

Women and Representation in Japan

THE CAUSES OF POLITICAL INEQUALITY

MIKIKO ETO

Hosei University, Japan

Abstract

Japan's high level of socio-economic advancement notwithstanding, the level of women's representation in Japan lags behind that in not only other advanced countries but also many developing countries. This article aims to elucidate the causes of the under-representation of women in Japan. Preceding studies suggest that multiple, intertwining factors have had a collective influence on the number of women representatives. Based on these studies, I highlight four factors which affect women's representation: the electoral system; socio-political culture; electoral quotas; and the activities and attitudes of women concerning their own representation. I discuss how these factors have influenced the under-representation of Japanese women, in effect demonstrating that all the above factors have had negative impacts. Among these, the most serious obstacle is women's lack of enthusiasm for a larger political presence, which is sustained by Japanese political culture and social customs. I argue that strong women's voices calling for more women representatives are the necessary basis for measures to improve the under-representation of women.

Keywords

electoral system, gender quotas, Japanese women, socio-political culture, under-representation

INTRODUCTION

Since Japanese women first exercised their right to stand as candidates in the general election of 1946, the proportion of women in politics has increased moderately (Figure 1).¹ Japanese women currently make up 11.3 per cent of the Lower House or House of Representatives, 17.4 per cent of the Upper

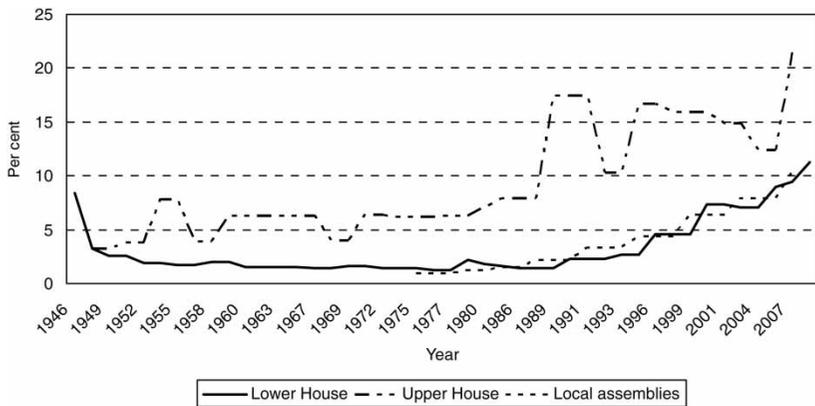


Figure 1 Changes in the proportions of elected female candidates in Japanese national and local elections
 Source: The Gender Equality Bureau and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in Japan

House or House of Councillors and 10.4 per cent of the local assemblies. The level of Japanese women’s presence in politics lags behind that in not only other advanced countries but also many developing countries,² despite Japan’s high level of socio-economic advancement. This article aims to elucidate the causes of women’s under-representation in Japan.

Preceding studies suggest that one factor alone can hardly explain the decisive reason for women’s under-representation – rather, multiple, intertwining factors have had a collective influence on the number of female representatives. These studies³ have identified key factors affecting women’s representation, such as the electoral system, party attitudes, socio-political culture and electoral gender quotas. I suggest that additional factors, namely social policy and women’s movements, should also be taken into account, although they have not previously received much attention. When women engage in public activities, women-friendly social policy is indispensable to enable them to balance their gender roles with their activities outside the home (Siim 2000). Women themselves have had significant effects on their governments and political parties by demanding the introduction of positive measures for improving their representation – without the strong demands of women, no significant gains can be made.

Applying these factors to the case of Japan, I will investigate the reasons for the under-representation of Japanese women. First, I will examine how the Japanese electoral system discourages women from getting involved in politics, unpacking the three different institutional levels of the Japanese legislative process: the Lower House; the Upper House; and local assemblies. Second, I will discuss the impact of Japanese socio-political culture and social policy on women’s political activities. In my discussion of social

policy, I will refer to models of welfare states which frame social services. The third section will highlight the two interrelated issues of party attitudes and electoral gender quotas, as the quota is the most powerful potential measure in parties' positive actions for women. I will look into government policies and party initiatives which have created obstacles to the introduction of electoral gender quotas. Finally, I will explore the attitudes of Japanese women themselves regarding the candidacy of other women. In doing so, the article will demonstrate that all the aforementioned factors have had negative effects on the advancement of women's representation in Japan. I conclude that the most critical factor hindering the representation of Japanese women is that, in the current Japanese political and cultural environment, women are reluctant to effectively demand political equality.

Several authors have previously studied the same subject. John Hickman (1997) and Ray Christensen (2000) focused on Japan's electoral system, taking into account district magnitude, candidate opportunity and candidate nomination in their assessments of the impact of the now-defunct multi-member district system with single non-transferable vote (SNTV) on women's representation. However, their empirical research was unable to account successfully for the under-representation of Japanese women. Catherine Bochel and Hugh Bochel (2005) have since investigated how political culture affects the low proportion of female local assembly members. Another essay by Christensen (2008) explored the reasons for the under-representation of women in the Lower House by focusing on electoral systems, party endorsements of women candidates and societal factors, particularly in Japan's long-standing ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Kazuki Iwanaga (1998, 2008), meanwhile, concluded that three factors – the electoral system, party competition and Japanese culture – constrain the progress of women's representation in Japan. Some of my findings complement the results of the latter three studies, but this article is distinguished from their analyses not only in my wider international perspective but also in my emphasis on the consciousness and expectations of women.

The political representation of women has been a crucial subject in the global study of gender and politics, with numerous feminist scholars worldwide seeking to dissect and define it. In this international academic circle, however, Japan is conspicuously absent – feminist scholarship in Japan, it seems, is unique among developed countries in that it has not successfully attempted to tackle the issue of women's representation or to relate this issue to wider international debates. One of the two goals of the present article is to bridge this gap. My second goal is to offer a holistic account of the diverse factors affecting women's representation in Japan, bringing together several factors identified by preceding studies. In other words, my purpose is to synthesize and further develop the feminist ideas already established in the field rather than to propose a new theoretical framework. I begin by looking at the effects of the electoral system in Japan.

