

sustainable japan

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Enterprising moms make a big impact by living small

Roundtable

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Last year, at the weekly farmers market near Omotesando Station, two stars were born.

Standing behind a booth stood two Japanese women with bright smiles, loud laughs and the kind of "aw shucks" energy exclusive to newcomers. Above them was a simple black-and-white sign: "minimal living tokyo." Arrayed in front of them were a range of small, perfect objects, the kind you didn't know you needed... but once you saw them, you did. Bamboo toothbrushes. Simple soaps that came without packaging. Beauty products that offered purity, with ingredients ethically sourced. What they were selling cut through assumptions: that waste is necessary, that surface gloss is required. The objects were small choices that felt good because they were good.

One of the women had a 4-kilogram baby slung to her chest and was frankly sweaty. Her hair was a bit of a mess and her clothes were more California beach bum than Omotesando mom, but that was part of the charm.

People walking by stopped. A crowd formed, and didn't dissipate until late in the day. Instagram pics were taken. Products were sold. What they achieved that day was a milestone. Minimal living tokyo, the business two moms had started six months prior, would now operate at a new level.

Since that appearance, the two moms

have kept going. They appeared at more farmers markets, posted homemade product shots and made live feeds complete with baby appearances and bad hair days. And they continued to find products that captured ethical consumers' eyes, growing with slow but with uninterrupted success.

Mom, entrepreneur, activist

Saina Chiba, that busy mom, was the chosen guest for the June edition of the Japan Times Roundtable: Sustainability with Ross Rowbury. Their conversation went through her story and the inspiration behind their business, which she, together with her partner Eri, have grown for two years while both cared for their children. Her story shows the power of intentional entrepreneurship and the resonance such purpose can create with consumers. Her success proves the research correct: that Japanese society now ranks environmental impact as one of the key factors in purchasing products.

I want that here!

Chiba and her co-founder, Eri Akai, paused successful careers to raise children. While being busy caring for their young, they realized they had a niche waiting for them right in their own sustainability values. "I spent my college days (in Vancouver) thinking that sustainability was the norm," she said. "But when I came back to Tokyo, I realized that living like that is just not as available. I had to go out of my way to live more sustainably."

Chiba and Akai thought their personal



Co-founder of minimal living tokyo, Saina Chiba. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

choices might resonate with other Japanese people. "We were like: OK. Why don't we start a shop that provides all these options for people like us, who want to create a better, more sustainable world for their kids and the generations that come," Chiba said.

Products make people talk

As they made this decision, they made it their mission to make "eco" options more available to the Japanese consumer. And a shift in consumer values was happening. "Now being 'eco' isn't about living in a commune," Chiba said. "Even living in the city, being a total city person, like myself, you can live a very sustainable lifestyle, reduce

your footprint, reduce your waste and make changes that way."

The range they created had simple rules. "All of our products are 100% plastic-free. All of our products also come in biodegradable packaging. And none of our products are single-use-based," Chiba said. "So that everything is made to last. We also make sure all our products are palm-oil-free." As they hunted for the right products to sell, they also noted products' popularity and sought for products that "people would want here but can't get."

The results: products that start conversations. An example is their solid bar dish soap and shampoo. Chiba's eyes lit up when

explaining the product: "What's insane is that most dish soaps are, like, 95% water! So we're shipping all this water all over the world!"

Sustainability is now beautiful

Another trend minimal living tokyo recognized: The beauty category is changing. Chiba laughed at this: "It was assumed that selling beauty products needs glamour and perfection, with this glossy packaging that means, 'this product is expensive.'" No more. Minimal living tokyo's products come with zero-waste packaging: Lipsticks without plastic tubes, balms without plastic push-up wheels. And instead of models, these products are modeled by two moms smiling in their homes. Filter-free and friendly is now as effective as glamour.

Construction vs. the people

It is a sad irony that as the Japanese government continues to systematically ravage its own environment, today the Japanese people profess to be almost uniformly concerned with environmental impact in the products they choose.

Every year, Japanese forests are clear cut to plant the useless and toxic *sugi* (cryptomeria) tree. Over 70% of the Japanese coastline has already been ruined with concrete, with more poured every year. And while every major river has already been dammed once, more dams and chutes are built every year.

