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Japanese women's activism sustains a life-giving community in the pandemic

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to the women dependent on the healthcare and tourism industries for the livelihood of their families. These challenges opened opportunities for organisations to alter their traditional forms of assistance into modalities that address the effects of the pandemic. I explore the Asian Women Empowerment Project (AWEP), a Japan-based organisation dedicated to helping poor women in Asian countries attain economic power. During the pandemic, AWEP attuned its programmes to respond to its challenges. Using ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague's ecological model, I demonstrate that AWEP reveals Japanese women's acute understanding of a need for an ecological ethics of solidarity that includes ecological interests, a consciousness of solidarity, and cooperation through global sisterhood, which posits that women the world over share everyday experiences regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, class, or economic status and, therefore, should help one another.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization declared a COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. Since then, billions of lives in the world have been significantly affected. Women bore and continue to endure the more significant burden from the effects of the pandemic because of the social expectation to manage domestic obligations, oversee children's education at home, and

extend care to ill family members. The pandemic hit economically challenged women, especially in Asia's developing countries. In response, some transnational groups and organisations attuned their campaigns to address the challenges of the pandemic.

In Asia, transnational groups, often citizen-initiated, non-governmental organisations, reached out to their Asian neighbours with offers of help through financial aid, capacity-building projects, awareness campaigns, and study/research tours, among others. Japanese women are at the forefront of this movement. Their relative economic stability, the growing political consciousness of gender equality and parity, and a heightened sense of the need for social transformation have all contributed to their activism, which, in turn, provided the impetus to initiate projects for other women less privileged than they are. These projects often aim at providing more destitute women with the resources to cope with the effects of globalisation.

According to Nishimura and Hitomi (2020:185-186), social inequality in Asia is expanding more rapidly than in any other region. Fast income growth and rapid progress of globalisation and technological change have accelerated income inequality in Asia over the past two and half decades. Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic that gripped the world in 2020 greatly affected women who are overly represented in informal sectors, because they lost their jobs and other means of livelihood.

The Asian Women Empowerment Project (AWEP) describes its work in Asia, with the focus on producing and selling fair-trade goods to improve women's income. Specifically, its brochures and newsletters list its objectives as follows: To create jobs for the single mother members mainly through producing fair-trade goods; to acquire and disseminate the fair-trade spirit and knowledge; to empower women, and to train women to become managers themselves in the future.

AWEP highlights the critical contributions of Japanese women's activism in advancing global sisterhood. Global sisterhood refers to the idea that women worldwide share everyday experiences regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, class, or economic status and should help one another. Amid the raging pandemic, however, AWEP's activities revolved around offers of assistance to foreign women in Japan who are experiencing economic difficulties, due to the closures of many businesses such as restaurants, bars, and hotels that employed most of them. This assistance or help also includes mental health awareness campaigns and cultural tasks such as translating complex Japanese legal documents to English or Filipino.

This article answers the following questions: What lessons can be learned from Japanese women's activism that sustained, and continues to maintain, a life-giving community that focuses on women, by empowering and enhancing the resource-enabling abilities of its female stakeholders? During the pandemic, the forms of support included humanitarian aid to foreign women in Japan who were struggling with the effects of the pandemic on their livelihood and status as foreign workers in Japan. How does McFague's ecological model frame the ecological ethics of solidarity evident in AWEP's mission and work?

2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I primarily use feminist discourse analysis in evaluating the feminist content of all materials used and obtained through a literature review, focus-group discussions, and interviews of AWEP members in Japan (online) and their Filipino stakeholders in the Philippines (offline). Feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger (2013) prefers using ideology rather than discourse but posits that the two terms can be used interchangeably. The detailed analysis serves as a theoretical lens to evaluate whether a particular material promotes gender equality and inclusivity and reinforces or abolishes unequal power structure. In so doing, gender becomes the analytical category to assess whether or not an act is empowering. Japanese feminist scholars Kawahashi *et al.* (2003) write that gender is a critical concept that can generate the power to disclose discrimination related to sex and the structure of authority and leverage reforms in society.

In examining the ecological dimension of AWEP's work, I apply the ecofeminist theologian McFague's subject-subjects ecological model to frame ecological ethics of solidarity. McFague's model derives its impetus from a Christian praxis of solidarity with the oppressed. For McFague (1997:175), Christianity offers a direction to the loving eye: toward the oppressed, to see nature not only as "nature", but also

as one sees the face of Christ in our poorest, most devastated brothers and sisters, so does nature, in its way, is a vision of God.