Empirically comparative studies identify a strong correlation between the type of electoral system and the level of women's representation achieved. According to Pippa Norris (2004: 39), electoral systems worldwide are categorized into 'three primary families', namely, majoritarian, proportional representation (PR) and combined. Combined systems, composed of both majoritarian and PR elements, are divided into 'combined-dependent', in which both electoral forms are interconnected, and 'combined-independent', where the two parts are implemented separately but in parallel (Norris 2004: 55). Using the data of 182 countries in 2000, Norris (2004: 187) observed that PR and combined-dependent systems are more women-friendly than majoritarian and combined-independent systems. Other studies (e.g. Rule and Zimmerman 1992; Darcy *et al.* 1994; Norris 1996) point out that, even in majoritarian systems, district magnitude – the number of seats per district – influences the outcome of women's representation. Multi-member districts, which provide two or more elected seats in each district, are better for women than single-member districts, where only one representative wins in each district, because 'parties strive for an overall balance' (Blais and Massicotte 1996: 75–6).

The Japanese national parliament, known as the Diet, is a bicameral legislature. The Lower House is more powerful than the Upper House; votes by the Lower House precede those by the Upper House and only the Lower House can pass a vote of no confidence in the Cabinet. Until 1993, Lower House elections were implemented by multi-member districts with SNTV in which three, four or five members per district were elected, with one ballot per voter. In January 1994, the system was reformed and a new combined-independent system was put into place. Of the 480 Lower House seats, 300 are elected by a single-member district system with a plurality or First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system – that is, one seat is allocated to each of the 300 districts, and the winner in each district is the candidate with the most votes – and the rest by a PR system with a closed-party list in which the nation is divided into eleven broad regions and each voter casts his or her ballot for a party. In the new system, party-authorized candidates who are running in single-member districts and are judged by party leaders to be important candidates can be nominated in the PR system. Even after being defeated in single-member districts, therefore, such dual-nominated candidates still have an opportunity to be elected under the PR system according to the number of votes gained by the candidate and their party. However, dual-nominated candidates will lose the election if they fail to gain the necessary number of votes or if their parties are defeated.

The new system appears to have had no negative effects on women's representation. In fact, the proportion of female Lower House members has shown gradual growth since the reform, as demonstrated in Figure 1. The incremental increase in the number of women in the Lower House is facilitated

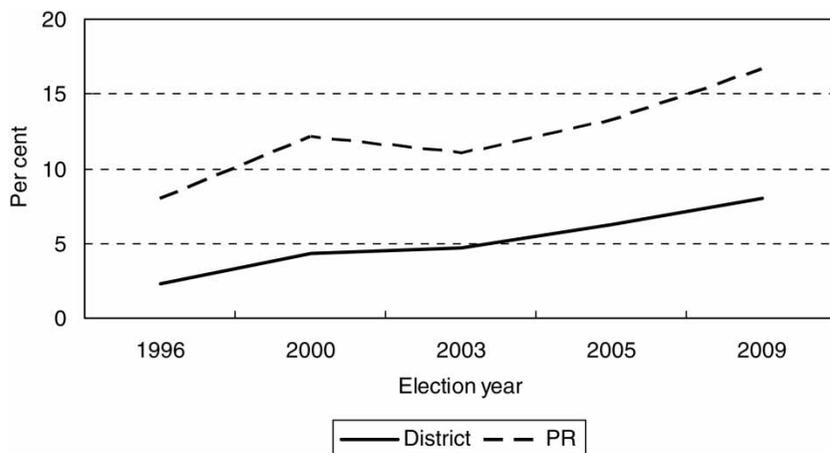


Figure 2 Different proportions of elected female candidates between district and PR in the Lower House elections

Source: The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in Japan

by the PR system; in all five general elections after the reform, women candidates have been more successful in the PR lists than in single-member districts, as Figure 2 shows. When the Japanese government began to discuss single-member districts, minority parties opposed the new electoral system, insisting that it would deprive them of their presence in the Lower House (Curtis 1999: 141). Instead, the minority parties and their supporters proposed the PR system. The introduction of a combined-independent system was thus the result of a compromise between the opposing forces (Wada 1996: 2).

Since PR seems to mitigate the negative effect of single-member district elections on women's candidacy, women and minority parties were able to secure their presence in the Lower House under the new system. In single-member district elections, the competition among candidates is so severe that parties choose candidates who have a fair chance of winning, such as incumbents or their successors. Parties are reluctant to nominate newcomers, particularly women who have traditionally been excluded from male-dominated political networks. Even though female newcomers can run in single-member districts, it is difficult for them to be elected due to the limited political resources at their disposal. In the general election of September 2005, for example, the LDP endorsed twenty-two female candidates for single-member districts. Of these, two former parliamentarians who had failed in the previous election as well as eight incumbents were successful. Out of twelve newcomers, however, only four were elected in this way. Since the LDP swept the board at the election, however, eight of the defeated women, who had been also nominated on the PR list with higher rankings, were finally elected.

The Japanese case, then, contradicts the general perception that the multi-member district system is a more women-friendly electoral measure – the

multi-member system previously practised in Japan did not facilitate an increase in the number of women representatives. Hickman (1997: 21), after empirical analysis of the effect of this prior system on the candidacy and election of women, concluded that: '[T]he empirical findings are especially telling against the hypothesized district magnitude effect' and that such findings 'might be interpreted as evidence that increasing district magnitude under SNTV has a negative effect on the election of women.' Christensen (2000: 45) also noted that: 'Japan's multimember districts were hostile to women candidates'. Why, then, was the outcome of the electoral system previously practised in the Japanese Lower House seemingly incompatible with the expectations of many feminist scholars? The main reason is the period in which the system was implemented.

In the male-dominated political culture of Japan, women themselves, as well as political parties and the general public, have typically thought of politics as men's business; it was not until the late 1980s when Japanese people came to realize the important role women played in politics. In the local elections of 1987, a women's consumer movement group, called the Life Club Co-operative Society (or Life Club), which had gained its first local assembly seat in 1979, increased its number of seats significantly, and the victory drew public attention. The success of the Life Club demonstrated that even ordinary women could get into male-dominated local assemblies (Eto 2005: 323–7). Public attention to women's representation grew subsequently with the Upper House election of July 1989, in which twenty-two women members of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) were newly elected. The sudden and unsettling increase in the number of women parliamentarians earned them the tongue-in-cheek soubriquet in the media of 'Madonnas', which means special women who are admired by men – like idols or stars – in Japan. Moreover, the United Nations Beijing Conference in 1995 gave Japanese feminists an impetus to increase the number of women legislators. Improving women's representation was becoming an important item on the feminist agenda, and tens of women's action groups emerged aiming to increase the number of women legislators (Eto 2005: 323–7).

