



The Road to a Difficult Olympics: One way or another, the Games will have to address gender equality themes

Raita Kyoko, Professor of Chukyo University

Editorial team of *Chuokoron* speak with Professor Raita Kyoko about gender and the Olympics. Professor Raita is a new appointee to the executive board after the resignation of Mori Yoshiro, (former) President of the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (hereinafter, the Organising Committee), following his remark that “board meetings involving many women take a long time.”

Backlash against Mori’s Remarks

—How do you view the remarks made on February 3?

One of the problematic remarks was “Someone was saying that if we increase the number of women on the board, we need to also make sure that speaking time is restricted to some extent, or a meeting will drag on and it becomes a problem.” It is my understanding that President Mori was referring to hearsay when he made this remark. If so, Mr. Mori should have explained the reasons for increasing the number of female board members and said that such statements are ridiculous.

We need time to exchange ideas even if the conversation drags on when someone is unfamiliar with a meeting. Anyone who joins a meeting for the first time, man or woman, will have many questions because there’s a lot they don’t know. It is something that anyone experiences when they find themselves in a new situation. The problem is the idea that “it’s because she’s a woman” or “it’s because he’s a man.” As a leader, I think Mr. Mori was in a position where he should have amended the statement and suggested ways to deal with the situation. For someone like him to be unable to do so is a negative for the sports world.

—Many people raised objections this time.

In the sports world, there’s a tendency not to object to powerful people or people in senior positions. It’s a sports-oriented problem, so to speak. Of course, this is also a kind of labeling and I am sure there are organizations that are not like this. So I’m speaking conditionally here, but



Prof. Raita Kyoko

there is a tendency to emphasize the seniority-based hierarchy in sports-oriented organizations. In the past, people mostly ignored remarks like those attributed to Mr. Mori and did not raise objections. I think that it is a sign of progress that so many people involved with sports were sensitive enough to realize that the remarks were problematic.

Many people have asked me personally about this incident. I think the media should have explained exactly what the problem was and I am uncomfortable with how the issue was treated like a piece of resignation theater. The day after Mr. Mori's remarks, I made a statement to the Japan Society for Sport and Gender Studies, which I chair. I felt that it was our role to document the issues and to share them with as many people as possible amid the unfolding repercussions.

There have been similar discriminatory remarks against women in the past. The difference this time was that several sports-related societies and sporting associations issued statements. Previously, there have been statements against corporal punishment, violence, and child abuse, but sports-related associations have hardly ever issued statements on gender equality.

Of course, the issue of diversity has been discussed in the field of sports. Sports also include the Paralympics, and people have thought a lot about sports for people with disabilities or sports that several generations can enjoy together. But, in the case of sports, any mention of diversity focuses on people with disabilities and gender equality is rarely discussed.

—What are your thoughts on the subsequent resignation of Mr. Mori?

Maybe he wouldn't have had to resign if he had recognized the problems with his own remarks. If, in his role as leader, he had been able to make a clear statement at the press conference about what went wrong and announce strategic initiatives such as a review of the aims of the Organising Committee and where the Committee had failed.

From an organizational standpoint it seems improbable to think about the impact on the organization of a change of leadership with five months to go before Tokyo 2020. But, the problem is that the remarks were a human rights violation. The way public opinion galvanized around human rights to say that violations will not be tolerated under any circumstances no matter how lethal to the organization makes me think that society is changing for the better. The decisive factor was that the press conference was so out of touch with this reality.

There are two problematic patterns when handling a verbal gaffe where violations of human rights are concerned. Firstly, simply apologizing does not prevent reoccurrence or introduce measures to improve the situation. The other pattern is the one where the offender acts the victim because they don't understand what is wrong. Both are bad, but this time it was a question of the latter.

Unfortunately, the Organising Committee did not immediately introduce appropriate measures. It would have been good if the Organising Committee had issued a statement saying that the remarks by the president were inappropriate. President Yamashita Yasuhiro of the Japan Olympic Committee (JOC) alluded to this at the regular press conference on February 9.

More Women on the Organising Committee

—Hashimoto Seiko, the new president of the Organising Committee, has appointed twelve women to the executive board so the ratio of women on the board is now over 40%. What is your assessment?

As the starting line for gender equality, the high ratio of women on the board is a key requirement and I think it is very good that the newly appointed board members have a range of experience. There are researchers like myself, lawyers, researchers specializing in sports for the disabled, experts on ethnic discrimination, and healthcare professionals. This increases diversity in the organization. I think the 40% threshold would have been passed even if all twelve members had been former athletes, but I think it's good that they didn't do that.

