Japan Past & Present

Disability & Gender in Japan

Lesson Plan: Gender & Disability in Japan
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Target Audience:

Undergraduate students, Graduate students

Duration:

1 or 2 class sessions (add one more if the film is screened in class)

Learning Objectives:

This lesson aims to explore the intersection of gender and disability, based on the 2019 film *37 Seconds*. This film focuses on the issue of sexuality, but also tackles themes such as work, financial precariousness and family relationships. It illustrates the female experience of disability through the case of the main character's quest for autonomy.

The film is a work of fiction. However, director Hikari worked in collaboration with disabled people's associations to provide a realistic representation of the difficulties faced by disabled young women, at least

in the first part of the film (up to the 80th minute). The second part, more melodramatic, may be of lesser interest in this regard. .

The main aim of this lesson is to provide an introduction to the issue of intersectionality between gender and disability, and to encourage students to develop comparative thinking between male and female experiences of disability; it would be an excellent way to bring the topic of intersectionality into a wide variety of courses and disciplines, both Japan- and globally-focused.

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:

- Japanese, Asian, or global gender studies
- Japanese, Asian or global disability studies
- Japanese, Asian, or global sexuality studies
- Any course that focuses explicitly on disability

Required Materials:

- *37 seconds* (*37 sekanzu*), a 2020 movie by Hikari, 115 minutes. Distributed by Netflix (no DVD distribution).

Potential Readings:

DPI Women's network (2012), Challenges Faced by Japanese Women with Disabilities and their Policy Proposals : https://dpiwomennet.choumusubi.com/english.pdf (english version)

- This text provides a summary of a survey conducted by DPI Japan - women's network, the main association of women with disability in Japan. It reveals the specific problems faced by women with disabilities, such as sexual abuses or barriers on the labor market.

Anne-Lise MITHOUT (2024), "A Quest for Autonomy: Work and Personal Fulfillment in the Japanese Film '37 Seconds' ", in Ellie Thomsett, Nathalie

Weidhase, Poppy Wilde (eds.), *Working Women on Screen*, Palgrave McMillan.

- This paper investigates the representations of female disability in *37 seconds*, with a specific focus on the issue of employment. It analyzes how Yuma's quest for intimate fulfillment is connected with her professional situation and her path to make a career as a manga artist.

Hiroko YASUDA and Carol HAMILTON (2013), "Investigating the sexuality of disabled Japanese women: Six autobiographical accounts", Women's Studies Journal, Volume 27 Number 2, December 2013: 44-53.

- This paper discusses six autobiographies written by Japanese disabled female authors. It shows how these authors narrate their quest for sexual empowerment, in a cultural context where non-disabled Japanese women and men hold mostly negative attitudes towards the sexuality of disabled women.

Anna VITTINGHOFF (2022), "Reassessing Japanese Radical Feminism from the Vantage Point of Dis/ability", In Micky Lee, Frank Rudy Cooper, Patricia Reeve (eds), *Dis/ability in Media, Law and History: Intersectional, Embodied AND Socially Constructed?*, Routledge: 119-133.

- This paper investigates the relations between feminist groups and the disability right movement in Japan. It shows that, in the 1970's, relations between both groups were very complicated : women with disabilities faced many difficulties in making their voices heard, be it in one or the other.

A few suggestions of general readings about intersectionality in a non-Japanese context:

Kimberle CRENSHAW (1991). "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law*

Review 43 (6): 1241–99.

Eunjung KIM (2011). “Asexuality in Disability Narratives.” *Sexualities* 14 (4): 479–93

Rosemarie GARLAND-THOMPSON (2002). Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory. NWSA Journal, 14(3).

Rosemarie GARLAND-THOMPSON (2005). “Feminist disability studies”. *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society*, 30(2), 1557-1587.

Discussion Questions:

- How would the movie be different if the main character was a young man ?
- What manifestations of ableism and/or sexism does Yuma face ? Which characters impersonate these aspects of society ?
- About the scene when Yuma meets a host in a love hotel : what does this scene reveal about access to sexual services for disabled women ? How is Yuma’s experience different from that of the male character Kuma-san ?
- Why do you think Yuma’s mother is so protective of her daughter ?
- To what extent does Yuma face discrimination on the labor market due to her gender/ disability/age ? What are the main barriers faced by Yuma in the development of her career ? How does the movie represent professional relations between women ?
- How is (lack of) female solidarity represented in the movie ?

Relevant Vocabulary:

Here is a great general guide for best practices in disability-related language by the Center for Disability Rights.

Background Information for Instructors:

The DPI Japan Women's network's website contains various resources regarding the situation of disabled women in Japan, some of which are available in English.

Anna VITTINGHOFF (2023), *Yonezu Tomoko and the ūman ribu movement: The intersection of radical feminism and the disability movement in Japan from the 1970s until 1996*, PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh.

This dissertation provides a lot of information about disabled women's activism and their position both in feminist groups and in the disability right movement.

The male disabled character Kuma-san is played by the activist Kumashino Yoshihiko and inspired by his own experience as a user of sexual services. Kumashino is the founder of Noir, an association promoting disabled people's access to sexuality. He wrote many essays and an autobiography (Japanese only). He also played in the 2017 film Perfect revolution.

For a more detailed account of the experience of Japanese disabled women regarding sexuality, see the activist Asaka Yûho's writings (Japanese only), especially: *Iyashi no sekushî torippu* 癒しのセクシー・トリップ [A therapeutic sexy trip] (1993).