At the same time that Japanese society began to pay more attention to women's representation, reforms were under way to make the Lower House less friendly to the candidacy of women. The present electoral system was introduced after only a few years' discussion and no serious research (Wada 1996: 2). Two-and-a-half years before its enactment, female activists for women's rights began to fear that the new system would be even more disadvantageous to women's candidacy. A nationwide alliance of fifty women's groups, which had been set up to campaign to put pressure on the Government to adopt the United Nations resolution proclaiming International Women's Year as an internal policy, conducted a questionnaire asking forty-six women parliamentarians about the single-member district system in September 1991. The survey revealed that thirty-four out of forty respondents thought the single-member district system discouraged women from running for public office

(*Asahi Newspaper* 1992). Women in the alliance petitioned the Government to withdraw the proposal for a single-member district system (*Yomiuri Newspaper* 1992). Subsequently, in late December 1993, seven women's groups held a public meeting to discuss Japanese women's under-representation and the electoral rules, inviting several women parliamentarians (*Yomiuri Newspaper* 1994).

These women's groups and events, however, neither mobilized a significant number of women to the movement nor had a substantial influence on the general public – indeed, their reactions to the Government's reform proposal were too late to stop it. The previous multi-member district system, as Gerald Curtis (1999: 141) states, 'had the advantage of infusing new blood into national politics'. Given the changing attitudes towards women in government, more progress in Japanese women's representation might have been expected if the previous electoral system had remained in place – in response to women's demands, parties might have nominated women as secondary candidates in multi-member districts. The more opportunities for candidacy women have, the more their representation increases, and in multi-member districts, even secondary candidates have an opportunity to win. This assumption is demonstrated by the Upper House and local assembly elections.

Elections in both the Upper House and local assemblies are still operated according to the multi-member district system. The Upper House electoral system is comprised of a combination of multi-member districts with SNTV and PR: the former is divided into forty-seven districts, each prefecture being a district; the latter constitutes a single constituency nationwide. Every three years, half of the fixed 242 seats are elected, seventy-three by the multi-member districts and forty-eight by PR. In the multi-member districts, the number of seats in each district ranges from one to five depending on population: among the forty-seven districts, eighteen have plural seats and the rest have only one seat. The biggest district is Tokyo Metropolis with five seats; five other urban regions have three seats each. In districts holding plural seats, parties often nominate women as their secondary or primary candidates.⁴

Whereas the Lower House represents the local interests of each constituency, the Upper House pursues broader public concerns. Parties tend to nominate candidates with diverse backgrounds and experiences, encouraging the inclusion of women on the PR lists. As a result, the proportion of elected women candidates in Upper House elections has been consistently higher than in the Lower House, as Figure 1 indicates above. The proportion of female Upper House parliamentarians has shown a particularly significant increase since the election of 1989, although there have been ups and downs. Clearly, the Upper House electoral system is more supportive of women's candidacy than the Lower House. In the latest Upper House election of July 2007, the proportion of elected female candidates reached 21.5 per cent.

In local assemblies, in contrast, Japan has a very low proportion of women representatives, particularly when compared with most other countries (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific n.d.).

The number of female representatives, however, varies according to the different type of local assembly. Japanese local governments are comprised of a two-tiered structure, with forty-seven prefectures (similar to counties) and 1,823 municipalities. The municipalities, regarded as the basic governmental entities, are divided into four categories: general cities; designated cities; Special Wards of Tokyo; and towns/villages, which number 765, 17, 23, and 1,018, respectively.⁵ Based on this categorization, Figure 3 presents differences in the proportion of women representatives among the five types of local assemblies.

As of 2007, the Special Wards have the highest level of women's representation at 24.7 per cent, the designated cities have the second highest at 17.2 per cent and the general cities are third at 11.8 per cent. The proportions in prefectures and towns/villages are both less than 10 per cent: 8.0 per cent and 7.7 per cent, respectively. The low level of women's representation in these regions is due partly to the differences in the number of seats allocated to each district. In general cities, the Special Wards and towns/villages, the area governed by each municipality comprises a single constituency. The constituencies of prefectures and designated cities are divided into several districts according to their administrative demarcation. The number of seats in each district is different; prefectural assembly seats are limited to at most three, though there are some exceptions, and designated cities have around ten seats on average. In other municipal assemblies, the number of seats varies, ranging from fifty to twenty. Densely populated districts like the Special Wards secure a larger number of seats, whereas districts with small populations such as towns/villages secure around twenty seats or less.

Differences in the number of fixed seats correspond closely to the varying extents of women's representation in local assemblies: the larger number of seats allocated to the local assembly district, the higher the proportion of

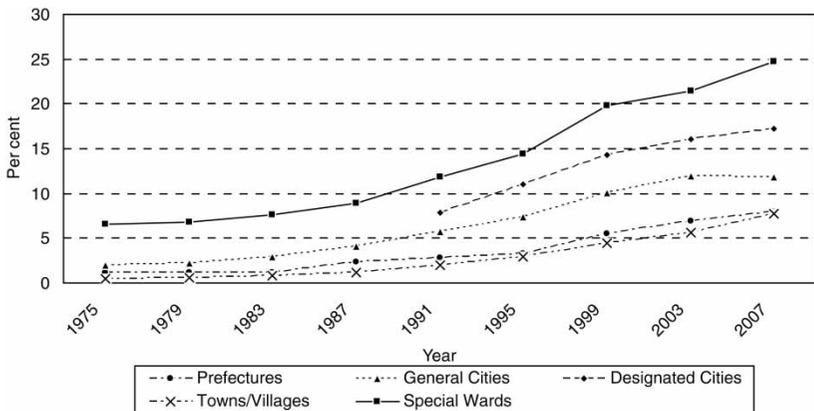


Figure 3 Changes in the proportion of female members in five types of local assemblies
Source: The Gender Equality Bureau and Cabinet Office in Japan

female representatives. At the prefectural level, the number of fixed seats per district is few, and electoral competition among candidates is fierce – prefectural assembly elections are the most competitive local assembly elections. As noted earlier, this intense competition creates a situation more advantageous to incumbents and their successors than to new candidates. In the Special Wards and other densely populated cities, in contrast, assembly districts secure a relatively large number of seats, resulting in less competitive election environments in which women can more easily run and be elected.

