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## Gender (in)equality in Japan

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## Gender (in)equality in Japan (Nie)równość płci w Japonii

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### Abstract

This essay opens with the rhetorical analysis of the article which appeared in April 2016 in the *Japan Times* entitled “An Open Letter to the Japanese Womanhood. Advice on How to Take the Best Parts of the Stereotypes without Becoming One Yourself” in the context of gender inequality in Japan. Japan is one of the three largest economies in the world and a member of G7 group, yet the level of discrimination of women in Japan is without equal in the developed world. Widely criticized by international institutions such as the United Nations or the World Economic Forum, Japan finally introduced a new government policy in order to balance the status of women with men. The article examines the recent changes and argues that it is difficult to introduce them because of the gender biased rhetoric and a long history of patriarchal patterns in the society.

Artykuł na wstępie analizuje strategie retoryczne zawarte w „Liście Otwartym do Japońskich Kobiet”, który ukazał się w gazecie *Japan Times* w kwietniu 2016 roku, a który dotyczył kwestii nierówności płci w Japonii. Japonia jest jedną z trzech największych gospodarek świata i członkiem grupy G7, ale poziom dyskryminacji kobiet w tym kraju jest wyjątkowo wysoki jak na kraj rozwinięty. W obliczu krytyki ze strony instytucji międzynarodowych, takich jak ONZ czy World Economic Forum, rząd Japonii wprowadził niedawno nowy kurs polityki w celu wyrównania statusu kobiet z mężczyznami. Esej analizuje ostatnie zmiany i twierdzi, że trudno jest rozwiązywać problemy dotyczące dyskryminacji z powodu tendencyjnej retoryki odnoszącej się do płci i długiej historii patriarchalnych wzorców w japońskim społeczeństwie.

### Key words

rhetoric, Japan, patriarchal society, gender discrimination, *kawaii*

retoryka, Japonia, społeczeństwo patriarchalne, dyskryminacja ze względu na płeć, *kawaii*

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## Gender (in)equality in Japan

Across Japan, April 1st is the day when freshmen at universities and newly hired staff at companies are about to start their academic and professional career. On this occasion, on April 3rd, 2016, Kris Kosaka wrote “An Open Letter to Japanese Womankind. Advice on how to Take the Best Parts of the Stereotypes without Becoming One Yourself” in the *Japan Times* (largest English-language newspaper). As *gaijin* in Japan (a foreigner), a Western woman who is about to teach students in a prestigious women’s college, I found perfect opportunity to start my classes with discussing the letter with the students as an introduction to my gender class. The rhetoric of the letter was found patronizing by a lot of internet readers, but for me it was a perfect combination of thoughts by someone who lives in Japan long enough to realize the full spectrum of cultural differences and still has a mindset of an American. Kosaka addressed “a 21st-century Japanese woman, raised in this sometimes shockingly patriarchal society.”<sup>1</sup> No wonder some men found her writing condescending – she used a lot of overstatements in her rhetoric to prove a point and empower Japanese women.

The audience of the letter are young Japanese women who are starting a new chapter in their life – at the university, or, after graduating, at the workplace. Anywhere they will go, some aspects of that “sometimes shockingly patriarchal [Japanese] society” are going to bother or annoy them a lot. The author of the letter used a number of hyperboles and metaphors to stir the minds of female readers – giving them examples of everyday life in Japan where you walk the streets surrounded by posters and billboards with unrealistic images of half woman-half child created to please men. The article has one flaw – only the opening and closing remarks mention any Japanese word. Probably if it had been written and printed in Japanese, the letter would have reached a wider audience. Koseki wants her readers to reflect and asks a lot of rhetorical questions. She juggles with amplification so that the Japanese women can feel the “kawaiiiness” (*kawaii* – in Japanese means “cute” or “adorable”) in the letter too. But sometimes her bluntness and outspoken methods may not be suitable for a delicate Japanese audience.

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1. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2016/04/03/voices/open-letter-japanese-womankind/#.V4CP1igQ2td>

She clearly uses rhetorical tools to help her make her case in a provoking way. Being effective as a writer, with her passionate and vivid rhetoric, Koseki has crafted a message with a potentially powerful impact on Japanese women, even if the internet comments discount its transformative effect. Nevertheless, the author made her point.

