“It’s not just economic factors…”:

The pervasive gender gap in 21st century Japan

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Abstract

More than twenty-five years have passed since the Japanese government introduced legislation to address gender discrimination in the workplace. This has been followed by other legal measures to safeguard employment during childcare or eldercare leave, and most recently to promote the formation of a “gender-equal society.” Yet, official policies and legal provisions have had only little impact on reshaping gender attitudes and role expectations, suggesting that top-down efforts to effect change occur very slowly. This paper is a preliminary examination of everyday practices in Japanese schooling, particularly at the junior high school level (grades 7–9), that provide insight into gender socialization in Japan. It suggests that the educational process is inscribed with a range of gendered practices from diverse sectors that contribute to the reproduction of gender-based inequality in Japanese society.

Introduction

In April 2013, Myanmar’s iconic pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi made a week-long visit to Japan to raise support for her continuing efforts to promote her country’s democratic reforms. This was one of her first international trips after almost two decades of house arrest in Myanmar. Her last visit to Japan was as a visiting scholar at The Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University from 1985–1986 (Kyoto University 2013). During this recent visit to Japan, she returned to Kyoto University where she was awarded an honorary doctorate and gave a lecture on women’s participation in the recent transformation of Myanmar’s socio-political landscape. In her remarks, she noted that her party’s sweeping victory in the 2012 by-elections won the National League for Democracy (NLD) 43 of 45 open parliamentary seats, creating 13 new female lawmakers (Ryall 2013). While acknowledging that further progress remains to bolster women’s political leadership in Myanmar, she sharply criticized Japan saying, “But I have to say gender discrimination is not as great as it is in this country… statistics show Japan and South Korea have some of the greatest gender differences in the world today” (Ryall 2013). She also questioned economists’ suggestions that the gender gap will narrow with economic development. “If it is true that the gender gap is largely economic in nature, why is it that the greatest gender gaps in the world exist in Japan and South Korea?” she asked (Ryall 2013). “It is not just economic factors; it is social values as well” (Ryall 2013), she concluded.

As harsh as these words might seem, Suu Kyi's remarks provoke renewed consideration of the progress of gender equality in Japan. More than a quarter-century has passed since the Japanese government introduced legislation to address gender discrimination in the workplace, and subsequent legal measures call for the formation of a "gender-equal society." Yet, official policies and legal provisions have had only little impact on reshaping gender attitudes and role expectations. Although the *Childcare Leave Law* enacted in 1992 legalized paternity leave after childbirth, for example, few fathers take it more than two decades later (Fujimura-Fanselow 2011: xxiv). Further, while 'womenomics' has entered the lexicon as a key component of the 'third arrow' of 'pro-growth' structural reforms of Prime Minister Abe's policies aimed at reinvigorating Japan's moribund post-bubble economy (Magnay 2013), the extent of social and cultural change required to get women into the workforce has many observers skeptical of the prospect for success of 'womenomics' (and of 'third arrow' reforms of 'Abenomics' generally) which are seen as the most difficult, yet most critical, for achieving the desired effect of long-term sustainable economic growth in Japan (Das 2013). Although 'womenomics' brings additional attention to the need to increase the female workforce participation rate, such efforts are colliding with the practical challenges women face in achieving a work-life balance, as Japan's traditional "M shape" female labor participation curve (whereby women enter the workforce in great numbers, leave for childrearing, and then return after children enter school) becomes shortened as more women leave the workforce to care for elderly parents (Brookings Institute 2013).

If social and cultural values are key to transforming the gender gap, it follows that education, which both shapes and is shaped by sociocultural values and structures, is an important arena for investigating gender socialization to shed light on how national policies are interpreted locally in practice. This paper is a preliminary examination of everyday practices in Japanese schooling, particularly at the junior high school level (grades 7–9), that provide insight into gender socialization in Japan. It suggests that the educational process is inscribed with a range of gendered practices from diverse sectors that contribute to the reproduction of gender-based inequality in Japanese society. The following section presents the contemporary macro context that frames issues of gender equality in Japan, including equal opportunity legislation, the country's educational gender gap in student enrollment patterns, and Japan's global standing on gender empowerment measures (GEM). Section three then demonstrates the importance of the underlying social values that both are shaped by and reshape the implementation of policy, presenting evidence from ethnographic studies of Japanese junior high schools conducted by the author in several regions of Japan in the last decade. The discussion begins with an analysis of artifacts of material culture such as uniforms, class roster, and textbooks and then moves to less tangible yet clearly observable social practices at school, from club activities, to teacher behaviors and peer relations. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of these findings on the prospect for mitigating the gender gap in Japan.