In general, candidates in municipal assembly elections have a better chance of winning than those in national parliament and prefectural assembly elections; this is also true for women. Comparison of the probability of female candidates' success in recent elections at the municipal, prefectural and national levels reveals that more than 80 per cent of all female municipal assembly candidates, around 40 per cent of female prefectural candidates and 20 to 30 per cent of female national candidates are successfully elected.⁶ The greater possibility of success for women running in municipal elections contributes to the relatively higher proportion of female assembly members in the Special Wards and densely populated cities, and the higher number of women running in these municipal assembly elections assures a steady increase in the number of women elected. In sparsely populated municipal assemblies, on the other hand, the smaller number of women candidates limits advancements in women's representation. What prevents women from running? Japanese political culture and the socioeconomic status of Japanese women, it seems, are to blame.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING WOMEN

Cultural and social structure affects women's presence in politics. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2003) identify social modernization and cultural change as necessary conditions for gender equality, though these societal shifts alone are not sufficient. Through cross-national analyses based on the data of the World Values Survey (WVS), they illustrate that social progress and modernization orient people's values and attitudes towards gender equality. Categorizing the countries surveyed by the WVS into three types (post-industrial, industrial and agrarian) (2003: 29–48), Inglehart and Norris (2003: 11) argue that post-industrial countries usually attain higher gender equality scores than industrial and agrarian countries. Gender equality spurs increases in women's political influence.

Inglehart and Norris (2003: 34–5), however, mark Japan as a peculiar case, noting that 'all of the postindustrial nations, with the important exception of Japan, are . . . most strongly in favour of gender equality'. High levels of economic growth and human development notwithstanding, Japanese attitudes towards gender equality remain underdeveloped. The main reason for this gap is the traditional culture of Japan, which has its origins in Buddhism and

Confucianism; Japan is the only post-industrial country without a Christian cultural background (Inglehart and Norris 2003: 65). Even after the modernization of aspects on the surface of Japanese society, such as economic activities and socio-political institutions, social values and popular attitudes derived from deep social traditions remain largely intact. Traditional Japanese culture is still influential in shaping the values of modern Japanese, especially in rural areas with ageing populations.

Hideko Takeyasu (2002), who conducted a fact-finding survey attempting to elucidate causes behind the difficulty of female candidacy in local elections, found that women confronted three obstacles in running for public office: women's own consciousness of their gender roles; relatives' opposition to their candidacy; and community bias against the engagement of women in politics. Obstacles such as these are much more pronounced in sparsely populated rural regions, where traditional values and conservative thinking tend to remain and put a brake on women's motivation. Such a repressive cultural climate is less widespread in urban regions – the Special Wards in central Tokyo, for example, the most urban, densely populated areas in Japan, have a social openness and flexibility that allow women to be more freely involved in politics. It is no surprise that the Special Wards have the highest proportion of women assembly representatives in Japan.

In sparsely populated municipalities, in contrast, both traditional culture and political custom exclude women from local politics. Most municipal governments in rural regions have for a long time been financially dependent on the central government – towns/villages with ageing populations cannot sustain their administrative budget without state subsidies. Politicians in these regions therefore go to great lengths to build cordial relationships with the central political elite in the ruling party. Local assembly members belonging to conservative blocs tend to support LDP candidates in national elections and, in exchange for their support, the LDP rewards local politicians by allotting generous state subsidies for the municipal budget and by providing public works for boosting local economies. Material benefits like these ensure the re-election of the central elite as well as of the local assembly members allied to them, and their seats are passed to their successors after they retire. The vicious circle of local electoral customs thus makes new candidates from outside conventional political networks – including women – difficult to elect.

Like small rural municipalities, provincial prefectures also frequently suffer from financial shortage, causing a strong interdependent relationship to develop between prefecture assembly politicians and the ruling party. In addition, serving as a prefectural assembly politician is seen as career-enhancing, a stepping stone towards national election candidacy, which is managed exclusively by the so-called 'old boys' networks'. Along with the fewer numbers of seats allocated to each constituency, these factors discourage women from getting involved in prefectural politics; however, the proportion of female representation in all prefectural assemblies varies slightly by the

degree of urbanization as well as population size. The highest proportion is Tokyo Metropolitan assembly, with twenty-four (18.9 per cent) women out of 127 members. The prefectural assemblies with no or few female representatives are concentrated in sparsely populated, conservative provinces (Ichikawa-fusae-kinenkai 2008).

In addition to an adverse socio-cultural climate, modern political practices conducted in accordance with norms defined by men further alienate women and limit women's representation. Japanese Diet members, for example, devote their entire lives to ongoing Diet sessions and maintaining their constituency bases for upcoming elections. Effectively, male parliamentarians sustain their political activities at the cost of their personal lives, a working style possible only if the parliamentarians' partners take complete responsibility for all aspects of family life. This male-defined political pattern is incompatible with the lives of ordinary women. Until 2000, for example, there was no maternity protection policy for pregnant parliamentarians.

The Labour Standards Law established in 1947 provides maternity leave for pregnant working women; however, the law was not considered applicable to female parliamentarians. While pregnancy was not unheard of in the Lower House (independent member Tenkoko Sonoda had a baby in 1949), there had been no pregnant Upper House representatives until LDP member Seiko Hashimoto became pregnant with her first baby in early 2000. Some male LDP members attacked Hashimoto, arguing that her pregnancy would negatively affect her political performance, and they asked her to resign from the House. Nonetheless, the LDP soon set up a meeting to discuss maternity leave for Diet members. Finally, in March 2000, the Diet regulation law was amended, granting female parliamentarians the right to maternity leave. The maternity leave issue illustrates that the Japanese government, with its male-defined mindset, had not anticipated the possibility of expectant mothers in the Parliament. Women have thus been forced to assimilate into a male world in order to become part of such a political community (Young 1990: 114–21).

It is questionable, however, whether many Japanese women have the inclination to assimilate in this way. A survey on gender gaps in political participation in Japan⁷ revealed that women are less interested in politics than men are. According to the survey, 33 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women answered that they had a considerable interest in politics; furthermore, 5 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women indicated that they were indifferent to politics (Yamada 2007: 271). Masahiro Yamada (2007: 274, my translation), a member of the survey project team, explains the reason for Japanese women's disinterest in politics with a rational choice theory: 'women do not see that their interests are served by their involvement in politics and they perceive political work as relatively unrewarded'. Yamada does not mention why women think this, but one interpretation is that they understand that politics is a male-defined world divorced from their everyday lives.

