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Education in Japan

Gender inequality, especially in recent times, has been a hot topic of sorts in mainstream Western media. Particularly, due in large part to the feminist movement, there has been a push to make women social equals of men. We see that the sight of the office lady is becoming more and more common, and increasing numbers of women are at least in part forsaking traditional female tasks and roles, such as taking care of the family, to pursue their own individual interests.

However, if we look internationally, this progressivism is not necessarily a global trend. Particularly, we look at Japan, which tells a different story. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study found that the gender wage gap for Japan was significantly higher at 26.59 percent than America's, which came out to be 17.91 percent (OECD). This suggests that while western countries may be progressing towards a more gender-equal society, there exist countries, such as Japan, which are not. It is of interest then, to look at what is inhibiting this progress towards equality in Japan. Particularly, by looking at the historical social structure of Japan itself, we see that in a sense, contrary to what we have seen so far, it would make sense for progress to occur in terms of gender dynamics. This is reflected in changes made over time to the education system, which has been generally aiming to provide equal education opportunity to both men and women. However, if one looks more carefully at the quality of education being provided to both genders, we see that not a huge amount has

changed in terms of progress towards gender equality, suggesting that while the intention exists to make Japanese education and more generally Japanese society more equal, the focus has been placed on the wrong areas.

The first thing that comes to mind when looking at stagnancy in gender dynamics is to look at the history and social structures behind these gender dynamics. After all, it is not unreasonable to believe that there is some cultural factor that is causing inequality. We observe that Japan is a country that has historically empowered men over women. As noted in a Yoko Sugihara and Emiko Katsurada paper, “the fall of the *uji* (clan) system [...] facilitated inequality between sexes”, as the “establishment of the *ie* system institutionalized a gendered division of labor and a power imbalance between men and women” (Sugihara & Katsurada). The two authors then proceed to describe this power imbalance, citing that under the law, only men could inherit property and the family name. Men also had complete control over family members, while women were not allowed to participate in matters outside of the home. That is, the husband-wife relationship was characterized by an absolute dependence of the wife on the husband.

However, one may argue that modern Japan is a different story. There are a number of arguments and phenomenon one could cite to support this claim. For example, the introduction of host clubs as a counterpart to hostess clubs supports the idea that Japan, like Western countries, is on its way to becoming more equal, as it provides a venue that “offers women a chance to enact their fantasies and experience their dream lifestyles—even if only for a moment” (Takeyama). As host clubs existed long before hostess clubs began to appear, the fact that hostess clubs are being created seems to point in a progressive direction. Moreover, after the Second World War, the *ie* system was largely reformed (Beauchamp). That is, the supposed

institutions historically in place that created as large of a gender gap as there was in Japan are largely changed and much less of a factor today. This suggests that it is not something embedded in Japanese culture or way of thought that is inhibiting change towards gender inequality.

Of course, this then still does not answer for us why Japan has not reached at least a Western level of gender equality. To take a look at what is causing this lack of progress, we look at the youth of Japan. We reason that feminist theory has been around since at the mid-twentieth century in the West (Jackson). However, a large amount of progress in gender equality in general has been in recent years. That is, the current feminist movement that is bringing about change is largely a product of today's youth.

One thing that immediately comes to mind when investigating youth is popular culture, as it is essentially what is popular among young people. After all, "109, a tall shiny department store in Shibuya that, for a few million of Japan's teenage girls, is the most stylish, most important, and most exciting place in the world" (McGray). Such a medium is bound to have effects on the ideals of youth on the relationship between the two genders. However, we must realize that children actually spend most of their time in schools in Japan, even more so than countries such as the United States with more than 70% of students attending private cram schools, called *juku*, at least once in their lives (Lowe). Therefore, it makes the most sense to look at education as the main factor in influencing young Japanese thinking regarding gender that is impeding progress towards equality. This of course makes sense to look at when considering that education level has an effect on one's salary, which also would help explain the large gender wage gap in comparison to the rest of the world.

