

◆書評◆

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Comparative Perspectives on Gender Equality in Japan and Norway: Same but Different?

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Scandinavian countries are the champions of gender equality, whereas Japan is substantially lagging. This is a generally accepted perception supported by statistics and international rankings. Nevertheless, this book begins by highlighting the commonalities shared by Japan and Norway: both countries possessed similarly traditional gender norms and division of household tasks, and many pivotal moments that shaped women's social standing in each country occurred simultaneously. So, why are they so different today? Do they still share any commonalities? This book endeavors to analyze these intriguing questions.

Surely, a country's state of gender equality is influenced by the larger societal, economic, and cultural contexts. The book provides interesting insights through deep comparisons between the two countries, emphasizing both the processes and manifestations through which gender (in

equality occurs, from the perspectives of family and home (Part I), education (Part II), media (Part III), sexuality and reproduction (Part IV), and by the dialog between two gender scholars (Part V). It is presented as an anthology, the fruit of an ambitious collaboration project among 16 gender studies scholars in Norway and Japan. The authors synthesized the insights from both countries and across themes, thereby providing a convincing picture of the commonalities and differences between the two nations.

If one looks back into the late 19th century, women's primary roles were homemakers in both countries. Following the second world war and through the waves of modernization and economic growth, gender equal education was envisioned in both countries (Ch. 4) as gender equality was presented as an important policy agenda. Then, both countries experienced the second wave

feminist movement in the 1970s (Ch. 1) and increased female labor force participation through the 1980s (Ch. 4). In the 1990s, fathers' participation in childrearing became an important issue, and paternity leave policies were developed throughout this decade (Ch. 3). However, both countries have experienced a generally declining fertility rate since the 1960s (Ch. 11). Issues surrounding sexuality (Ch. 10) and reproductive rights (Ch. 12) are relatively new, so the current states are similar. Likewise, no systematic country differences are found regarding the introduction and discussion of feminist values in higher education, primarily due to the lack of accepted pedagogical practices (Ch. 6).

Despite these similarities within the dynamic societal changes, the two countries are currently observed in substantially divergent states of gender equality. In Norway, women are better educated with a higher labor force participation (Ch. 4), a higher ratio of women in higher-status positions (professors, Ch. 7), and a more equal division of household work (Ch. 2 and Ch. 5) than in Japan. So *why* are there differences? There are clearly direct and substantial influences from the policy instruments implemented to achieve gender equality, such as paternity leave (Ch. 3) and comprehensive measures to support

the promotion of female scholars (Ch. 7). However, a more fundamental difference is the perception of gender quality in society (Conclusion section). In Norway, gender equality is considered a human right, while it is an “issue to be discussed” in Japan. The importance of gender equality is undisputed in Norway, meaning that society and policymakers can focus on *how* to achieve it. In contrast, Japanese people are still culturally more adherent to traditional gender roles (Ch. 2) and seem unable to reach a consensus on action.

As a Japanese woman living in Norway and working as a scholar and an educator in a Norwegian university, I read this book with great interest. Japanese people often automatically assume that Scandinavian countries have always been gender equal. This book shows that it is not so—Norway *became* a gender equal nation through political will and social changes. There are glimpses of changes in modern masculinity and increased childcare participation among fathers in Japan that could positively influence gender equality. In addition, the book provides a more nuanced picture of gender equality in Norway, where men and women still behave differently regarding the choice of study fields, occupations, work hours, and division of chores. They are also not free of time-bind, despite the generally

shorter work hours.

Although the book discusses gender equality from diverse perspectives, it focuses on the domains of home/family and school. Consequently, it lacks a thorough discussion surrounding the workplace. I believe that including perspectives from economics, management, and leadership literature can enrich the discussion. For example, Norway was the first to implement the mandatory gender quota on corporate boards. It would also be interesting to understand the influence

of the strong egalitarian belief embedded in Norwegian society on its implementation of gender equality compared to the patriarchal and hierarchal Japanese society.

In conclusion, this book provides valuable knowledge and insights toward a better understanding of the background and processes of achieving gender equality for scholars, practitioners, and readers interested in gender equality in Norway, Japan, and beyond.