The people, helpless to stop or undo this damage, are now trying to effect change through their consumer spending. "There's a gradual shift in the generations," Chiba said. "My mom is all single-use everything. It's cheaper, it's lighter, it's clean. But their children grow up seeing all this waste. And we start to think, wow! There has to be something to be done, because what happens with our kids. I just found the millennial generation is less about producing money, but making an impact, something more mission-driven."



Saina Chiba and co-founder Eri Akai with their products. MINIMAL LIVING TOKYO

The new luxury

The founders of minimal living tokyo live what they sell. Instead of fancy "influencer" events, Chiba and Akai are doing mucky but fun beach cleanups. Instead of asking which celebrity started a beauty product, they ask which local community gathered its ingredients. This authenticity goes far beyond a quote post on Instagram. Consumers want to join them in their purpose to live with less waste and harmful additives in their homes.

The exponential success of minimal living tokyo is a warning shot across the bow of Japanese corporations and bureaucracies. For decades, they have thrived on the destruction of the environment. Dumping waste, destroying forests and wrapping the smallest products in layers of plastic was how they made their money. But the Japanese people are waking up.

Today, the Japanese people are cleaning up their homes. Tomorrow, they may become more ambitious.

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information and video of the interview visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



Roundtable host Ross Rowbury gets familiar with the products Chiba brought to showcase such as cosmetics, steel bento box and a dish soap block. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

Symposium examines role of finance in path to sustainability

ESG/SDGs

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Recent actions by the Japanese government signal a potential tailwind in the transition to a low-carbon economy.

In May, Japan's parliament enshrined into law Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's pledge to reach carbon neutrality by 2050 with legislative measures for investment in green technology and renewable energy projects. The establishment of this legislation and related targets, including a pledge to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 46% from the 2013 level by 2030, indicates a push to align Japan's economy with the government's sustainability goals.

The role of finance will be key in this process, according to Green Finance Network Japan (GFNJ), whose stated mission is to provide a platform for the public and private sectors to engage in dialogue and find ways to enhance green investment — financial activity that is structured to ensure positive environmental outcomes.

GFNJ's most recent symposium was held on June 19 and invited representatives from MUFG Bank and Mizuho Holdings, as well as from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry; the Financial Services Agency; and the Ministry of the Environment, among others. Under the overarching theme of "Sustainable Finance," participants discussed global trends regarding carbon neutrality and the role finance should play.

The symposium opened with a video-recorded message by Shinjiro Koizumi (Minister of the Environment) and keynote speeches from GFNJ cofounder Takejiro Sueyoshi (special adviser to the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative) and Naoko Ishii (director of the Center for Global Commons, University of Tokyo).

In his speech, Sueyoshi expressed concern about Japan's lacking a sense of urgency regarding climate change. He observed that although conversations about environmental considerations have become more frequent, such as in the form of SDG targets, these conversations have yet to translate into substantial systemic change. Citing a landmark German



Shinjiro Koizumi, minister of the environment

court ruling that the government's deferring of cuts in emissions to after 2030 violated the freedom of the young plaintiffs, Sueyoshi suggested Japan follow suit and situate the notion of human rights at the center of decarbonization efforts.

Ishii echoed Sueyoshi's call for a more aggressive approach to decarbonization. She further elaborated that any action to combat climate change must be part of a holistic approach to restore balance between the current economic forces and the planetary capacity, which only can be achieved through transformation of key economic systems. There needs to be a "greening" of the financial system to drive economic transition so that we can save ourselves away from the point of no return, she said.

Following the keynote speeches was a panel discussion among government representatives and financiers moderated by GFNJ Secretary-General Hideki Takada (Counsellor, Climate Change Office, Cabinet Secretariat). In addition to conversations regarding ESG (environmental, social and governance) metrics, representatives from the Financial Services Agency, the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry discussed initiatives to revitalize local economies through green technology investments. Representatives from MUFG Bank and Dai-ichi Life Holdings also detailed plans to reach net zero emissions across their portfolios.

A lively topic of discussion was the role of government regulation in encouraging sustainable investment. Considering that Japan currently has no plans to issue green bonds and that there is still an air



Naoko Ishii, director of the Center for Global Commons, University of Tokyo



Takejiro Sueyoshi, special adviser to the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative

of uncertainty surrounding sustainable investments and their potential return on investment, Mana Nakazora of the French international financial group BNP Paribas said the government should implement more aggressive regulation to encourage sustainable investment. An example of such regulation would be mandating that half of all assets under management fulfill ESG criteria, she said.

