

BOOK REVIEW

**Fumika Sato, *The Conundrum of the Female Soldiers*,  
Tokyo, Keio University Press, 2022.**

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(Received 12 February 2023; revised 1 May 2023; accepted 3 June 2023; first published online 10 July 2023)

Japan's most prominent sociologist of gender and militarism in her latest 2022 monograph tackles the 'conundrum' that military servicewomen raises for feminism. Fumika Sato, who holds a professorial appointment in a graduate school of Tokyo's prestigious Hitotsubashi University, describes the difficulty of researching women in Japan's Self Defense Forces in a country whose academy leans towards pacifism, and away from the liberal feminism of America that embraces women's entry into the military on employment and empowerment grounds. In the *Conundrum of the Female Soldiers*, Sato nonetheless aligns her approach with that of American feminist theorist Cynthia Enloe who believes that resisting the militarisation of peacetime patriarchal society requires multifaceted and wide-ranging feminist engagement with all aspects of the armed forces, including that of servicewomen. In the *Conundrum of the Female Soldiers*, Fumika Sato takes up this challenge for Japan. The challenge is important for contemporary Japan because the country faces levels of sex inequality that are not declining at the same time as rising rates of militarism shown through base development, bilateral agreements, and expanded defense budgets.

Before now, sociological inquiry has mostly ignored Japan's Self Defense Forces, let alone their female contingents, according to Sato. This neglect has political motivations, mainly relating to the role the Forces have played in Japan's surreptitious remilitarisation after the war, their ideological link to right-wing and reactionary civic groups, and their promotion of traditional sex roles (see Dalton, 2022). Her book therefore asks a number of questions, such as, 'how is gender implicated in war and militarism, How do women and men as gendered selves contribute to them?, and How does gender support and promote war and militarism in Japan?' (p. 50).

Sato answers these questions over 13 chapters divided into five parts. The chapters of Part I describe the major frameworks of the book's research: the nexus of gender and war/militarism, military masculinities, and militarising patriarchy. These frameworks synthesise scholarly opinion in English across a range of thinkers, including Cynthia Enloe, Paul Higate, Cynthia Cockburn, and Sabine Fruhstuck. The chapters of Part II then focus on the debates and academic positions surrounding the book's topic, including servicewomen and their harassment/sexual abuse, sex equality, and feminism. The chapters of Part III bring the insights and debates of the previous two parts to the specific case of women in Japan's Self Defense Forces (JSDF). Their case is described on the basis of diverse and rich primary materials, including JSDF recruitment advertising, roundtable discussions, interviews, and media items. Part IV addresses problems of sexuality in the military incorporation of servicewomen, including their rape, prostitution, and sexual harassment. Sato's fifth-part conclusion to the book advances a theoretical approach to war and militarism that goes beyond the incorporation of feminist knowledge and insight, but rather sees feminist politics developed on their very basis (p. 255). As Sato writes, 'the female soldier represents, for feminism, a means to understanding the militarization of ourselves and our societies' (p. 62). Her empirical task in the book, therefore,

ultimately makes a contribution to knowledge of feminist theoretical approaches that better take account of the reality of militarizing patriarchy all over the world.

Indeed, Sato's findings in Part III in particular are substantial enough to forge a feminist understanding of this militarization. They will also likely be of interest to Japan watchers more broadly, and also students of gender and security studies. Sato argues that efforts towards revision of Japan's peace constitution have been aided by women's incorporation in the JSDF through helping its characterisation as a 'humanitarian' rather than military force, and therefore an altruistic player on the world stage. This outcome of the (limited) feminisation of the military is notable in Japan's case because of, as mentioned, widespread public hostility to the JSDF for many decades following the Second World War, and also because of limitations on its activities and international deployment in Japanese law, Sato writes (p. 162). The gradual shift of the United States military towards 'inclusivity' on the basis of things like LGBT identification, neoliberal conceptions of individual rights to goods provided by subcontractors for military personnel, and the gradual expansion of military-related job opportunities to youth and migrant groups is highlighted as a major influence on the military in Japan. Sato notes that, while these kinds of marginalised groups do not yet achieve recognition and rights-based entitlements in (still relatively illiberal) Japan (see Surak, 2020), the JSDF nonetheless follows America's lead in transitioning to a 'postmodern' military through expanding its recruitment pool and promising recruits newly conceived liberal 'rights'. This discussion is coupled with her observation of the 'camouflaging' effect of women's gradual incorporation in the JSDF in terms of the (supposed) feminised altruism that functions to obscure its intensifying and expansionary activities, which now allow Japan to act internationally in a way commensurate with its economic super-power status (p. 111).