2.1 McFague's subject-subjects ecological model

In *Super, natural Christians*, McFague (1997:9) forwards the subject-subjects ecological model that offers a new sensibility, "one that sees everything, all others, as subjects". The subject-subjects model affirms a view of reality, wherein characteristics such as agency, activity, and

influence are present not solely in human beings, but also in animals, plants, and the rest of the natural world. McFague turns to feminist epistemology to articulate a subject-subjects model. Benjamin (1988:53) speaks of a self through the “dance of interaction”, which promotes kinship and difference by both “asserting the self and recognizing the other”. C. Keller (1986:4-5) criticises the stereotypical male “separative self” and the female “soluble self”, suggesting a “connective” self instead. Plumwood (1994:154) advocates the relational or ecological self that can desire the well-being of others for their own sake and one’s own, for instance, a mother’s desire for her child’s health. E. Keller (1987:99) argues for a dynamic autonomy, which reflects a sense of self as differentiated from, and related to others and a sense of others as subjects with whom one shares enough to recognise them as subjects.

McFague underscores that this model appreciates the numerous relationships with other subjects continuously and analogously. The continued interactions with other subjects shape our experiences as human beings, and we should respect the distinction from one another without claiming to be the other. In other words, we should regard others with love. Love is being objective; it is a recognition that other subjects make up reality. Love then moves the self to know, appreciate, and understand others. Whatever promotes the well-being of everything should have rejoiced, as this also translates into the well-being of the self (McFague 1997:22).

2.2 Friendship as the expression of the subject-subjects model

McFague argues that acknowledging the subjectivity of other life forms, the land, and even the earth is critical to embrace the subject-subjects model fully. She holds that friendship best captures the knowledge of taking the world of others seriously. Friendship moves us, human beings, to know non-human beings as subjects and not merely as objects. McFague claims that feminists often use friendship instead of blood relations, because the former insists on detailed, careful acquaintance, which can happen only through interactive, reciprocal links between the knower and the known. A friendship is a live-and-learn relationship. Thus, this knowledge’s goal is practical: to help create a better world, one fit for habitation by human beings and the earth (McFague 1997:22).

2.3 The ecological ethics of solidarity

The ecological ethics of solidarity expands McFague's subject-subjects model. While the latter emphasises the epistemic turn in developing deep regard for nature, the former highlights the link individuals or groups share around a common goal and consciousness of their common interests and moral obligation and responsibility to help others (Jennings 2015:144). The ecological ethics of solidarity springs from ecology and conservation sciences (Thompson *et al.* 2011). Scientists noted various natural processes and observed that ecosystems operate in equilibrium, symbiosis, and interdependence (Thompson *et al.* 2011:414). With the increasing human footprint in ecosystems, human activities and practices must be considered in the ongoing discourses about biodiversity loss, climate crisis, and environmental destruction, on the one hand, and biodiversity conservation and protection, local ecological knowledge, and environmental care, on the other. The increasing and expanding interconnections among various disciplines that study, examine, and advocate for the environment highlight the possibility of support for one another. The ecological ethics of solidarity emerged from the connection and support that mirrors the interconnectivity and reciprocal interdependence of beings in the world (Thompson *et al.* 2011:144).

McFague's ecological model constitutes the self as embedded in the network of relationships and exists only in relationships. The ecological ethics of solidarity expands the notion of self as being comprised within the community of subjects. The resulting ethos is a commitment (praxis) to work for the community's well-being. Belonging in a community implies complex relationships in solidarity that can buffer when "bad" events such as natural disasters, accidents, and failures happen. The moral boundaries are no longer limited to the "I" but include the others. The self feels responsible toward the other because the well-being of the whole community is the well-being of one. For McFague (1997), the care, concern, and love for others starts in the place near, known, and local, and gradually grows to include even those not in the vicinity. Inspired by the natural world, the ecological ethics of solidarity illustrates how flourishing and diminishing activities are in the ecosystems. As human members of the community, we share both the sorrows and joys of the other members.

