

**A MASCULINISED PARTY CULTURE: OBSTACLES FACING WOMEN IN JAPAN'S  
LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY<sup>1</sup>**

EMMA DALTON, CENTRE FOR ASIA PACIFIC SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION STUDIES,  
UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

## **Introduction**

Female representation in the Japanese legislature, the Diet, is extremely low. Or, put differently, male representation, at approximately 87 percent, is disproportionately high. In the Upper House, 17.4 percent of seats are occupied by women; in the Lower House the figure is 9.4 percent. Female representation at the local level of politics is similarly poor. Scholars (Mikanagi, 1999; Ōgai, 2005) who have researched impediments to increased female political participation in Japan have revealed institutional, structural and cultural reasons for the scarcity of women in politics. Institutional and structural reasons include the electoral systems and political parties, while cultural reasons include access to political resources such as education and money, and social norms surrounding women's expected roles, duties and capabilities. The literature on the under-representation of women in politics in Japan has focused largely on the electoral system and cultural or social obstacles, but has failed to take

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into account the role that political parties play. This paper aims to contribute to the debate about the reasons for low female representation in the Japanese parliament, the Diet by filling some of this gap and focusing on the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The conservative and largest party in Japan, the LDP, has been in power for most of the last 53 years.<sup>2</sup> It has the lowest total female representation in the Diet of all political parties and, this paper argues, has a political culture that is unwelcoming to women. If political parties are in fact the gatekeepers of female political participation (Caul, 1999; Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005, p.30; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003), focusing on LDP policies to increase its female members, party rules and party culture will assist in uncovering reasons for female under-representation in the Diet in Japan. Due to the limited scope of an individual article, this paper will focus on party culture to demonstrate how the LDP's masculinised characteristics affect the way LDP women negotiate their positions within the party and within the Diet.

Based on interviews held over 2007-2008 with 14 female LDP Diet members and three female opposition party members (Democratic Party of Japan, hereinafter DPJ),<sup>3</sup> this paper will illustrate that LDP women operate as 'space invaders' (Puwar, 2004) within a masculinised space that has been created and managed by men, who are largely indifferent to the issue of female political representation. This paper discusses the characteristics of this masculinised party culture and suggests that it creates a 'code of silence' where LDP women are inhibited in their ability to speak against sexism that occurs within the party and the Diet.

### **Masculinised space**

A male-dominated space is typically one where there are few women present—that space might be filled with men who embody the traits of hegemonic masculinity, as well as men who contest them (for example, homosexual men). Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) is regarded as the most manly type of behavioural and lifestyle code for men to aspire to. As Enloe (2004, p.17) notes, dominant forms of

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<sup>2</sup> The LDP has been in power since its formation in 1955, apart from a period of several months after losing power in August 1993. It regained control of the government in 1994 and has held coalition governments since then. It now governs in coalition with the New Kōmeitō.

<sup>3</sup> All interview subjects will be treated anonymously in this paper.

masculinity are dichotomously constructed against notions of femininity. A masculinised space is one where expression, behaviour and attitudes perceived at that particular time in that culture as most manly are dominant, and expression, behaviour and attitudes that are perceived as the most feminine are subordinate. Therefore, women must negotiate their positions within the gender hierarchy of a masculinised space as do, to a lesser extent, men who do not conform to those ideals of hegemonic masculinity valued within that organisation.

Labelling the LDP a masculinised space means that apart from being numerically dominated by men, it is also characterised by: normative behaviour for masculinised spaces such as late-night meetings and smoking; normative lifestyles, such as heterosexuality and a focus on career over family; and normative political styles, such as corrupt dealings, aggression and boys-club networking. Mackie (2000, p.247) has argued that the bureaucrat and the politician in Japan embody the *sarariiman* model of masculinity, which Dasgupta (2003, p.123) has identified as being the hegemonic masculinity in Japan. Male Diet members therefore embody hegemonic masculinity by dressing similarly to the *sarariiman* in dark-coloured suits, aspiring to marriage and fatherhood, and importantly, having full-time careers as the centre of their lives. The *sarariiman* model of masculinity emerged during the period of rapid economic growth in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s, when men became state-sanctioned 'corporate warriors' and women's roles as their supporting housewives was reinforced. The Japanese population became increasingly urbanised the nuclear family normalised. Women, although the majority of them work at least on a part-time basis, became economically dependant on their husbands and in return provided them with emotional, nutritional and sexual support. By excluding those who actively resist, or cannot engage in devotion to economic labour, hegemonic masculinity and therefore the masculinised culture of the LDP excludes women because they are typically less able or willing to devote themselves to paid work. Furthermore, because dominant forms of masculinity are constructed dichotomously against notions of femininity the masculinised culture of the LDP is dependent on women to occupy support roles outside the Diet in the private sphere.

