

ASAA WOMEN IN ASIA SERIES

Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan

Emma Dalton

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Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan

This book looks at the gendering of the political system in Japan and the effects of that system on gender equality in national-level politics specifically and wider society more generally. It examines the approach taken by the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to issues of gender equality in Japan, and the repercussions of that approach on women's political experiences and representation. This book covers a range of themes including the role of the LDP and other major political parties in constructing the modern Japanese political system, the under-representation of women in Japanese politics, women's experiences in party politics and the gendering of government policies. Using in-depth interviews with women members of the national Diet, the book sheds light on how political women negotiate the male-dominated world of Japanese politics.

Emma Dalton is a lecturer in the Japanese Studies Research Institute of Kanda University of International Studies, Japan.

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Series editor's foreword

The contributions of women to the social, political and economic transformations occurring in the Asian region are legion. Women have served as leaders of nations, communities, workplaces, activist groups and families. Asian women have joined with others to participate in fomenting change at micro and macro levels. They have been both agents and targets of national and international interventions in social policy. In the performance of these myriad roles, women have forged new and modern gendered identities that are recognisably global and local. Their experiences are rich, diverse and instructive. The books in this series testify to the central role women play in creating the new Asia and re-creating Asian womanhood. Moreover, these books reveal the resilience and inventiveness of women around the Asian region in the face of entrenched and evolving patriarchal social norms.

Scholars publishing in this series demonstrate a commitment to promoting the productive conversation between Gender Studies and Asian Studies. The need to understand the diversity of experiences of femininity and womanhood around the world increases inexorably as globalisation proceeds apace. Lessons from the experiences of Asian women present us with fresh opportunities for building new possibilities for women's progress the world over.

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) sponsors this publication series as part of its ongoing commitment to promoting knowledge about women in Asia. In particular, the ASAA Women's Forum provides the intellectual vigour and enthusiasm that maintains the Women in Asia Series (WIAS). The aim of the series, since its inception in 1990, is to promote knowledge about women in Asia to both academic and general audiences. To this end,

WIAS books draw on a wide range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political science, cultural studies, media studies, literature and history. The series prides itself on being an outlet for cutting edge research conducted by recent PhD graduates and postdoctoral fellows from throughout the region.

The series could not function without the generous professional advice provided by many anonymous readers. Moreover, the wise counsel provided by Peter Sowden at Routledge is invaluable. WIAS, its authors and the ASAA are very grateful to these people for their expert work.

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For my friends and family

Acknowledgements

Colleagues and friends often ask me if I still 'like' my research project, which began in 2006. They laugh when I tell them I love it more and more as time passes by. I am probably biased, but my research project is fascinating. It is made fascinating because of the interesting people I have met and continue to meet and be inspired by along the way.

I started this project as a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Arts in the University of Wollongong, having some basic academic knowledge about Japanese women's studies, but limited knowledge about gender and Japanese politics specifically. I am deeply indebted to Lenore Lyons for helping me steer my project in a coherent direction in the initial stages, and to Christine de Matos and Helen Kilpatrick for their assistance along the way. I have benefited immeasurably from the guidance of Vera Mackie, who has been a true mentor. I remember many 'light bulb moments' reading her feedback on my drafts at various different stages of the writing process. These many moments inspired by Vera's insights coalesced into a gradual understanding of what constitutes rigorous and robust research.

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I am very lucky to have friends who research a wide range of academic fields, including Japanese women's studies. I have benefited both intellectually and emotionally from these friends. I have pestered many of them to read drafts and have always received excellent and constructive feedback. Thank you to Kumiko Kawashima, Frances Steel, Jen Philips and Kabita Chakraborty for your guidance and encouragement. I benefited and will continue to benefit from the wise and warm counsel of Laura Dales and Caroline Norma, whose friendship is invaluable.

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Abbreviations

AFER	Alliance of Feminist Representatives (newsletter)
DPJ	Democratic Party of Japan
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
EEOL	Equal Employment Opportunity Law
FWCW	Fourth World Conference on Women
JCP	Japan Communist Party
JSP	Japan Socialist Party
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party
LSL	Labor Standards Law
PR	Proportional representation
SDP	Social Democratic Party



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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xv
 Introduction	 1
1 Women, power and politics under LDP rule: gender equity discourses and practices 1955–93	12
2 Post-1993 political power structures and gender equity policies	39
3 Ambivalent ambitions	68
4 The importance of women in politics	82
5 Negotiating a masculinised party culture	103
 Conclusion: the failure of ‘equality’ and the possibility of gender quotas	 122
 <i>Appendix 1: women in the Lower and Upper Houses</i>	 138
<i>Appendix 2: women per political party</i>	139
<i>Appendix 3: interview participants</i>	140
<i>Glossary</i>	141
<i>Bibliography</i>	142
<i>Index</i>	155