AWEP's embrace of the fair-trade principle underscores its environmental consciousness. The consciousness is part of AWEP's ongoing support for citizen-initiated movements for social change that emerge from the grassroots. AWEP's turn towards fair trade as a way to empower Filipino women (at present, including Nepalese, Indonesian, and Thai women) demonstrates Japanese women's acute understanding of a

need for an ecological ethics that not only stops with protecting human interests, but also includes ecological or environmental interests. AWEP's activism and solidarity with Asian women demonstrate its appreciation of female-centred praxis. Praxis refers to reflection and action upon the world to transform it. An intertwining epistemological and ethical stance marks this praxis oriented towards a particular slant – the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised. The challenge for the community is to develop a specific response to a situation in which vulnerable sectors of human society are oppressed and subjugated. A life-giving community in the pandemic results from the intertwining of activism, commitment, and ecological ethics of solidarity.

3. TRANSNATIONAL JAPANESE WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

Japanese women's activism is a product of entrenched consciousness about women's rights to gender parity. While gender inequality persists in contemporary Japan, many Japanese women, exposed to global movements, seek to end poverty, inequality, and marginalisation, and promote peace and justice. The year 1995 marked a global milestone in the history of the United Nations because of the 4th Beijing Conference on Women. The Conference was significant to Asian women, especially their concerns, issues, and societal contributions. Approximately 17,000 participants and 30,000 activists worldwide attended the event. The resulting document, also known as the *Beijing Platform of Action*, highlighted empowerment. In this article, empowerment refers to recognising the importance of acknowledging the inherent power that women already possess. Mackie (2003:203) notes that many Japanese delegates to the event were members of the Asian Women Association (*Ajia no Onnatachi no Kai*), which has been involved in liberation struggles in the region since 1977.

Japan's violent war atrocities and the subsequent shame in many Japanese people also contributed to a heightened awareness to make it right by those countries that Japan occupied in the second half of the 20th century. The war, particularly its devastating effects on occupied territories and the home front, led many Japanese to decry it. Part of the restitution process was to seek peaceful ways to "apologise" for the mistakes that led to war or were committed during the war. One of the thornier issues in international relations between Japan and its former occupied territories is to comfort women. According to Piper (2001:155), the legacy of the Second World War continues, leaving many issues and much injustice unresolved.

These issues and unfairness are the so-called “military comfort women” – survivors of enforced sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the Pacific War. The latter has emerged as an internationally well-known group of war victims fighting for compensation.

3.1 The feminist origins of AWEP

In 1979, AWEP founding member Kazumi Moriki decided to return to Japan with a Brazilian man she met in Belgium while on an academic fellowship. She was shocked to learn that her husband could not get a Japanese visa as a spouse of a Japanese citizen. She found out that the existing law (the 1951 Immigration Control Order, also known as the “Old Act”) granted only spouse visas to foreign wives of Japanese men. According to this law, what made the situation worse was that her daughter, a Japanese-Brazilian, could not obtain Japanese citizenship.

This intensely personal experience of gendered discrimination prompted Kazumi to form a women's group, called Multi-Family Association (MFA), in 1980 to help Japanese women marry foreign men. Initially, it only had five members. They engaged in various campaigns to make the public more aware of how such laws discriminated against women by not granting citizenship to foreign husbands and children of Japanese women.

The year 1982 ushered in a momentous event that would change the cultural landscape of Japan. The nation became a signatory to the UN Treaty for the Refugees. While foreigners had entered Japan prior to the Second World War, they were mostly from Japanese colonies such as China, Taiwan, and Korea. The treaty allowed for the influx of foreigners from other Asian countries. *Nihonjinron*, a Japanese term for the idea of Japan's so-called specialness or uniqueness and its people, was seriously put to the test. In 1982, a new Japanese law (the 1981 Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, also known as the “New Act”) was promulgated (Kondo 2015:157).

The 1980s showed a marked change in the feminist engagement of activist Japanese women towards labour and migration issues (Mackie 2003:297). At about this period, their encounters with “Asia” could just as quickly mean encounters with the immigrant workers who came to staff bars, small-scale industry, and construction sites (Mackie 2003:203). Ordinary Japanese citizens who were curious about the experiences of foreign workers and migrants in Japan were the first to be attracted to the possibility of forming support groups to study and assist foreigners.