According to a comparative survey on the division of labour by gender in seven countries (the Philippines, Japan, the USA, Germany, South Korea, the

UK and Sweden), the percentage of women surveyed in each country who agree with the notion that 'men should go out to work and women should stay at home to look after the family' is 44.8 per cent, 36.8 per cent, 18.1 per cent, 14.7 per cent, 13.2 per cent, 9.7 per cent and 5.4 per cent, respectively (as of 2002).⁸ Japan is thus the second highest scoring country on this question after the Philippines. The survey also indicates that the gender consciousness of Japanese women is changing, as the percentage of the women who agreed with this notion was 55.6 per cent a decade ago. However, even now, one in three Japanese women and almost half (46.5 per cent) of men are still confined to traditional gender roles. In a conservative social environment such as this, even women who are liberated from traditional gender consciousness may find it difficult to act on their perceptions and beliefs.

Along with an egalitarian political culture, women-friendly social policies are necessary to encourage women to enter the political world. Working women require day-nurseries and nursing services for elderly people to balance their jobs with care for their families, as such domestic responsibilities often fall on their shoulders. In Japan, a public nursery system and publicly provided nursing services for ailing elderly people have been established; the former was introduced in 1947 and has expanded since the 1970s, and the latter system was introduced in 2000. Despite these social services, however, Japanese social policies are still apparently inadequate to support the active public life of women. The pattern of Japanese women's participation in the labour market is characterized by the so-called 'M-shaped curve' (Figure 4). Many Japanese working women in their late twenties and early

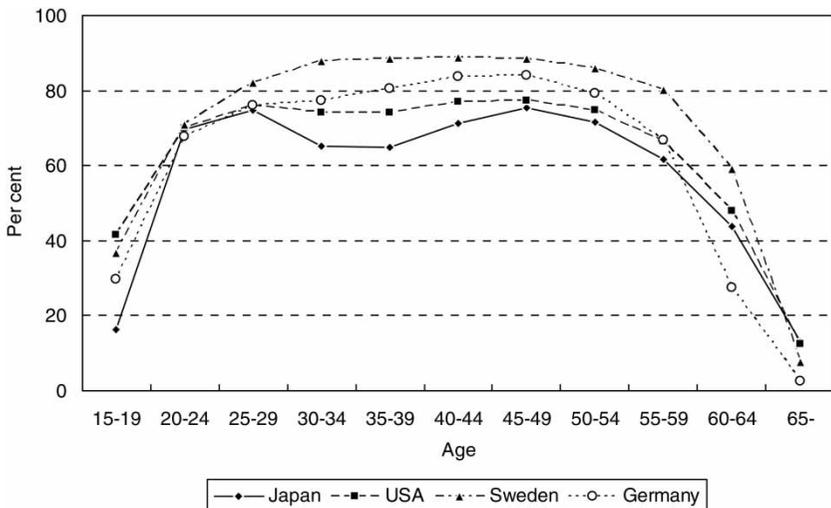


Figure 4 Women's participation in the labour market classified by age, in Japan, the USA, Sweden and Germany
 Source: The Gender Equality Bureau and Cabinet Office in Japan

thirties resign from their full-time jobs to raise children, returning to the workplace in part-time positions when their children are in their teens. This pattern is different from the West, where the proportion of women in the labour force remains quite consistent from the early twenties to the late fifties, as illustrated in Figure 4.

In many countries, the 'dual breadwinner' welfare model underpins women's political life as well as their active participation in the labour market (Siim 2000: 121–4). The dual breadwinner model provides necessary social welfare services for full-time working mothers and posits a new social norm that the basic social unit is not the family but the individual, meaning social insurance and taxation target each adult equally. In a dual breadwinner society, husbands and wives are equal partners, sharing financial and domestic responsibilities. The dual breadwinner model has contributed to the high level of women's representation in Scandinavian countries.

The Japanese welfare state, in contrast, has adopted the 'male breadwinner' model. In this model, the basic unit of both taxation and social insurance is the family, and wives are categorized as dependants. The Japanese male breadwinner norm discourages women from engaging in public life both financially and psychologically. Non-employed wives enjoy generous benefits, including social insurance services and large income tax deductions, without making any contributions of their own; because working people with annual incomes exceeding ¥1,300,000 (approximately US\$13,000) must pay social insurance premiums themselves, a married working woman earning little more than ¥1,300,000 will have hardly any disposable income after these public expenses. If a woman makes ¥1,030,000 (\$10,300) or more annually, she loses the right to be deducted as a dependant on her husband's income tax – a deduction of ¥380,000 (\$3,800) per year. Because few married women with small children are able to get high-paying jobs, it seems natural that they would wish to stay at home – or limit their income to less than ¥1,030,000 per year – rather than abandon their benefits.

The male breadwinner norm, moreover, puts pressure on young mothers. The Japanese welfare state adheres to the belief that, for the health and emotional well-being of children, mothers themselves should look after their children for at least the first three years of life. Japanese socio-political culture therefore does not encourage women with children to pursue careers in the public sphere. As Christensen (2008: 229) points out, the under-representation of women in politics is one manifestation of Japan's social and cultural rigidity.

POSITIVE MEASURES FOR WOMEN

High levels of socio-economic development and democratic political culture, as well as an electoral system accessible to women, provide important foundations for gender equality in politics. A stronger measure, one enabling

many more women to be legislators, however, is the introduction of electoral gender quotas by political parties or the Government. Party-based gender quotas for electoral candidates have spurred increases in the number of women representatives, while legal gender quotas, prescribed by constitutional amendments or electoral law, have proven more effective in rapidly increasing the number of women legislators.

In addition to the active efforts of the UN, which have stimulated countries with extremely low proportions of female politicians to enact quota laws, a cluster of factors in the 1980s and 1990s created a political environment compatible with the enactment of quotas – the Women’s Conferences in Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995), for example, required member states to intensify efforts to ensure the equal participation of women in all national and local legislative bodies, aiming to increase the proportion of women in decision-making positions to at least 30 per cent.

Such international pressures have influenced Japan. The Basic Law for Gender Equality in Society (BLGES) in 1999 and the Protection Law against Domestic Violence in 2001 were reactions to pressures from the UN and Japanese women’s groups that pushed the Government to implement the Beijing Platform (Gelb 2003: 4–10; Eto 2005: 322). The BLGES aims to foster gender equality in society, stipulating that national and local governments should conceive of basic and local plans, respectively, to implement policies for mitigating gender inequality. The basic plan for gender equality in society, however, merely stipulates that women’s participation in policy-making processes be enlarged. The Headquarters for Promoting Gender Equality, the main policy machinery for women in Japan, formulated a more concrete action programme that aims to increase the proportion of women members in national advisory councils to 33.3 per cent by March 2011. According to the White Paper on gender equality (Danjo-kyodo-sankaku-kyoku 2008), the number of female advisory council members has been steadily increasing, reaching 32.3 per cent in 2007.

