questions, "who exactly is the main subject of this 'understanding of ancestors' analyzed in Kōmoto Mitsugu's study of Reiyūkai? Is the main subject exclusively the head of the family or the man who has the potential to become the head of the family? Otherwise,

were not visible to male researchers, despite their recognition that many active members of new religious groups were women. Researchers focusing on new religions, women, and gender accurately pointed out how male-centered research on new religions overlooked the relationship between the social framework of gender and new religions, a relationship that is essential to interrogate and understand in order to also decipher the fundamental mechanisms in the establishment and maintenance of modern states.

In contrast to such studies, female researchers in the study of religion have attempted to capture the realities of women.[13] For instance, Usui (1994b, 107) argues that "the 'housewife' is the keyword for thinking about women's independence and authority in the modern and contemporary periods. New religions highly valued the presence of women as 'housewives' and gave women authority in the management of the household." After summarizing this general tendency in new religions, Usui examines the activities of women from different generations to describe the changes in religious activities of women influenced by the changes in the social conditions of women. She follows the development of activities by Shūkyōdan Hōseikai's "Omina kai," comprised of elderly female members, and the "Gathering of the Mrs.," mainly comprised of younger generations (second-generation female members and the female spouses of male members). Usui describes the situation in which the members of the "Mrs." group show discomfort and resistance to the founder's view on men and women—the idea of women "lowering" themselves in front of others)—and yet still preserve the gender roles. Usui also demonstrates how this in turn is criticized by younger generations. Regarding the organizational transformations associated with changes in society, Usui's study on Sōka Gakkai confirms the coexistence of diverse groups of women and indicates "the social fact that women's lives have become more diverse" (Usui 1995, 169). However, even if there are aspects of the new religions' organizations or teachings that could contribute toward the realization of gender equality, the gender binary is constant

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isn't the wife thought to have the same exact view on ancestors like the husband? But it would be premature to conclude that the meaning of 'family' for women is the same as that for men."

13. Works on ancestor rituals by Kōmoto Mitsugu (2001) are important studies often cited in research on new religions, women, and gender. In addition, Kumada Kazuo (2005, 2022) has published essays on gender in religions such as Ōmoto, Byakkō Shinkōkai, and Tenrikyō primarily from a male perspective. Sakurai Yoshihide (2003, 2023) also addresses issues of gender. Regarding the study of female founders, there are the works of Mega Atsuko (1985), Usui Atsuko (1987), Yamashita Akiko (1990), Helen Hardacre (1994), Kashimura Aiko (2000), and Asano Miwako (2001). Regarding the role of women and their various activities in religious groups, Usui Atsuko has researched multiple groups such as Tenrikyō (1992), Risshō Kōseikai (1994a), Shūkyōdan Hōseikai (1994b), Sōka Gakkai (1995), and Shinnyoen (2002). Additional work on this subject includes Komatsu Kayoko's study on Sekai Kyūsei Kyō (1995), Ishiwata Yoshimi's work on PL Kyōdan (1996), Kaneko Juri (1995) and Horiuchi Midori (2012) on Tenrikyō, Hibino Yuri (2001, 2002, 2022) on Reiyūkai/Risshō Kōseikai, and Nakanishi Hiroko (2004) on the Unification Church.

throughout the management of the religious community. In other words, new religions tend to maintain a gender-based division of labor in which men lead and women assist. There is no mechanism for realizing "gender equality" in practical or substantive terms within such a system.

Yet, this situation is not fixed. Rather, it is in the process of transformation in response to societal changes. As "mirrors of society," new religions offer a glimpse into this transformation without simply reaffirming an unequal and unbalanced framework of gender. In her analysis of female members who are housewives, Igeta points out that they "gained power by accepting the existing power structure and fulfilling the roles assigned to women" by joining a new religion, but "as long as the division of labor by gender is sanctified and treated as absolute, this ends up strengthening the social order of modern Japan that sees the gender roles as essential prerequisites. The women's life energy is getting sucked into the power structure of the corporatized 'state'" (Igeta 1993, 168).

Watanabe's (1994) study on female trainees in Konkōkyō provides another reflection of gender and social change. On the one hand, these women have heterosexual marriages within the church, have children, and become subordinate to their husbands. On the other, they depart from the typical role of housewives and homemakers by leaving their children at home and becoming trainees, or in some cases they become trainees along with their children to seek a religious path. Even then, there exists in the church a substantial division of labor between men and women based on the gender of the trainees, and this division of labor has had a strong influence on how the training itself is conducted. Although the church does not clearly state its intentions, this situation was probably not designed to intentionally exploit the domestic labor of female trainees. Here we find another kind of influence of gender that cannot be deciphered through just one interpretive framework, namely that the labor power of female members was simply exploited by a new religion that was coerced by the power of the state.

