

## An Alternative Place for Women : A Case Study of Women ' s Support Activities in Japan

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journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Studies
volume	91
page range	121-138
year	2015-07-31
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15021/00002343">http://doi.org/10.15021/00002343</a>

## **An Alternative Place for Women: A Case Study of Women's Support Activities in Japan**

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### **1. Introduction**

Women's movements in Japan have faced numerous difficulties in the past, and continue to do so. *Ūman ribu* (The Japanese Women's Liberation Movement)<sup>1)</sup> originated in Tokyo in 1970 with the goals of eliminating fixed gender roles, procuring self-determination for women, and establishing sisterhood within women's practices (Senda 2005). It was a profoundly political movement, opposing gender discrimination, questioning norms of femininity, and giving expression to women's ideas about society in their own words. The movement spread across Japan, seeing the birth of many women's groups. However, it had effectively ended by the end of the 1970s, owing to conflicts among activists (Nishimura 2006). Sociologist Mitsuko Nishimura argues that while the *ūman ribu* movement of the 1970s attempted to overcome the power relations that forced women into "feminine" roles, what it actually did was create power struggles among its members.<sup>2)</sup>

On the other hand, the Seikatsu-Club Consumers Co-operative (hereafter the Co-op), which mostly consisted of housewives, successfully spread across Japan in the 1970s. The Co-op of this period created a distribution channel connecting producers with consumers, in order to protest the masculine, capitalist values of mass production, mass consumption, and mass disposal (Satō 1988; 1995). In that it did not pursue the problems that *ūman ribu* had identified, the Co-op could well be regarded as an ecology movement rather than a women's movement. However, it provided housewives, who had previously had no voice of their own, with the opportunity to become active consumers, reconsidering their everyday lives and striving for what they really wanted. Co-op activities also became a way for women to develop networks. In this sense, it deserves to be categorized as a women's movement. By 2011, however, the Co-op had become a huge conventional business in Japan, with a revenue of 334 billion yen, and 26 million members. As the association grew, its initial enthusiasm for social movements protesting against pollution or contaminated food died away. Most Japanese housewives today are unaware of the Co-op's original aims, and now its members' activities actually demonstrate the same capitalist values of mass production and mass consumption that it was formed in order to protest.

The Workers' Collective, launched in Kanagawa Prefecture in 1982, is a regional non-profit organization of housewives that spun off from the Co-op but has since followed a

similar trajectory of depoliticization and increasing commercialism. Similarly to many US collectivist organizations, it initially rejected the norms of rational bureaucracy (Saegusa 2003: 92). Its mission was to become an enterprise that offered the sort of local services that housewives viewed as necessary (Murakami 2010: 236). The Workers' Collective started by offering many kinds of services, such as nursing care for the elderly, housekeeping, meal delivery, transportation, and childcare. Today, there are more than 500 Workers' Collectives in Japan. However, since the Long-Term Care Insurance Act (LTCIA) was passed in 2000, most of their activities have been taken over by the government, and they are gradually disintegrating. For example, after the LTCIA was passed, some collectives that started by offering nursing care for the elderly got into the insurance business. The Secretary-General of the Worker's Collective stated that the incomes of the workers in these Collectives have increased, and that some of the workers have begun giving priority to this insurance work and neglecting their non-profit work (Okada 2012: 148). Okada (2012) observed that serious divisions exist between those women who share the Collectives' initial purpose and those who have joined the Collectives simply because they are engaged in care services.

Most women's movements in Japan, including co-operative and collective movements, have thus lost some of their focus, or are in a state of chaos and lack direction. They also face internal struggles; although they set out to challenge the structures of stratification, they suffer from divisiveness among their members. In addition, there is little evidence of the mobilization of volunteers and collective action that the word "movement" connotes.

This paper therefore addresses the following questions. First, why is it so difficult to maintain lasting women's movements in Japan, when those in other developed countries have played key roles in triggering new social movements (Yazawa 2003: 3-4)? Second, is it possible to establish in the practice of these Japanese women's movements the spirit of sisterhood that *ūman ribu* originally sought?

It is important to point out that internal confusion is perhaps inevitable for any social movement-type association that guarantees its membership freedom of participation. The ideologies or policies that the association advocated in its early days might undergo fundamental changes due to the ever-changing nature of the association's membership, or as a result of the institutionalization of an organization. As a social movement develops, and the diversity of age and social class within it increases, it may become increasingly difficult for the movement to set a unified set of goals, and it is natural for some conflicts, contradictions, or oppositions to emerge. After all, younger generations will have been raised differently, and will have different problems, different educational backgrounds, and different ideas about work and family to the older generations.

Therefore, focusing on one long-lasting and active women's association will help not only to explain in detail the reasons for stagnation and divisiveness among its members, but also to understand what possibilities are available to such an association for overcoming this difficult situation. An in-depth ethnography of a women's association can provide evidence of the mechanisms that promote continuity; and by understanding those mechanisms, we may gain an understanding of the ways in which sisterhood can be established within women's interactions.