Japan’s response to UN requirements has targeted advisory councils exclusively; it has never aimed actively to increase the number of female legislators. The advisory council is an influential body in Japanese policy making that aims to balance the differing objectives of diverse interest groups. As a result of deliberation, a policy draft is often revised in order to reach a compromise between opposing interests. As such, advisory council members can exert some influence on policy making, and increasing the number of women council members is meaningful in the Japanese political context; however, women appointed to council have neither legal legitimacy nor genuine power in legislative bodies.

True gender equality in politics can be achieved by increasing the number of women legislators. It would be unrealistic, however, for a Japanese government, which works within a liberal framework built onto universal equal rights for all, to adopt a policy that treats women favourably. In liberal democracies, after all, legal gender quotas invite much controversy (e.g. Squires

1996; Mansbridge 2005: 629–35; Bacchi 2006). In addition, as discussed earlier, the Japanese majoritarian electoral system makes differentiated treatment difficult. Nevertheless, there are some Japanese political parties that have taken steps towards improving women's representation.

In Western European countries, four conditions indicate the need for electoral gender quotas within political parties: women's active involvement inside and outside parties, type of electoral system, competition among parties, and party characteristics (Caul 2001; Kittilson 2006: 50–66). The actions of women in large groups and individual women legislators alike put pressure on parties to increase their numbers of female representatives (Caul 2001: 1215–6; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005: 27; Kittilson 2006: 61–5). Among the various electoral systems, the party-list PR system is most suited to gender quotas for electoral candidates (Caul 2001: 1216). When electoral competition between parties becomes intense, each party is sensitive to its rival's electoral policies – soon after the implementation of gender quotas by one party, others follow in fear of losing female supporters (Short 1996; Caul 2001: 1216; Kittilson 2006: 61). In addition, leftist parties are more likely to adopt quotas than liberal or conservative parties, and newer parties tend to introduce quotas sooner than older parties (Caul 2001: 1220–1; Kittilson 2006: 59–61).

The Japan New Party (JNP), established in May 1992, is an example of a Japanese political party adopting the idea of gender quotas. However, this was not in response to the demands of the women's movement. Instead, the party's founders were concerned that the decidedly old-fashioned parties established in Japan could not cope with the stresses of globalization, and they realized the need for a new party totally different in ideology, organization and mobilization from any other. The JNP therefore sought to steer a unique course in its party management (Nakai 1997: 35–7). As part of its efforts to support women's political empowerment, the party even started a school to teach women political affairs (Nakai 1997: 59). The party's most innovative measures, however, which no other party had practised at that time, were implementation of the quota policy and public advertisement of candidacy recruitment. The gender quota was applied only to party machinery, not to electoral candidates; the platform provided that more than 20 per cent of party executive and committee positions would be held by women, and that this proportion would be raised to 40 per cent by 2000 (Nakai 1997: 59).

The Upper House election of 1992 was the first election in which the JNP participated, and four candidates won seats. In the Lower House election of 1993, thirty-six JNP candidates were elected. Among these successful candidates were one woman in the Upper House and two in the Lower House. In a reflection of the political powerlessness of women caused by their limited political experience, only one woman was appointed to the JNP executive committee, despite the party's women-friendly course of action. The JNP dissolved in December 1994, and its policy of gender quotas in party machinery failed to inspire other parties to follow suit.

In the 1990s, Japanese politics underwent repeated party realignment (Otake 2000). Fourteen new parties were established between 1992 and 2000. Unlike their European counterparts, the new Japanese parties, with the exception of the JNP, were all offshoots of the LDP. Forty-four male LDP parliamentarians who were discontented with the party's management set up two parties, the New Party Harbinger and the Japan Renewal Party (JRP), in 1993. These two parties split, and those parties in turn split, giving rise to eleven parties in total – in this context, Curtis (1999: 25) notes that 'it was virtually impossible to keep track of changing party names and party affiliations of Diet members'. Such a crowded pattern of new party establishment prevented severe rivalry among emerging parties, and this competition-free environment in turn failed to attract new supporters, especially women. Rapidly emerging parties also failed to form long-range electoral strategies because they were busy with immediate alliances and ruptures, and of the eleven new parties, only one, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), survives to the present day.

Established in 1996, the DPJ is a hybrid and ideologically ambiguous party that includes former members of the JRP, the New Party Harbinger and the Japan Socialist Party (JSP). In 1999 the DPJ introduced a modest women-friendly policy, called the Women Support Fund (WSF), which provided female candidates at national and local levels with partial election campaign funds (see Democratic Party of Japan 1999). The DPJ became the largest opposition party at this time, and thus introduced the WSF policy to distinguish itself from the then-ruling LDP. Although it did not incorporate gender quotas into its policy framework, the DPJ appears to have actively recruited women candidates in recent elections. The party endorsed thirty-four women in the Upper House election of July 2007 and forty-six women in the Lower House election of August 2009 as its candidates. Of these candidates, fourteen and forty, respectively, were elected.

Unlike the LDP, which has a well-organized recruitment machine, it is difficult for new parties like the DPJ to find forthcoming electoral candidates. To recruit competent candidates, the DPJ introduced a public advertisement measure inspired by the JNP; as a result, people with diverse backgrounds, including women, applied for candidacy. Moreover, in the August 2009 election, the DPJ's women candidates were seen by voters as 'challengers' of the political status quo. The DPJ, seeking to gain power,⁹ spotlighted its fresh line-up of candidates in order to contrast its political reformist style with the ruling LDP, which by comparison looked like more of the same. The DPJ thus used women candidates as symbols of their political strategy (Yamazaki 2009).

There are two other examples of this kind of endorsement of women by Japanese political parties. One is the twenty-six female LDP candidates elected in September 2005. As mentioned earlier, of the twenty-six women, twenty-two were dual-nominated candidates, nominated both for single-member districts and the PR list. The party also endorsed four women as PR list-only candidates. In this election, the LDP President Junichiro Koizumi

decisively placed all twenty-six women high on the PR list. The most important issue in this election was the privatization of postal services. Koizumi took the initiative, refusing to endorse LDP incumbents who opposed his plan. Instead, he recruited and pitched new candidates, including the twenty-six women, who ran on platforms opposing the anti-privatization incumbents. He identified the women candidates as the symbol of his plan and wanted to ensure their election.

