

Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation

Women in Politics in the UK and Japan

Friday 9 April 2021

Presentations by Professor Mari Miura, Professor of Political Science at Sophia University, and Professor Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics & Gender at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Professor Miura began by giving a brief overview of women's representation in Japanese politics: currently, women make up just 9.9% of members of the lower house of the Japanese Diet, and 22.9% of the upper house. With the world average of women's political representation at 25%, it is clear that Japan is lagging behind. Compared to the percentage of women in equivalent lower houses in other countries around the world, Japan is far down the list, at 165th out of 194. The situation is even worse for local officials, with only 2 out of 47 prefectural governors being women, and fewer than 2% of municipal mayors. These figures show how male-dominated Japanese politics is, Professor Miura said. Reflecting on historical trends, she showed that the situation in Japan has been stagnant for the last 10-15 years. While in the 1980s, political representation for women stood at around 5% in both the UK and Japan, Japan has remained at about 15% for the last decade and a half, while in the UK the number has steadily risen to the record high of 34% today.

In May 2018 the Japanese Diet passed a gender parity law. This was drafted as a private member's bill by a non-partisan parliamentary group, a group created due to pressure coming from civil organisations including notable women's movements and for which Professor Miura served as academic advisor, she explained. The key organiser was a women's organisation called 'Association Q', which promotes the goal of at least a quarter of Diet politicians being women. The basic principle of this gender parity law was that all political parties are required to aim to field an equal number of male and female candidates in all elections. However, she pointed out the key phrase of 'aim at' – meaning that this bill is just encouragement rather than compulsory – in other words, it has no "teeth" to it. Nevertheless, all parties agreed to the passage of this law. Further, all parties are encouraged to take certain special measures, such as setting numerical targets for male and female candidates. The term 'quota' was avoided due to lack of knowledge and resistance to the term in Japanese, hence the phrase 'numerical target'. In the lower house elections coming up in the next few months, Professor Miura said, there will be an opportunity to see how effective this new law will be. It did contribute to an increase in the number of women candidates fielded in the upper house elections of 2019, although the impact was limited. It therefore remains to be seen whether it will have a significant impact.

Nevertheless, she said, there has been a big change in the atmosphere of Japanese society since 2017, with the public growing far more aware of the problem of sexism which is deeply rooted in Japanese culture and politics in particular. As elsewhere in the world, it started with the #MeToo movement, before a watershed moment in 2018 with a number of high-profile incidents of sexism: sexual harassment claims against the then Vice Minister of Finance, Junichi Fukuda; the discrimination against women through doctoring of entrance exam results of various medical schools; and movements by students across the country to demand education on sexual consent. Cases of sexism thus began to gain coverage in the media around this time. Subsequently in 2019, rallies by grassroots movements (so-called 'flower demos') were held every month in all 47 prefectures of Japan, demanding an amendment of the penal code to include a Swedish-style 'Yes means Yes' regulation. Also significant was the #KuToo movement, which utilises a play on words with the Japanese terms for shoes (J: kutsu / 靴) and pain (J: kutsū / 苦痛) to draw attention to the outdated rule that women must wear high-heeled shoes in the workplace, and a student-led campaign against sexual harassment during the job-hunting process.

In 2020, the Davos Congress gender gap index ranked Japan 121st in the world for gender equality, giving a shock to the Japanese elite and Japan more generally. This was particularly shocking, Professor

Miura explained, as despite the then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's purported advocacy of women's empowerment, Japan had dropped 10 places since the previous index. As a result of this, many across the country started to accept the reality that Japan had a significant problem, leading to many journals and articles discussing discrimination against women. The final blow was in early 2021 when former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori resigned from his position as head of the Tokyo Olympics organising committee following sexist remarks; had this happened one or two years previously, Professor Miura said, he might well have been allowed to stay in his job, but in the context of 2021, widespread outrage led to his resignation. This demonstrates that Japanese society has completely changed in the last few years, she said, following the accumulation of many incidents and movements which brought the issue of sexism into mainstream discourse. However, the low index placement in 2020 indicates that more fundamental changes are required.

