

Japan's Far More Female Future, by Bill Emmott. , ,
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Japan's Far More Female Future addresses gender inequality through the lens of twenty-one female leaders in respective fields in Japan and its impact on the country's economic and social future. The book acknowledges a steadily rising number of women accessing education and taking up prominent positions, and argues that despite the fact that Japan's future will be far more female than its past (p. vii), greater equality calls on big changes for a country historically operating with remarkably gendered roles. This speaks to the ongoing debate of whether the progress made on gender equality legislation equates equality laws actually being implemented in a fair, just and transparent manner. This book is of interest to readers who are interested in understanding gender discrimination women face in a particularly "male-dominated, misogynistic society" in Japan (p.32).

The book is divided into three parts. The first part presents an overview of the institutional context and how it shapes women's role with an analysis of the data, laws, public policy, and institutions surrounding Japan's socio-economic development. For a nation having one of the world's oldest populations and a mandatory retirement age at 60, the book discusses how employers use this as a means to depress wage costs since pay and promotions are tied with age and seniority (p.15). Being financially poor and socially insecure, people in retirement have to go out for work on part-time or short-term contracts; a rising number of females are also forced to take on non-standard jobs either to minimise the impact of marriage tax or divide their time for childcare purposes. As such, for a country like Japan whose human capital is embodied by a well-educated population, the book argues Japan's human capital is under-used and depleted. With the proportion of women enrolled on to 4-year university courses has increased from 15.2 percent in 1990 to nowadays nearly 50 percent, the book argues the first ever generation of women in Japanese history that have the ability and desire to take up influential roles of all kinds still remains a "phenomenon of potentiality more than actuality" (p.39).

The second part is the main body of the book containing seven chapters. It consists of field research of interviewing twenty-one women who have established careers in their particular fields (such as business, arts, academia, politics and media), nationally or internationally. Each chapter presents a shared theme in relation to how cultural, social, institutional changes have impacted on these women's aspirations and choices made to lives and careers. On the face of it, a recurring message in the interviews suggests that ambition, independence, target-driven, and resilience, among many others, play a vital part in developing them into who they are. Behind these success stories, readers are constantly drawn to the subtlety among the details in relation to how these women struggle with 'unspeakable' inequalities rooted in the nation's culture, reinforced in social life, and operated by institutions. Intersectional feminism perspective also comes into play when the analysis accounts for seniority in the equation of gender discrimination.

Believing in that measures based on justice and human rights are the primary resort to root out gender discrimination, the book concludes in the third part with recommendations on public policy and private actions. Measures for public policy point to areas such as raising national minimum wage, labour laws reform to protect precarious workers, abolition of the marriage tax, universal provision of childcare facilities, gender equality in education, immigration system reform to fill the labour gap, legislation for binding quotas for political representation.

Measures for private actions offer, for example, modernised family-friendly practices, early career development opportunities for female professionals, integration of maternity and paternity leave into career development. These are all fairly standard suggestions evident among research of gender inequality.

What appears to be most striking in this book is unfolding the ‘unspeakable’ gender inequalities conveyed by each success story. In a culture in which people do not feel comfortable to criticise others (p.180), the operation of gender inequality tends to be guarded by the peaceful and law-binding democracy in Japan. The impact of these success stories on potential challenges to public policy and management practices is far-reaching: women’s struggle against inequality in Japan is an “uphill one” (p.40). The contrast is obvious: on one hand, women relate their success to personality and attitudes towards work, lacking engagement with the conversation of gender discrimination; on the other hand, the prejudices and misogyny faced by these women at various stage of their lives and careers are manifested through the way of how they have become who they are. This is where the author smartly dogged a potential question of whether women should work like men in order to stay competitive and excel in male-dominated professions, echoing the ‘ideal worker’ norm: single-minded commitment and complete devotion unencumbered by family responsibilities. While a gender-neutral tone largely shared among these success stories with comments ranging from “physical strength and toughness” is most needed (p.81) to “when one is working, I haven’t really felt that there is any difference between men and women” (p.84), these interviews often end (or in the mid of) with a work-life balance response to questions asking how these female leaders juggle work and personal life. Flexibility stigma reported elsewhere, therefore, does not appear to be an issue here.

With nearly forty-years’ experience of writing about Japan, the former editor-in-chief of The Economist places great emphasis on social, cultural, institutional influences on the operation of gender inequality and how they affect the success stories through insightful personal interviews. If one argues that measures at policy level (public or private) tackling gender inequality open up more opportunities for women to access education and labour market, one likely wonders how these measures would exactly play out at organisational level once women are deployed in workplaces.

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