This book introduces a new way of looking at the effects of women’s engagement in religious civil society on their lives by teasing out the complexities of interactions among three important dimensions of civic life: gender, religion and civil society. Rather than focusing on religious beliefs, internalized social norms and responses to externalized constraints, this study explores how women create hybrid solutions in which traditional aspects of gender expectations integrate and evolve in newer practices that push boundaries of traditional gender roles. Approaching faith-based volunteering as a social practice helps downplay the normative role of belief and gender socialization in order to emphasize the binding role of practice.

The main purpose of this chapter is to give readers some sense of the tension between the continuity and changes in cultural ideals and social models Japanese women have been experiencing, an argument that helps outline the context for contemporary women’s engagement in religious civil society. It offers a broad overview of the state of research with a gender perspective in faith-based volunteering in Japan and the main reasons for the overall lack of studies about women in volunteer groups sponsored by religious organizations.

It also explores the slow process through which traditional values, cultural ideals, social models and institutions have adjusted to foster women’s behavioural predispositions toward volunteering. This part also takes into consideration the influence of religiosity and gender on volunteer care work, and discusses whether the volunteer role can be accounted for as gendered in its institutionalization. The discussion focuses on the tradition of maternalism as a consolidated rationale behind Japanese women’s social engagement.

In order to elucidate the significance of such collective activities, the chapter concludes with an exploration of the empowerment discourse in social work. The review explores the conceptual framework appropriate to assessing the extent to which women’s agency in grassroots activities may empower them and how it has an impact on their society and politics.
Understanding Japanese Women’s Faith-Based Volunteering

In Japan, people openly expressing and practicing their religiosity, or adhering to a specific religious group by individual choice, tend to be a minority (Inaba 2011: 15). However, almost 70% of the Japanese assert they perform rituals for their ancestors, celebrate the New Year with a visit to a Shintō shrine and return to their hometown to pay respect to their family tomb during the summer festivity, while 60% think it is important to have a religious spirit (Ishii 2007). Inaba conceptualizes this elusive religious component in Japanese people as “unconscious religiosity” (Inaba 2011) and accounts for it as a grounding cultural element fostering the spirit of relatedness [tsunagari no kankaku], gratitude [okagesama no nen], and harmony [wagō] that characterizes Japanese society (Inaba 2011: 15).1

The act of giving one’s time to help others to contribute to social harmony has a long tradition in Japan. However, altruism in Japanese society nowadays merges several cultural components. These include Neo-Confucian views on the virtues of solidarity for the sake of social harmony and welfare; utilitarian views of constructive actions as good means both for individual moral cultivation and the wellbeing of the community; and the need to give those actions a public expression, which can also enhance an individual’s image in Japanese society (Shimazono 1992c). In religious groups this comes under different names, often hōshi or tsutome [service] to mean the various altruistic acts individuals perform to contribute to the community.

The notion of volunteering and the word borantia are relatively new in Japan.2 Hōshi, the Japanese word to describe volunteering, is widely used both

1 The idea of an elusive religiosity deeply entrenched in the lives of the Japanese was originally conceptualized by Shimazono (2003).

2 Several seminal moments have been identified in the development of the institution of volunteering in post-war Japan. A trend of volunteerism arose in 1979 in response to the intensifying crisis in Indo-China with the boat people from Vietnam and the mass of Cambodian refugees (Avenell 2009: 258). Japanese Buddhist NGOs, like the Buddhist Aid Center, emerged at that time, also partly in response to criticism in the mainstream media that Buddhism had become irrelevant to modern society and that Buddhist priests had no concern for the general wellbeing of people’ (Watts 2004: 417). The second crucial moment was the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, when the paralysis of governmental bodies in responding to the crisis led to a huge and spontaneous outpouring of volunteers, including many religious organisations (Hardacre 2004: 396). In 1997 the oil spill from a sinking Russian tanker off the Japan Sea coast stirred a strong awareness about environmental problems among the Japanese population, with thousands of civilians engaging in cleaning up the polluted area...