Current situation

Although there has been growing recognition that Japan's aging society has created a 'demographic problem' that urgently demands a more flexible, gender-equal society on economic as well as human equity grounds (Matsui 2010, Das 2013, Brookings Institute 2013), past efforts to legislate gender equality and encourage more equitable patterns of student enrollment in educational institutions suggest that such top-down efforts to effect change occur very slowly, causing Japan to remain near the bottom of global rankings of gender equity measures. The following sections look at each of these in turn.

Legislation

As noted above, more than twenty-five years have passed since the Japanese government enacted the *Equal Employment Opportunity Act* in 1986 as a measure to deter discrimination against women in the workplace and promote recruitment, hiring, placement and promotion practices on par with men. Subsequently, the *Childcare Leave Law* of 1992 secured the right for either parent to take a year's leave without pay while safeguarding their employment. Further revisions of this law in 2010, now known as the *Child-care and Family-care Leave Law*, both extended benefits to make it easier for fathers to participate in child care and also recognized that, in Japan's rapidly aging society with one of the lowest fertility rates among developed economies, the impetus for work leave may just as likely be to attend to elderly parents as to young children. Even more comprehensive legislation was promulgated in 1999 with the enactment of the *Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society* which obliges the government to enact policies that promote gender equality across various priority fields ranging from support for the harmonization of work and family life, education and training for women, public health, economic and social participation in society, and measures to counter violence against women (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2010). Subsequent *Basic Plans for Gender Equality* in 2000, 2005, and 2010 serve as practical action plans, setting targets to accelerate the development of gender equality in Japan. One such numerical target, for example, is "30% by 2020" which calls for increasing the number of women in leadership positions in various fields ranging from academia to politics (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office n.d.).

Education Gender Gap

Educational attainment could be considered one bright spot in the gender equality discussion. At both the primary and secondary levels, student enrollments have reached gender parity (Nozaki et al. 2009: 222). At the tertiary level, although there is still a slight disparity between female and male enrollments, progress has also been made in educational attainment. Young women in Japan today are more likely to have a university degree than young men: 59% of women and 52% of men aged 25–34 years, compared with 23% and 32%, respectively, for women and men aged 45–54, according to an OECD report titled "Closing the Gender Gap: Act Now"

(2012).

However, a closer look at the educational decision-making of young women and men reveals gender differences in fields of study, institutions, and pursuit of advanced degrees. According to the OECD study cited above, there is a strong pattern of gender segregation by field of study, as close to 60% of Japanese graduates with health and education degrees were women compared to only around 10% with computing and engineering degrees (OECD 2012). In addition, there is a tendency for young women to attend shorter university courses, such as two-year colleges (although this has been declining), and/or less prestigious institutions (public vs. private universities), contributing to the situation noted by Nozaki et al. (2009: 225) that "in the technology- and vocation-related education, women are concentrated in the lower strata." Likewise, fewer Japanese women than men pursue graduate degrees, perhaps indicating that "researchers face difficulties staying and advancing their careers because of the responsibilities of child rearing and taking care of aging parents" (Nozaki et al. 2009: 223–224). Thus, it is likely that young women wanting a family decide not to pursue academic and research careers due to these challenges. Additionally, it is perceived that a highly educated woman will face difficulty in finding a spouse. A female graduate student of organic and synthetic chemistry at Tokyo Metropolitan University, for example, said that "having a higher degree in a scientific field could stand as a barrier to marriage, particularly if the man is seen as being less educated or of a lower social status" (Tanikawa 2013).

Global Standing

Despite legislative commitments by the government that aim to achieve women's empowerment and gender equality (and which have increased gender parity in educational attainment, though less so in terms of educational choices), Japan fairs poorly in international comparisons of gender equality. Ten years after the establishment of the *Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society*, Japan ranked 57th out of 109 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) (UNDP 2009), which gauges equality based on women's participation in economics and politics. Further, in the recently released 2013 *Global Gender Gap Report* by the World Economic Forum, Japan's ranking on gender parity slipped a further four places to 105 out of 136 countries. This is Japan's worst position since the 2006 inauguration of the report, which focuses on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. A major factor in Japan's decline stems from the political sphere, with Lower House elections in December 2012 seeing a decrease in the ratio of female lawmakers from eleven percent to eight percent (Masuda 2012). Likewise, the gender gap in economic participation remains stagnant due to gender-based wage gaps, glass ceilings, and marginalization in the workforce.

