Among Equals? Women in Japanese Politics  
Yuko Nakano

On June 14, the Abe government approved a national growth strategy, the third of three “arrows” in an economic revitalization policy known as “Abenomics.” One focus of the growth strategy is women’s participation in the workforce.\(^1\) Prior to the announcement of the strategy, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a series of speeches outlining his policies and in an address on April 19 stated that his goal is to have “no less than 30 percent of leadership positions in all areas of society filled by women by 2020.”\(^2\) Abe made a brief reference in that speech to two female Diet members who hold leadership positions in his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), yet the number of female representatives in the Diet indicates that participation of women in politics is not fully embraced in Japan.

According to a report published in March 2013 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the percentage of women in national parliaments worldwide rose from 19.5 percent to 20.3 percent, marking the first time the proportion of women in parliaments exceeded 20 percent globally.\(^3\) With a rate of female representatives at 8.1 percent in the Lower House and 18.6 percent in the Upper House, Japan ranks 123 among 189 countries surveyed in the latest study.\(^4\) Why does Japan trail many developing countries as well as other established democracies such as the United States?

**Women in Japanese Politics**

Female participation in Japanese politics has evolved in phases and across the political spectrum. Perhaps the most successful female politician that Japanese politics ever produced is Takako Doi, who served as chairperson of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) from 1986 to 1991. Doi entered politics in 1969 and steadily climbed the ranks. Her ascent to a leadership post coincided with the decline of the LDP, which was battling scandals and weakened after the introduction of an unpopular consumption tax. Doi fiercely attacked the LDP, and her public approval rating soared despite the fact that the party she led was socialist. A phenomenon called “Madonna Boom” ensued. For the Upper House election in 1989, the JSP endorsed dozens of female candidates, many of whom were housewives with no political background, and the JSP and other opposition parties gained a majority in the Upper House. While Doi’s rise marked an increase in women’s participation in Japanese politics, ironically the Madonna Boom fizzled as it soon became apparent that many of those newly elected female politicians were unprepared for the task.

Another notable “boom” emerged in 2005, when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi dissolved the Diet for a snap election centered on postal privatization and endorsed 124 new candidates. As a result, 83 “Koizumi Children” in the LDP were elected, 15 of them women. Although the number of female candidates was low compared to their male counterparts, their success rate was much greater at 93.7 percent.\(^5\)

Then came the “Ozawa Girls” of 2009. Ichiro Ozawa, who was in charge of campaign strategy for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), decided to “parachute” 164 new candidates, 32 of whom were women, into the districts where the LDP fielded older male candidates in an effort to oust the LDP from power in the August 2009 Lower House election. He succeeded in placing 143 new members of the DPJ in the Lower House, of which 26 were women. Although women

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5. Out of 124 new candidates, 108 were men and 16 were women. While 63 percent of the male candidates were elected, 93.7 percent of the female candidates were elected.
accounted for around one-fifth of the newly elected DPJ members, they attracted much attention and became headliners. Only 10 of the 83 “Koizumi Children” survived that election.

But political fortunes were reversed after the DPJ failed to govern effectively, and in the Lower House election of December 2012 all but one of the “Ozawa Girls” lost their seats. The LDP did not necessarily try to expand the number of female candidates at that time. Rather, they focused on reelecting former members, including “Koizumi Children,” who had lost their seats in the 2009 election. All parties combined, there are currently 39 female members in the Lower House (8.1 percent) and 44 in the Upper House (18.6 percent). There are fewer female representatives today than prior to the 2012 election, but these numbers could change after the Upper House election scheduled for later this month.

In 1996, Japan adopted a new electoral system for the Lower House that combines single-seat districts with proportional representation (PR). Out of 480 seats, 300 are contested in single-seat constituencies. The other 180 members are elected through allocations to an electoral list submitted by each party. Having a strong electoral support base, which can be earned either through inheritance or diligent canvassing, is essential for competing in a single-seat race. Therefore, candidates who lack such a support base are listed on the party’s PR section. In the 2009 election, only two of eight female LDP members were elected from a single-seat district, indicating that few female candidates have enough political capital to win a single-seat election.