The second example is the case of the JSP's 'Madonnas' in the Upper House election of 1989. Just before the election was announced, the LDP was confronted with three election campaign crises that incited voter hostility towards the party: first, charges of bribery involving core LDP members; second, the consumption tax enacted the previous year had just taken effect; and, finally, a sex scandal emerged around President Sosuke Uno (*Asahi Newspaper* 1989; Wada 2000: 193). In an attempt to counter the increasing negativity surrounding the party, the JSP recruited female candidates outside conventional party networks. These women, who seemed to be more sensitive to voters' anger at the consumption tax and were untainted by sex scandals and bribery, became more attractive to voters. In this election, the JSP, with forty-six seats, defeated the LDP with thirty-six seats. The JSP's winning seats included the twenty-two 'Madonnas'. In the following Upper House election of 1992, however, the JSP was defeated by the LDP, and their elected seats dropped to twenty-two; only four women were re-elected. Since then, the JSP has declined not only because socialist ideology has lost its appeal in Japanese society but also because party leader Tomiichi Murayama became the prime minister of a three-party coalition government, along with the LDP and the New Party Harbinger, in 1994. Since the JSP had been the leading opposition party for more than three decades, collaboration with the LDP meant that the JSP abandoned its *raison d'être* and betrayed voters (Shinkawa 2000: 169–75). Without its supporters, the JSP became a minority party and missed the opportunity to adopt gender quotas in its platform.

The lukewarm reception of women's candidacy in the parties, however, might be considered the reverse aspect of women's attitude towards their own representation, as explored in the final section.

WOMEN'S ENTHUSIASM

The influence of women's movements on the adoption of gender quotas by political parties can be seen clearly in Nordic countries (see Phillips 1991: 85–9; Freidenvall *et al.* 2006: 62–4) and Britain (see Lovenduski 1996: 1; Short 1996), while women's endeavours to establish gender quota laws for elections have been undaunted in African countries (see Tripp 2004: 72–5), across South America (see Gray 2003: 60–1) and in France (see Opello 2006: 104–8). Women's claims for improved representation are the key

force driving the introduction of positive measures by their parties or governments (Lovenduski 1993: 14).

In the early 1990s, the idea of electoral gender quotas was known among some Japanese feminists. Michiko Matsuura, deputy chair of the Japan League of Women Voters, pointed out that quotas should be introduced when she participated in a meeting opposing the single-member district system (*Yomiuri Newspaper* 1994). Feminist activist Mariko Mitsui, who had served as Tokyo Metropolitan assembly member as an independent from 1987 to 1993, researched Norwegian party-based gender quotas and reported her findings to Japanese society. In those days, Mitsui was involved in two feminist action groups. One group, called the Alliance of Feminist Representatives (AFER), was organized in 1992 and aimed to increase the number of female representatives nationwide.¹⁰ AFER is composed mainly of independent female members of local assemblies, along with some non-politicians such as feminist activists and scholars. The other group in which Mitsui was involved, called the Women's Association for Action (WAA), established in 1975, fought to improve women's social and economic conditions. Although the WAA dissolved in 1996 because of financial difficulties, its ideas and activities were taken over by the Women's Solidarity Foundation (WSF), set up in 1997 with the sponsorship of Tamako Nakanishi, a former female member of the Upper House.

Through these groups, Mitsui aimed to spread the idea of gender quotas throughout Japanese society. Despite the efforts of Mitsui, the AFER and the WSF, however, the idea of gender quotas neither attracted the attention of mainstream Japanese society nor inspired political parties to change their policies. The AFER and the WSF were both small-scale organizations with 200 to 250 members each, and many members of the two groups overlapped. They had no members who remained in any party executive office and they did not enjoy a strong connection with parties; thus, they could not influence parties' decisions in any way. The WSF, like the WAA, dissolved in 2005 due to financial problems. Importantly, liberalism is an influential ideology in Japanese feminism (Eto 2008: 123–31) and, as previously mentioned, liberalism is not sympathetic to the idea of quotas. Under these circumstances, the quota movement has hardly expanded beyond the circle of a few advocate groups.

Rather than demanding quotas, in the 1990s local feminist groups developed campaigns to increase the number of women representatives in local assemblies. These groups were relatively small, ranging from a few dozen to a couple of hundred members each. They held lectures or seminars called to teach current or future candidates how to win elections. The number of such groups reached a peak of more than forty, but it was reduced to half the original amount by 2003 as many dissolved after the end of the specific elections with which they were concerned (Eto 2008: 131). In 1999, six leading Japanese feminists, inspired by Emily's List in Washington, DC, founded a group called the Women in the New World, International Network (WINWIN) to support

female candidates for national assembly and gubernatorial elections by subsidizing part of their campaign funds. In its first five years, the WINWIN attracted hundreds of members and was active in raising money for a substantial number of female candidates (Eto 2008: 130). Recently, however, the presence of the WINWIN has faded in the face of fundraising difficulties and the loss of many of its members.

The weakness of the quota movement and the failure of Japanese women's groups to break into politics seem to be indicative of the political mindset of Japanese women. An opinion poll conducted by the Gender Equality Bureau in November 2004¹¹ indicates that few Japanese women support electoral gender quotas. Listing ten examples of positive measures, the poll asked respondents which measure they agreed should be enacted to improve the presence of women in male-dominated fields. The proportion of women respondents who agreed with party-based electoral gender quotas for improving political inequality was 20 per cent, while that of men was 20.8 per cent. Among the ten measures, the most accepted was the initiative promoting female employees at private companies (35.2 per cent of women and 34.5 per cent of men agreed with the plan). The poll found that respondents were more receptive to positive measures for women in the labour market than in politics, and the proportions of men and women showed similar trends.

Employing the survey on gender gaps in political participation mentioned earlier, Masako Aiuchi (2007) explores whether more women voters support female rather than male politicians in Japan, concluding that there is no gender gap in Japanese voting preference. Many Japanese female voters, according to Aiuchi (2007: 369–70), think that they vote for the best candidate as their representative, regardless of gender. While Japanese women do not outright oppose or reject women legislators, they do not necessarily give women candidates their enthusiastic support. The voting behaviour of Japanese women appears to be egalitarian with regards to gender; from a feminist's perspective, however, egalitarianism often conceals inequality. As feminist theorists argue (e.g. Young 1990; Phillips 1991), standards for equality are established by men, and therefore the end result of ostensibly gender-neutral equality is a situation favourable to men.

