

[Example of international activities at Kansai University]

## International research on the public impacts of mega sporting events

Assistant Professor Satoko Itani

Faculty of Letters



[ A scene from the spring 2017 event to promote human rights awareness ]

### [Activity Outline]

Main activities	Research activities making use of international networks
Related organizations	University of Toronto and other institutions
Duration	Ongoing since 2009

[Interview with Dr. Itani, Assistant Professor]

—Could you tell us about the background of your activity?

### Dr. Itani

After graduating from high school in Japan, I studied at the Ohio State University. I've always loved sports, and dedicated myself to track and field during my school days in Japan. But because of gender issues, so to speak, such as differences in how male and female athletes were treated or gaps in what was expected of males and females, I felt limited, even demeaned, in doing sports. Although getting involved in physical education or sports was my dream when I was in high school, I wasn't enthusiastic at all about studying sports at a domestic college. In my view, Japanese physical education should be blamed for creating a sporting culture that bothered me so much. Another reason why I went to Ohio is that I vaguely thought around that time that English would be a must in the future. So, considering where to study sports as well as gender issues, an idea came to me—why not go to the States? Looking back, it was a rather simple, and naive high school student-like idea, though (laughter).

During my undergraduate years, I steadily made progress in the study of gender issues in sports, with a focus on cases in North America, while receiving training to be a PE teacher in Ohio. Meanwhile, I came to know about some critical research on sports conducted by a teacher who advised me in academic affairs. I found it very interesting. This research led me to decide to continue studying sports and gender issues at graduate school as a researcher.

I received my master's degree in 2008. Around that time, studies on gender issues in sports started to shed light on problems related to sexuality, such as the seriousness of human rights violations for LGBT athletes. I myself doubted whether just tackling gender equality in the

sporting environment could help solve problems that transgender people were facing, including the exclusion of transgender athletes from sports. I began thinking that unless the challenges of LGBT athletes were addressed, you would not get any conclusive answers to the question, “What is gender equality in sports?”

However, only a few teachers were dealing with these issues at the Ohio State University. So I searched for researchers specializing in this area, and found Professor Heather Sykes at the University of Toronto. I wrote to her asking if it was possible for me to study with her, enclosing my research plans, and she accepted me. That was the beginning of the research that I and Professor Sykes have been involved in.

Now, let me explain why I started to work on social issues caused by the Olympic Games. I knew that there was some, but not much, research on discrimination problems faced by homosexual athletes or on the lack of participation of transgender individuals in sports. My initial study also concerned how LGBT people were engaged in human rights movements and their situation in the sporting environment at that time. In 2009, when I went to the University of Toronto, Canada was scheduled to host the Vancouver Olympic Games the following year. Thus, my interest was to seek ways for the proactive participation of LGBT athletes, assuming the Olympic Games were not free from discrimination issues related to sexual minorities.



[Professor Heather Sykes at the University of Toronto]

Professor Sykes, though, pointed out that it was not only LGBT people who felt unease with mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games. She cast doubt on focusing only on the participation rights of LGBT athletes, without addressing other oppression and elimination problems emerging from the Games. I remain truly grateful to her for giving me this insight. So, I joined Professor Sykes as an assistant researcher in the research she was conducting on the Vancouver Olympic Games from these viewpoints. As the study progressed, human rights issues related to the Games were revealed to be complex and multi-layered just as the professor had indicated. Serious problems, which I had not been aware of, were shown to arise from mega sporting events.

During the seven years I was in Toronto, from 2009 to 2016, critical researches on mega sporting events, focusing not only on gender roles but also on various other aspects, gained impetus in the West. In contrast, in Japan, especially after Tokyo won the bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games, critical researches on the Games have met strong resistance, even though the event could have a great impact on Japanese society. This tendency is found not just among those involved in the Games but also among sports and gender researchers. Noticing this situation, I determined to work toward strengthening the status of this research area in society.