These structural imbalances, in turn, provide structural incentives for individual and household decision-making. Higa's (2013) study of supplementary educational spending among Japanese households for their children from preschool through secondary school finds that while there is little difference in the amount of spending Japanese parents devote to their girls and

boys, the target of such spending is substantially different, with spending on boys focused on academic progress and cram schools while educational spending on girls is targeted to non-academic pursuits such as music lessons. Higa (2013: 11) further suggests that this gap in educational spending appears to be a rational decision by households to invest in their children according to the structural incentives given by society, with boys being rewarded in the workplace and girls through pursuits that would attract a suitable marriage partner.

"It is social values as well": Investigating gender equality from the bottom up

While top-down structural reforms in law, policy and action plans to promote gender equality in economic, business and political spheres have been underway for more than two decades, and awareness has grown of the structural incentives that lead these patterns to be reproduced through the generations, less attention has been given to social arenas such as family and education where children and adolescents' ideas of gender roles and expectations take shape. In the current *Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality*, for example, education is number eleven in the list of the fifteen "priority fields and performance objectives." Calling for "Enhancement of education and learning to promote gender equality and facilitate diversity of choice," priority field eleven states:

> If we want to achieve a gender-equal society, we need both men and women to independently express their individuality and abilities, and participate in building that society. All of this begins with education and learning.
>
> We plan to cooperate interactively with schools, the family, local communities, workplaces and all other arenas in society to expand education and learning that advances gender equality. Our aim is to dispel belief in the stereotyped perception for gender roles, build a sense of gender equality based on respect for human rights, and promote a deeper understanding of gender equality.
>
> And we will provide support carefully tailored to people's lifestyles at the various stages of life to enable men and women to act of their own accord in making a wide range of choices, and to promote women's empowerment as a way of drawing out women's abilities and vitality.
>
> (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2010)

Yet, the "performance objectives" for education focus solely on increasing the number of women in leadership positions by 2015 as members of local and prefectural boards of education, as vice principals or higher at elementary and secondary schools, and as faculty members in universities (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2010). Emphasis is placed squarely on

solving the gender gap in education through increased female representation in educational leadership, a position that research on the educational spending decisions of families described above suggests may have only a limited effect.

Fieldwork observation at Japanese schools in several different regions of Japan, from kindergartens through high schools, also suggest that significant obstacles to gender equality lie within the everyday practices of schooling — the "social [and cultural] values" referred to by Suu Kyi above. A gendered hidden curriculum, school policy, textbooks, customs and practices as well as peer relationships and teacher behaviors often tacitly reproduce gendered roles and expectations. These gendered meanings and expectations learned at school all contribute to the gender socialization of students that locally reinforces at educational sites throughout Japan the dominant gender relations and roles in Japanese society that are resistant to macro-level changes in social policies and laws. Data for this preliminary research is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted at public junior high schools in Okayama, Hyogo, Kanagawa and Iwate Prefectures from 2000 to the present, and the analysis is further informed by experience as a teacher in two public junior high schools as well as both brief and extended visits to kindergartens, elementary schools, high schools, and universities throughout other regions of Japan.

Japanese junior high schools and everyday practices

While it is well known that the Japanese educational system is highly centralized, with official curricula at the compulsory levels that aim to provide uniform content and instruction across the nation's schools, the notion of a top-down centralized system tends to mask consideration of the various ways in which gender differentiation may be institutionally embedded. A close examination of the daily activities at school, however, reveals practices and expectations that frequently place priority on male students. From school uniforms to club activities to interpersonal relationships among students, school is more than just a place where young people learn academic subjects. Rather, it is an important arena where students are socialized in behavior expectations and interaction patterns from which they subsequently form their own attitudes and value systems based on their experiences — many of which tend to resonate throughout their lives.

Uniforms

Uniforms, which are first worn by many students in Japan as they enter public junior high school, are a constant source of heated debate on gender discrimination by supporters of the *Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society*. Uniforms are an example of what Sato and Tanaka (2002: 54), who examined the reproduction of gender within kindergartens, call "surface structures" or easily observable impediments toward improvement in gender equality. Uniforms have also been cited as "objects of subjectification" (McVeigh 2000: 48) that subconsciously inscribe social norms and values on students' bodies (Ando 1996: 71).