## **Implications of a masculinised party culture**

A woman's entrance into the LDP threatens the taken-for-granted privilege of men who, because of scripts and practices embedded into the party through repeated performances, are the 'normative figures of authority' (Puwar, 2004, p.81). Female politicians are rendered highly visible in a role that over time has come to be defined as male. Puwar (2004) has noted in the British Westminster context that because the bodies of women and non-white members of parliament differ to those of the long-incumbent men they are inherently foreign and invasive—they are 'space invaders'. Utilising Butler's (1999) theory of performativity, Puwar (2004, p.81) argues that repeated masculine performances by male MPs have made Westminster a space where white men are the 'somatic norm' (Puwar, 2004, p.8) and those who fall outside the normative framework of the middle-aged white male are outsiders. Due to their status as outsiders, 'space invaders' are subject to the 'burden of doubt, the burden of representation, infantilisation and super-surveillance' by the public, the media and other MPs (Puwar, 2004, p.11). Although there are no formal barriers to women's participation in Westminster politics, their absence leads to doubts over and scepticism towards their suitability or indeed their capabilities for the traditionally-male role of MP. This idea is applicable to Japan where the word 'politics' conjures up images of elite men in dark suits, known contemptuously as 'sewer rat' coloured suits (Komiya, 2002, p.20; Mikanagi, 1999, p.42). Similarly, the LDP is typically associated with factions which, though some informants suggest their power has dwindled, have played a critical role in career progression, 'networking' and 'information gathering' within the party. Faction leaders have typically wielded decisive power in these areas and significantly, a woman has never headed a faction. LDP women face the challenge of negotiating positions for themselves in the masculinised space within which they work, thus making career progress extremely difficult unless they conform to existing masculinised norms. As Puwar (2004, p.94) argues, '[s]ince the universal masquerade was specifically made with the male image in mind, women face an enormous struggle when they also try to take part in it'.

An attempt to apply the theories of Puwar and Butler to Japanese politics was made by interviewing (primarily LDP) Diet women. One methodological issue involved in interviewing female Diet members was creating an environment conducive to open

discussion of the sensitive issues of sexism and gender inequality in the LDP. As a white female interviewer, I ran the risk of becoming the stereotypical white person coming to ‘rescue’ Japanese women from ‘oppression’ resulting in the interviewees becoming defensive about the LDP. Therefore, in an attempt to reassure the informants, a comment about sexism in the Australian political context made by former Australian Sexual Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward was initially raised. In 2007 on the evening of her first day in the NSW parliament Goward stated that it was one of the most sexist places she had ever worked (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 2007, p.1). As I told this story some women nodded while others responded as though they did not understand why anyone would say that. In comparing this story to their own experiences in the Diet, the most common, carefully articulated response was along the lines of ‘I think some people seem to think it’s sexist but I don’t’. For example,

(Long pause) If you think very carefully and super sensitively about a comment, there might be some people who say things towards female Diet members. It’s done without malice though. There is no malice - rather it’s the person’s education. For example, I might go to a committee meeting or study group concerned with defence and someone there might say to me, ‘you’re enthusiastic for a woman’, and whether or not you feel that comment is sexist or not..... There is *definitely* no one who makes comments like, ‘you shouldn’t be here because you are a woman’. And I also make sure that people recognise that I am a specialist in international politics. I sharpen my expertise on a daily basis so that people will think [informant’s name] has come [to the meeting etc] because of her expertise.’ (Name withheld, 2007)

To ensure there is no possibility of being criticised by her colleagues, this informant hones what she calls her ‘expertise’. Otherwise, she might be an easy target for gender-based criticism, particularly in the very masculinised space of a defence meeting. Due to a woman’s high visibility as a ‘space invader’ in the male-dominated political world, she is under heightened surveillance (Puwar, 2004, p.11). A woman faces particular pressure to excel when she works on a political portfolio that is typically (even more) male-dominated, such as defence, because a small mistake might confirm the implicit doubts surrounding her ‘suitability’ for such a position (Puwar, 2004, p.91). While ‘you shouldn’t be here because you are a woman’ would

be an unacceptable remark in the contemporary political world of Japan, the comment ‘you’re enthusiastic for a woman’ reminds the female politician that she is an outsider and implies that her femininity is at risk by attending the meeting as defence, dealing with violence, protection and aggression, is a masculine concern.