That was the long process I took until reaching my current research theme: the impacts that major sporting events have on people in terms of gender roles and sexuality.

— Could you tell us about this more in detail?

#### **Dr. Itani**

Well, the mass media never deals with this topic, do they? Now that the Olympic Games are regarded as a national commitment, it takes courage to say something critical about the event. It has become hard to make anti-Olympic remarks in Japan. This is why there has been insufficient data and little research relating to it. This situation makes information exchanges with overseas researchers all the more vital.

Although Tokyo serves as the host for the Games in 2020 only, Olympic Games have been held every two years, alternating in summer and winter. That means you cannot just stay in one place for, say, ten years to do research. How should the data and knowledge obtained through the Tokyo Games be utilized in the host cities to follow? How should research outcomes accumulated through the experience of previous host cities be harnessed? To work on these themes effectively requires research cooperation on a global scale.

I mean, research in this field cannot be performed locally in Japan alone, but requires worldwide research cooperation. It is very difficult to theoretically analyze this sort of sporting event that keeps changing venues, in terms of gender. It is also very challenging to share information with researchers abroad on such events and circulate research outcomes. Another hard part is how to contribute to society with research outcomes achieved from examining issues arising during the short period of organizing the Olympic Games, from its venue selection to the actual holding of the event.

—How about writing articles to deliver this information to the public?

**Dr. Itani**

Yes, that is one way. For another path, I organized an open lecture. At this year's spring event at the university to promote human rights awareness, I invited Professor Sykes as a lecturer. I have always felt the need for activities to make known critical research on the Olympic Games for as many people as possible. Writing academic papers is important



but their readership is often limited in number. So, I would like to make the utmost effort in doing these kinds of speaking sessions. Apart from writing academic books, I am also thinking of contributing news columns, for instance.

In the States, Jules Boykoff is actively engaged in this arena. As a professor at Pacific University in Oregon specializing in sports and journalism, he continually contributing articles to newspapers and other media that are capable of delivering information globally, the New York Times or the Guardian, for example. He is very prolific, writing many books as well. Professor Boykoff is a good model for me since he focuses not only on writing academic papers to be accredited in the academic world, but also on contributing to the public with his research outcomes.

And there is Dave Zirin, a sports journalist and co-author with Professor Boykoff. He is not an academic but a very keen sports journalist. They are very close (laughter), and as a team deliver information from the views of a leading sports journalist and a sports researcher. This style of information dissemination is definitely needed in Japan. It's often the case in Japan that academic figures share information with the public only after they are invited by TV programs or other media. In other countries, however, proactive involvement of researchers in journalism has been increasing, especially in the fields of humanities and social sciences. This could be because the public expectation for researchers to repay society is much higher than it is in Japan.

—Have you experienced any difficulties doing this research?

**Dr. Itani**

Well, it is of course important to keep networks both at home and abroad, but it isn't that easy to actively take part in overseas conferences or events, and to build long-term relationships with researchers and activists for exchanging opinions.

—How would you like to develop this program from now and into the future?

**Dr. Itani**

“Mega Sporting Events and Gender” was my presentation theme for the 2017 summer conference of the Japan Society for Sport and Gender Studies. The papers presented in the conference will be published around March 2018.

What I have in mind at the moment is to examine the current situation of people who will most likely be affected by Tokyo’s redevelopment for the 2020 Olympic Games, which is occurring amid the rapid ongoing preparations for the Games. I’ll be collaborating with activists in Tokyo for this project. I also plan to interview researchers and activists who have raised alarms over the Winter Olympics and Paralympics in PyeongChang.



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Research fields	Physical culture of North America and Japan, gender and sexuality in sport, politics in terms of racial and ethnic groups
Information	<a href="http://gakujo.kansai-u.ac.jp/profile/en/87a3987a322eb72e.html">http://gakujo.kansai-u.ac.jp/profile/en/87a3987a322eb72e.html</a>

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