In this paper, I shall focus on the case study of one active women's association that

has been evolving through the practical efforts of its members, who are united by common ideals and facing challenging realities. This paper presents analyses of: (1) the ways that diverse people such as professionals and executives, volunteer housewives, and women in need are interconnected in this association; (2) the types of mechanisms that may help to develop the spirit of sisterhood in their practice; (3) the types of divisiveness that have occurred between housewife volunteers and the secretariat, or among volunteer staff members; and (4) the ways that this divisiveness might be overcome.

## 2. What is Mizura?

This paper will take the women's group "Kanagawa Women's Space Mizura" (hereafter Mizura) in Yokohama City, as its case study in investigating Japanese women's movements. Mizura is an association of the women's movement type, which offers a "consulting space for women" and operates shelters for victims of domestic violence (Kanagawa Women's Space Mizura 2002).<sup>3)</sup> This study will employ a qualitative, ethnographic methodology to describe the ways in which this association has evolved through its members' practical efforts and responses to challenges. It addresses the two research questions posed above using data from interviews with fourteen Mizura members (five supervisors, eight volunteer staff members, and one former supervisor). I distributed a request to participate in this study to specific individuals who had been members of the organization for seven or more years, and of these, fourteen members agreed to participate. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted from one to four hours, and were conducted at Mizura's offices or shelters between July 2013 and January 2014. All quotations in this paper come from these fourteen anonymous interviewees.

Mizura was founded in 1990 by a woman who, for the purposes of this study, we will refer to as "Ms. A." She and several other activists were engaged in the anti-war movement and the labor disputes of that time. Ms. A and her colleagues experienced struggles in their everyday male-female relationships, but they were reluctant to confront the seemingly incurable male-centered nature of society seen, for example, in the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which did not secure real "equality" of treatment, promotion, recruitment, or pay (Kanagawa Women's Space Mizura 2002).

Because of their reluctance to directly take on the male-dominated power structure, Ms. A and her colleagues made it their mission instead to create an alternative "space"<sup>4)</sup> for women, where they could find empowerment, develop various abilities, and accumulate knowledge by finding practical solutions to problems occurring in their daily life. They obtained a lease for an office space and some donations, and began operating a "consulting space for women" free of charge at that location, in association with "Women's Union Kanagawa," which was a specialized division of labor consultation services. At this early stage, the space was also intended to be a place where members would be free to pursue their interests and needs, from personal care such as acupuncture or moxibustion (traditional Chinese medicine therapy using moxa) to participating in social movements to eliminate discrimination against homosexuals. The members were assumed at that time to be working women with incomes, so the membership fee was not inexpensive at 2,000 yen per month

in 1990.<sup>5)</sup>

The group's name "Mizura" was created by adding the pluralizing suffix "ra" to the Japanized version of the English word "Ms.," thereby creating a collective, non-exclusive female identity. Mizura's uniqueness lies in its fluidity; it has no fixed ideology and no counter-discourse. It aims to empower women "from the ground up" by resolving their problems individually and in practical ways. During the organization's preparatory period, the founders considered some basic questions of principle, such as whether to adhere to feminist ideology, and whether to apply the Co-op model. Feminism, however, was considered unrealistic because it was an imported theory.<sup>6)</sup> Likewise, they believed the Co-op model was not a good fit, since the Co-op was operated by housewives for housewives, while Mizura was organized by working women. Therefore, Mizura's founders agreed to devote themselves to practical activities and abandon the notions of setting grand goals and creating a specific ideology.

Mizura began its activities after appointing its full-time paid members (termed "staff"), including Ms. A in leadership roles, and employing some part-time volunteer members to work at the office. Increasing numbers of victims of human trafficking and organized prostitution began to seek help from the group. In response to this growing demand, the staff added sheltering to its consultation services, to help women who wanted physical protection. The demand continued to increase, so Mizura set up an independent shelter in 1991. Since then, consultation services and private shelter management have been the two central pillars of Mizura's activities. There were 1,057 new consultations in 2012, 10 percent of which were with non-Japanese women. The number of shelter clients was 164, including their accompanied children, and the organization currently operates three private shelters.

Mizura became a non-profit organization in 2000. Its activities are mainly supported by membership fees; there are 130 regular members (each paying 2,000 yen per month) and 60 associate members (each paying 10,000 yen per year) in 2003.<sup>7)</sup> Mizura's governing structure consists of a council of twelve supervisors and two auditors, and it holds an annual general assembly. In addition, Mizura has an administrative office (secretariat) with four full-time supervisors and two volunteer staff that hold weekly meetings to organize and manage daily activities.<sup>8)</sup> The secretariat has the central role in deciding how to solve the problems that Mizura's clients have brought for resolution.

### **3. How Can Diverse Women Connect with Each Other?**

When it was first organized, Mizura's staff body consisted of full-time working women. However, over time, housewives also began to join. The housewives had a very different perspective from both the existing members and, when protection became part of Mizura's activities, the shelter clients. This section describes the changes in Mizura's activities and explains how its members were able to connect despite their diversity.