—How did you feel about your appointment to the board?

At first I hesitated. Since I am a researcher, I specialize in looking at things from the outside and examining them critically, but I have little hands-on experience. If you join an organization, you might lose sight of things. Information may become biased if you are not sure in which camp you belong. For example, this is a bit extreme, but I wondered if it would be possible to say that the Olympics had better be canceled in a situation where everyone around you is working so hard to make the Olympics happen.

However, in this case, many media channels have covered what I think should be done about gender equality. I accepted the appointment to the board because I wondered if I could just talk about the issue without doing anything, saying “I don't know. I am not on the Organising Committee.”

Olympic History and Gender

—The first board meeting after you joined was on March 22.

Before the start of the board meeting, I gave a presentation of about twenty-five minutes to the board members and staff about the Olympic Charter and gender. The history of not achieving gender equality at the Olympics is extremely long. I talked about the changes to the Olympic Charter since 1908 because I wanted the members and staff to understand that this is a very difficult issue and that this is precisely why we must come to grips with it.

Since around 2018, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been aware that the lack of progress with gender equality is a major issue for the Olympic Movement. I mentioned that the IOC has taken some measures, and that Tokyo 2020 is the first Olympic Games since the IOC

introduced the new gender equality policy in 2018 (the IOC Gender Equality Review Project), and that this is why these efforts must be made visible at Tokyo 2020.

—So there have been problems with the Olympics from a gender perspective?

Yes. In the early stages women were shut out of competitions. For a man of his time, Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, was progressive in some ways. For example, his views on the working class and his opposition to discrimination based on race. However, he was also a white man of his time and did not consider women.

Many people know that Hitomi Kinue won a silver medal at the Olympics in Amsterdam in 1928. However, hardly anyone knows anything about the people who created a sporting organization for women and lobbied for women's track and field events to be included in the Olympics at the time.

Hitomi ran the 800 meter race in 1928, but the event was not held again until 1960 because it was a tough race for women. It was men who decided that women could not do it. In the meantime, women's 800 meter events were organized in Japan. Ultimately, the current Olympic Games are the result of women continuing to prove that they can do it.

It is typical of Japan that if you win a medal, anything is possible. Both Hitomi and Maehata Hideko, who won a gold medal in swimming at Berlin in 1936, lived at a time when the men around them said that there's no reason for women to do sports. However, when they won medals, people said it's okay if they do it. In short, there was a strong tendency in Japan to attach significance to the Olympics only in the sense of winning medals, and this attitude has still not changed.

In the past four Olympics, the male/female ratio among Japanese athletes has been roughly fifty/fifty. Compared to other countries, this is relatively progressive. If you look at the number of medals that Japan has won in the past four Olympics, the women have won more gold medals than the men. Even though there are a lot of female athletes in Japan, the decision-makers in Japanese sporting organizations are still men. If a female athlete wins a medal, they thank her for the hard work, but there is no effort to develop successful women into leaders in society.

Previously, I did a comparative analysis of the number of medals won by women and country rankings in the World Economic Forum statistics, which is the international indicator of the gender gap. As a result, I found that there is almost no relationship between the number of medals and diversity management in society.

Some Islamic countries do not include any women or extremely small numbers of women in their Olympic delegation. On the other hand, in extremely advanced European countries that rank high on the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Gap Index (GGI), I found a trend for fewer medals and a high ratio of women participating in the Paralympics.

Japan and Korea, on the other hand, have many successful female athletes, but their social status is low. The medals count is relatively high, but the gender equality index in society is low.

Nonetheless, the situation has been changing little by little even in Japan with Yamaguchi Kaori (judo), Tanaka-Oulevey Miyako (synchronized swimming), Arimori Yuko (marathon), and other former Olympic athletes contributing their expertise to society.

As a Member of the Board

—What was the March 22 board meeting with more women like?

That day, the board meeting was extended by about one hour. We talked a lot (laughs). After brief self-introductions, the meeting ended with an exchange of opinions including points about better approaches to sharing information since gender equality and COVID-19 countermeasures have little visibility among residents.

—As a board member, what would you like to achieve in the future?

Since I specialize in gender equality in sport and the principles and history of the Olympic Movement, I would like to achieve something related to this. There are twenty-five recommendations in the 2018 IOC Gender Equality Review Project that I mentioned earlier. I would like to put the feasible ones into practice at Tokyo 2020.