I also want to note that the above studies on new religions rarely present arguments that challenge the gender binary and heterosexism due to their focus on the order and power structure of "women" and "men" as social and cultural categories. As long as men and women continue to be treated differently, it is important to examine the current circumstances in new religions. Yet, society is changing. Analyzing the elements that constitute the framework of gender from a perspective that reconsiders the hetero-normative gender binary will possibly lead to clues for restructuring the gender order and the realization of gender equality.

Conclusion

Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō on 8 July 2022, much attention has focused on various issues related to the Unification Church (Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, currently the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification). The resulting investigation has led many questions about the Unification Church. One query that is related to the issued discussed in this article is the matter of why so many victims of the practices of the church are women.

Previous studies have demonstrated the prominence of gender inequality at the core of the teachings and activities in the Unification Church. For example, the Unification Church tried to exert political control over the domain of gender at the local council level (Yamaguchi, Saitō, and Ogiue 2012), and the organization incorporated into its teachings the idea that Japanese women must take responsibility for the atonement of Japan's colonial rule over Korea (Sakurai 2023). In other words, the Unification Church is a religious organization that has used the framework of gender to control its believers and manipulate their perceptions of society.

After the Abe assassination, it was discovered that the assassin's mother had significant contributions to the Unification Church, adversely affecting the his life. Additionally, it was revealed that politicians, especially those from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), had close ties to the Unification Church. As a result, other "second-generation" members of the Unification Church began to speak out, stating that they had suffered harm from the organization.

The media attention on "second generation" members shined light on similar problems in other religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witness (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society), in particular issues regarding children being whipped or denied blood transfusions as well as the shunning of apostates.[14] Jehovah's Witness is a religious group also known for attracting female members (Inoue 1988). Furthermore, it is a religious community with a strong sense of gender roles within the organization and the family in which men often take leading roles and women assisting roles.

In her examination of women who join new religions, Igeta (1989) points to how the teachings of new religions include the idea and image of a "sacred order between men and women," especially how ancestral rituals gave women "power" within boundaries approved by their families. This paper reaffirms the importance of examining the ways in which modern new religions grant legitimacy to the

14. There are growing number of organizations for addressing the issue of second-generation Jehovah's Witnesses, such as the "Lawyers Support Team for the Jehovah's Witnesses Problem" (https://jw-issue-support.jp) and the "Sunshine Center for Support for Religious Second-Generations" (https://nisei-hidamari.org).

framework of gender in the modern family and as well as a certain level of empowerment for women.

Social control using the concept of "family" is not something limited to new religions. The Japanese nation has long used it, as observed in phenomena such as the "Japanese-style welfare state" (Andō 2022). Recently, the state implements one component of family policy as "countermeasures to the declining birthrate," which is to an extent accepted by society. In the current trends, Nishioka Susumu sees some progress toward a more social democratic regime in the family policy of the "Japanese-style welfare state" with strong norms of "familism" (Nishioka 2021). But, I would say that the influence of familism is still strong and deep-rooted. This is because the modern family, which was formed based on norms such as the gender binary of man and women, the separation of public and private, and the gendered division of labor, has been the very logic underpinning the social fabric of the nation (Muta 2006).

Under such norms of the modern family, it is difficult for women to live their own lives and liberate themselves from women's roles. They are pressured to locate the "self" within family relationships such as daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, etc. As I demonstrated in my analysis of Sōka Gakkai, women are expected to keep the household bright and warm, like the "sun." Because women are designated the role of maintaining "harmony" among the groups to which they belong (including their families), many women find it difficult to choose actions that potentially disrupt this harmony. In some cases, by participating in a new religion, women may be able to find a certain amount of "escape" from such gender norms or gain a certain amount of "power." In some situations, however, the religious activities of members may lead to conflict, confrontation, or harm within the family. If members succumb to feelings of fear or obligation in the face of extreme demands and expectations from the religious organization, it could lead to harmful exploitation by the religious group in the form of excessive monetary contributions or labor and time commitments.

Currently, there are various movements—including feminism, gender theory, and human rights advocacy—trying to reorganize the framework of gender toward a more egalitarian direction. In opposition, there are those who consider the status quo, which takes gender inequality for granted, to be a "sacred order" and therefore resist change. This resistance is where conflict arises (FIGURE 3). With the declining birthrate and aging population—and with no means to stop these trends—the framework of gender, which has been fundamental to the structure of the modern nation up to the present, will have to be reorganized throughout society. The conflict between values or worldviews (as shown in FIGURE 3) is the result of such social changes.