#### **3.1 Characteristics of the original core staff members**

Mizura's original staff members accumulated expertise on problem resolution specific to their clients through their daily consultation services. Some of the problems they handled

were: international divorce, workplace sexual harassment, family violence, human trafficking, child abuse, bigamous marriages, homelessness, and debt, or some combination thereof. To solve these problems, staff members needed to gain extensive legal knowledge and skills related to resolution processes as well as a strong understanding of the workings of public administration offices, such as welfare or child consultation. They also needed specific information about certain lawyers' specialties and their personalities, language translation skills, medical understanding, and knowledge about how to search for employment and housing. Through the trial-and-error nature of their consulting activities, staff members also cultivated attitudes of *kyōkan* (empathy) and *juyō* (acceptance), which are important in counseling, and gained a working knowledge of counseling terminology, which influenced their interactions with the women whom they were helping.

In addition, they became skilled diplomats with bargaining abilities, which they developed while engaging in labor union activities to appeal for recognition of women's hidden realities, create new support systems, and obtain money from local governments. For example, in 1998, Mizura established a collaborative system of shelter operations with public facilities, known as the Kanagawa method.<sup>9)</sup> This system is a pioneering tri-care support activity for domestic violence victims in which private shelters, local governments, and Kanagawa Prefectural Government administratively connect to provide seamless support for women. This system was undertaken as a result of Mizura's original core staff's strong appeal to the local government after a man murdered his wife in 1996; presumably, she could not escape from him because there was no room for her in the public shelter, and the public shelter did not refer her to a private shelter.

Through its core staff members' efforts to spread the word about women's issues, and its expertise in successfully interacting with a government that provides subsidies for consulting and shelter operations, Mizura thus became an association with a specific set of practical functions. As a result, several local governments in Kanagawa Prefecture commissioned Mizura and some secretariat staff members to participate on national or local committees that work to revise existing laws, enact new ones, or develop basic plans for women who have been victimized. Additionally, Ms. A, who has been leading Mizura since the beginning, is now playing an important role on an expert panel about violence against women established by the Cabinet Office. Secretariat staff members have immersed themselves in their clients' problems, connecting these particular, private issues to women's problems in general, and have thus fought the oppressive system. This devotion to solving clients' problems has indirectly promoted sisterhood between secretariat staff members and their clients.

### 3.2 Characteristics of the housewives

Secretariat staff members have played a key role in establishing Mizura as a specialized agency for the support of women, but it is the forty trained volunteers who actually carry out the organization's daily activities. In response to the increasing needs of its consultation and shelter clients, Mizura has conducted annual staff training courses since 1994. Most of the new members are housewives in their thirties who have almost finished raising their children and are looking for a "connection to society" or a way to make a "social contribution." Generally, these members are women with time and money who face few problems in their



Figure 1 Mizura's 20th anniversary symposium



Figure 2 Mizura's charity bazaar

everyday lives. Initially, new members gain expertise as telephone consultants under the supervision of the secretariat staff. When they are more experienced, some of them are selected to become part of the shelter staff engaged in support activities (e.g. cleaning, shopping, walking with clients, making hospital visits, patrolling, and staying overnight). The shelter's greatest asset is the establishment of these face-to-face relationships between the volunteer staff members and the shelter clients. The "specialized" housewife volunteers, many with more than eight years of experience of telephone consulting, run the 24/7 shelters.

Interestingly, when I asked staff members in the interviews why they continued to participate or stayed interested in Mizura's activities, none of them mentioned making a "social contribution" or providing services "for the people," and most actually denied that these were motivations for them. Instead, they stated that they enjoyed the surprising encounters with women they would be unlikely to meet in their ordinary daily lives; at Mizura, they might spend time with a drug addict, a tattooed ex-wife of a gangster, an intellectually challenged woman abandoned by her parents, a victim of sexual abuse, a woman whose mother was raped by her husband, or numerous women suffering from various family estrangements. In other words, they were enjoying glimpses of a world they would never otherwise personally experience.

For the housewife staff members, the shelter becomes a place where they can reconfirm the diversity of women, or their *tashasei* (alterity or otherness). *Tashasei* refers to the sense of externality that people feel toward another person. Through alterity, we understand how other people are different from us, making it possible for us to identify who we are in contrast. The staff members therefore grow psychologically close to the clients while recognizing their alterity. For example, another reason for staying involved in Mizura that was mentioned in interviews is the joy people felt when they witnessed changes taking place in the women who use the consulting services or shelters. Several women said they felt happy when a shelter client's face brightens.

