



The Cultural Suppression of Women in Politics

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Introduction

As of 2021, Japan ranked one-hundred and forty-seventh out of one-hundred and fifty-six countries in terms of female representation in government. In the Liberal Democratic Party (the leading political party), women represented a mere ten percent of the members (Takeuchi et al., 2021). When accounting for the total number of lawmakers in Japan, female representation remains identically insignificant, at 9.9% (Takeuchi et al., 2021). To put this in perspective, the global average of women in parliaments is 25.5%, and in many G-7 nations, including France, Italy, and the U.K., the numbers are 39.5%, 35.7%, and 33.9%, respectively (Takeuchi et al., 2021). Thus, Japan lags significantly behind the rest of the world, especially given that it is one of the G-7 nations, the most economically advanced countries in the world. These statistics raise the question of why female representation is so scarce in Japanese politics.

Historical Norms

Due to historically grounded norms, Japanese culture, unfortunately, tends to subordinate women in society, both inside the household and in government. Dating back to the Meiji Era, a strict family structure was established, encouraging women to pursue the role of housewives (Dalton, 2013). This limited women to remaining in the household and taking care of matters that pertained to being a wife and a mother. Soon, being a housewife became a feminine ideal, with society posing it as “synonymous with womanhood” (Dalton, 2013). These norms are still being upheld today, and



their implications can be seen in the Japanese labels of *Shufu* (housewife) and *Seikatsusha* (ordinary citizen/living person), which strictly refer to women, and delineate their importance as limited to the confines of a household. Consequently, these labels force women to uphold their duties at home, preventing them from running for office and holding any political power.

The Cyclical Disadvantages for Female Candidates

The difficulty in countering such inequalities is that it requires more female advocacy, which is precisely the issue at hand. It has been proven that female advocacy in governments has a direct correlation to the effectiveness of policy changes that benefit women in society (Shim, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial that Japan meets an adequate level of female representation in government.

However, the current political system in Japan does not make it easy for women to run for office. The labels such as *Shufu* and *Seikatsusha* restrict women's ability to pursue careers outside the home, especially ones that require such dedication as a political position. Additionally, once women do obtain a position as a politician, they need to gain the support of the people, as any politician would. However, to do so, they are often pressured to promote the suppressive gender norms that most Japanese society is accustomed to (Dalton, 2013). It is crucial for female candidates to serve the interests of such a politically conservative society. So, naturally, an unproductive cycle is created in which women struggle to pursue political careers, and those who are successful can not effectively advocate for women's rights and needs.

Illustrious Female Leaders

Despite the political disadvantages that women face in Japan, few prominent women prove to be successful. Yuriko Koike, the governor of Tokyo, was the first female governor of the metropolitan. Overcoming many instances of gender discrimination, Koike gained considerable popularity among Japanese citizens. When she first ran for governor, the LDP had

refused to support her candidacy, instead choosing to sponsor a separate male candidate (Rich, 2016). Nevertheless, Koike won, beginning





her journey as a leading female politician in Japan. It is widely agreed that Koike's powerful position in Japanese politics is almost revolutionary and symbolic of the progression of Japanese culture (Rich, 2016).

This year, Tomoko Yoshino was elected as the first female leader of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation ("Rengo") making strides for women in politics (Dooley & Ueno, 2022). Women in Japan face many challenges in the workplace, including wage gaps, sexual harassment, and punishment for maternity leaves, making it crucial for unions to provide proper support for women in the workplace. However, Japanese unions have not been prioritizing the protection of women, causing many women to give up, discouraging them from pursuing jobs outside the home. Fortunately, with Yoshino as the new union confederation leader, her female perspective shaped by experiences of gender discrimination will hopefully change the course of women's protection in the workplace.

Conclusion

Japanese culture surrounding gender norms has been upheld by Japanese society since the time that they were first established. Although the suppression of women is recognized as being outdated, the strong cultural history behind the gender norms, as well as the conservative population, make it



hard for women to escape such conventions. A direct consequence of this is the female under-representation in the Japanese government. This is a crucial issue for Japan to address in order to ensure the welfare and equality of women, which has been seen in the leadership of figures such as Koike and Yoshino. Nonetheless, Japan is implementing new policies regarding gender equality in the workforce in 2022, and hopefully, new measures will be taken to improve gender equality in politics as well (*News Navigator: What Is the UN's Gender Equality Goal and How Is Japan Doing?*, n.d.).





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