3.2 Filipino women in Japan

The 1980s also saw the rise in Filipino entertainers in Japan. For centuries, Japan had closed itself off from the world. The defeat in war and the rebuilding of 20th-century Japan spurred frenzied economic growth. By the late 1970s, it became economically powerful – second only to the United States. The economic boom in the 1980s up to the 90s paved the way for the influx of male immigrants from poorer countries such as China, Thailand, Korea, and the Philippines to work in construction, factory, fishing, and other heavy industries. Many Japanese women participated in the growth through wide-ranging economic activities that allowed female immigrants from the Philippines to fill up the demand for labour in the hospitality industry as service, cultural, and entertainment workers (Da-anoy-Satake 2006:6). The Philippines' labour policy in the 1980s promoted foreign work to Filipinos to address the economic crisis in the country. This context initiated a new trajectory for Japanese women as the MFA. In an interview with the researcher, Kazumi recounted the fateful meeting with a Filipina entertainer who was pregnant, alone, and desperately in need of assistance. The Filipina was one of thousands of unskilled immigrants who came to Japan to work in pubs, bars, and massage parlours in major cities, including Kobe. Even as early as the 1970s, state-sanctioned “sex tourism” to the Philippines and Thailand thrived (Faier 2009:15). This personal encounter prompted a re-examination of the direction that the group would undertake. The group would be renamed Asian Women's Friends (AWF). Alongside other feminist groups in Japan, AWF protested against sex tourism in the Philippines, Thailand, and Korea.

In the 1970s, these issues were externalised as much as this part of the prostitution industry was carried out offshore. Still, the problem was very close to home for some women as they tried to come to terms with the sexuality of the men who engaged in such activities overseas or profited from their promotion of such tours. Many women internalised a policing role and spoke of their responsibility to curb men's behaviour (Mackie 2003:205). Remarkably, the campaign was so successful that the popularity of organised sex tourism waned. As a result, the more entrepreneurial Japanese brought the women from those previously mentioned countries to Japan to work legally as entertainers and cultural artists. This development presented new problems for women activists. Kazumi acknowledged this fact with a laugh.

In 1994, AWF formed a study group and conducted a study tour to the Philippines facilitated by a Philippine NGO, *Batis Women Center*. The Center was established in 1988 to respond to the growing number of Filipino

women migrant workers coming home from Japan in distressed conditions (Anolin & Javier 2010). In an article published in *Human Sciences*, Chase *et al.* (2012:21) wrote that Filipino women were especially vulnerable because

their socio-cultural categorization creates their images as objects of sexual exploitation, [being from] the third world, low class, poor nation, and coming from the non- English-speaking region.

Regardless of their experience of discrimination and marginalisation based on their sex and gender in Japan, these women activists saw Filipino women as needing more help and assistance, primarily because of their poverty, which is doubly exacerbated by being non-White. Approximately a year later, several important events happened that would usher in the creation of AWEF.

3.3 Kobe earthquake and a new direction

The year 1995 is significant to the Japanese people in Kobe, because of the great *Hanshin-Awaji* earthquake that presented many challenges to the earnest Japanese women residing around Kobe. The local Catholic Church in Takatori, one of the hardest hit areas, opened its grounds to earthquake survivors, particularly foreign workers, who flocked to the church needing urgent assistance. The local priest invited AWF to set up an office and other NGOs in the newly built Takatori Community Center, established shortly after the earthquake. It is interesting to note that 1995 was also the Year of Volunteerism in Japan. Prior to the earthquake, AWF was already a regular presence in the Takatori Catholic Church because of its involvement with Filipino women. However, the earthquake further revealed the extreme vulnerabilities of Filipino women who sought their help. Their unsecured status as immigrants further complicated their insecurity and helplessness. Some of these women would return to their old jobs as entertainers, completing the vicious cycle (Chase *et al.* 2012:20). Since 1995, AWEF has become an organisation involved in education and training, job creation and enterprise development, gender issues, human rights, and labour conditions (Moriki 2005). Consistent with the experiences of AWEF members, Mackie (2003:209) notes that the authors of a 1995 report on shelters in Japan commented on a shift in attitude from “helping those in need, to working towards ‘empowerment’ in terms decided by their partners”.

The start of the 21st century saw the volunteers of AWEF engaging in fair trade before the term became popular.