List of illustrations

Figures

A1.1	Women in the Lower House, 1946–2012	138
A1.2	Women in the Upper House, 1949–2013	138

Tables

A2.1	Lower House	139
A2.2	Upper House	139

Introduction

On 6 December 2012, on a special election programme aired by Japan's national broadcaster, NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), political leaders sat against a plain backdrop, faced the camera and implored viewers with their election promises. Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader Abe Shinzō sat with LDP Upper House member Marukawa Fukuyo and, in a heavily scripted conversation, discussed the party's plans for Japan's future if the LDP was elected to power. Marukawa's appearance was intriguing, and I quickly assumed that she had been selected to be Abe's dialogue partner for her youth, beauty and because she had once been a newsreader. But there was more to it than this. This was less of a conversation between party colleagues than an interview of the party leader by a pretty and much younger woman. Some way into the dialogue, Marukawa started talking about having had a baby earlier in the year and the difficulty she experienced combining work and family. This was a segue into a dialogue about the party's plans for childcare. Marukawa's role in this performance was clear. Not only was she a beautiful prop, she was a symbol of what the LDP could offer women. After their brief conversation about LDP policies surrounding childcare facilities, Abe said triumphantly, 'so the LDP will make woman-friendly policies'. This one televised dialogue captured much of what I want to explore in this book about women and Japanese party politics.

It is not difficult to see this interview as symbolic of gender relations in broader Japanese society. Men talk with authority and women listen attentively. But for me, the more specific story it told was that of the roles of men and women in Japanese party politics. Both the physical bodies before the camera as well as the content of the dialogue appeared to capture the essence of gender inequality in Japanese politics. Despite the removal of legal barriers to female political participation, women's entrance – into electoral politics at least – is something that stands out simply because women are still a numerical minority. Japan has the lowest rate of female political representation in the industrialised world. Women's actions on the political stage are therefore particularly remarkable, and the symbolism of the young, attractive Marukawa smiling and interviewing Abe was striking.

Marukawa certainly appears 'out of place' in national-level politics; thus her presence is somewhat jarring. However, her presence in the televised

2 Introduction

interview did little to disrupt any assumptions about political knowledge and masculinity. Marukawa was not talking with any authority about the party to which she belonged. It was left to Abe to explain the LDP's party promises. Through his one-way conversation with Marukawa, Abe re-inscribed his own male body with political authority, thus fortifying the assumption that political knowledge belongs to men.

Marukawa's role in the interview also did little to disrupt ideas about women's relationship with politics. She does not threaten the privilege of LDP men and was therefore a perfect choice for this dialogue with Abe. In her role as subordinate and also as a beautiful voice of working mothers around Japan, she re-inscribed her own female body with the distinct passivity of a citizen that needs to be taken care of by the (male) government. Abe's well-intentioned but revealing statement 'so the LDP will make woman-friendly policies' reveals an all-too-common conflation of women with mothers, or potential mothers. 'Women-friendly' and 'mother-friendly' are the same thing according to dominant political discourses. It would appear to be almost impossible for male political leaders in Japan to visualise women as autonomous human beings with interests and needs outside 'combining work and family'.

Japanese women were once subjects who were expected to reproduce for the nation and rear the next generation. As this book will demonstrate, women are no longer so overtly enjoined to sacrifice their own subjectivity for the greater good, yet they remain citizens for whom male political leaders know best. Their needs are defined and provided for by policies created by male bureaucrats and politicians. When women enter the fray that is party politics, it seems it is very difficult to behave in a way that might challenge this. In the chapters that follow, I consider how this situation has emerged and why the dearth of women in politics continues. I enquire into the role that political parties play in maintaining this situation. Political parties must be held to account for their role in hindering women's increased participation in the political decision-making processes. This is the objective of this book.

Persistent inequality

In the general election of December 2012, 470 members were elected to the lower house of Japan's national legislative assembly, the Diet. Of these, 38 were women, the lowest number of women elected since 2003. The proportion of women elected in the 2012 election (8.1 per cent) was lower than the proportion of women elected at the first election in which women were able to vote and run for office, in 1946 (8.4 per cent). This is a stunning statistic, difficult to justify.¹ Japan fares poorly in all international measures of gender equality. Despite ranking tenth in the world in 2009 on the Human Development Index, it ranked fifty-seventh on the Gender Empowerment Measure.² The poor representation of women in politics would appear to be a particularly stubborn problem.