The question worth examining is why a Western woman would think Japan is a “shockingly patriarchal society.” Before I started working in Kobe College, I conducted an independent study in the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, Japan, which is a renowned university for bureaucrats. As a Deputy Head of Equal Treatment Office in the Polish Government I was invited by the Japanese Ministry of Education to obtain another MA in the Young Leaders Program, which was aimed at exchanging the views and the expertise between Japanese and international governments. The topic of my project was *Impact of the Recommendations of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on Gender Equality in Japan and Poland: Article 7 on Political Representation*. Japanese government wanted me to conduct research about inequality in Japan, because it had recently started realizing that ignoring women factor in 21<sup>st</sup> century is no longer justifiable.

Geographically almost the same size, Japan and Poland have different historical backgrounds and neither of them is internationally recognized as a champion in achieving gender equality (Fuszara, 2012). Japan is widely known as the most developed and the richest country in Asia, ironically with a significant number of records of discriminatory practices against women (Fujita, 1968; Iwamoto, 2001; Mohwald, 2002; Osawa, 2010).

To compare, it took Japan five years from signing to ratifying CEDAW, while Poland managed to do so in one year. Japanese women received the right to vote after World War II from the American General MacArthur, whereas Polish women were granted the voting rights after World War I from Marshal Pilsudski in the same year as Poland got the independence after more than 120 years of not existing on the map. Finally, Poland has now, for the second time in their history, a female prime minister, whereas Japan has never appointed a female prime minister yet.

The Gender Global Gap Report, a yearly update of gender statistics published by the World Economic Forum (2015), notes the percentage of female lawmakers in Japan remains one of the lowest in the world – and this has been proven to be an important factor to fully understand low political participation of women in Japan (Mikanagi, 2001).

Data available for July 9, 2016, from Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking of women in parliaments from all over the world shows that Poland is more advanced

than Japan with a proportion of 27.4 % of women in the parliament (126 seats), while Japan has only 9.5 % of women in the Diet (45 seats).<sup>2</sup> Through a case study about recommendations, it was relatively easy to prove that CEDAW is a useful instrument in enhancing political participation of women in national politics, in the parliament in particular, which, in the long run, may have a positive impact on lives and livelihood of women in both countries.

In the Global Gender Gap Report 2015, Japan is shown as one of the countries with the lowest level of gender equality in the developed world and below that of developing countries such as Tajikistan and Indonesia, coming in 101 out of 145 assessed countries in 2015. In contrast, Poland was ranked 51. The report analyzes women's economic and political participation, education and health. To compare with internationally recognized champions in achieving gender equality in 2015, Iceland topped the list for the sixth consecutive year, followed by Finland and Norway. These countries have been consistently on the top of gender equality since the very first issue of The Global Gender Gap Report in 2006. In 2015, the United States ranked 28, China 91, and South Korea 115. Japan is ranked 42 in the health and longevity category, 84 in educational attainment, 106 in economic participation and 104 in political participation. Polish scores are remarkably better: 42 in the health and longevity category, 38 in educational attainment, 75 in economic participation and 52 in political participation. Looking briefly at the scores, it looks like Japan and Poland have a different approach towards gender equality – they were chosen to be examined in this paper because of their uniqueness in their regions.

Gender equality used to be perceived as a justice issue or a human rights issue, while during the last decade gender equality started to be recognized by international organizations such as the European Union, OECD or World Economic Forum as a factor for economic growth. It has been reflected in Japanese Prime Minister's, Shinzo Abe's, official policy entitled *Expansion of Women's Participation in Policy and Decision-making Processes in All Fields in Society* introduced in 2014. Gender mainstreaming is one of the four horizontal policies of the European Union of which Poland is a member state since 2004. This means that there is a one-decade difference in implementing gender equality at a national level in a structured way.

Participation of women in the labour market in Japan is only 64 %, while men – 84 %. This is the lowest score from all 34 big economic countries of OECD. Additionally, Japan is a G7 economy. In Japanese households there are more pets than children under 15 years old. Women are emancipating in Japan, slowly, but it is becoming a fact. The structure of the society – for example labor market – is not ready for that so the new trend causes a lot of problems and leads to discrimination.