3.4 The turn to fair trade

AWEP describes its work as producing and selling fair-trade goods to improve women's income. What is fair trade? Immediately after World War II, an American woman named Edna Ruth Byler started buying needlecraft from low-income women in Puerto Rico. Ms Bayer then established Ten Thousand Villages to become the world's first fair-trade organisation. Fair trade refers to an alternative marketing strategy that aims to mitigate the inequitable trade relationships that have come to characterise the global economic system. The World Fair-trade Organization (WFTO) introduced the fair-trade practice, which recognises, promotes, and protects small producers' cultural identity and traditional skills, as reflected in their craft designs, food products, and other related services. Fair trade aims to be a countervailing force to mitigate the "evils" of the neoliberal economic agenda. Unbridled, competitive capitalism, supported by policies reinforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), has caused tremendous global damage.

3.5 The gendered component of fair trade

Since its inception in the United States, the fair-trade movement has expanded and is now present in nearly all corners of the world. Nevertheless, even if fair trade positions itself as an alternative to the prevailing economic model, it ineffectively addresses the structural processes perpetuating gender inequality in less developed countries resulting from neoliberal development policies, according to Rice (2010:48.) These structural processes include the inability of entrepreneurs or organisations involved in fair trade to consider the multiple tasks women do, such as keeping house, child-rearing, caring, and the like, which hinder their capacity to produce hand-crafted goods to meet market demands. Rice (2010:47) admits that fair trade provides an income for women, at a cost, with extra labour due to their household responsibilities, compared with men.

Meanwhile, Lyon *et al.* (2010:93) conducted a study among fair-trade coffee producers in Mesoamerica. The research primarily aimed to examine and investigate the conditions that have supported women's increased participation in producer organisations, from which women were traditionally excluded. After taking into account several factors such as the social, cultural, and economic milieu of the people (patriarchal, in many aspects) as well as feminisation of labour, particularly in agriculture, the researchers noted that, in the communities they had studied, when women were given tasks such as being quality control inspectors, attendance checkers, record keepers (albeit tasks traditionally associated with women), and general file managers for their organisations for

accreditation purposes, they became more participative and exhibited greater participation in all aspects of the organisation's life (Lyon *et al.* 2010:110-101).

The changes in the policies of the Fairtrade Organization increased the participation of women, especially in ensuring the manifestation of gender equality by any fair-trade enterprise that seeks to obtain a license from the Organization. Such changes occurred after multiple studies emerged about gender inequalities in the practice of fair trade in many parts of the world (Lyon *et al.* 2010:94). The authors concluded that fair-trade organisational norms, combined with organic procedural standards, have a significant impact in three areas: women's organisations have greater access to network benefits, gain greater control over farm practices, and enjoy increased access to cash. These studies with contradictory results point to the challenges and, at the same time, a promise of the fair-trade movement to empower women in poorer nations by giving them access to livelihood.

3.6 Expansion to Thailand, Indonesia, and Nepal

On 16-18 January 2015, AWEF celebrated its 20th anniversary, with the theme, "Past, Present, Future". Members celebrated the event with the usual food and dancing, and some sessions on assessing the past activities of AWEF, as well as charting its future. With many projects to occupy them, AWEF has moved beyond helping Filipino women in Japan and is now working with Nepalese, Indonesian, and Thai women struggling in their respective countries. From its humble past as an NGO, AWEF has grown to its present status as a non-profit organisation, which, according to Kazumi, recognises its organisational strength.

4. THE CHALLENGES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

According to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) (2020) report, unemployment and women's overrepresentation in the informal sector increase their vulnerabilities during crises. The International Labor Organization estimates that 195 million jobs could be eliminated globally, due to the pandemic, with women predominating in most of the sectors. Furthermore, over 740 million women worldwide work in the informal sector. As low-wage workers, their employment is vulnerable to elimination, due to COVID-19, and they often lack protection against exploitation and harassment. Migrant women working in non-essential service industries such as food service and hospitality and domestic workers in predominantly female-heavy sectors (for example,

housekeeping, childcare) are particularly vulnerable to being laid off or exploited for labour during COVID-19 (ICRW 2020:1). By 2021, the Center's report expanded to include data on an increased incidence of gender-based violence due to COVID-19, impeding women from participating in economic activities (ICRW 2021:2).

From its annual activity reports for 2020-2021, the pandemic presents various challenges to AWEP. In 2019, it decided to stop ordering products from its member organisations and focused on selling the remaining inventory. Back home, the member organisations struggled with severe economic loss, due to various restrictions on business and travel. An Indonesian partner organisation had to let go of some of its workers. AWEP also stopped organising study tours since 2019. The restrictions on business and travel impacted on AWEP's sales, its primary source of revenue.