For example, in Japan, it is routine to have women dressed in long-sleeved kimono hand out the medals to the winners at the awards ceremony, but I think it would be better to stop this. Taking account of gender equality, I think it is important for Japan to visually represent all the different people who engage with the Olympic Movement.

In addition, I think it would be a good idea to collect data for future use on themes such as the ratio of men to women on the Organising Committee, at sponsoring corporations, and in the media, how much parental leave men took, and whether there were any efforts to achieve gender equality as a microcosm of Japanese society. Since there is a gender equality promotion team led by Kotani Mikako (synchronized swimming) within the Organising Committee, I would like to address these issues while keeping in contact with that team.

Hosting the Olympics During the Corona Pandemic

—Coronavirus infections are on the rise. Will it be possible to host Tokyo 2020?

First, we need to think about countermeasures. We are looking at measures such as travel bubbles where the athletes are inside a bubble and have as little contact as possible with the outside world. But there is also the issue of controls for volunteers and people working in the stadiums, which raises concerns that we are placing an enormous burden on the medical establishment. I think that every national team coming to Japan will be accompanied by doctors who can deal with the

coronavirus, but we also have to think about what to do in case of an increase in the number of the seriously ill.

Then, there's the money. The costs have risen rapidly and are now far beyond the initial estimates. Since the Games were postponed, this is not surprising. There is another argument that this money should have been used for people who find themselves in difficulties because of the pandemic. To be honest, I agree. But, I think we also have to look specifically at the level of loss incurred should the Games be canceled.

Many articles in the media are critical of the Olympics and mention how much they have cost so far, but none of them refer to the losses we would incur if the Games are canceled. It is difficult to draw conclusions if there is no clarity on the cost of canceling.

Of course, taxes should be spent on the people who are suffering in Japan these days. I would like the government to do this properly. The Japanese government and metropolitan Tokyo need to think about what to do about this and give their points of view on the issue.

The Prime Minister has said, "We intend to hold the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games as proof that humankind has defeated the novel coronavirus." As someone who is close to the Olympics, even I wondered what he meant by that. Hosting the Olympics should not come before protecting the lives of the citizens. The final decision rests with the IOC and in some respects nobody in Japan holds any of the cards. The Organising Committee is the body that organizes the Games. It is a difficult role because the Committee is not set up to make decisions about cancellation or to work specifically and efficiently toward such an outcome.

So far, the Olympics have been canceled because of two world wars. There are actually no records of the cancellations at the IOC because of the chaos of the wars. The only existing documentation is a discussion about relinquishing the 1940 Tokyo Olympics. It is possible that not even the IOC knows how to go about cancelling the Games. However, from the perspective of operating the Games, the Organising Committee may be able to say that it would like to relinquish the Games because hosting them is difficult under the current social circumstances.

Making the Olympics Our Own

There are various reasons why the discussions about hosting the Olympics are at cross purposes, but one of them is that the Organising Committee has not been clear about the costs and other information. With the situation changing from one minute to the next, it is perhaps difficult to give exact amounts, but only the Organising Committee can do this.

Economists are also split on the economic effect of the Olympics. It is difficult to work out an answer based on the economic perspective because too many variables cannot be calculated immediately. I believe we have to think in terms of the Olympic principles and whether going ahead with the Games is a positive or a negative.

I don't think it is a negative to be discussing the Olympics at this time. So far, Japanese people have not taken ownership of the Olympics. It can hardly be said that the discussions were

exhaustive at the time of the bid. If the Games were held in another country than Japan during the pandemic, we would not have had the kinds of discussions we have had so far in Japan, and Japanese people might have lost another opportunity to develop a mature understanding of the Olympics.

It is good that people have different opinions on whether to get involved or not involved with the Olympics, whether to oppose the Olympics, whether to put a stop to the Olympics because of the commercialization even though the principles are good, and so on. I think it is very important to keep this discussion going in the future.

Whether the Games go ahead or not, the Organising Committee must engage with the theme of gender equality. Of course, there are some things we won't be able to do if the Games are canceled, but I believe the movement itself, which is in accordance with the original Olympic principles such as the promotion of gender equality, can continue without stopping.

If the Games are cancelled, there will be things we cannot do, however, the movement itself, which is in accordance with the original Olympic principles such as the promotion of gender equality, can continue without stopping.

Translated from “Kannan-shinku Gorin eno michi: Taikai ga donattemo Jendabyodo wa torikumubeki teima (The Road to a Difficult Olympics: One way or another, the Games will have to address gender equality themes),” Chuokoron, June 2021, pp. 108-115 (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [July 2021]

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