To demonstrate this shift in attitudes, Professor Miura cited a World Value Survey poll which asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that men make better political leaders than women do: while in the mid-1990s 43% of Japanese respondents agreed with this statement, the number has dropped to 22% in 2020. For comparison, 18% of UK respondents agreed with the statement in the mid-2000s, and the number was at 11% in 2020. She emphasised that when the field is narrowed to Japanese women under the age of 29, the number is only 6%; thus, while there is a cultural shift happening where fewer and fewer people have this kind of view, there are huge generational and gender gaps. Thus, young women need to be encouraged to engage with politics in order to accelerate the speed of change in Japan and to achieve gender equality in politics.

Professor Miura went on to say that she runs the Academy for Gender Parity, an NGO which provides young women with training in how to run for office. She founded this in 2018 with her colleague Dr Ki-Young Shin of Ochanomizu University on the model of similar programmes which they had observed in the United States, with the vision of inclusion, respect, and justice. In training young women, they focus on 'three Cs': confidence, capacity, and community. The academy aims to teach young women confidence, eradicating the thought that politics is a male world, and producing clarity of motivation; it teaches key skills (thus 'capacity') such as public speaking; and fosters and nurtures a strong sense of community and connections. As she pointed out, politics is always conducted with colleagues, rather than in isolation, so a strong community of support is an important element of being a successful politician. This has now been operating for three years, with success already in local elections and preparations being made for candidates to be fielded in the upcoming lower house election. She expressed her pride at the positive short-term results of the Academy's work and explained that the programme is being expanded to be able to train more young women.

Professor Miura then looked at the next steps needed to achieve gender equality in politics. The young generation is a source of great hope, being highly active, engaged with politics, and very vocal. Thus changes need to be made to political parties and the legal foundations of politics: the gender parity law needs to be amended and strengthened, for instance by making numerical targets mandatory, and getting the major political parties to implement a target. While four parties have set numerical targets of 30-50%, the ruling conservative LDP has ignored calls from some of its own members to set a target of 30% due to significant resistance within the party. Thus, the gender parity law needs to be amended such that implementing a numerical target is made mandatory for all political parties, which would mean the LDP would have to stop dragging its feet on this issue. Another idea by her parliamentary group, she explained, was to institute a public subsidy law to provide financial incentives for parties fielding more women candidates. They are also pushing for the gender parity law to include a clause on the prevention of harassment against women in politics. As around the world, many Japanese female politicians receive harassment and threats of violence from voters as well as powerful male politicians, and there needs to be a legal foundation to prevent this, Professor Miura explained. Finally, she suggested that implementing a gender-sensitive parliamentary audit, in the style of the UK parliament's IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) audit, would help in checking that the regulations of the Japanese Diet are more gender-sensitive.

Professor Miura then handed over to Professor Sarah Childs, who began by noting the significance of the fact that feminist professors of political science also have to be active on the ground trying to effect change. For her and Professor Miura, she explained, it is not just a subject of purely academic interest but an area of practical involvement and action. She hoped to give some context to understanding the representation of women in British politics, particularly in the House of Commons, which can be considered “gender insensitive”. It is not unchanging, and though politics can sometimes appear very resistant to change, there are ways to reform parliament and political parties. She reiterated Professor Miura’s belief that with the desire of younger women to see change, change can and will be brought about. The issue is not lack of understanding about the reasons for political underrepresentation of women, or confusion over the actions necessary for rectification, but rather political will – that is, ensuring others take the steps necessary for improvement.

Professor Childs explained that in 2015 she had asked to be invited into the UK House of Commons in an advisory capacity and was accepted. Drawing on the IPU’s gender-sensitive parliaments framework, she set up a Red-Amber-Green (RAG) analysis to show where the House of Commons is insensitive, with the aim of showing parliamentarians what is wrong with their parliament, which areas to focus on, and what needs to be done. One problem is that it is often women who are blamed for not having the correct resources, experiences, and confidence, rather than the environment. Thus, the goal is to fix institutions in order to accommodate women, rather than changing women to fit institutions. Further, it is not just formal rules which need to be changed, but informal ways of doing politics which need to be adjusted and made more inclusive. She also noted that it is important to take note of the needs and circumstances of other underrepresented groups in parliament, as well as to recognise the diversity and differences among women themselves.

