

**Report of the Pre-Conference of the IGU-Commission on Gender and Geography  
“Gender, Power and Knowledge: Building Global Networks through Local  
Sensitivities”, August 1-4, 2013 in Nara, Japan**

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Nara has a history of 1,300 years, with over 70 of them being as Japan’s imperial capital, and along with Kyoto is considered to be the nation’s most famous historical city. With many ancient temples and shrines, central Nara has also been designated as a World Heritage Site. The pre-conference meeting site of Nara Women's University was formerly known as Nara Women’s Higher Normal School and was established in 1908 with the goal of training women teachers. While its student body cannot be described as particularly large, it is currently comprised of 2,700 students (including graduate students) in the three faculties of the Faculty of Letters, the Faculty of Science, and the Faculty of Human Life and Environment. The University boasts small class sizes and, along with Tokyo’s Ochanomizu Women’s University, is playing the major role in women’s education in Japan. The Auditorium and the Security Office from the time of the Higher Normal School are still in use today. The Auditorium has been designated an important cultural property in Nara City and has become a symbol of Nara Women's University.

With the pre-conference meeting theme of “Gender, Power and Knowledge: Building Global Networks through Local Sensitivities,” a total of 20 researchers presented their research findings in the following six general sessions on August 2 and 3.

Session 1 : Gender, Ethnicity and Migration

Session 2 : Globalization, Borders and Mobility

Session 3 : Women’s Empowerment and Socio-economic Transformations

Session 4 : Gender and Sexual Identity

Session 5 : Gender and Public/Private Space

Session 6 : Toward Alternative Geographies

Within many frameworks of gender analysis that have been utilized in presented findings, particular concentration was given to issues of positionality of the researcher and issues related to conducting international research. The papers encompassed

extensive diversity of topics, including trajectories of urban and rural development, economic and political geographies, migration and border studies. Presented papers contextualized gender politics at various scales and highlighted the production of new spatialities in relation to local and global linkages. Presentations dealt with a number of diverse issues, such as gender and labor, queering of public spaces, mobility, forming migrant communities, rural development, creation of national identities, and changes in social structures and gender relations following processes of neo-liberalization. In addition, papers discussed building of cross-boundary research and complexities of building qualitative international research. Moreover, participants reflected on the lesser number of quantitative research projects within feminist geography and encouraged support for scholars utilizing statistics and GIS.

After the three sessions on August 2, participants watched a first episode of the television series, "Women Keep the World Turning: 40 years, A Time for Change." The series was created by Japanese, French, and Canadian producers. The episode followed the daily lives of women from five countries; Japan, France, Kenya, China and the U.S.A. The women portrayed in the series talked about their experiences of work and family life and reflected on the promotion of social changes that began in the 1970s, such as increased political and economic freedom of women. A discussion about the women's lives across different contexts and about the TV series followed. There were three major points raised by the discussants. First, they conversed about the possible contribution of feminist geographers to improve the lives of women, for instance, through urban planning. Second, participants questioned the series' focus on urban, middle class, heterosexual couples. Third, discussants brought up the relevance and transferability of the series. A number of participants thought that in countries where earlier public dialogue about recognition of women as participants of household and national economies was present in the media, it would not be possible for the series to be as popular and closely followed as it was in Japan.

On August 3 after the closing of the general sessions, a closing session was held summarizing the pre-conference meeting. The participants divided into groups and, after some discussions, presented their conclusions to the conference, further deepening the debate. Each group raised issues regarding the deconstruction of feminist geographies that are rooted in Western-centric viewpoints, the acceptable ways in which male researchers can take part in feminist geographies, and also how as researchers we can best respect local sensitivities. In addition, we talked about common challenges related to expectations of professional performance and how they relate to difficulties of collaborating between researchers from different countries. The

participants shared their experiences of international partnership, publishing with co-authors, and dissemination in journals outside of their country of origin. Goals for future meetings include better representation of research coming from the Global South and cultivating productive cooperation between researchers across boundaries. In addition, to foster better participation, members expressed interest in having subsidies made available for researchers with limited access to travel funding.

Overall, the meeting was successful in terms of the participation and growing membership of the Gender and Geography group. During the pre-conference, we added new members to our electronic mailing list including new student members. The quality of papers, presentations, and discussions which were covered across all sessions, indicate a very productive meeting for the Geography and Gender Commission.

Participants attended a half-day field trip on August 4 to south Osaka's downtown districts of Kamagasaki and Tobita. In the former, male day laborers and out-of-work homeless men (and women in extremely rare cases) congregate, while the latter is an old red-light district, where is adjacent to the east of Kamagasaki and even now vestiges of its brothels can be seen. In the Abeno district, which borders Tobita across the road to the east, gentrification due to redevelopment is progressing rapidly. The districts of Kamagasaki and Tobita, in which live large numbers of day laborers and homeless as well as being the sites of brothels and restaurants from a bygone era, present starkly contrasting scenes to the adjacent gentrified Abeno district. Disbanding after lunch in Osaka's Korea Town, participants of the Kyoto Regional Conference (KRC) then continued on to Kyoto.

41 participants from Japan (including Chinese exchange students), America, India, Australia, Israel, Singapore, Canada, Switzerland, Norway, and other countries attendance the conference over the four days. 24 also participated in the field trip.

The success of the preconference is a good signal for the future of our Commission and now the preparations are on the way for the next pre-conference meeting, in 2014, in Poland.

Finally, from my standpoint as the local organizer, I would like to thank everyone who was kind enough to attend this pre-conference meeting. I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Prof. Shirlena Huang (Chair of the IGU Commission on Gender and Geography) and Prof. Janice Monk who provided continual advice on the occasion

of this pre-conference meeting. Thanks also to pre-conference meeting participant Milena U. Janiec-Grygo (University of South Florida) whose help in preparing this report was much appreciated.

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