Nevertheless, the pandemic bestowed some opportunities on AWEP. In the early months of the pandemic, AWEP immediately pivoted to support foreign women in Japan who were also greatly affected by business and travel restrictions. The pandemic severely affected many women who worked in the hospitality and travel industries. Moreover, many struggled with the various city ordinances and guidelines published entirely in Japanese. The language barrier is a major stumbling block for foreign residents to overcome. AWEP's long involvement with the City of Kobe on foreign residents' affairs would benefit all concerned. In 2020 and well into the 1st half of 2021, AWEP's assistance expanded to include counselling on living in Japan during the pandemic, providing information on COVID testing and vaccination, and creating content related to the above for traditional and online radio programmes. AWEP'S Facebook page contains all the data, which became the primary social media platform of the organisation.

Another opportunity arose from AWEP's heightened focus on improving its online presence to promote its goods and services. Since its traditional modes of selling prior to the pandemic closed down, it decided to partner with several online stores and marketplaces to promote and market its remaining inventories. Staffers sent out regular sales promotion emails to online stores. This move proved to be a better method of handling promotional and marketing campaigns. While sales from the traditional set-up were sluggish, online sales picked up by 2021. AWEP's robust and engaging online presence helped its partner organisations in Asia cope with some economic challenges during the pandemic.

At present, one of the constraints of AWEP is the lack of funds to generate more resource-enabling projects. They derive their funds mainly

from citizens' voluntary offering of their labour and financial resources and the income derived from selling goods produced by their local partners in the Philippines and Nepal. Organisations such as AWEP are not on Overseas Development Aids' (ODA) radar because the payoffs from funding such groups are not beneficial to donor countries. Surprisingly, the lack of funds for more significant projects may not be a real constraint, according to the members of AWEP, who prefer its growth to be organic and moving at its own natural pace. This scenario is ideal because it does not exert much pressure on the members.

5. A LIFE-GIVING COMMUNITY

Since it started, AWEP has highlighted its mission and empowered poor Asian women, by giving them training and livelihood. The economic significance of the mission demonstrates that female empowerment as a financial strategy emphasises two critical poles of reference. The continuing gender gap in work keeps women away from fully participating in the economic development of their communities. On the one hand, mechanisms that enable women to participate economically through access to loans, employment, and education are crucial for the community's economic development, on the other. In other words, empowering women pays off for the community in significantly quantifiable ways.

AWEP's international community is life-giving, because it is based on the shared experiences with Asian women, divided into the following categories.

5.1 Shared experiences of gendered discrimination and oppression

As noted earlier, Japanese women's initial encounter with foreign female migrants, particularly Filipino women in vulnerable conditions, stoked strong feelings of pity for the latter because of their poverty (coming from a poor, third-world nation). However, such strong empathy turned quickly into respect for these women who endured severe homesickness and faced discrimination by giving their families a good life back in the Philippines. Through sustained personal encounters in the form of various services that AWEP offered, both Japanese and Filipino women had come to appreciate the presence of each other in their lives. In the internal survey on the meaning of empowerment that AWEP conducted on its members, a very telling response emerged on the shared experience of gendered discrimination and oppression:

Before they became involved with AWEF, they saw Japanese women. Any desire for empowerment was missing. However, through their involvement with AWEF, they see women as still subjected to men; but are now struggling to be empowered (Chase *et al.* 2012:23).

The pronouncement is a crucial realisation, primarily because it manifests a new consciousness – feminist – that has emerged from the encounter with other Asian women. In the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Report (2020), Japan has one of the worst standings among the developed nations, performing poorly in the empowerment category. Japanese women struggle to achieve genuine empowerment, despite their apparent economic advantage over their third-world counterparts.

5.2 Shared experiences of being female with similar needs and concerns

Marissa was 18 years old when she first set foot in Japan in the late 1990s as a “cultural worker”. The Japanese and Philippine governments knew that “cultural worker” was a euphemism for Filipino women entertainers who flocked to Japan in the 1980s, but they turned a blind eye to their situation. Just a few days into her job at a club, she and the other newcomers were told to complete a “book of coupons” of services that ranged from entertainment to escort to sex and many others. This practice was illegal, according to strict Japanese immigration laws. However, authorities seemed reluctant to enforce the law. Even before finishing her six-month contract with the club (the maximum number of months for informal workers to stay in Japan), she became pregnant.