Since 1997, there has been a steady improvement in the number of women sitting in the House of Commons, with women making up a third of all MPs elected in the 2019 general election. But headlines which talk of ‘unprecedented numbers’ of women MPs can be unhelpful or misleading, given that the precedent is not a good yardstick with which to judge gender equality. Professor Rainbow Murray at Queen Mary, University of London, advocates changing the language of such discussions from ‘underrepresentation of women’ to ‘overrepresentation of men’ to remind readers that even a parliament which is doing comparatively well in this field is still massively male-dominated. Side-by-side comparisons of male and female MPs, even today, show that there is no room for complacency, Professor Childs said.

Another important angle from which to approach the topic is women’s political presence across the different political parties. Looking at purely national percentages can misrepresent the real issue of serious party asymmetry; if higher percentages of women MPs overall are a reflection of the electoral success of one or two political parties, rather than the overall system, the gender balance of parliament is therefore delicate and at the mercy of electoral swings for or against certain parties. In 1997, 101 out of 120 female MPs were from the Labour Party, and in terms of raw numbers, there has been some rebalancing, with roughly equal numbers of female MPs in the Labour and Conservative parties. However, when one looks at women MPs as a percentage of their respective political parties, a very different picture emerges – women comprise over half of all Labour MPs in 2021, while accounting for just over a quarter of Conservative MPs, which is significantly lower. Professor Childs contended that equal political representation necessarily means parity of women across all political parties, not just in some. It is also important, she said, to look at which women are in politics, and party asymmetry is also clear in ethnic diversity, with for instance, Labour accounting for 76% (28 people) of all ethnic minority women MPs in the House of Commons.

Professor Childs went on to highlight the important issue of the ‘supply pool’ for female politicians. It is not a simple issue of supply – how many women are willing to put themselves forward for candidacy – but also demand, and the extent to which political parties are open to the recruitment of women. It is often crudely assumed that the supply pool is fixed; in fact, she said, the actions and words of parties and parliaments can encourage women to put themselves forward, and equally if quotas demand certain

numbers of women candidates from parties, then those parties will go and seek them out. Political recruitment needs to be actively undertaken to increase diversity, as in the case of Dame Anne Begg, who became a Labour MP in 1997 after being 'head-hunted' by the party in response to the newly-instituted all-women shortlists, without which she would not have put herself forward for the role. She agreed with Professor Miura in saying that the Japanese Diet would benefit from taking an audit in the style of the IPU, either internally or in conjunction with an external organisation, as it would enable it to understand its own inner sensitivities and therefore draft bespoke reforms that truly address the particular cultural and infrastructural manifestations of gender inequality which need to be improved.

Professor Childs explained how she had produced the Good Parliament Report in 2016, which included 43 recommendations for the UK parliament to improve equality. She recalled how she was asked at the time to include just 3 or so recommendations, as this would be perhaps more manageable; the issues surrounding gender inequality are so complex, however, and parliament is so saturated with masculinised practices, that it would have been impossible to limit the recommendations to so few. She was subsequently able to work with the then Speaker of the House John Bercow to take the agenda forward. She stressed that although an audit identifies the problems which need to be addressed, and recommendations provide possible solutions, there needs to be institutional capacity to bring about the change.

While there have been many successes with the recommendations, Professor Childs said, and many more than she thought possible at the time of writing, there have also been some significant failures, including the important issue of legislated quotas. Indeed, a proposal in the Equality Act 2010 which aimed to ensure political parties keep candidate diversity data has twice been rejected due to government resistance. Thus, she said, the British parliament is by no means a perfect parliament, or even a good parliament, even though there has been considerable progress. One ongoing issue is proxy voting during baby leave, something that is currently impossible, leading Tulip Siddiq MP to have to delay having a Caesarean section operation due to the insistence on in-person voting. Following women's (and men's) activism on this issue, proxy voting became allowed under a permanent change to the House of Commons standing orders in September 2020. Professor Childs finished her presentation by advocating the role of what she termed 'gendered parliamentarianism' – that is, women MPs working as women and for women in reforming their institution. Thanks to women MPs' activism, women who are mothers or are planning to become mothers might now feel able to put themselves forward for election with the changed practices of the House of Commons. This illustrates nicely the power of gendered parliamentarianism leading to a positive step towards inclusivity, and how it can take parliament forward with further progress.