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2. <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

The most (in)famous discriminatory practice is maternity harassment (*matahara* in Japanese) – a concept unknown in Western societies. Once a woman gets pregnant, she is harassed at work in many ways, mostly by questions when she is going to quit her work. It became a serious problem, as it leads to reported miscarriage and was already addressed at the Supreme Court. Moreover, the reconciliation of work and family life is a virtually unknown concept in Japan. The structure of the labor market with long hours and work at the weekends, seniority system, not clear ways of promotion, short holidays (if lucky), not paid over hours – all of these prevent women from being successful workers and happy mothers.

Adding to that not enough child care per population and care centers for disabled people and all dependents – as a result – the demographics and fertility rate of Japan are decreasing, as women simply choose career over children and marriage. They do not want to get married and have children because they know that they will be taking care of elderly parents of both sides too. Men do not participate in domestic chores, so they are left alone. Raising children is also expensive – education in Japan is very expensive, the health care is affordable, but still not free. Also, a lot of families struggle to make ends meet with one income, so a lot of women take part time jobs (once they are lucky to find day care for kids) which are not careers, but second-rate jobs to pay the bills. Also, Japanese government is reluctant to the concept of diversity in a full sense. In Japanese the word *diversity* means only equality of women and men – not racial/ethnic origin or sexual orientation etc. So for example there is no law banning discrimination based on sexual orientation at work. Similarly, the question of inviting more immigrants and refugees in order to relax labor market is yet unanswered. Still, it is not a reason to be dismissed or at least heavily punished if a politician makes a sexist remark about another politician. For instance, a female member of the Diet (the Japanese legislative body) was shouted at as she was giving a speech about women's rights. One of the members of the Diet yelled, "Go get married!" It was embarrassing, but the general public doesn't think this kind of behavior in public is postponing real emancipation of Japanese women. And last but not least of all the obstacles – in Japanese a wife is called professional full time homemaker (*sengyoo shufu*) – not just a housewife! "Homemaking" is regarded as a profession which consist of all aspect of housework, childrearing, management of family finances, and care of elderly parents and parents in law, among other responsibilities. Therefore, for an average Japanese woman it is not easy to explain to the society why she chooses professional career instead of such respected profession.

The roots of that kind of notion one can seek back in time, when in 5<sup>th</sup> century Confucianism was brought to Japan through Korea. This ethical and political philosophy that emerged 2,500 years ago in China, pays special attention to loyalty and

social harmony. This concept is debunked in the concept of *wa* – the creation and maintenance of peaceful unity and conformity within a social group, with a commitment to cohesive community taking precedence over personal interest. (Hirata and Warschauer 2014) Starting with ancient Confucianism, Buddhism, tempered with feudal system through late 19<sup>th</sup> century, created caste system of samurai warrior class placing men in public sphere and women – in private. Additionally, Japan's history as an island nation become ethnically more homogenous than any other country in the world. In 17<sup>th</sup> century, Japan had forced all foreigners to leave and barred almost all relations with the outside world. Japan's policy of *sakoku* (isolation) lasted for 200 years, until an American, Commodore Matthew Perry, sailed to Japan and reopened diplomatic relations in 1854.

Basically, the concept of *wa*, due to its persistence in the Japanese unique culture, is very hard to overcome and it is still reflected in the way the society is organized. Apart from the rigid orderliness, strong self-reliance and service to others or the concept of honor, extreme loyalty, sharp hierarchies and sharp boundaries between the in-group and out-groups, the concept of *wa* is entrenched in various code systems in Japan. One of these is a family code system (*koseki seido*), which does not recognize the individuality of a woman – from the moment of registration of the head of the family at the moment of marriage, where a man is automatically superior until the divorce. For example, until June 2016 a divorced woman in Japan had to wait at least six months before being allowed to remarry, while men did not have to wait a single day. Moreover, the Japanese taxation system does not recognize individual taxation and favors women with part time jobs (men in Japan receive wife allowance). There are many similar examples from everyday life of an average Japanese woman. Bearing all this in mind, how one can be emancipated or empowered, when her individuality depends on the group she should belong to, starting with a family unit. Single life is still stigmatized. This is one of the reasons the fertility rate is so low, unlike in the West, where a lot of children are born out of legal family unit and nobody even calls them bastards anymore.

