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# Gendering the Japanese political system: The gender-specific pattern of political activity and women's political participation

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## Abstract

In the Japanese political arena, gender equality remains elusive. To explore the reasons for that inequality, this paper analyses the gender-specific pattern of political activity in Japan in the post-war period. Building on analyses of feminist theorists, it examines three case studies before proceeding to a discussion of the issue of women's political participation in Japan. It concludes with a consideration of the double-edged nature of gender-specific political strategies which both empower and constrain the political struggles of Japanese women.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> [UNDP](#), Human Development Report 2004.
- <sup>2</sup> [Norris and Inglehart](#), 'Cultural Barriers to Women's Leadership', 7.
- <sup>3</sup> To name but a few, [Kubo and Gelb](#), 'Obstacles and opportunities: women and political participation in Japan'; [Christensen](#), 'The impact of electoral rules in Japan'; [Martin](#), 'Alienated, independent and female: lessons from the Japanese electorate'; [Pharr](#), Political Women in Japan.
- <sup>4</sup> Two examples among many are [Sievers](#), Flowers in Salt, and [Mackie](#), Creating Socialist Women in Japan.
- <sup>5</sup> [Young](#), 'Impartiality and the civic public'.
- <sup>6</sup> The typical example of this kind of work is [Lister's](#) Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives.
- <sup>7</sup> For example, the discussion by [Young](#) in Justice and the Politics of Difference and Inclusion and Democracy.
- <sup>8</sup> In Japan, the idea of the 'mainstreaming of gender' was incorporated into the policy-making process through the promulgation of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> [Young](#), Inclusion and Democracy, and [Phillips](#), The Politics of Presence.
- <sup>10</sup> [Young](#), Inclusion and Democracy, 90.
- <sup>11</sup> [Lewis](#), 'Model of equality for women'.
- <sup>12</sup> [Folbre](#), The Invisible Heart, 10.
- <sup>13</sup> A number of researchers have observed the impact of the doubling in the number of female MPs in Britain over time, and have published their research outcomes in such

journals as Parliamentary Affairs and the British Journal of Politics and International Relations. For example, see [Lovenduski and Norris](#), 'Westminster women', and [Childs](#), 'Having the target'.

<sup>14</sup> Equal Employment Opportunity Committee v Sears, Roebuck and Company. See e.g. [Milkman](#), 'Women's history and the Sears case'.

<sup>15</sup> [Gilligan](#), In a Difference Voice.

<sup>16</sup> [Randall](#), 'Gender and power'.

<sup>17</sup> [Scott](#), 'Deconstructing equality-versus-difference'; [Bacchi](#), Same Difference.

<sup>18</sup> For Phillips's account on the equality/difference dilemma issue, see [Phillips](#), 'Universal presentations in political thought'.

<sup>19</sup> On the dissociation of the 'politics of recognition' from redistributive politics, see [Fraser](#), Justice Interruptus, in particular, 13–16.

<sup>20</sup> [Lister](#), 'The dilemmas of pendulum politics'.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see [Okano](#), Shiteizunshippu no seijigaku; [Tamura](#), 'Seijigaku to jendā'.

<sup>22</sup> [Yokoyama](#), Sengo nihon no josei seisaku.

<sup>23</sup> [Mackie](#), 'Dimensions of citizenship in modern Japan'.

<sup>24</sup> To name but a few out of many, for example, [Gelb and Estevez-Abe](#), 'Political women in Japan'; [LeBlanc](#), Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife; [Uno](#) 'The death of "good wife, wise mother"?'

<sup>25</sup> As many studies have already demonstrated, women's gender roles as mother and wives have been assigned to women according to gender norms that are constructed in historically contingent political, economic and social settings. For example, see [Uno](#) 'The death of "good wife, wise mother"?'; [Koyama](#), Katei no seisei to josei no kokuminka. I have also extensively discussed this issue in [Takeda](#), The Political Economy of Reproduction in Japan, but it is beyond the focus of this paper.

<sup>26</sup> According to Fujime, there were certainly grass-roots activities by midwives responding to this situation and introducing birth control techniques to women living in rural communities. [Fujime](#), Sei no rekishigaku.

<sup>27</sup> Besides autobiographies by Katō, for example, see [Hopper](#), New Women of Japan.

<sup>28</sup> It is misleading to say that birth control was completely at odds with the governmental pro-natal policy. I have discussed this at length in [Takeda](#), The Political Economy of Reproduction in Japan, 59–66.

<sup>29</sup> [Kitaoka](#), Waga omoide no ki, 278.

