

Women in politics: strong power or smooth cooperation? (2000) *

Dr. Hiroko Mizushima

Japan's constitution ensures equality between men and women in politics. But we have still very few female politicians. On the national level, we have 35 women in the House of Representatives, which is 7.3%, and 43 women in the House of Councilors, which is 17.1%. In total, we have about 10% female politicians in the Diet. On the local level, 6.2% of the politicians are female. The reason that the percentage is higher on the national level seems to be that the national elections tend to be more like a popularity poll in urban areas, and a number of female Diet members are former actresses, TV personalities or relatives of senior conservative politicians.

Female politicians have been increasing in number in the last decade. Ten years ago, women were less than 6% in the Diet, and only 2.4% in the local assemblies. On the local level, the percentage has been increasing steadily, while it has been fluctuating on the national level.

The major challenge, which women in politics are facing, is the first step of entrance into the political system. Of course, we have any other problem in the terms of social and political support for women, but I think the lack of support services is not really the primary problem.

The poor status of democracy in Japan is the main obstacle. In Japan, it is very difficult for the average person, regardless of sex, to enter politics. This is because Japanese people are not trained to vote based on political platforms and issues. Many politicians are elected just because they are the sons of former politicians, or just because they give special facilities to supporters. Most of the people in the general public are not interested in the politics because it seems to have nothing to do with them. I believe we need to increase participation and understanding of democratic processes in order to increase female representation in politics.

The second challenge in getting women to participate in the political system in Japan is gender discrimination, especially on the local level. The stereotypical belief that politics is something for successful men is still dominant in most of Japan, except the center of big cities like Tokyo. This discrimination will be diminished in accordance with the achievement of gender equality in other fields, which will take a long time in Japan.

I think the quota system is the best way to ensure that more women enter politics. I think this kind of affirmative action is necessary for the time being, and if I were in such a position, I would like to adopt a quota system in Japan.

I believe that younger female politicians take a more or less different approach towards politics. For example, younger women are seeking to establish a “gender-free” idea is more likely to be accepted by men because they themselves could take advantage of it. I think younger female politicians can cooperate with younger male politicians to achieve a “gender-free” society. It is likely that younger male politicians will not be opposed to such ideas.

I think female politicians will increase in number and will wield more power in politics. Eventually I think Japan will have a female Prime Minister if it can rise above the existing low-level, non-democratic politics. I am really concerned about the future of Japan, and thus I believe that we should accelerate the commitment to change in Japanese politics for our children and grandchildren.

The main aim of female politicians should be to achieve a “gender-free and barrier-free” society, which can accept different values and life styles in order to allow everyone to have a healthy mental life.

**This paper was presented during the 1st FES Young Women Leaders Network Conference held on 3-4 November 2000 in Bangkok, Thailand.
Copyright 2001 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*