Discussing rigid social societal norms in Japan, the question of language – ancient kanji Chinese character system combined with hiragana and katakana, description of western words – should not be omitted. All of those have been studied by Naoko Takemaru, who discovered that the discriminatory practices are deeply rooted in the language. Interestingly, before 5<sup>th</sup> century when Confucianism was introduced women were enjoying more freedom, despite the feudal construction of the state. This was even reflected in the organization of kanji characters, which means that the kanji organization has changed in the course of time. Takemaru (2010, 3 and 5) observes that

Japanese expressions for women and men (...) reflect prevalent gender stereotypes and bias in society. Likewise, a large number of gender-related expressions in the Japanese language not only define acceptable and unacceptable traits and demeanors of women and men, but also designate their roles and status in society. (...) Gender asymmetry is found among the vast majority of expressions for women. (Takemaru,).

Shinto and Buddhist beliefs that assorted women with impurity and sinfulness present in the Japanese language combined with “men superior, women inferior” Confucian ideology (*danson johi*) created a tradition of not allowing women (*nyonin kinsei*) to access certain public places or events like festivals, sacred mountains, sumo rings or Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines, but also construction sites and fishing boats. Sacred famous Mount Fuji or Mount Koya, known as Buddhist Vatican, were not allowed for women to climb until 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although this tradition was officially abolished in 1872, women are still excluded in a number of places and events in present Japan. In these circumstances how can anybody take speaking of empowering women seriously in this country?

Takemaru conducted research about gender bias in the Japanese language. She found 151 words and phrases which are degrading to women by one or more of the following features: gender asymmetry, dehumanizing as well as stereotypical description of women, and an element of *danson johi* (men superior, women inferior). This notion to subjugate women to men developed among the ruling and privileged samurai class in the Kamakura period (1185-1333), prevailed in all classes by the Meiji period (1868-1912), and became an indispensable element to support the hierarchical structure of pre-World War II patriarchal Japanese society (Takemaru 2010, 137).

Women – because of their secondary status due to male supremacy embedded in religious and philosophical beliefs – are not fully emancipated of the system and the rhetoric does not change. Nowadays the combination of the system and the traditional rhetoric promote only the development and maintenance of gender-based role division and gender inequality in the Japanese society. Despite many efforts of the government to change the system, promised tax reform is still only a promise without any action. Takemaru also notes that despite the ongoing anti-sexist reform which started in the mid-1970s, the majority of Japanese language dictionaries maintain the status quo and continue to list entries as well as definitions embedded with gender bias. (Takemaru 2010, 187)

Famous poster campaign from Tokyo featuring the slogan “Have a Nice Body” shows that Japanese women are constantly being reduced to patriarchal stereotype of nice looking Geisha who praises a Samurai. *Kawaii* is the quality of cuteness entrenched in the Japanese culture. It has become a prominent aspect of not only J-pop (popular culture), entertainment, clothing, but also food, toys, personal



appearance, behavior, and mannerisms. According to a feminist critique, *kawaii* leads to a reductionist stereotype of a woman who objectifies herself to please a man (Aoyama and Hartley 2011). There are also a number of other discriminatory practices which were not even mentioned in this article – human trafficking, violence against women, legal pornography in manga (and other art creations), child pornography banned not so long ago – only in 2014 – because Japan has the biggest porn business in the world. As it was mentioned, immigrating to Japan is very difficult, yet every year a lot of girls from underdeveloped countries enter with entertainer visa and work in host clubs. Japan is known to be the safest country in the world, yet in Tokyo or Osaka subway there are special “women only” cars, in order to prevent sexual harassment during rush hours. Sexual education and paid abortion are virtually non-existent and birth control pill was legalized after Viagra in 1999 – four decades after it became available in the West.

Summing up, it must be stated that in Japan there is a visible linkage between religious, philosophical and rhetorical traditions and gender discrimination. The article has demonstrated how gender intersects with social and discursive practices in a culture which supports male domination. Today Japan aspires to the greatest postwar show – the 2020 Olympics. Ironically the slogan of the Olympic Games is “Diverse in unity.” Japan so far has only been united in the fear of diversity.

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