There are three possible explanations for why Japanese women tend to be reluctant to speak out for equal representation. The first is a remnant of traditional behavioural expectations: Japanese people tend to avoid what may be construed as aggressive or assertive behaviour, and women in particular are under greater social pressure to be reserved and not speak out, a role contradicted by active political participation. Second, Japanese women have become less trustful of party politics. Although Japanese people in general have been becoming increasingly wary of politics since the 1990s, women are more suspicious of parties than men are (Eto 2008: 117). Additionally, as discussed earlier, the mindset that politics is men's business is still prevalent. Women may wish not to send their fellows (or themselves) to an alien, unreliable, male-defined world. Finally and most seriously, a backlash movement

against gender equality – consisting mainly of extremists from right-wing groups but also including politicians¹² – has recently atrophied the activities of feminists in Japan. The backlash activists attack outspoken feminists in contemptible, highly visible demonstrations. Such threats, it seems, not only make Japanese feminists shrink from the spotlight but also alienate Japanese women from feminist issues.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed women and representation in Japan, discussing the causes of women's under-representation under four main headings: Japan's electoral system; the socio-cultural circumstances of women; gender quota policies; and women's activities and attitudes.

To summarize each of these in turn: three types of electoral systems have been implemented in Japan: the Lower House electoral system is combined-independent, composed of single-member districts and a PR list; the Upper House is a combination of multi-member districts and a PR list; and local assemblies are multi-member districts. As preceding comparative studies have demonstrated, the Japanese case confirms that PR and multi-member districts are more women-friendly than single-member districts. In multi-member districts, larger district magnitude improves women's access to the Upper House and local assemblies.

The average proportion of female representatives differs among local governments, with urban regions having relatively higher proportions than sparsely populated rural areas. One reason for this is the difference in district magnitude between urban regions and rural areas, and the other is a reflection of the conservative values and political customs persisting in rural regions – in keeping with the conventional Japanese climate that the public sphere is a male world, the male breadwinner norm of the Japanese welfare state discourages women from getting into politics. While Japan has experienced significant economic growth and succeeded in establishing democratic political institutions, the traditional socio-political culture, which orients women towards the home and away from politics, is still prevalent in the many parts of the country.

In the past, major Japanese parties have sometimes unexpectedly nominated women candidates; however, this was not because the parties were keen to increase the number of female legislators but because male party leaders merely utilized women candidates as campaign strategies. Political parties in Japan have not shown any interest in electoral gender quotas, and the subsequent absence of such quotas has severely limited progress in the representation of women in Japan.

Finally, Japanese feminist activists have been involved in two kinds of movements to improve women's representation: the quota movement and support for women's candidacy. Despite these efforts, feminist movements

are usually small-scale, with only a handful of members, and often lose their potency soon after their activities reach a climax. Feminist activists have therefore had little influence on wider society. Specifically, the Japanese quota movement has been ineffective in encouraging the Government and political parties to introduce positive measures for women. This situation, however, is not a failure of the Japanese feminist movements as such but rather is a reflection of the mindset of Japanese women. Importantly, many Japanese female voters are unlikely to support women candidates, as they generally attach little conscious importance to gender with respect to political issues but simultaneously tend to reflect the underlying bias against women's representation found in Japanese culture.

Together, the factors outlined above make Japan a unique case among developed countries with respect to the under-representation of women. Perhaps most crucially, the cultural framework surrounding politics and society in Japan makes it difficult for women to demand the equal representation enjoyed by women in other countries. The representation of Japanese women has improved little by little over the past several decades. Without further positive measures, however, it will take decades for gender equality to become more fully integrated into Japanese legislative bodies. As Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall (2005: 27) suggest, it is questionable whether Japanese women will be able to tolerate the current level of political inequality that long into the future. Indeed, women possess within themselves the key to improving this situation. An organized, large-scale movement of women to demand equal representation is essential not only to ensure the establishment of gender quotas and other positive measures by parties and the Government, but also to draw public attention to political discrimination against women and to foster a women-friendly political climate.

Mikiko Eto
Department of Politic Science
Hosei University
Ichigaya Campus
Tokyo
Japan
E-mail: eto@hosei.ac.jp

Notes

- 1 In the Upper House elections, half of the fixed 242 seats are elected every three years. They have participated in local elections since 1947, but the data start from 1975.
- 2 See the Inter-Parliamentary Union website, <http://www.ipu.org/>.
- 3 See, for example, Rule and Zimmerman (1992); Lovenduski and Norris (1993); Darcy *et al.* (1994); O'Regan (2000); Caul (2001); Inglehart and Norris (2003); Norris (2004); Opello (2004, 2006); Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005); Dahlerup

- (2006); Kittilson (2006); Sawyer *et al.* (2006); Paxton and Hughes (2007); Sanbonmatsu (2006); Tremblay (2008).
- 4 In the Upper House election of July 2007, for example, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) nominated seven women as primary or secondary candidates in its twenty-one multi-member district, while it endorsed six female candidates in its twenty-nine single-member districts.
 - 5 A municipality must have a population of more than 50,000 to be called a city, and those cities whose populations exceed 500,000 and which possess higher levels of administrative competence are called designated cities. The twenty-three Special Wards in Tokyo are authorized to exercise almost the same administrative competence as other municipalities.
 - 6 Local assembly election data are based on the three local elections of 1999, 2003 and 2007 (Ichikawa-fusae-kinenkai 2008). National election data (as supplied by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications) are the average of the two houses' recent elections: the Lower House in 2000, 2003 and 2005; and the Upper House in 2001, 2004 and 2007.
 - 7 This survey was conducted by the Twenty-First Century Centre of Excellence Program of Tohoku University between 18 September and 20 October 2005, by interviews with 3,000 Japanese voters. See Kawato (2007).
 - 8 The survey is periodically conducted by the Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office (<http://www.gender.go.jp/>).
 - 9 The DPJ was successful in the August 2009 election, defeating the LDP and forming the Japanese government.
 - 10 Personal interview with Mariko Mitsui on 28 June 2005.
 - 11 The respondents of this survey numbered 3,502 – of them, 1,616 are men and 1,886 are women (see <http://winet.nwec.jp/toukei/save/xls/L120540.xls>).
 - 12 Backlash politicians include some female LDP parliamentarians.

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