On the basis of this discussion, Sato then critiques the preoccupation of Japanese feminist political scientists with a so-called 'care agenda'. This focus of scholarship and conferences in Japan, most prominently represented by Yayo Okano at Doshisha University (see Okano, 2016), is alleged to be an alternatively feminist approach that avoids the pitfalls of Western liberal equality concepts. The 'care agenda' approach emphasises collective, non-individualistic notions of political engagement that prioritise women's roles in elder and child care. But Sato challenges the solution this 'care' approach purportedly offers for feminism with her observation of precisely 'care agenda' elements that are adopted by Japan's military to promote recruitment among young women, and also to enhance its institutional reputation. In other words, in a country like Japan where liberal feminist conceptions of female 'empowerment' exercise little currency, rhetorical approaches of the feminist 'care agenda' are made effective tools of the military and Japan's defense bureaucracy to persuade the public and international community of the country's new humanitarian state. Sato therefore questions its enthusiastic pursuit among Japan-based feminist political scientists as having much utility as an alternative to Westernised 'equality' approaches (p. 250).

Sato's different approach is that set out in *The Conundrum of the Female Soldiers* over 294 pages. The book is a notable contribution to the literature for its unwaveringly feminist discussion of war and militarism in reference to various aspects of women's lives and political condition in Japan. For example, she questions the 2018 deployment of female JSDF personnel to Somalia as 'gender advisors' when in that year Japan ranked only one place higher in global gender equality indexes than the country it was supposed to advise on issues of women's status (p. 153). Various forms of sexual violence in Japanese civilian society, too, are raised in Chapter 13 in a discussion that emphasises connections and similarities between different types of sexual coercion of women across wartime and peacetime contexts. As the translator into Japanese of the 2013 book by Mary Louise Roberts *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II*, Sato notes the importance of highlighting allied crimes of wartime sexual violence against women in confronting contemporary issues like the 'comfort women' scheme of sexual slavery by the Japanese military in contemporary feminist advocacy on behalf of victims.

This is because Japan's Ministry of Defense currently undertakes the promotion of women for legitimising purposes in the same fashion as the conservative government headed by Abe Shinzo did in its

‘womanomics’ policy. In other words, a kind of promotion that is oriented towards foreign observers, and benefits the interests of the state more than Japanese women themselves. In Abe’s ‘womanomics’, higher rates of female management and board participation were promised, if only women would step forward to nominate for such positions (which the government alleged they did not). Sato cites a similarly cynical example of the lifting of the ban on women piloting fighter-jets that took place in 2015 in advance of the planning of an ‘all-female’ military airshow for the Olympics (p. 153). She reminds readers that these kinds of gender-equality stunts catering to international audiences were staged by a government whose commitment to sex equality was so weak that Japan continues to slide down gender equality world rankings today. Indeed, sex equality in Japan falls behind even South Korea in some indicators, which is a formerly colonised country emerging from military dictatorship only in 1987 (see Youm and Yamaguchi, 2016).

But the trend among feminist sociologists in Japan is to see female servicewomen as perpetrators of wars and violence, and therefore rightly outside of feminist consideration, or else to see them as victims of harassment and assault (see Muta, 1999). This latter view is recently strengthened by courageous public testimony and civil court action pursued by Rina Gonoï in 2022 after her abusive experiences in the JSDF. As reported at the time, Gonoï reported sexual harassment and assault while still enlisted, and an SDF ‘police unit investigated her complaint’. However, while her abusers ‘were referred to prosecutors on suspicion of indecent assault’, Gonoï’s ‘case was ultimately dropped’ (Iki, 2022). Since this case, women like former navy general Miho Takemoto have stepped forward to describe similarly harrowing experiences of Japanese military service.

Sato raises the fact that Japan’s 1927 military service law restricted recruitment to men, even if a small percentage of women were nonetheless employed in auxiliary roles throughout the history of the Japanese military (p. 63), and so Japanese servicewomen have not yet occupied the battlefield roles of those criticised for violence in militaries like that of the United States. In Japan, the roles are much more constrained and traditional, Sato explains, even while the JSDF and its supportive defence ministry use notions of female equality and altruism to promote the supposed liberalism of Japan’s postmodern military.

Sato notes that seventeen years have passed since the publication of her first book in the gender and security field, and since that time the proportion of servicewomen in the world’s militaries – particularly those of the Western world – have increased exponentially. Even in relatively conservative Japan, their numbers have grown. In *The Conundrum of the Female Soldiers* she asks from the outset, should feminists welcome this development? (p. 79) Like Cynthia Enloe, Sato cannot reconcile war, militarism, and occupation with feminist goals, but nonetheless believes that institutions like the JSDF, and their female recruits and workers, should be an intense focus of feminist theorising and discussion. For Sato, it is these women, and their military contexts, that deliver feminist politics its biggest insights and strongest arguments. The ‘conundrum’ that animates her discussion, therefore, is not the usual debate about whether women’s entry into the armed forces is ‘empowering’ or not, but, rather, how feminist politics can develop to better address the rapidly expanding challenge that militarising patriarchy poses for women and girls.

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