In response to the same question, another informant commented that she had never experienced any discrimination personally and did not feel it was a problem because politicians should be able to manipulate their situation to their advantage:

I haven’t really felt any, but apparently some people do. It depends on the individual. This might sound strange, but sometimes you can reach a point where it becomes a plus for you. There are times when you can use something discriminatory to your advantage and curry sympathy or create a movement, for example, that emphasises the importance of more visibility for women. We’re politicians after all, and it’s one of our jobs to use that power and create our own comfortable work environments (Name withheld, 2007).

This and similar comments suggest a belief that experiences of sexism are trivial because there are more important things to deal with. Perhaps this encapsulates the attitude deemed necessary to climb the LDP ladder. In order to survive and thrive in the LDP, it may be necessary to adopt the attitude that a woman’s decision to come into the male-dominated world of politics is her own decision so she ought not to complain about unfair treatment but ‘toughen up’ (Ross, 2002, p.196). One informant indicated her success in assimilating (in a period of less than five years) by commenting: ‘Well, I think I might have felt some at some stage. I don’t know whether I’m immune to it or not, but I don’t feel it now’ (Name withheld, 2007). Childs (2004, p.9) has written of women Members of Parliament in the British Westminster who feel as though they have to adapt to the ‘traditional entrenched masculine atmosphere’. Labour MPs believe that it is more severe in the Conservative Party where women have to ‘shed their femininity’ and adopt masculine political tactics, such as being less consultative and more aggressive. What constitutes ‘masculine political tactics’ is certainly debatable, as is the idea of ‘shedding’ one’s femininity. Some female Diet members in Japan have acted in aggressive and

confrontational ways.<sup>4</sup> One informant mentioned that she joined a party faction because its members were ‘aggressive’, rather than moderate (Name withheld, 2007). Whether she did this because she felt a need to ‘shed her femininity’ or simply because she prefers a more aggressive style of politics is debatable. Shedding her femininity to become ‘one of the boys’ might be successful in the long run in terms of career promotion in a male-dominated party, but at the same time she may be reminded that she is fact *not* one of the boys with a comment such as ‘you are enthusiastic for a woman’. This reveals the dilemma women face if analysis of their performance is based on the feminine/masculine dichotomy whereby women are deemed passive and men aggressive. While aggression is not a characteristic exclusive to men, it is an element of hegemonic masculinity and part of the masculinised LDP culture.

While overtly hostile comments such as ‘you don’t belong here’ may not be very common, more general comments regarding assumptions of women’s reproductive roles have been made by LDP politicians recently. The next section discusses female politicians’ reactions to such incidents and reveals that party identification affects the reactions of Diet women.

### *Code of silence protects masculinised culture*

There are more than a few members in my party [the LDP] that hope for a return to good old Japan and frown at the idea of expanding women’s rights (Noda Seiko, quoted in IFMA (Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association), 2003, p.6).

LDP Lower House member Noda Seiko made the comment above in response to a question about the spate of sexual harassment incidents and sexist comments made by male Diet members in the months June to July 2003. The majority of these comments were made by LDP members: Former Prime Minister Mori famously remarked that women who had not borne children should not receive the pension (IFMA, 2003, p.4); Ōta Sei’ichi remarked that gang-rapists are virile (IFMA, 2003, p.4); and though not a Diet member, LDP Tokyo mayor Ishihara Shintaro mentioned in a public speech that

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<sup>4</sup> Former LDP member and Foreign Affairs Minister Tanaka Makiko was well-known for being assertive and up-front. Her political style was quite aggressive—she publicly criticized her own party’s leader Koizumi.

there is nothing worse in the universe than ‘old hags’ who have passed the age of reproduction (Asakura, 2004, p.9). Comments like these question not only the integrity of those who made them, but also the political party in which they hold senior decision-making positions to respect the rights of women—particularly their reproductive rights—when formulating policy (Asakura, 2004, p.9). Noda’s comment indicates that she regards these types of comments as illustrative of sexist beliefs widely-held by LDP men and not simply as individual aberrations, a sentiment revealed in the discussion below to be held by other LDP women.