We begin by looking at the history behind Japanese education. As already mentioned, until the mid-nineteenth century when the *ie* system was reformed due to the fall of the

Tokugawa shogunate, Japanese society itself was decidedly male dominated. This also manifested itself in the education of the time. In order to become a respectable man, one had to receive “training in classical Chinese letter and martial arts” (Saito). On the other hand, “the books used to educate women discussed a woman’s duty to admire her husband, who was considered as superior in many aspects as a god” (Sugihara & Katsurada). Historically, education until this point mirrored the societal structure. It is worth noting that at this time, the concept of gender equality had not even made its way into the west—“first-wave” feminists first exerted some influence in the late nineteenth century and until then, gender dynamics developed as their mostly misogynistic societies willed. While Japan was incredibly male-dominated at this period of time, we can say to some degree that relative to the West at this time, Japan was not more or less advanced in terms of achieving gender equality.

With the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, however, there were a number of educational reforms that seemed to bring more equality to education. The newly formed Ministry of Education spurred the passing of the Education System Ordinance, which created an elementary, middle, and high school system (Beauchamp). In the early Meiji period, mission schools, which taught girls English, music, singing, and dancing in addition to Christian beliefs, were established, which gave girls a means to a higher education. However, there was a negative stigma behind this, as girls who attended these schools were seen as “western culture freaks” (Saito). Even still, the government established the first official girls middle school based on these western culture schools. However, this also coincided with the establishment of tradition-oriented schools such as the Atomi girls school, which taught subjects such as flower arrangement. This stagnation continued until around after the First World War, where there was an increase in popularity for secondary education for girls in order to make them good mothers

and wives. While girls' middle schools became legally recognized much like boys' schools, many of the schools taught subjects related to home economics (Saito). This to some degree, we observe that Japan falls behind the West here in terms of gender inequality, as the advances, while significant, do not seem to be as noteworthy as changes prompted by first-wave feminists in the West.

After the Second World War, however, even more reform was made to help even out the gender difference in education due to intervention by the winners of the war. Particularly, the amount of years of compulsory education was increased and equal opportunity of education was required. This major change, along with numerous minor reforms afterwards, led to the situation today, which features less difference between enrollment rates of women and men in all levels of education. In higher education, particularly, the percentage of women graduates was 41.1% in 2010 compared to just 36.2% in 2000 (Economist). While this is lower than the global average, it is not outrageously low. In fact, it is high enough that one might say that we cannot conclude that there is a significant difference in education between men and women. Of course, as this change was spurred by intervention from Western countries, it makes sense that this progress mirrors progress in the West. Moreover, we observe that most reform that occurred was in relation to providing equal opportunity of education in terms of getting students any sort of education, which does not immediately lend itself to equal education.

This then suggests that education is not in fact the problem with the lack of progressivism in terms of gender equality of Japan's youth, as education has been more and more progressive over time, even compared to Western countries. However, once we compare the quality of education between men and women, we see a rather stark disparity. As we mentioned before, just because opportunity in education is equal, the education itself is not necessarily equal.

Particularly, we look at the University of Tokyo, which has consistently been ranked the best university in Japan. We observe that the university is less than twenty percent female. Looking at science and engineering, which has higher paying jobs relative to other fields, women only account for less than ten percent of students (Iida). This implies that there is indeed a difference between education of women and men in Japan. To get a sense of how severe this difference is, we look at the gender difference in enrolled students in elite American universities. Of the top twenty or so schools in America according to a variety of ranking sites, Caltech consistently posts the worst gender ratio, being slightly less than forty percent female. While the wage gap in Japan is to a nontrivial extent more severe than the wage gap in America, we observe that the education gap is even greater.

Looking now at lower levels of education, we realize that this issue of the quality of education does not stop at universities. We first note that the schools that post the best admission rates into top universities are six-year schools that combine middle and high school into one fluid process (USJP). A cursory survey of the rankings of these schools brings up the following statistics. The top five schools are all-boys schools. What follows is then a six-way tie for sixth place. Of these six schools, only two are all-girls schools, while there are two co-ed schools and three all-boys schools. That is, of the top twelve middle and high schools in the country, there are eight all-boys schools, compared to only two all-girls schools (Chu-Shigaku). That is, while there may be an equal number of middle schools girls can attend when compared to middle schools boys can attend due to the requirement of equal opportunity passed during the era of reform, the quality of this opportunity is quite different.