In addition, more than a few of the housewife volunteers mentioned the personal characteristics of the key members of the secretariat staff as one of Mizura's attractions. They are all instructed by those secretariat staff when in the process of becoming consultants,

and even after becoming consultants, are often supervised by these staff members. They also observed that secretariat staff discuss clients' problems from every angle. Three key members stood out in the interviews: Ms. A, who is the Secretary General and the organization's principal founder; Ms. F, who has been a representative for more than ten years; and Ms. K, who is a co-founder and a shelter manager. Ms. A is sometimes described as charismatic, Ms. F is described as highly enthusiastic, and Ms. K is often said to have a strong personality. Housewife staff members spoke of these three key members with respect. For example,

The sense of discomfort toward society that Ms. A and Ms. K felt was enormous. They have a charm which makes people around them feel they are unique.

When Ms. A, Ms. F, Ms. K, and Ms. O were playing a central role in Mizura, the office was so full of activity and excitement that I couldn't hear the consultants' voices on the phone. Words flew about and flooded into my ears. It was fun just to be there.

When Ms. F was on duty, everything was given proper consideration. There was so much informal conversation and unrelated chat that I felt welcome. The staff understood how to create a good atmosphere at the office.

Ms. F created a system in Mizura whereby people understood how to respond and contribute properly.

It was Ms. A's diplomatic skills that meant Mizura has lasted in the way it has. Ms. A had the power to gather people together, and had foresight, having had experience of sexual harassment before it became a commonly recognized phenomenon. On the other hand, Ms. K created Mizura's collective guidance system and the rules.

I thought that someday I might become a terrific person like one of them.

The key staff members can be thought of as "strong individuals."<sup>10</sup> Nishikido, who investigated empirically several social movements, pointed out that there are "strong individuals" in most social movement associations and their loss often causes their successors great difficulty (Nishikido 2008: 275–276). The housewife staff members interviewed stated that the key members were the strongest individuals they had ever met. They had never before observed people engaging in strategic negotiations with government administrations, been coached by other women with their qualities, or known such unique women. As such, the alterity that the housewife volunteers felt toward key staff members also created an attraction to Mizura. For them, both clients and key staff were "others," and this otherness intrigued them.



#### 4. Mechanisms That May Help Inspire a Lived Spirit of Sisterhood

“*Tashasei*” is a keyword at Mizura, and is an element that serves to connect these diverse women with one another. However, *tashasei* is sometimes experienced as a difference that indicates superiority or inferiority. How do the women gathered at Mizura achieve a spirit of sisterhood and overcome any sense of superiority or inferiority among them? To understand how this might be done, we should focus on the staff members’ reflective narratives.

Several staff members told me that their perceptions changed as a result of their training by their supervisor and the things that they learned through trial and error with clients. For example, one staff member shared the lessons she learned from her telephone counseling experience with a client in which she avoided asking about the client’s financial circumstances. She described how her supervisor, a member of the secretariat, had pointed out that her own recommendations to a client would vary depending on whether or not the client received official financial support payments. In other words, her supervisor implied that the comments the staff member made to the client in the absence of information about the client’s financial situation would not be of maximal benefit to the client. The staff member thereby realized that the reason she had avoided asking about finances was that she had believed that discussing official financial payments with the client would be humiliating or embarrassing for the client. Furthermore, she realized that empathy does not imply pity; rather, it means thinking about things from the clients’ point of view.

For the staff members to consider themselves and their values objectively in this way may be interpreted as forming an awareness of their own habitus. The term “habitus” was coined by Bourdieu and is understood to be a schema of perception, thought, or evaluation, as well as acts that organize individuals’ customary behavior (Bourdieu 1977: 82–83). One’s habitus produces one’s practices and representations, but it also restricts and limits them because the habitus structures and bounds individuals’ worlds. Thus, we rarely notice our own habitus. However, Mizura’s support activities can bring an individual’s habitus to her or his awareness through experiences such as those described by the members.

In addition, interviewees shared experiences of their understanding and acceptance of their clients’ habitus. They gained an understanding of the diversity of habitus through their recognition of the clients’ habitus. In their narratives, the staff members’ personal transformations evinced their acceptance of others’ habitus, while retaining a degree of alterity. In other words, they maintained their distance and achieved understanding without pity or emotional involvement. Interviewees made statements suggesting that they understood but did not necessarily support clients’ decisions. The following quotations from interviewees show the extent to which the members were accepting of the clients’ habitus:

These are ultimately someone else’s affairs, and their problems have nothing to do with me. You can’t continue in this business without thinking this way. At the end of the day, she is the only one in the world who can make herself happy. The homeless woman who ran away from the shelter needs the environment she is used to, like fish need water . . .

I occasionally feel very uncomfortable when speaking with selfish people; in fact, I have

yelled “Idiot!” right after hanging up the phone. However, since joining Mizura’s activities, I no longer shut out others. I am feeling changes inside myself: I am becoming more accepting of others who have values that contradict my own, and my tolerance of others has obviously increased.

They [the clients] sometimes lie or hide things. It makes me very disappointed . . . but, anything goes. Sometimes I might think they are stupid because what they’ve done will not benefit them . . . but, I also think they have a right to choose to be unhappy. I am accepting of them now, so there are no barriers between us.

