Japan Court Rejects Couple’s Request for Different Surnames

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TOKYO (AP) —A Japanese court has dismissed a couple’s appeal of the government’s refusal to register their marriage unless they observe a law that effectively forces women to change their surnames when they marry.

The Tokyo District Court ruled that the couple’s demand is a domestic inquiry that should go to a family court, their lawyers said Friday, Feb. 25. The court, however, did not rule on the legality of the town’s decision.

Emie Kayama and her partner Tsuguo Watanabe are part of a bigger lawsuit seeking the government compensation for upholding the 19th-century law, which they say violates constitutional equality. The main lawsuit is still pending.

In the lawsuit filed Feb. 14, the couple and three women allege that the law on surnames violates constitutional equality and a fundamental right to keep one’s name. They seek a total of 6 million yen ($70,000) in damages from the government for their distress. The plaintiffs planned to appeal Thursday’s ruling. The rest of the lawsuit is still pending.

Their legal battle is drawing attention to the rights of women in a country where they are underrepresented in corporate, academic, and political ranks and still expected to do most of the homemaking and childrearing.

Japan is the only one of the Group of Eight industrialized nations that requires married couples to have the same family name.

In 1996, the Justice Ministry drafted in a bill allowing married couples an option to keep separate surnames. The bill was shelved by conservative lawmakers just before submission to parliament. It has since stalled.