We can further extend our study to the *juku* we mentioned at the beginning of this literature review. While most *juku* are in fact co-ed, a study by Robert J. Lowe found that the

texts used to teach students English contain “disproportionate references to males and females”, “different roles assigned to males and females”, “reinforcement of gender stereotypes”, and “condescending statements or generalizations about women” (Lowe). Previous studies had found similar problems in the books used by Japanese high schools. This to some degree makes sense, as this could be a case of catering to an audience. If one’s students are mostly male, then it makes sense to introduce texts that show males both more positively and more frequently. Additionally, texts written when society itself was more male-dominated may still have pure educational value, and as such are still being used.

Essentially, through these readings, we see that contrary to the surface façade of equal opportunity and enrollment, when looking at quality, there indeed is a disparity between male and female education. Namely, with regards to elite private secondary schools and universities, males opportunity and enrollment rate is higher. Thus, we find that education does indeed seem to play a role in impeding the progress of Japan towards a gender equal society. For one thing, the introduction of mandatory education carries with it the implication that education affects everybody. Moreover, if the people gaining better educations and moving into positions of power are mostly males who are taught implicitly through compulsory readings about male superiority, then it seems natural that societal change with respect to gender would be slow.

Fortunately, identifying education as an area inhibiting progress towards gender inequality in Japan’s workforce and society as a whole gives us some rather clear steps that need to be taken to encourage more progress. Namely, balancing quality of education seems like it would be necessary to place more progressive-minded people into power and in and of itself encourage a movement towards gender inequality in Japan. This can be done in a multitude of ways, one potentially being introducing more opportunity for girls to receive a higher quality

education by increasing the number of top girls high schools or making some of the top boys high schools coeducational as once was done with universities. Of course, there are potential problems with this, as most elite universities in Japan are public, whereas the upper tier of high schools and middle schools are private, but what is important is that there are ideas and effort to try to bring a semblance of balance to the quality of education between genders. While gender representations in media such as anime like Evangelion, more mainstream movies like Ghibli films, can be argued to be growing more and more gender neutral as mentioned by Ariana in class, the reality is children spend more time being exposed to education than they are exposed to any kinds of this media. While according to Lynda, there are groups of people such as fujoshi that contain more people than one might think, in almost all cases, these people are students as well. By not looking deeper than the surface façade of equal opportunity in education between genders, one disserves himself in putting himself in a position to tackle Japan's gender inequality problem.

More generally, we can see that this trend of treating issues on the surface and not dealing with deeper problems in the institutions persists among a myriad of areas. Take, for example, Takarazuka, an all-female acting troupe. Takarazuka does provide a counterpart to Kabuki as a more modern female counterpart to the male acting tradition, and in that sense, it could be considered progress towards gender equality, as it provides the same thing we saw in education—equal opportunity (Robertson). However, this surface analysis ignores the fact that a male-dominated management controls the women in Takarazuka, and the implications of this are still quite gendered. For example, women in Takarazuka are encouraged to shield relationships from the public eye and have to leave the acting troupe if they choose to marry. Contrast this with Kabuki, where it is not surprising for an actor to be sleeping with multiple women and we

see that this surface equality is put into question. Looking at idol groups as an example of providing equal representation of females in popular media ignores the same issues mentioned with regards to Takarazuka above and also ignores the implications of male gaze. Furthermore, this extends to issues not limited by gender equality. For example, take the issue of representing transgender and homosexual people in media. We heard in class from Minami that homosexual entertainers are becoming more and more popular as television personalities, but that popularity is based on these personalities shoehorning themselves into stereotyped roles. In this sense, we see that Japan's perceived achievement of equality of the sexes is questionable at best. While it is a step in the right direction to achieve this surface level of equality, in order to truly change gender dynamics in Japan and as an effect close the gender gap, those aiming for social change towards gender equality should look past the surface and deal with more inherent issues in institutions causing gender imbalance. This is true in a number of cases, but as we have explored above, education is not a bad choice to start with.

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