Too Few in Number

Why are there few women in politics in Japan? More importantly, why are there few influential women in Japanese politics? The first clue can be found in the characteristics of candidates. Male candidates tend to have prior experience in politics by having served in a municipal assembly or an elected official’s office as a kabane-mochi (bag carrier). On the other hand, many of the female candidates are “accidental” politicians who haven’t sought a political career previously. They often enter politics from a gaishi (foreign company), academia, or the media, but some are already recognized nationally, an advantage for candidates who lack experience in politics.

Because of the “coattail effect” resulting from the Koizumi and Ozawa strategies in recent elections, it became relatively easy for candidates who lack an electoral base to be elected. However, keeping a seat is not easy. When male politicians lose their seats, they are more inclined to stay in politics, having invested in their political careers for years, and continue campaigning in their districts readying for the next election. In contrast, women tend to leave politics for good after losing their seats and move on to the next chapter of their lives. Consequently, there are few female Diet members who have served multiple terms. There are some exceptions, such as Yuriko Koike of the LDP, who has held cabinet positions including minister of defense, and Seiko Noda, chairperson of the LDP General Council. Both are serving their seventh terms. But the general trend for women remains short-term involvement in politics.

Second, successful politicians depend on strong support from their families. Many Diet members split their time between Tokyo and their home district and rely on their families to attend various events in local constituencies. Keeping a work-life balance under such an arrangement is especially hard for women with children, in part because it is still considered a norm that mothers play a day-to-day management role at home.

Third, the culture of politics in Japan is largely biased in favor of men. Negotiations take place not only in the chambers of parliament but also during social engagements after hours where female politicians are not necessarily excluded but presumably feel uncomfortable.

What Is Happiness?

A 2012 Cabinet Office poll showed that only 28.5 percent of the Japanese public believes men and women are treated equally in the workplace, and only 18.6 percent felt that way about politics. The low participation rate of women in the workforce is due to cultural biases still persistent in Japan and the lack of a support system for women to advance their careers while raising children. But it is also true that women are likely to find fulfillment in marriage and family life more than in work. According to a survey by the Meiji Yasuda Institute for Life and Wellness, the research arm of a leading insurance company, women who are housewives are happier than those who are employed. Women may find solace in family life possibly because it is difficult to rise in the workplace, but the same study suggests that women regard relationships and marriage as a primary source of happiness. Among women who are married or have a partner, 54.4 percent said they are happy whereas only 26.8 percent of those who are employed said they are happy. Meiji Yasuda

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7 57.9 percent of housewives said that they are happy, while 40.3 percent of those who are employed said they are happy. Meiji Yasuda
As a means to advance gender equality, about 60 percent of Japanese people think that the government should promote support systems to assist parents with children. The policies outlined by the Abe government seem to incorporate those views and may help encourage both women and men to advocate for women’s increased participation in society, which could lead to Japan’s revitalization.

**Conclusion**

Family support (e.g., a very understanding partner), a system that encourages women to have better work-life balance, and the advancement of cultural and social norms that more fully embrace women’s contributions to society can together create an environment in which female politicians in Japan can thrive. The term “prime minister” derives from a Latin phrase, *Primus inter pares*, meaning “first among equals.” While men and women are created equal, this principle is yet to be practiced fully in the field of politics. Japanese society needs to evolve for more female political leaders to emerge.

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8 According to the survey by the Cabinet Office conducted in October 2012, when asked what kind of plans they think the government should promote to advance gender equality, in multiple choices, 61.1 percent selected support systems that assist women and men with reentering the workforce after children. About the same percentage of the respondents said that supporting parents to remain in the workforce during childrearing is also important.