Sexist comments made by political leaders are not unique to the LDP, and they are not unique to Japan. As recently as 2007, Australian Liberal Party back bencher Bill Heffernan criticised then-opposition leader Julia Gillard for being ‘deliberately barren’, remarking that politicians should be experienced in changing nappies and general family life. This comment was introduced in the interviews as a way of broaching the topic of similarly sexist comments made by men in the LDP. Heffernan’s comment brought disbelief from all informants who criticised him primarily for being unrealistic in expecting politicians to be experienced in every aspect of life. Their comments were more varied, however, when asked for an opinion about former Minister for Health, Labour and Welfare Yanagisawa Hakuo’s February 2007 comment that women were ‘baby-making machines’ (*Japan Times*, 2007) during a speech given to LDP members in western Japan. Speaking as an economist, he made this unfortunate reference to women in the context of the declining birth rate and discussions about the number of woman could give birth to in her lifetime. This comment produced wide-spread condemnation in Japan from women’s groups, feminists and opposition political parties. Social Democratic Party leader Fukushima Mizuho created a petition calling for Yanagisawa’s resignation which all female members of all political parties *apart from the LDP* signed. This incident is significant when considering the responses from some informants.

Three informants<sup>5</sup> defended his comment. They were all over the age of 60, had been in the party for several years and were on friendly terms with Yanagisawa. Confusing paternalism with sexual egalitarianism, they all commented that he was ‘very kind to

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<sup>5</sup> Due to time constraints during some interviews, not all 18 interviewees were asked their opinion on this topic

his wife' to attempt to bolster their argument that Yanagisawa did not have sexist attitudes. Another common response came from women who regretted Yanagisawa's comment in a rather passive and controlled manner. This is represented by the comment made by one informant that Yanagisawa's 'slip of the tongue' was 'typical of male Diet members', or by another who said that, 'he may have apologised profusely, but many people truly hold such beliefs'. These comments share a similar view to that of Noda's above—that many male MPs probably continue to think in terms of limited social roles for women.

Not surprisingly all three opposition party women from the data sample categorically condemned Yanagisawa's comment. Three of the LDP women condemned it outright, with one saying she had wanted him to resign when she heard the comment. Having only recently been elected to the Upper House, she was not a Diet member at the time of the comment. It is interesting to speculate whether she would have signed Fukushima's aforementioned petition calling for Yanagisawa's resignation had she then been an LDP Diet member. The three LDP women who condemned his comment were relatively new to the party—two were elected to the Lower House in 2005 and one was elected in the 2007 Upper House election. This could perhaps point to a new wave of women in the LDP who interpret such comments as sexist or offensive. A less optimistic reading would be that they have not yet learnt how to assimilate, or 'toughen up'. Although the women revealed their discontent during the interviews, the two who were Diet members at the time did not sign the petition calling for Yanagisawa's resignation. The failure of LDP women to sign the petition indicates the difficulties facing LDP women who may feel uncomfortable working in the masculinised political culture, and suggests a code of silence preventing them from speaking out against sexist incidents. The code of silence is possible only because of the extremely small number of women present. Party identity influences the actions of women in these situations—the more women there are in the party who feel angry with regards to being referred to as 'baby-making machines', the easier it will be for those women to change the party by breaking the code of silence and challenging its culture.

The code of silence operates to ensure women do not challenge the deeply entrenched masculinised culture. Puwar (2004, p.52) argues that the entrance of women to elite

public spaces that have hitherto been occupied by the privileged—the middle-class male in the case of the Diet—creates ‘terror’ in the minds of the incumbents. While ‘terror’ might be too strong a term, the unease felt by the privileged power-brokers in the LDP when their space is encroached upon by women is intensified when women attempt to challenge their positions. The code of silence in the Diet therefore functions to prevent women from gaining any further ground. In this manner, the inability or refusal to ‘toughen up’, that is, to assimilate to the masculinised culture, may make the Diet an uncomfortable workplace for some LDP women, as seemed the case for one informant. This LDP woman responded to an inquiry into her experience of sexism in the Diet with an immediate ‘yes, there is sexism in the Diet’ and expressed disgust with Diet culture. She stated that after more than 20 years in her previous career (before entering politics), women finally accounted for approximately 30 percent of workers in her industry. When she became a Diet member, she felt as though she had travelled 30 years back in time:

Informant: Firstly there are so few women. And everyone smokes. People who want to smoke can smoke, but there are those who don’t want to and when I ask smokers to smoke elsewhere they think *I* am the one being selfish. The men have that attitude. So they deliberately smoke close to me.

Author: Really.

Informant: Yes. I have no idea what they are thinking. Anyway... And also, even when I speak perfectly logically there are those with the attitude ‘a woman has nothing worthwhile to say’ or ‘I’m better than you - you aren’t going to say anything worthwhile’. Not in so many words though.

Author: I see. So they don’t actually voice this – but you feel this is what they mean?

Informant: Yes.

Author: I see.

Informant: So, a lot of people have the attitude that ‘women don’t understand politics; women can’t understand a thing’ or ‘you [women] are only mascots, you aren’t human, you are a type of pet’.

Author: Is this attitude more likely to be in older men?