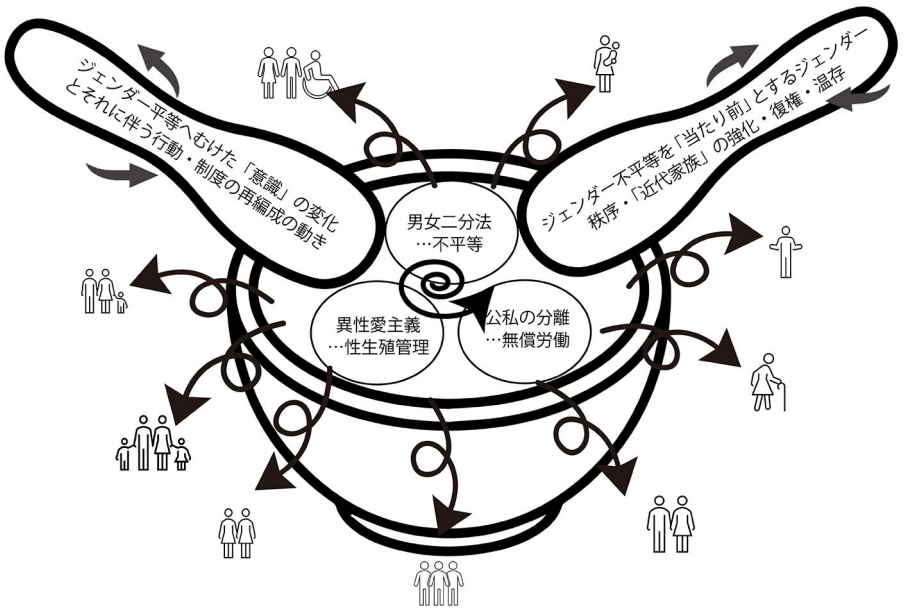

FIGURE 3: Conflict regarding family values and the people involved in this conflict.

Many new religions have conducted their religious activities in accordance with the framework of gender implicit in the modern family, which divides labor based on a gender binary, assumes a gender essentialism, and separates the public and private. In general, these new religions have had neither the intention nor the action to substantively transform the social norms and structures that create gender inequality in Japanese society as a whole. Rather, they have tended to utilize such societal norms and structures to maintain and operate their religious organizations. For new religions to contribute to the realization of gender equality, they would need to fundamentally reform the teachings and institutional structures that have historically supported them. Such reforms are likely to be extremely difficult, although the degree of difficulty varies according to the new religion in question.

It is often assumed that feminism (or gender studies) and the study of religion are incompatible. However, Kawahashi and Komatsu (2016) argue that the relationship between religion and gender cannot be so simply dismissed. As seen in the example of Sōka Gakkai, although the group advocates for "gender equality" as its official organizational goal and philosophy, gender inequality functioning within structure of the organization is preserved as a "sacred order."

Komatsu (2021, 27) provides a detailed analysis of the activities of people who believe that feminist movements (led by women during the 1970s) and religious

worldviews are continuous. She states that "many women's activities were not systematized, with various ideologies and movements coexisting and intermingling. It appears that no structure remained afterwards. However,… there is no doubt that these movements continue to exist in different forms." Komatsu further points out how "the big wave that seems to have disappeared is now reappearing here and there as smaller waves. How we understand these movements that lack institutional continuity remains a constant challenge." Efforts to examine overlooked movements to connect feminism and religion could serve as driving forces towards the realization of gender equality.

On the other hand, resistance to gender inequality does not necessarily manifest as large or small waves of direct opposition to religious groups by clearly articulating feminist values. In some cases, it may take the form of not making waves, as if holding your breath and staying still. Still other strategies may be employed, such as creating a whirlwind of conflict and confrontations by involving the people around oneself, such as family and local residents, and raising objections that are not necessarily premised on feminist ideology.[15] Various kinds of waves can be found in the everyday experiences, such as big and small waves that directly challenge the traditional gender order; receding waves that do not show a clear stance on gender, as if going into hiding; vortexes created by bringing together different worldviews and value systems; and still other variations that respond creatively to the gender inequality. In order to achieve gender equality, it is necessary to explore ways of coexistence that are not exclusive, so that even when it is impossible to directly interact with people whose ways of thinking and acting appear incompatible with ours, we can still find meaning in connecting with each other.

In the introduction, I argued that "modern new religions" do not contribute to gender equality in society. This is because "modern society" is based on the modern family and the framework of gender established by the gendered division of labor between men and women; new religions are religions that were formed and organized on the premise of this modern family. However, in the future, we must discover the potential forms of religion that aim to realize gender equality and connect feminism and religion, the budding of "new religion" that reflects a new society by considering how each individual's life and experience are woven together in different ways while fundamentally interconnected.

15. One example of this could be joining a controversial new religion that some people in society may designate as a "cult."

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