At the local level, however, responses to these views have been mixed, revealing a tension

between change and continuity at the micro and macro levels of society that also permeates many school environments. At one fieldsite, for example, gender equality initiatives persuaded school officials to adopt gender-neutral physical education uniforms for girls and boys, with the most significant change being quarter-length shorts for all students instead of the traditional form-fitting "bloomers" for girls. At the same time, however, daily uniforms remain unchanged, with boys required to wear dress shirts, jackets and trousers, and girls required to wear blouses, jackets and skirts. In fact, while there had been frequent calls to change the physical education uniforms, the practice of wearing the standard school uniform, which extends back to the Meiji Era, was viewed by most students, parents and teachers as a custom, not as a form of gender discrimination, and there was no interest either in changing them or in abolishing them altogether.

Perhaps one reason for the disinterest in changing the uniforms is the powerful emotional associations that many Japanese experience as they put on a uniform for the first time. For many grade 7 students, uniforms symbolize growing up, and students proudly revel in this visible marker of changed status. Hata-san, a grade 7 girl, told me "When I became a junior high school student and began wearing my uniform, I felt more adult-like, and then a neighbor said to me, 'Yoko-san, you're really starting to look grown-up, and I think you' ve also gotten a bit taller as well. This really made me happy." At the same time, though, observations of grade 7 students during free time between classes suggest that girls' uniforms have a socializing effect on body management. As girls learn that, in skirts, they can no longer easily run, jump or roughhouse with the boys, they begin to turn their interests towards activities that either require less attention to minding their skirts or involve only same-gender friends in front of whom an accidental "impropriety" will not matter. Girls also take to regularly wearing gym shorts under their skirts to avoid any embarrassing moments.

Class Roster

One of the most pervasive pedagogical practices in Japan is the use of separate class rosters for girls and boys (a list of student names with boys' names first, followed by girls') that result in boys receiving priority in virtually every organized activity or event. While ostensibly merely a list to record attendance, the class roster becomes the organizational basis for many of the activities in junior high school, and so its indirect effect on gender differentiation is profound. The class roster becomes a significant tool that through its multiple and varied uses entrenches gender differentiation on a daily and regular basis, dangerous because it holds powerful yet tacit and unexamined assumptions of a natural order. During fieldwork observations, for example, teachers collated completed homework assignments and graded tests according to the roster and returned them to students by calling out their names with boys first, then girls. Report cards were handed out to students similarly, as were diplomas at grade 9 graduation. The roster also structured the display of student work on classroom bulletin boards and was frequently employed whenever students needed to line up as a class for various activities and events. In cases where it was deemed necessary to walk single file, such as during an excursion or a school

festival, teachers would direct the boys' line to proceed first, followed by the girls' line. The persistent and daily practice of girls following in the footsteps of boys during their formative years lends a sense of naturalness to this arbitrary structure.

Textbooks

Another prevalent source of gender bias can be found in school textbooks. Although texts are examined rigorously and must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT) prior to publication, gender issues are not often considered in the inspection process and so textbooks are rife with gender biases, though awareness of this issue is increasing.

As early as 1989 when the League of Japanese Lawyers conducted a survey to examine gender discrimination in textbooks, it was revealed that the majority of figures and main characters who appeared in Japanese language arts textbooks were male, while in social studies texts, women were often portrayed as homemakers (Kameda 1995: 113). By 2001, government initiatives to improve gender bias in textbooks were beginning to appear. A home economics textbook, for example, had been updated to include statements on the importance of gender equality, mutual understanding, and cooperation. The following is an excerpt from the New Industrial Arts and Home Economics textbook (2001: 11):

Family Cooperation in Household Chores

Regarding household chores, they are for the benefit of all members of the household, so it's important that everyone cooperate, both adults and children, men and women. In Japan, adult men's participation in household chores is actually quite low. [A chart of international comparisons accompanies the text, showing Japanese men's participation in household chores to be less than half the rate of men in other industrialized countries.] In each household, it's important to discuss the ways in which all family members will cooperate. By doing this, the family's bonds (*kizuna*) will be deepened.