Informant: No, it exists in younger people too (Name withheld, 2007).

The way this informant responded suggests a deep dissatisfaction with Diet life and lack of opportunities to challenge or even discuss these issues. This was the only informant who stated outright that the Diet was a sexist place. She was also the only LDP informant who requested her anonymity be maintained, supporting this paper’s argument that there is a code of silence in the LDP that renders protest by women against sexist behaviour or comments near impossible.

*Keeping women out with not-so-‘old-fashioned’ ideas*

Another informant responded that on becoming a Diet member less than five years ago, she noticed that there remained ‘old-fashioned’ ways of thinking, including ‘gender-divided roles’, but at the same time she was unsure whether this was discrimination or difference. This woman had obviously thought deeply about the concept of gender equality. On the one hand, she articulated the age-old feminist sex equality debate over ‘difference vs sameness’, while on the other was dangerously close to falling into the trap of accepting discriminatory treatment as simply different treatment and at times, quaintness. She claimed that she did not necessarily think of the ‘old-fashioned’ attitudes in the LDP in a negative light. Yet, she had earlier narrated a specific incident where the city and prefectural councillors in her electorate told her clearly that they did not want a woman representing them in the Diet. Even the expressed desire to be represented by a man and not a woman, however, was justified by the informant as the remnants of old-fashioned thinking that included the idea that women needed ‘protection’:

People [in the Diet] still have the idea that long ago in Japan, women looked after the house. Men worked outside—men were warriors and women looked after the children and the home and family. The notion that men can make the most of their

potential if women are taking care of the home and that in contrast, if women can't go outside to work, then they can't become warriors is deep-rooted (Name withheld, 2007).

Kamata Sayuri's experience running in the 2000 Lower House election for an LDP seat illustrates a similar experience. Kamata decided to leave the LDP for the opposition DPJ after being told by LDP local councilors that she should be home looking after her husband (Aiuchi, 2001, p.222). Both of these experiences illustrate how the idealised notion of the male-breadwinner/female-housewife couple informs some LDP members' beliefs and discourages women from running for the LDP. The belief in the normalcy and predominance of this particular model of the heterosexual couple is, contrary to the above informant's belief, not a remnant of 'olden-day' Japan, but a product of modern industrialisation and capitalism (Ueno, 1988, p.170). While the rhetoric around this idealised couple and the social policies constructed around them during the period of rapid economic growth encouraged the belief that these gender identities were based on 'tradition', Osawa (2002, p.72) reminds us otherwise. She notes that the proportion of full-time housewife-*sarariiman* couples as a percentage of the total number of married couples was only at its highest in the 1970s, when it reached 36-37 percent. Furthermore, with regards to the 'warriors' mentioned by the above informant, apart from elite samurai families, married couples in the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) did not resemble the idealised modern-day nuclear working-husband, housekeeper-wife couple. They were more likely to work together as a unit in a family business and their roles were not as clearly demarcated as those of the housewife/*sarariiman*. In this way, imagined pasts engender a belief in 'traditional' and 'old-fashioned' notions of gender that inform LDP members' thoughts about women's (and men's) roles. The public/private binary that these thoughts are based on whereby masculine and feminine stand in contrast to each other serve to hinder women from entering the male-controlled Diet because they are deemed unsuitable for public positions of power and authority.

## **Conclusion**

I hesitate to make any conclusive assertions that the LDP is any more or less resistant to the inclusion of women than other political parties in Japan on the basis of the 'sexist political culture' argument. Nevertheless, there are several points outlined that

support the argument that the LDP is more resistant and these can be summarised as follows: there is less female representation than in any other party; the experiences presented in the anecdotal evidence above; and most public sexist remarks made by politicians come from LDP men. However, I cannot neglect to point out that many informants, including one DPJ member, was of the opinion that the sexist and patriarchal nature of the Japanese politics was characteristic of the whole Diet and not just the LDP.

In sum, this paper has suggested that LDP women are faced with a party culture and more broadly a political culture that is not friendly to women. The masculinised party culture that women enter upon election to the LDP renders it extremely difficult to climb the political ladder and to speak out against any discriminatory or sexist behaviour. In order to climb the political ladder, it appears that a woman must turn a blind eye to any sexist behaviour, comments or treatment, obey the code of silence and 'toughen up'. When the number of LDP women in the Diet increases, they will gain the ability to challenge the code of silence and the general masculinised culture of the party and in doing so cease to become 'space invaders'. The solution to the under-representation of women in elite-level politics in Japan remains unresolved, but this paper has articulated an institutional barrier that requires further interrogation and critique.

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