With no means to support herself and her son, Marissa returned to the Philippines, where she struggled to raise her son alone. His Japanese father refused to acknowledge his existence. Through a network of former Filipino women entertainers, Marissa was able to join a Philippine NGO that assisted women in a similar situation. Development Action for Filipino Women (DAWN) was established in 1986 to help distressed Filipino women entertainers in Japan and their children. In the Philippines, DAWN provides livelihood training for these women.

Moriki met Marissa and three more women from DAWN during a study tour to the Philippines. With the vision of fair trade to provide sustainable livelihood to these women in her mind, Moriki invited the four women to join her. In 2012, the Lampara (in English, Lamp) House was born. In a small apartment at the heart of the City of Manila, AWEF set up a working station and displayed the finished products. The operation started and still is very small. The original staff of Lampara House is now down to three

women. The oldest of them died of cancer in 2014. From 2012 to 2019, Moriki visited the Philippines twice a year to supervise the operation. She frequently brought recycled textiles from vintage kimonos that Japanese women donated to AWEP. The Filipino women would then fashion them into bags, blouses, purses, and slippers, which Moriki would bring back to Japan for weekend markets and fairs.

Perusing the kinds of problems that AWEP receives from vulnerable migrant women, one encounters issues in marriage, domestic violence, lack of financial support, anxiety over children's desire to meet Japanese fathers, problems with families back home, and many others. Since women are socialised to care deeply for the family, they draw from each other's experiences of caring to seek support from those who can understand one's situation better.

Both shared experiences result in understanding power as emancipatory, as capacity-building, and informs solidarity because it is human-centred. In the same internal survey, AWEP members self-reflexively acknowledge that what initially drew them to help out was the feeling of pity; their encounters with vulnerable Asian migrants awakened them from the delusion that they were empowered in Japanese society simply because they have much more economic and educational opportunities compared to others who flock to Japan in search of a better life but find despair instead. In reality, those so-called advantages are not advantages *vis-à-vis* male privileges afforded to the male population in Japan.

6. CONCLUSION

AWEP'S notion of female solidarity contributes to deepening the understanding of being women helping other women across borders, nationalities, ideologies, and cultures, while remaining sensitive to the postcolonial realities of South-east Asians. Japanese women's activism is peculiar among its Asian counterparts in its emphasis on networking, study groups, and volunteerism. Mackie observes that patterns of feminist engagement with welfare issues provide insight into some distinctive features of the Japanese situation. Most of the Japanese activity has been carried out by private volunteer organizations dependent on subscriptions and donations (Mackie 2003: 209), of which AWEP is an example.

The ongoing pandemic underscores the need to re-imagine international solidarity and cooperation to be more people-driven and rooted in shared experiences of being human in the contemporary world. The pandemic also reveals the vulnerabilities of women in many parts of

the world and the helplessness of the environment against the onslaught of unabated resource extraction and the climate crisis. In this connection, McFague's ecological model gives an insight into how we should regard the relationships between human and non-human vulnerabilities. For McFague (1997:152-153), to view the community as a metaphor provides the setting that we understand our responsibilities to others (1997:152-153). It connotes neighbourhood, colony, fellowship, and the like. Community, as a metaphor, implies a society of subjects. The community, as a metaphor, also captures how issues in this world mutually influence each other in meaningful ways. The interrelationship in a community entails that care for those in it becomes critical. The basis of respect for our neighbours lies in the deep understanding of solidarity for the vulnerable planet.

“Love thy neighbour” refers to a framework to practice extending divine love to strangers, may they be our neighbours or people from different cultures. The mandate of Jesus refers explicitly to the neighbours who have experienced, and are continuing to experience, the following: discrimination, injustice, deprivation, and various forms of oppression. For McFague (1997), love is the actual practice of one's religion, not only Christianity, and the method highlights transformative actions. The ecological ethics of solidarity rests in recognising the intrinsic value of the more-than-human world. Without this fundamental Gestalt shift, it would not be easy to regard ourselves as part of the more-than-human world. It would be challenging to see its current state and how our actions, individually and collectively, have rendered the Earth unable to sustain life that thrives and flourishes.

Even deep into the pandemic, The Lampara House and other member organisations of AWEP continue their activities with the full support of AWEP in Japan. Now, more than ever, we are deeply aware that when we stand in solidarity with one another as members of the planetary community, we affirm our connection and nourish our relationship. In so doing, we nurture and sustain life-giving communities, even in the face of tremendous challenges.

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