

# Out of her mother's yard

*Keiko Ochiai is one of Japan's most accomplished feminists, author of over 20 books, and film and television producer. She was also one of Japan's most popular disc jockeys in the '60s. Twenty years ago, she founded the Crayonhouse, a three-story structure that houses an organic restaurant as well as Japan's first women and children's bookstore. Crayonhouse also serves as women's space for concerts, movies and lectures. Some Isis staff who went to Japan had the opportunity to meet her.*

## **ON SUCCESS**

**Q: You are a successful woman—an accomplished novelist, a radio personality, a pioneer in building this wonderful space with a women and children's bookstore and an organic restaurant. Is there anything that you still dream of doing at this stage?**

A: I am wondering if I am a successful woman or not. First of all it's been 20 years since I started this woman's bookstore. But in reality, for me to maintain this place, I must engage in lecture tours. One other reason I don't feel I could be considered a success is that my books are not accepted by mainstream society.

Success means that you have reached that point where you do not need to accomplish anything more. I ask myself, "Have I actually succeeded?" I want to think that being successful means being able to share that success with other women. But there are few women who use their success and money to reach other women. One reason is that it is very difficult for women to make money. In business, for example, women seldom reach the senior positions in a given company. But this is a system that men have created. . .

## **ON BEING FEMINIST**

**Q: At what point in your life did you feel you wanted to take on feminism?**

A: I cannot tell when. I just suddenly realized that I was a feminist.

When I was young I wanted to be a captain of a ship but the girls I played with would say, "No, girls cannot be captains." This was one



all photos by Taeko Okada

instance when what I wanted to do was different. Also, when I was a child, I saw and felt the discrimination people showed towards me and my mother who was a single parent.

**Q: How did that make you feel?**

A: Angry and sad, yet I did not want to be depressed by either. So I turned these feelings into a resolve to change society. I knew I could not change it by myself, but I hoped that I could find people who would want to change it with me.

**Q: How did you break away from the mold that says that you should marry and look for a man to protect you?**

A: My mother is a single parent and she never once told me I should get married. She always said, "It's your life and you decide what you want to do." This is not the usual thing Japanese mothers say to their daughters.

**Q: How about the men in your life? Surely there were times in your life when men wanted to own you—hold you?**

A: As a feminist, I don't pay attention to men who want to control me. Men—even those who appear liberal—cannot hide their macho side. I am still a single woman. In Japanese society, women have to use the men's surnames, although we do have a movement to repeal this

"It's your life and you decide what you want to do."

law. I never wanted to change my own name. Changing surnames is connected to the emperor system, it is a way to connect families. Much of the discrimination in our society, especially that against minority groups and women, stems from this system where we have to go through some registration process and indicate who our parents and siblings are as a way of locating our families in society. Then you can easily tell who is the single parent, who is not part of a legitimate family. When you enter the university, you have to submit this form which right away reveals who your mother is or if you are part of the Ainiu people. Even companies can deny you work based on what this registration form says. As an individual, I oppose such a marriage system. But things are changing as feminism gets stronger and stronger.

#### **ON THE BEGINNINGS OF FEMINISM IN JAPAN**

**Q: How can you tell feminism is growing?**

A: By the readers who come to the bookstore and later send me letters. Since this shop is 20 years old, I can make some generalizations about the readers. The first-generation readers were older. But now, it is their daughters who come here. Twenty years ago, when I had lectures on violence against women, I had to explain what this is, but now, the reaction from those who attend my lectures is markedly different. Back then, most people did not even use the word 'feminist,' but now, women are

beginning to make the connection between feminism and their own work.

**Q: What do you think happened over the past twenty years that women are appreciating feminism?**

A: Women started realizing the oppression they have long suffered as well as their rights. Twenty years ago few women's organizations were working on issues such as women's rights but now, even unpoliticized women know that these organizations are places they can go to if they need help.