Many of the staff members had originally wanted to assimilate psychologically with the shelter clients through relationships of trust or sympathy. For example, some staff members trusted a client who said that she could manage herself without her medication, when in fact she was almost near death. Another staff member felt sorry for a woman who was desperately asking for money, so she lent her some cash; however, the woman never paid her back. Through these experiences, staff members learned that even when they tried, assimilation with others was not always possible and that when they could, assimilation did not make them happy. They also learned that they could accept and respect others’ habitus.

In fact, this might suggest the true meaning of *tashasei*. The shelter staff were attracted to the alterity of the clients, which was a result of their managing to objectivize their own habitus and acceptance of the clients based on their desires to better participate in the association. Mizura is, then, a space mediated by the *tashasei* that animates a spirit of sisterhood in their practice.

“Sisterhood,” a keyword of *ūman ribu*, refers to solidarity among women. Women were encouraged to overcome the internal divisions among them, such as those between housewives and prostitutes, the unmarried and the married, and the young and the old (Senda 2005). They tried to bring people together in a way that overcame differences in attributes such as economic status, race, and ethnicity, using a focus on gender identity to transgress other divisions. However, what *ūman ribu* actually achieved was the marginalization of habitus among their collectives’ members. The relationships at Mizura are different. Volunteer members and staff try to think from the client’s point of view and understand their position, but they never completely internalize the clients’ habitus or way of thinking. As such, they have succeeded in building relationships among diverse women. In Mizura, sisterhood originates in the acceptance of differences and otherness, not in the mandated overcoming of divisions.

## 5. Divisiveness Within the Membership

Objectifying their own habitus and accepting Mizura’s clients has increased staff members’ self-confidence because, by doing so, they have gained “another set of eyes.” It seems reasonable to assume that this self-confidence might create more equal relationships between the members and the administration of the association. However, it appears that greater

equality has not been achieved at Mizura. From about 1998 onward, the more that Mizura's activities were developed and the more experience the staff gained, the more strict the staff began to feel that the secretariat's management and control had become.

In 1998, Mizura, in co-operation with other private and public shelters, local governments, and Kanagawa Prefectural Government, began providing "tri-care support" for victims of domestic violence using the "Kanagawa Method," as described in Section Three. The Kanagawa Method enables shelter clients to avoid civil court and to minimize their risk of being tracked down by their husbands. As they can sort out their future plans through the visits from the civil court staff, they never need to leave the safety of the shelter.

The commissioned operation of the shelters carried with it the need for strict risk management. In Mizura's early days, shelter management was relatively relaxed; for example, staff and clients ate dinner together and clients had the freedom to leave the shelter to go shopping. However, now the staff members must purchase and provide all household commodities, patrol the shelters several times a day, and manage the clients' money and medicines. Furthermore, Mizura representatives (instead of staff members) are assigned to each of the three shelters to make decisions in collaboration with the secretariat office about the clients' treatment.

Several volunteer staff members noted that changes in the secretariat's activities and their attitudes toward the volunteer staff coincided with the significant budget increases after the inauguration of the tri-care support approach. They stated that in the past the secretariat had been concerned about how minimal the payments to the volunteer staff were for expenses such as transportation. They stated that the secretariat had made up for any shortfalls with appreciative words, but that no longer happens. The budgetary changes have been dramatic. In 1990, the year of its establishment, the budget was only five million yen; by 2012, it had increased to 38 million yen.<sup>11)</sup> Since 2000, when the Kanagawa Method was introduced, Kanagawa Prefecture and the local governments have provided Mizura with approximately 9 million yen as commission for operating the shelters. The volunteer staff now receive approximately 6,000 yen per day, but some expressed their dissatisfaction with the secretariat's attitude. For example, they pointed out that the secretariat did not give sufficient explanation for the changes and that there were inconsistencies regarding the support and treatment of clients. One of the volunteer members stated, "Mizura does not provide mentoring, and it does not delegate responsibilities to the volunteer staff members. There's shouldering responsibility, and then there's doing everything yourself. In this situation, I feel like a maid."

Conflicts between the volunteer staff members and the secretariat have arisen from the volunteer staff members' ambiguous position in the organization. In other words, conflicts have been triggered by the changes undergone by Mizura, as it has progressed from being a volunteer association of housewives who receive token rewards or commuting expenses to an organized staff body of "paid volunteers" who receive minimum wage salaries when they commissioned to operate the shelters. This shift toward a business model has intensified as Mizura's activities have increased in scale.<sup>12)</sup> Staff members who had once taken the position that it was "unpaid volunteer work" believed that they deserved care or comfort from the secretariat as compensation for their volunteer services. The greater the salaries

they received, the more people came to see themselves as “workers,” believing themselves to have the right to play more important roles in the support activities at the shelters and to be given more responsibilities and duties. Because volunteer staff members are treated neither entirely as volunteers nor as employed workers, they struggle with the mental conflict that comes from being not fully either one, but aspects of both. They feel dissatisfaction that they are not assigned tasks of relatively high responsibility, such as determining the clients’ treatment. Mizura’s institutionalization provides the volunteer staff members with opportunities to gain practical knowledge and confidence, but it does not guarantee equality between the members and the administration.