In his closing remarks, GFNJ cofounder Sueyoshi explained that the demands to respond to climate change and environmental issues will only become more stringent. "There needs to be a consistent sense of urgency regarding the state of the planet and the severe competitive environment to come," he said.

This section highlights the environment and a sustainable society. For more information on ESG and SDG issues, see www.sustainable.japantimes.com/esg



Lawyer Terahara's Marriage for All Japan fights for you too

ESG/SDGs

MAIKO MURAOKA
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Through the activities of the nonprofit Marriage for All Japan, Makiko Terahara, a lawyer registered in Japan and the U.S., has been aiming not only to win same-sex couples the freedom to marry but ultimately to also create a society where no one feels left out.

The Champion of Change Japan Award (CCJA), recognizing her efforts, selected her as one of the five winners in 2020. The CCJA was founded by Atsuko Toko Fish, a philanthropist who has engaged in various social movements in Japan and the U.S. She helped create the Fish Family Foundation to aid immigrants, at-risk youths and people struggling with mental health, and established the award in 2017 to shed light on female leaders in Japan who are dedicated to addressing social issues and needs.

Marriage for All Japan was launched in January 2019 to fully support the five ongoing lawsuits across Japan over the recognition of same-sex marriage, conduct lobbying activities and raise public awareness. Terahara also leads the defense team of one of the five suits.

Having grown up in a family where she was forced to face some serious issues from a young age, she became a lawyer with a strong sense of mission to support those who have difficulty being themselves. Soon after she became independent about a decade ago, after 10 years of experience working for law firms of

different sizes and specialties as well as a global securities firm, she had a life-changing experience of learning deeply about issues of sexual diversity and LGBT rights.

"I felt ashamed of my ignorance, and a sense of guilt. But at the same time, I found much in common in this field with what I have always wanted to achieve through my career," Terahara said, explaining that she began to devote herself to the fight to win the freedom of marriage for same-sex couples on a nonprofit basis while also doing other legal work for a living.

Terahara stressed that freedom of marriage is an issue of human rights. Since not recognizing marriage among a particular group of people denies them a human right, the issue is neither one of balancing pros and cons nor one that the heterosexual majority can ignore. However, the reality is that "Indifference by the majority has led to the neglect and acceptance of discrimination, symbolized by the lack of same-sex marriage" said Terahara. That is why she emphasized that the majority should play its full part in solving this issue. "The Diet is based on the rule of majority — in other words, the majority has the responsibility and the power to change," she said.

At the same time, Terahara feels that the heart of the legal system — senior Diet members and the Supreme Court — is the hardest to change. It is the above-60 generation that Marriage for All Japan needs to approach and convince that they are the ones who are not in line with the opinion of the majority. She said a public opinion poll has shown that the vast majority is in favor of recognizing same-sex marriage and of securing married same-sex couples the same legal rights as married heterosexual couples. "We don't need to try to convince younger generations anymore. The majority is in favor among the people in their 50s or younger," said Terahara.

However, there was significant progress in one of the five lawsuits in March.



Makiko Terahara



Plaintiffs and their lawyers in one of the nation's five lawsuits over same-sex marriage head to Tokyo District Court. MARRIAGE FOR ALL JAPAN

A district court in Sapporo ruled that the government's failure to recognize same-sex marriage is unconstitutional. Terahara considers this landmark ruling a step forward but also regrets the fact that one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuits died without witnessing the victory. "His wish was to hold his partner's hand and to say thank you to him who is legitimately married to him," she said. "Issues of human rights are not something that we can just expect to change someday."

To accelerate changes in society and the law, she strongly urges people to take action. "Silent approval means little — it cannot be distinguished from tolerance of discrimination. If you support our idea, do what you can. Just retweeting our message will make a difference," said Terahara, expressing appreciation to the Champion of Change Japan Award for giving her the opportunity to reach out to more people.

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A business endorsement news conference organized by Marriage for All Japan and two other organizations was held on Nov. 18, 2020. MARRIAGE FOR ALL JAPAN