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Archive to tell story of Beate Sirota Gordon's pivotal role in fight for gender equality in Japan

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RANZAN, SAITAMA PREF. - Documents related to Beate Sirota Gordon, the American translator who played a major role in the formulation of the Japanese Constitution's gender equality protections, are being archived in a project exploring the development of women's rights.

The initiative, which aims to demonstrate the role women played in the postwar fight for gender equality in Japan, came with Gordon's alma mater, Mills College in California, agreeing to donate six boxes of documents to the National Women's Education Center, or NWECC, in Ranzan, Saitama Prefecture.

"It is significant to keep them here in Japan to make them available for those studying, for example, the process of making the Constitution," said Michi Mori, an information division official at the NWECC, which is hosting an exhibition about Gordon.

The center has also received other materials from Gordon's daughter, Nicole, as well as other people and groups linked to her work.

The documents collected by the NWECC include a Japanese draft of the Constitution typed in the Roman alphabet.

Gordon compiled the Constitution's human rights clauses, particularly concerning women, which eventually resulted in Article 24, which stipulates gender equality.

Among the document cache is a travel record from 1952, when Gordon attended a two-month U.S. tour with Fusae Ichikawa (1893-1981), a female activist and former Upper House member who spearheaded the women's suffrage movement in Japan.

"We are planning to organize these documents to post them on the internet for the benefit of those who are interested," Mori said.

Gordon was born in 1923 in Vienna as the only daughter of the internationally acclaimed pianist Leo Sirota and his wife, Augustine. She moved to Tokyo with her family in 1929 when her father started teaching at what is now the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.

She spent roughly 10 years in Japan before moving to California to attend college.

After graduating from Mills College and obtaining U.S. citizenship, she returned to Japan at the age of 22 in December 1945, four months after the end of World War II, to work at the headquarters of the Allied Occupation. She was assigned to help draft Japan's new Constitution.

In addition to Article 24, Gordon contributed to compiling Article 14, which stipulates equality before the law, reflecting the knowledge she gained through her own experiences witnessing the disadvantages suffered by Japanese women.

Using her Japanese-language skills, Gordon also served as a civilian interpreter and translator for the Allies. She was involved in negotiations between them and the Japanese government over the wording of the Constitution.

She moved to the United States in 1947 after witnessing the promulgation of the Constitution the previous year and worked as performance art director at the New York-based Japan Society and other institutions that endeavored to promote bilateral cultural exchanges.

While for a long time she never spoke of her role in the drafting of the Constitution, Gordon began opening up in the early 1990s, partly on the recommendation of her former supervisor in Japan.

From that point she was frequently invited by women's groups all over Japan to deliver lectures championing women's rights and the pacifism written into the Constitution.

Koji Sugimoto, an exhibition designer, supported her activities in Japan.

Sugimoto, 83, became acquainted with Gordon in 1965 when they worked together for a Japanese art festival project, and maintained mutual trust by visiting each other in Tokyo and New York until her death in 2012 at age 89.

"Ms. Beate saw Japanese women eating dinners in the kitchen while their husbands did so in dining rooms and walking a step behind their partners before and during the war," he said.

"Struck with their subordinate status, she always wanted to do something for them, and even after the war, she continued encouraging them by directly talking to them."

The NWECC has also collected records on the lecture events compiled by the women's groups, which show how enthusiastically women in Japan welcomed Gordon even a half-century after the creation of the Constitution.

Reiko Aoki, a visiting researcher at the NWECC involved in compiling the documents, said, "We expect these archives to be a visual representation of how Japanese women have learned about equality and their human rights with Ms. Beate, and to spur their learning activities in the future."

Visitors to the NWECC are also able to see a copy of a speech Gordon delivered in 2006 in Sendai.

"I think it is meaningful that the documents ... show how women in Japan have been empowered by Ms. Beate, preserved and made public in a comprehensive manner at the NWECC," Sugimoto said.

Some of the Gordon-related documents, including photographs and video footage, are now displayed at an exhibition hall of the NWECC.

The exhibition is free and runs through Sept. 30. For further information, call the NWECC at 0493-62-6195 or visit [its website \(http://www.nwec.jp/\)](http://www.nwec.jp/).