In other words, we could identify in the environment produced by this “quasi-volunteer” system what Murakami has described as *rōdō to shufu no motsure* (the entanglement of the worker and the housewife), meaning that Mizura has become a context in which each of the staff members must combine the characteristics of a “housewife” with those of a “worker” (Murakami 2012). “Housewife” characteristics in this context connote a lack of profit and payment, an absence of hierarchy, and a preference for intimate relationships such as neighborly friendships. “Worker” characteristics include concerns about profit, payment, hierarchy, and structured tasks. Volunteer housewives engage in caregiving through the expression of personal characteristics as housewives; however, Mizura’s organizational structure forces them to take on worker characteristics. It seems reasonable that one cause of divisiveness within Mizura’s staff derives from the intertwined identities of “housewife” and “worker” within each individual.

Although conflicts in Mizura exist, many volunteer members welcome new “paid volunteers.” One staff member stated, in essence, that free “charity” services for shelter clients might create a barrier between staff members and shelter clients. She also mentioned that payment can help eliminate these power relationships; therefore, payments or rewards for the care given to them are necessary from the clients’ viewpoint.<sup>13</sup> Another staff member mentioned in an interview that increased payment signifies not only social recognition of the importance of their role; it also motivates staff members to take on the responsibility of protecting the clients’ lives.

Another type of divisiveness is something like a sense of rivalry among volunteer staff that derives from generational change. Many of the Mizura volunteer staff feel that the organization faces a crisis now its leaders, including Ms. A and Ms. K, who have been in the organization since its foundation, have retired. The reason for this lies in the strength of these women, the likes of whom the volunteer staff have never met before. Through the years, these leading members fostered the trust of local governments involved in the counseling and shelter activities, improved public recognition of women’s welfare issues, and helped to support women in need. However, on their retirement, Mizura needed new members to take their place on the General Assembly, and the General Assembly therefore selected some new supervisors from among the volunteer staff. This strategy was appropriate, as many volunteer staff had plenty of training and sufficient knowledge to undertake the relevant activities within Mizura—and besides, there was no choice available to them. However, it has brought a certain amount of discord among volunteer staff members. For example, when speaking of the uncertain future of Mizura, not a few volunteer staff members

mentioned the new members of General Assembly with a touch of cynicism. The reason for this discord results from the common understanding among the volunteer staff of their respective degrees of experience. Each member knows who are their seniors and juniors, as all of them began participating in Mizura's activities after taking a part on one of the annual training courses. Therefore, volunteer staff members feel slight resentment and envy toward the staff selected as new members of General Assembly who are either their contemporaries or juniors. The more the volunteer staff have a lot of confidence in their knowledge about support activities and regard themselves as professionals, the more difficult that generational changeover and creating strong interpersonal bonds within the association becomes.

However, the anxiety or a lack of enthusiasm among staff members can also be attributed to the ambiguity of purpose of the current shelters. While the shelters were originally temporary stopover for women who had escaped from their husbands and were looking for a place to stay, their mission has expanded to include women who are homeless, mentally ill, and/or living in poverty but not necessarily fleeing domestic violence. In addition, an apparent lack of public enthusiasm for participation in volunteer welfare activities, evinced by the decreasing number of trainees, has recently given the volunteer staff members a sense that Mizura faces an uncertain future.

## **6. Ways of Overcoming Divisiveness**

Despite their complaints or uncertainties about Mizura's future, none of the staff members are leaving the organization. Rather, they all stated, in essence, "I've never thought of quitting. Even if it turns out that we won't be paid any more, I will continue to be a part of Mizura." How, then, do they overcome the divisiveness in the organization?

One way that the divisions are overcome is through the face-to-face interactions at the shelter, which also affect the volunteer staff members' motivation to participate in Mizura's activities. In other words, the volunteer staff members' individuality emerges through their face-to-face interactions with clients, even though shelter assistance is expected to be impersonal. For example, interviewed staff members recognized their own unique qualities through their relationships with clients during support activities such as going on walks or visiting medical facilities, or during trips to and from the shelters. They stated, for example, "They choose whom to speak with," "It seems I am approachable," or "When they return after running away, it's always me that they come to see first." While some loss of individuality is demanded by the work, being in contact with various personalities through the shelters and consulting activities provides an opportunity for the staff members to confirm their own distinct personalities.

Moreover, a lack of political ideologies or goals makes it possible for women with diverse backgrounds to gather and yet maintain a sense of communality. There is not even a common sense among the women of Mizura's activities being those of a social movement. For example, Mizura recently published a statement in its magazine in which it took a position against the Specified Secrets Protection Bill. This was Mizura's first statement of its political attitude as "anti-state." Although some regular members celebrated this public



**Figure 3** Mizura's charity Christmas party

statement as a breakthrough for Mizura, one staff member stated:

I would not be here today if Mizura were an association based around an absolutist movement. Mizura is not a place to talk about demonstrations. I feel uncomfortable that some people engage in that kind of talk.