While the changes to home economics textbooks attest to attempts toward promoting gender equality, the real effect of this effort is difficult to measure when, in addition to everyday schooling practices that contradict these messages, textbooks in other subjects continue to display evidence of gender stereotyping. In English textbooks, for example, sentences that dealt with activities such as baking and washing dishes consistently used the pronoun "she" or a female proper name for the subject (Mineshima 2008: 130) In science textbooks, too, illustrations continue to portray boys conducting experiments and girls reporting the results, and in health textbooks, photographs of infants and small children are frequently paired with mothers in activities such as reading books, sharing a meal, or playing in parks. Even a cursory examination of school texts reveals numerous examples of gender stereotyping such as these, and more intensive analysis of history texts by several scholars (Hein and Selden 2000) has identified men as the important and notable figures in decision-making and family economic support, while serious

issues such as comfort women (Kimijima 2000) and the goals and achievements of women's movements are absent from many textbooks. As gender awareness has risen in recent years, many teachers have begun to at least recognize the issue and some have sought changes; however, many teachers remain unaware of these issues, and given that very few teacher training programs teach gender issues, change is likely to be initiated from outside the educational system rather than within it.

Physical education, and sports and club activities

Gender segregation also occurs in the physical education curriculum. At multiple fieldsites, for example, in events such as the annual fall sports festival, boys worked together to create human pyramids while manipulating large bamboo poles, thereby demonstrating their strength and masculinity, while girls displayed their grace and femininity in choreographed dance routines waving colorful flags. Similarly, from April 2012, based on new education guidelines issued by MEXT, "dance" and "budo (traditional martial arts)" became compulsory in the physical education courses for first- and second-year public junior high students (MEXT 2008). Implementation, however, has varied widely at the local school level. In discussing the new curriculum, a municipal board of education member explained to me that: "Boys are physically stronger than girls so it's difficult to put them together in the same judo class. Right now, some schools are teaching them separately, and other schools have the girls take dance, and the boys take judo." When I suggested that this seemed to be a step back with respect to gender equality, the board member shrugged it off saying that it was simply a matter of student safety — girls could get hurt if they took judo classes with the boys. Similar discussions have been voiced throughout the nation's newspapers since the new curriculum was approved (Asahi Shimbun 2012).

Likewise, school-sponsored sports and club activities, in which all students are urged to participate, are yet other arenas of junior high school life that differentiate girls and boys. At one fieldsite, for example, none of the eight sports clubs were coeducational, and of the eight cultural clubs, only four (art, library, broadcasting, brass band) — the first three with only modest enrollments — could count both girls and boys as members. Exclusion and segregation as well as repeated embodied practice through physical education classes or preparation for school sports festivals under the direction and supervision of teachers work to inscribe gender norms on students' bodies and minds.

Teachers' behaviors and practices

Teachers also bring their own culturally-informed notions of gender roles and expectations into the school setting, and these ideas inevitably permeate the everyday practices of school life. Whether intentional or not, some teachers treat girls and boys differently and, on the whole, boys receive more of the teachers' attention and dominate classes, an observation that echoes the findings of numerous studies of American education that indicate that boys get more attention than girls (Morgan and Dunn 1990, Younger et al. 1999).

At one fieldsite during health examinations with the school nurse, for example, every teacher

followed a pattern of lining up the class in rows of girls and boys outside the nurses' office and then, as per the class rosters, directing all the male students to receive their check-ups first, followed by the female students. As students completed their examinations, they returned to their classroom one by one. When the checkups of the male students had been completed, teachers frequently returned to the classroom, leaving the female students to wait by themselves and monitor their behavior independently. When I later asked one teacher, Shibata-sensei, why the girls did not go to the nurse first, he replied, "If I did that, the boys would get out of control while waiting. The girls know how to wait quietly." What was interesting to me about his comment was that while I had anticipated that the class roster would be cited as the reason for the "boys-first" procedure, this teacher instead ascribed different personality traits to female and male students to justify his approach, suggesting that organizational practices embedded in the institutional structure of schooling are also mediated by individual notions of gender.

Gender differences were also observed in individual interactions between teachers and students. At another fieldsite, male-to-male interactions were particularly notable, whereby some male teachers showed more attention to boys through a sense of familiarity and friendliness. Takahashi-sensei, a middle-aged physical education teacher, in the demeanor typical of a coach, frequently roughhoused with many of the grade 9 boys, but never with the girls. Tanaka-sensei, a young science teacher, frequently placed his hand on boys' desks when he leaned over to help them with problems he had assigned. When he helped female students, though, physical distance was always maintained, and there was a greater sense of formality in his interactions with the girls.