We used to have no word for sexual harassment although this was taking place even then. I have used the term in the titles of my novels because I had wanted people to realize that sexual harassment was real. At first, no publishing company liked these titles—they said most people were not familiar with the term sexual harassment. But when readers became familiar with the term, they began naming the experiences they have had. About 18 years ago, I also used the word 'rape' in the title of another novel I had written. Of course publishing companies rejected this. But since then, women began using the word to describe their experience.

**Q: Has this consciousness-raising led to policy and political changes?**

A: Women's organizations have organized rape crisis centers just recently and eventually similar centers will be established in other parts of Japan. The creation of such centers means that more women are now talking about their experience which for many years, were kept secret.

#### **ON OLDER VS. YOUNGER FEMINISTS**

**Q: I heard a statement yesterday that young women today do not know that they are being oppressed. Do you agree with this?**

A: Some people say such things. This may be a case of the older ones being quick to judge the youth. But I really don't agree. Maybe as women get older, they forget that the younger women do not have to fight for the same things the older generation had to. Young women do not live under the same kind of oppression and I think that this is very good, don't you agree? If young women do not realize their oppression because of the affluence we now enjoy, then that's a problem. In school, girls do not feel discriminated against. In fact, they tend to be the

better students. But after graduation, job hunting becomes very, very hard if you're a woman. And when they get a job, after two or three years, they realize what discrimination and harassment are. At this point, they become feminists. It is the young women who are involved in fighting sexual harassment and in setting up rape crisis centers. They express their feminism in other ways than the older feminists.

I don't see this as a problem of generation, because there are also older women who don't know when they are being commodified. Some women are aware of feminism and some are not, regardless of age.



**Q: Do you see what could be called a "women's movement" in Japan? Are the women connected?**

A: Actually Japanese women do not have the space where they can meet with each other, which is one reason why I put up Crayonhouse. I wanted a place where women could meet. I had hoped that this place would be a starting point for a nationwide "connection" among women. But we must also recognize that even among the feminist groups, there are class struggles and other differences. There are those who don't want to work with others espousing a different shade of feminism. I myself have as much respect for the grassroots feminist groups as the academic ones.

I'd rather use the word 'knit work' than 'network.' The first means you can knit together as well as unravel together when a mistake has been made.

### **ON MEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD FEMINISM**

**Q: What reaction have you seen from the men?**

A: At first, they were very negative. Most of the men don't believe they engage in sexual harassment. They think rapists are a "special kind of men" and not one of them. In my books I challenge men to think. I raise the idea that maybe all men have the potential to be rapists. I want them to realize this point. Of course this has generated negative reactions.

I have been pointing out to men, "You are educated to be macho men." Macho behavior is not genetic, it comes through socialization and education. My books say that women cannot live in a world where there is violence, but they also say that neither can men live in such a world. In this sense I call on everyone—man or woman—to find his or her own identity as a human being.

I have asked men what they would do if their daughters became victims of rape or sexual harassment. The question, I think, is effective because their common response is that they would not forgive such a thing.

### **ON PERSONAL CAREER AND GROWTH**

**Q: Is there any chance of your books being translated?**

A: I am in the preliminary negotiations of an autobiography, which will partly be the story of my own mother and of how she has influenced me. The title is "I Don't Want to Play in Your Yard."

**Q: Why that title?**

A: The yard itself refers to my own mom's space a long time ago—50 years ago—when women suffered so much oppression. The message is that I don't want to go back to my mom's time. I want to create another yard or society for myself and the new generation.

**Q: How do you want people to remember you?**

A: I don't want to be remembered by my name or my books but by the work that I am doing now to continue to broaden and deepen the meaning of feminism, by leaving behind this building that will allow women a space to meet and grow in the women's movement.

All I hope for is that each generation will continue what has been started. I would want to be known as a woman who was part of the 1990s women's movement.)

*Ms. Crayonhouse is at  
3-8-15 Kitaaooyama  
Minato-ku, Tokyo 107, Japan*