



Emma Dalton

## *Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan*

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reviewed by [Caroline Norma](#)

1. We've all had our fill by now of 'women in Japan' books whose authors won't square off with Japanese men and their strategies to keep the country's female citizenry down. Timorousness is not an endearing characteristic of, particularly, authors who tackle the state of female political representation in the country: fewer women elected to the Lower House in 2012 than after female enfranchisement in 1946 makes mealy-mouthedness about who's to blame a flaw.
2. Excessively flawed, therefore, are explanations of the problem advanced by writers like Mikiko Eto who blame women's 'lack of enthusiasm for a larger political presence'<sup>[1]</sup> for their underrepresentation, and so recoil at the prospect of introducing gender quotas for this undeserving group: 'It would be unrealistic ... for a Japanese government, which works within a liberal framework built onto universal equal rights for all, to adopt a policy that treats women favourably.'<sup>[2]</sup> Slightly less flawed are explanations that make 'systems' the author of women's downfall, such as Tokuko Ogai's assessment that 'Japanese women's share of public office holding has been influenced by the type of electoral system within which they must operate.'<sup>[3]</sup> American academics, true to form, are mostly unable to imagine any such systems operating beyond the individual (or at least any not easily overcome by a bit of personal good spirit and hard work), and so their scholarship on female representation generally takes the form of lengthily-expressed wishful thoughts: Mary Alice Haddad writes hopefully that 'in the coming decades, when more and more women are elected to public office, it may be that the interests of women, as women, are once again given a place in Japanese politics.'<sup>[4]</sup> Giving up completely on the idea of improving women's status through greater political representation, Sherry Martin instead romanticises the provincial, low-level political activity that has characterised women's civic participation for centuries.<sup>[5]</sup> Finally, rather than flawed, the remaining litany of explanations simply confuse causation with correlation, as in Yoshie Kobayashi's assessment that 'women Diet members lack the type of political experience, career length, and patronage necessary to secure appointments as ministers.'<sup>[6]</sup>
3. To be fair, reigning discussion on women's political representation in Japan is no less meek than writing on any other aspect of women's condition in the country for which feminists have attempted explanation. Japan's most well-known feminist Ueno Chizuko in 2003, for example, blamed everyone but Japanese men for widespread child prostitution in the country: the 'patriarchal modern family, together with its hypocritical middle-class sexual norms, highly materialized consumer society, conformist pressure among youth, limited possibility available for women are all involved

with this phenomenon [of teenage prostitution].'<sup>[7]</sup> The sociological notion infecting the academy since the 1990s that 'gender roles' cause women's low social status has retarded the analytical abilities of a whole generation of feminist scholars who have been unable to coherently explain even the most dire of phenomena they observe. Strategies waged by men to subjugate women and continually elevate their position of sex-based social dominance in Japan, including through targeted sexual violence, fraternal collaboration, sexist policymaking and gendered labour market manipulation, barely register in this literature, which is much too fearful of offending the ruling sex class.

4. Emma Dalton's 2015 book, *Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan*, thankfully, turns a major corner in this recent history of 'women in Japan' scholarship. She rigorously interrogates the practices, attitudes and systems that men in political parties maintain to their own electoral advantage in Japan, and specifically against the interests and political success of women. Bluntly, she 'explores the ways in which political parties, as gendered institutions, may disadvantage women and uphold male privilege' (p. 4). Dalton nominates for discussion specifically five ways in which this is done:
  - 'The LDP [is] ... reliant on a system that involve[s] networking, connections with industry and business and money. These practices and structures ... [are] highly masculinist and elitist, acting as obstacles to to women and other outsiders' (p. 15).
  - 'Women contemplating running for political office are often discouraged by their families, including their husbands' (p. 22).
  - 'Japanese government ... ambivalence concerning the pursuit of gender equality is a problem whose interrogation can help uncover reasons for stubborn female under-representation in the Diet' (p. 44).
  - 'Women are overwhelmingly burdened with family duties and are socialised into roles that do not facilitate full participation in public or political life' (p. 65).
  - 'Women have always been situated outside mainstream politics because of their social roles as mothers and wives. When they attempt to enter mainstream politics, they disturb the masculine body politic, simply by being female' (p. 91).
5. Dalton focuses mainly on the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as both an organisation and a group of self-interested men that works to keep women out of the Diet. She selects the LDP not as a soft target on the basis of its infamous conservatism, but because the LDP is effectively Japan's one-party state ruling body, and is likely to be for many years to come. Different from the body of existing scholarship that looks anywhere but the LDP to find reason to think women's political participation is improving in Japan—such as local government, the Japan Socialist Party and grassroots activism—Dalton beards the lion in his den and interviews fourteen female LDP Diet members about their experiences and thoughts on the party's role in advancing female representation. Dalton's analysis of their answers is not only relentlessly critical, intelligent and unflinching, it has its funny moments. One LDP woman complained to her she feels like she has 'travelled 30 years back in time' because of the habit of male MPs smoking copiously in parliamentary buildings: 'The men ... deliberately smoke close to me ... I have no idea what they are thinking' (p. 111).
6. Dalton's contribution comes as a very welcome dose of reality in an English-speaking world that, up until only recently, was so gullible as to have cheered the Abe Shinzou government's 'womenomics' policies as genuinely intending to advance women's interests and as sincerely aiming to create a

'society where women shine.' But as the leader of a political party that delivers fewer women to power today than seventy years ago, it doesn't stand to reason that Abe intends to reform male supremacist institutions and practices to any extent allowing women to get ahead in the country. Dalton's book reveals just how committed to keeping women down the Liberal Democratic Party is in Japan, and her discussion casts a dark shadow of doubt over any future possibility of improvement in the status of women in the country.

## Notes

[1] Mikiko Eto, 'Women and representation in Japan,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 12(2) (2010): 177–201, p. 177.

[2] Eto, 'Women and representation in Japan,' p. 190.

[3] Tokuko Ogai, 'Japanese women and political institutions: Why are women politically underrepresented?' *Political Science & Politics*, 34(2) (2001): 207–10, p. 210.

[4] Mary Alice Haddad, *Building Democracy in Japan*, New York: Cambridge, 2012, p. 180.

[5] Sherry L. Martin, *Popular Democracy in Japan: How Gender and Community are Changing Modern Electoral Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

[6] Yoshie Kobayashi, 'Has the closed door opened for women? The appointment of women ministers in Japan,' *Political Science and Politics* 37(1) (Jan. 2004): 63–64, p. 64.

[7] Chizuko Ueno, 'Self-determination on sexuality? Commercialization of sex among teenage girls in Japan' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4(2) (2003): 317–24, p. 321.

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