Another staff member said:

Mizura does not participate in movements. When we get together, we just chat, maintaining a moderate distance between ourselves. As far as external policy is concerned, the way Mizura works is similar to a kind of lobbying. It weaves its own ideas into its practice and views itself as teaching the local government, without giving anyone the feeling of actually being taught. Mizura never intended to be a party that conflicted with anyone.

Because Mizura originally did not take a stand on political issues, some of its members identified it as a non-political association that is neither dissident nor conformist. It is important to reconfirm that women can be joined together in association for a long time without any political principles, doctrines, clearly defined goals, or rules for the administration of their organization.

As noted above, staff members respect the clients' personal decisions and recognize them as individuals, which is evident in their lack of imposition of their own ideas about how to live, what to do, or how women should be as women or mothers upon the clients. They recognize the clients' indispensable otherness. The same ideas can be applied to the Mizura staff members. There are housewives with grandchildren, and there are working

single women with no children. Even among the housewives on the staff, there are differences between women who face parenting difficulties and women who have gone to graduate school. The diversity of ways they choose to live their lives as women, wives, mothers, or daughters is not questioned because they all respect each other and their freedom of individuality. Securing one's own individuality and maintaining the alterity of others is, paradoxically, what makes the establishment of communality within Mizura possible.

## 7. Conclusion

Returning, then, to the original questions, namely why it is difficult to maintain women's movements in Japan, and whether it is possible to establish a spirit of sisterhood in practice, we can propose some answers. As discussed in Section Four, *ūman ribu* tried to overcome divisions among women. To accomplish this, they made their views explicit and tried to abandon their conventional ideas about women. However, the more they disclosed what they thought, the more the divisions among women grew, because they could not allow for or understand women outside the movement. That is why the movements in the 1970s became increasingly isolated and finally came to an end.

By contrast, Mizura's staff members do not force specific ideas or concepts on others. Moreover, volunteer staff members are energized by the ways in which their thinking has changed through the dialectical experience of understanding clients' habitus and the objectification of their own habitus. For example, one of the staff members identified one of the strengths of the private shelters as the fact that the staff members are able to see themselves in the clients' position. The interviewee, who had a full-time job, stated, "Saving up 100,000 yen is a big achievement for one of the shelter clients." This staff member seems to recognize how difficult it is to save this amount of money while staying at a shelter. Saving 100,000 yen may not be so difficult for this staff member herself, but she is able to stand on the same footing with clients and praise them. Staff members never pity clients, but understand and respect their habitus while contrasting it with their own. Through this comparative process, staff members' personalities or characteristics are actualized and their identities as Mizura staff members are strengthened.

Mizura's resilience may also stem from the fact that its activity system enables the avoidance of overt power relations among its volunteer members, secretariat members, and clients. Staff members have seen the organization's key members' ability to lead as stemming from their unique styles of interacting, but, ultimately, it derives from the devotion on the part of these members to resolving clients' problems. Although volunteer staff members' awareness of their own habitus and that of their clients' may be initiated and inspired by the presence of these "strong individuals," this relationship is different from the form of supervision that would result from a power-driven relationship. For volunteer staff members, receiving advice from these "strong individuals" is based on a mutual engagement in work such as counselling or supporting the shelter clients.

In addition, volunteer staff members often deliberately complained to other staff members within earshot of their supervisors about not having been given sufficient explanation for the changes regarding the support and treatment of clients. Therefore, the relationship

between the supervisors (strong individuals) and the volunteer staff members is different from rigid power relations, as both parties can identify their relationship as an outcome of the support activities for clients. As such, Mizura has become an influential and successful Japanese women's association that has been able to animate a spirit of sisterhood in its practices.

Nevertheless, challenges remain even for an organization as flexible and successful as Mizura. As we saw in Section One, the Workers' Collective has lost momentum after a successful start. According to Murakami, who researched the Workers' Collective from a sociological perspective, housewives have neither the time nor the money to spend on finding out what good could be done for their communities or what they are lacking, resulting in a lack of members of the Workers' Collective (Murakami 2010: 181). More and more housewives find that they must be gainfully employed for financial reasons, yet they cannot find full-time jobs. Today, the motivation for joining Workers' Collectives is often simply to earn some money to fulfill that need. The so-called "first generation" of the Workers' Collective in the 1980s could afford their ideal style of work and put that ideal into practice. However, the "second generation" of housewives, consisting mainly of middle-aged women, cannot survive financially without paid work. The generation gap between these two groups of housewives is also evidenced in the sharp decline in the number of volunteers who attend Mizura's training lectures. The problem of succession that occurs within women's movements may stem from the nature of women themselves, as a pluralistic and multilayered group mediated by alterity. Moreover, the problem may have an inherent connection with the nature of associations that guarantee the free movement of members in and out of it.

