

Addressing gender inequality in Japan: challenges and potentials of transforming institutions

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Abstract

While known for its economic success, Japan is considered as one of the unfortunate examples that has failed to translate economic prosperity into gender equality. This is demonstrated by a significantly low representation of women in all policy decision making processes/levels and their considerably weaker position in the labour market. Similar to other countries across the world, for decades, feminist organisations and groups in Japan have played a crucial role not only in demanding for social changes, but also in providing various services for women redressing the lack of public provision to alleviate gender inequality. However, more recently, feminist activists and scholars have also started to acknowledge the significance of transforming state/public institutions to ensure the presence of feminist voices.

Japan has a very contradictory (public) institutional structure on gender equality. Whereas the inequality in gender balance in the legislative is evident, it still has fairly well-organised structures of (promoting) gender equality in the government (both national and local). In examining why Japan has been lagging behind in improving gender equality, feminist scholars began to focus on the impact of formal and informal rules in institutions as well as the market.

Drawing on two examples of the recent initiative to introduce electoral gender quotas and the development of women's policy agencies at the local level, the paper explores how particular institutional rules and practices, both formal and informal, and the market economy hinder institutional changes, at the same time may present opportunity to develop a unique avenue for institutional transformation.