<sup>30</sup> The quote is from the eulogy given by Fukuda Yasuo, son of Fukuda Takeo and then Chief Cabinet Secretary to the Koizumi cabinet. [Fukuda](#), 'Chōji'.

<sup>31</sup> For her explanation, see [Katō](#), Futatsu no bunka no hazama kara; [Katō](#), Katō Shizue: aru josei seijika no hansei; [Ashino](#), 'Ripurodakuteibu herusu/raitsu no kiso o kizuita hito'.

<sup>32</sup> On the New Life Movement, see [Garon](#), Molding Japanese Minds; [Takeda](#), The Political Economy of Reproduction in Japan, Chapter 5. Tsunematsu has detailed activities of local organizations of the New Life Movement, though she does not discuss the functions and implications of the movement to the then national political economy due to the scope of the discussion. See [Tsunematsu](#), 'Gender power under female leadership'.

<sup>33</sup> By discussing the work of Hiratsuka Raichō, Furukubo has pointed out that the emphasis on motherhood tends towards eugenics. [Furukubo](#), 'Raichō no "bosei-shugi" o yomu'. For the New Life Movement and concepts of eugenics, see [Takeda](#), The Political Economy of Reproduction in Japan, 134–135.

<sup>34</sup> [Tsuge](#) et al., 'Furoku: yūsei hogo hō omeguru saikin no dōkō'. Also, [Norgren](#), Abortion before Birth Control.

<sup>35</sup> [Kansha](#), Mada maniaunonara. This book has been translated into English ([Kansha](#), Is it too Late?) but this quote is my own translation. Doden's translation simplifies the remarks on maternal instinct by omitting one sentence.

<sup>36</sup> [Kansha](#), Is it too Late? Publisher's preface.

<sup>37</sup> The rise of the Mother's Convention movement in Japan was triggered by the thermonuclear test in the Pacific Ocean in 1954 in which Japanese fishermen were exposed to a high level of radioactivity.

<sup>38</sup> [Kanō](#), 'Han-genpatsu undō no nakano bōsei', 185.

<sup>39</sup> [Tsutsumi Aiko](#), 'Myūtanto no kigu'.

<sup>40</sup> [Shiota](#), 'Gendai feminizumu to nihon no shakai seisaku', 31.

<sup>41</sup> Information on the case of the water protection movement in Ōno is based on research on 'governance through the family' funded by the Japan Foundation Endowment Committee. See [Takeda](#), 'Governance through the family'.

<sup>42</sup> [Fukuiken Ōno no Mizu o Kangaeru Kai](#), Yomigaere Inochi no Mizu, 10–11.

<sup>43</sup> [Fukuiken Ōno no Mizu o Kangaeru Kai](#), Yomigaere Inochi no Mizu.

<sup>44</sup> [Takeda](#), 'Governance through the family'.

<sup>45</sup> For example, the Shufuren (the Housewives' Confederation), mothers' conventions, post-war peace movements, a residents' movement in Zushi against the construction of US military facilities, the Seikatsu Club cooperative and the Seikatsusha net. These political movements/activities are discussed in the literature mentioned in footnote 24. Also, see [Mackie](#), *Feminism in Modern Japan*.

<sup>46</sup> For definition of gender, see [Delphy](#), 'Rethinking sex and gender', 3; [Kimmel](#), *The Gendered Society*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy that the sexual division of labour in political activity deprives men of opportunities to act politically. Examining a civil movement in Machi, Niigata, that was opposed to the construction of an industrial waste plant, LeBlanc argues that non-elite men have also been excluded from the local political arena due to their masculine gender. In contrast to women who could exploit their gender role as mothers and wives to successfully impact on the local assembly, non-elite men were hindered from running for local election due to their role as bread-winners, and hence, LeBlanc maintains, the masculine gender is not an automatic source of political power. See [LeBlanc](#), 'Why women are representing men in a Japanese town assembly'.

<sup>48</sup> [Takeda](#), *The Political Economy of Reproduction*, 193–196.

<sup>52</sup> [Hasegawa](#), 'Seiji shakai to jendā', 74.

<sup>49</sup> [Skocpol](#), *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*.

<sup>50</sup> [Bock and Thane](#), Maternity and Gender Policies; [Koven and Michel](#) (eds), Mothers of a New World; [Folbre](#), The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values.

<sup>51</sup> [Bock and Thane](#), Maternity and Gender Policies, 7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>54</sup> [LeBlanc](#), Bicycle Citizens, 197.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>56</sup> [Fraser](#), Justice Interruptus; also [Fraser and Honneth](#), Redistribution or Recognition?

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