Mizura has not yet been made aware of these general limitations. However, it will be one of the association's great strengths to recognize not only their limitations but also who they are, what they have done, and where they are going to. Mizura began as a space for women, where members could do anything they chose to do. Over time, it became a place where a member could find her place in society and form her identity. It is alterity that characterizes Mizura as a place for women and it transforms divisiveness into pluralism even when an association is faced with the loss of a strong individual.

## Acknowledgements

I sincerely appreciate the help provided by Mizura's secretariat and its support of my research. I also appreciate the gracious co-operation of the volunteer staff members who participated in the interviews.

This work was supported by KAKENHI Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (B) 25770314.

## Notes

- 1) The women who were a part of the *ūman ribu* (the Japanese rendering of the English words "women's lib") movement shared a strong sense that *ūman ribu* was not an imported system of thought. Certainly, the Zenkyōtō student movement which flourished in late 1960s Japan, including



the Okinawa reversion and anti-Vietnam movements and the fight against Sanrizuka, had originated in the United States and Europe. However, the slogan of “self-denial” which was the movement’s hallmark, which signified a denial by the participants of their privileged status, had not included the privileges that men were afforded over women. Even if women joined in the struggles, they were made to do the cooking or cleaning for the men, and were not permitted to hold a microphone. As such, the Japanese *ūman ribu* movement differed from the Western Women’s Liberation Movement in that it had been born out of those women who had participated in the Zenkyōtō movement in order to combat the value system created by men (Onnatachi no Ima o Tou Kai 1996).

- 2) Mitsu Tanaka, a central female figure of the *ūman ribu* movement, described the relationship of members in the collective she founded as “the grains of rice stuck to the bowl.” She sensed the formation of vertical relationships between her and the women who worshipped her personality. She therefore moved to Mexico in 1975, when the International Women’s Year World Conference took place there. It has been said that the enthusiasm for *ūman ribu* virtually ended with her departure.
- 3) I should note that I have been involved in Mizura’s activities as a volunteer since 2000. My involvement has been as follows. As an undergraduate student (1999–2001), I went to the office once a week as an unpaid volunteer, carrying out work related to newspaper articles, or escorting foreign consultants to their countries’ embassies. Although I took a training course and became a counselor when I was a graduate student (2001–2003), I did not engage in any consultation activities as I believed myself too inexperienced and young. Instead, I was primarily engaged in computer work such as typing up case records. I received only transportation compensation at that time. I took a break from activities at Mizura while writing my doctoral thesis (2003–2006), but upon its completion, returned to work at the office doing computer-related tasks, including accounts processing. I was also given responsibility for the night shift at a shelter once a week for about four years (2006–2008, 2010–2011).
- 4) The term “space” is an important technical term used in *ūman ribu*’s activities referring to women’s desire for personal places. The term is frequently used by *ūman ribu* groups in their literature, or as part of groups’ names.
- 5) The USD equivalent of 2,000 yen in January 1990 was \$14.25.
- 6) Shikano (2004) wrote that Mizura was an example of the “modern feminism” that embodies sisterhood, although Ms. A, one of Mizura’s founders, refused to see Mizura as an association based on feminist principles (Kanagawa Women’s Space Mizura 2006).
- 7) Women qualify as “regular members” by living or working in Kanagawa Prefecture, while “support members” include women living outside Kanagawa, men, and associations.
- 8) Its management solution is quite well organized thanks to the fact that most of the supervisors have experience working with labor unions, and they have applied what they learned to their work at Mizura.
- 9) The “Kanagawa Method” is a system in which Mizura manages the shelters while the prefectural government controls the budget for the shelters; it is based in part on a project commissioned by an anti-domestic violence law. At the same time, both the prefectural and the local governments bear expenses relating to the clients. Examples include the Counter-Measures Examination Committee of Violence Against Women in Kanagawa Prefecture, the Council for Gender Equality

in Yokohama City, and the Children's Rights Treaty Examination Committee in Kawasaki City. In 2009, Mizura received the Prime Minister's Commendation for Efforts Toward the Formation of a Gender-Equal Society.

- 10) The terms "strong individuals" and "weak individuals" are borrowed from Amano (1996).
- 11) In 1990, the USD equivalent of five million yen was \$34,722 and the USD equivalent of 38 million yen in 2012 was \$475,000.
- 12) Mizura is an organization that runs a volunteer-driven social support business. However, because the business is subsidized and money is paid to the volunteers for their participation and help as a sign of gratitude, the payment of money has changed from being a gift to remuneration in return for their participation in the business. As such, Mizura's business is no longer carried out on a purely volunteer basis. It is more like a business in which money is exchanged for labor.
- 13) This is similar to the philosopher Eva Feder Kittay's idea that relationships of dependence (such as care work) can be relationships of power in which caregivers are often dominant, resulting in problems such as abuse of the elderly (Kittay 2010: 90).

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