

Review - Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan

Written by Miki Anno

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Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan

By Emma Dalton

Routledge, 2015

Male-dominated politics is one of the factors which has been causing gender inequality in Japan, and the political under-representation of women in that country is a problem. Unless there are more women in the Diet, it is unlikely that Japanese politics will create family-supportive policies. One example of this is that women are less likely to get hired or promoted at a company because they tend to leave the workforce around the birth of a child or after they become pregnant due to inflexible working hours. Therefore, more women in politics are needed who know about the problems women face in society just because they are women.

Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan was published by Emma Dalton in 2015. The author is a lecturer in the Japanese Studies Research Institute of Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. The aim of this book is to argue that adopting gender quotas is the solution to the political under-representation of women in the Diet. The author examines barriers to gender equality in Japanese politics, and why Japanese politics needs more women. The book's argument focuses on the masculinity of Japanese political parties and specifically the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has had a significant impact on the way electoral politics are implemented and government politics unfolds.

As the author contends, it is also a problem that politics in Japan has been trying to promote gender equality in terms of equal opportunities because decision-makers are more worried about business and the economy. Their main aim to promote gender equality is not equality itself, but rather to boost the economy. Because the population is shrinking, bringing more women into the workforce is now considered important.

What the book does not mention is that the conservative government has been reluctant to accept immigrants. Even though accepting immigrants could be another solution to the severe labour shortage, it is unlikely that the government will take this approach to the problem. The Japanese government has denied immigrants the permission to work in the country, thus making women's empowerment more significant to fill the void in the labour market (Brinton 1993).

In addition, Dalton did not discuss Japanese culture which emphasises sameness among people in terms of ways of thinking, behaviour, and even appearance. Many Japanese women do not question the problem of their under-representation in politics because it has never been a question in society. Homogeneity in Japanese culture is one of the reasons why the government and Japanese people are so conservative.

What is interesting about this book is that the author conducted interviews with Japanese women who chose to work in the LDP, which is the most masculine political party. According to the interviews, one of the reasons why some Japanese women decided to work in the LDP is that they thought it would be quicker to attack and change the party from the inside rather than from the outside.

However, as Dalton points out, women in Japanese politics are generally considered as 'men'. This means that if

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they wish to survive in politics, they need to adapt to the male-dominated environment instead of changing it. This implies that even if Japanese women changed the LDP from the inside and encourage more women to enter politics, they are less likely to work as politicians in the long-term. In fact, women in Japanese politics tend to stay tough and do not perceive sexual discrimination as discrimination as such, which might be too hard for the majority of Japanese women.

Therefore, only adopting gender quotas would not easily solve the issue of women's under-representation in Japanese politics. The adoption of gender quotas is necessary, though. Yet, the book fails to mention another possible solution which could be the introduction of gender studies in compulsory education. Gender inequality in Japan arose not only because Japanese culture emphasises gender roles in society, but also because the problems women face in society are often invisible to men, or vice versa. Allowing boys to learn more about women, and girls to learn more about men could lead to gender equality in the long run.

Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan is a book for both researchers and those who wish to learn more about how Japanese political elections work and what has been hindering gender equality in Japanese politics. The book examines a number of good points which only people who have lived in Japan could be aware of. Therefore, it provides a unique window into the inner workings of the system. However, the book could have expanded on some other issues that are influential for this topic. It helped me better understand that in order to deal with gender inequality in society, especially in the workplace, it is important that more women enter politics in Japan, because policies are created mainly by men who do not have enough knowledge on the issues women are facing. While this book is missing some critical details to some of the problems that Japan encounters politically and socially, it still covers a good range of topics and points that make it well worth reading.

Reference

Brinton, C. M. (1993). *Women and the economic miracle: Gender and work in postwar Japan*. London: University of California Press.

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Miki Anno is an undergraduate student specialising in International Studies at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies.