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### **GENDER BIAS: TAKING ROOT IN JAPANESE CULTURE**

The gender gap in Japan is a serious problem. In world rankings, Japan is placed 116th out of 146 countries, which is the lowest rank in the G7. According to a graph related to this, it can be seen that Political Empowerment for women in Japan is also significantly less when compared to the global average. It means that gender issues are not fully supported by Japanese government. Today, we are going to talk about gender bias taking root in Japanese culture. First, we will introduce what the gender gap is like and how serious it is in Japan. Second, we will examine the difference between *distinction* and *discrimination* according to one's lifetime. Third, we will talk about the gender issues in contemporary Japanese society. Finally, we will present our conclusion and propose some solutions based on our interpretation of the facts.

A good starting point for this discussion is to ask why there is such a gender gap in Japanese society. One important reason is that a lot of it is based on Japanese history and culture. To be more specific, we have cultural values which depend on gender and they are cultivated in our daily life. Sexism in Japan is a mixture of distinction and discrimination, and we tend to regard it as "natural." For example, in the United States it is illegal to discriminate against workers based on gender. This came about through great efforts by the women's rights movement. But such movements did not play a central role in Japanese history. Sexism in Japan exists so "naturally" that hardly anyone notices it. Therefore, it's not easy to solve this issue.

It has long been taken for granted in Japan that males and females are treated differently. How serious is the problem? We can say that we experience it even from the time when we are babies. When a boy is born, he will be wrapped in blue blankets. If it is a girl, she will wear pink blankets. *Randoseru*, Japanese standard school bags, also have a form of gender distinction: boys usually have a black bag, girls are expected to have a red one. For example, when I entered elementary school, I wanted a blue *Randoseru*, but my parents didn't allow that and bought me a red one.

Another example is *Shichi-go-san* (Seven-five-three) which is a traditional event to celebrate the healthy growth of children as they turn three, five, and seven years old. But the content between boys and girls are quite different. Girls can choose their kimono from various colors; however, boys cannot do so. They usually wear a black and simple kimono.

We have gender bias from our childhood as well, and it continues into adulthood without being noticed to any significant degree. The viewpoint on marriage is peculiar to Japan in that girls have to polish their cooking and sewing skills etc., to prepare for a married life; and husbands are often dominant, believing they are the boss in the

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house. In European countries, it is common for husbands and wives to cooperate with housework and childcare; something that is quite alien to the culture of our country. What these examples have in common is that they are based on the notion of “gender role.” These issues are not often regarded as “gender discrimination.” Japanese children grow up with daily inequalities since childhood, so we don’t notice the bias. Therefore, it has developed into a social problem. In addition, the social structure of Japan itself is designed to promote gender discrimination. This is what we call “systematic sexism” and it is one of the reasons that the situation continues until now. We would like to introduce three examples of systematic sexism.

In politics, the gender ratio is unbalanced. The Japanese parliament has much fewer female members than male ones. Even today it is more difficult for women to be a politician. Strong political connections among male politicians are a feature of the political landscape even today. It is also difficult for female politicians to balance their job and family life. If female politicians prioritize child-rearing, their supporters may not vote for them, and female politicians may be slandered. Systematic sexism is also seen in the workplace. The number of Japanese women in managerial positions has been growing very slowly over the last decades, although the number of women in regular employment remains low overall. Those circumstances are related to the perspectives on marriage. The custom that “women should do housework” remains in Japan. Therefore, a lot of Japanese women work part-time or as contract workers.

Women-only cars are evidence of a wider social problem too. It separates women on the train because it is considered as a solution for incidences of women being groped on crowded trains. However, it is debatable whether it is the real solution for those crimes.

In conclusion, we can say that sexual discrimination has taken root in Japanese culture as it has much to do with Japanese traditional culture. Moreover, gender role is regarded as “distinction,” but not as “discrimination” in Japan. Therefore, reforms of Japan’s gender gap have made very little progress compared to other countries.

In this way, these problems are unique to Japan. In order to solve them we would like to put forward two proposals. Firstly, we suggest reforms from “above.” It means that the best way for changing Japanese society might be through the introduction of some laws. Japanese people are said to respect rules seriously, so if the government produces stronger gender-equality laws, people would be inclined to follow them. Such rules are particularly effective in the workplace.

Secondly, we suggest reforms from “below.” That means creating awareness amongst men about how to notice unconscious discrimination. We would like to introduce some examples of movement in Japan. #Kuttoo movement is one of the biggest. It is influenced by #Metoo movement which is famous for sharing sexual harassment experiences on SNS. The #Kuttoo movement is to free women’s footwear choice in workplace. It comes from the Japanese word “*kutsu*” which means “shoes.” Before, there was a norm “women should wear heels in a workplace.” But a lot of women suffered from pain in their feet and posture related health issues. So many women have posted about their injuries on SNS and have called for much needed change in society regarding gender awareness.

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To sum up, there are no simple answers to reducing gender discrimination. But it needs to be considered in the light of the country's cultural history. Maybe then there will be more substantial progress.

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