While similar gendered patterns of interaction between teachers and students can be found at many schools, there is also the occasional teacher whose views greatly exceed those of colleagues and who may as a result have a profound impact on the gender socialization of young adolescents. Noguchi-sensei, a male Japanese language arts teacher who was also the head teacher of grade 7 at one junior high school, possessed rigidly-defined views not only of gender roles but also of the micro-level ways in which they were to be enacted. His management of after-school cleaning was conducted according to a strict and gendered division of labor. In short, girls were instructed to sweep the floor, while boys were responsible for moving desks; however, this description does not adequately capture the very specific techniques students were instructed to follow while cleaning, amounting to an intricate choreography of girls and boys performing their gendered roles.

Though Noguchi-sensei may have intended this intricate performance to enhance students' sense of coordination and cooperation — stated goals of junior high school pedagogy — it simultaneously provided them with a concrete example of the specific tasks that girls and boys "should" engage in. The extent to which students had adopted this became clear to me one day while I was cleaning with a group of students for the first time. When I attempted to move a desk back into position, I was reprimanded by one girl who told me, "That's the boys' work. We have to wait." When I asked why, I was told it was how Noguchi-sensei had instructed them. Not wanting to challenge the teacher's authority by contradicting this approved technique in front of

the students, I acquiesced and cleaned only as they had indicated. Later, I found that the students did not think about the meaning of their practice very deeply, instead explaining it simply as "the way we are supposed to do it," according to another girl. Yet, the division of labor was highly gendered and promoted strong notions of the types of activities females and males should and should not perform. With regular participation over a long period of time, these notions seep into the subconscious, forming part of students' gendered subjectivities. The sanctions I received from students for my deviation from approved practice suggest that they had already begun the process of appropriating these views, and moreover, were identifying with these gendered identities (Rogoff et al. 1995). Of course, not all teachers agreed with Noguchi-sensei's procedure, but no teacher challenged it either, and when I asked other teachers about this approach, they flatly stated that "it's Noguchi-sensei's way."

Peer relationships

Despite institutional structures and teachers' own belief systems that I suggest undermine governmental efforts to promote a "gender-equal society," conversely, there are indeed other organizational features of schooling and teacher practice that can be viewed as contributing to gender equality in junior high school classrooms. These include the long-standing practice of mixing girls and boys together in small working groups (*han*), and utilizing boy-girl pairs as daily monitors who have responsibility for certain aspects of classroom management and homeroom activities at the beginning and end of the school day. However, sometimes despite teacher efforts to balance leadership roles and responsibilities, students themselves reproduce gendered notions of appropriate roles and responsibilities.

One example of this is the very frequent self-selection of positions by girls that are either gendered or of lower rank. Each term students select new leadership roles that include homeroom class leader and sub-leader, small group leader and sub-leader, and representatives of various homeroom and school-wide committees. In my observations of this selection process in several classrooms over a period of three years, the results always favored males as homeroom class leaders. Girls would not nominate themselves for this position despite frequent prodding by teachers. Although the nomination procedures were student-led, after a male had been selected as the class leader, teachers then generally unilaterally reserved the class sub-leader position for a girl, and often one or two girls would volunteer for this position. Girls were more willing to be small group leaders, however, and they represented about one-third of the leadership of small groups within the homeroom classes. For committee positions and as assistants for various subjects, girls quickly nominated themselves for cleaning, cultural activities, and health committees as well as for English, home economics, and music, while boys focused on the physical education activities committee, math, industrial arts, and science. Many teachers again encouraged one girl and one boy for each position as they watched the nomination process, but they held back from interfering too much with this student-led process and did not require girl-boy pairings. Thus, even when faced with an opportunity to freely choose positions and responsibilities, and faced with teacher encouragement to do so, girls frequently self-selected positions of lower

rank or culturally-appropriate gendered positions, thereby reproducing social notions of gender roles. The view that the leader or group representative ought to be male is, of course, reflected in adult society, where men clearly dominate top positions in politics, business, and elsewhere.

Discussion

Even if the formal setting of schools and classrooms is mandated by a national curriculum, daily features of schooling such as uniforms, class rosters, textbooks, and class organization practices described above instill in many young adolescents a consciousness of gender differences, and even of male leadership, if not superiority. In addition to institutional obstacles, teachers may hold stereotyped ideas about the abilities and behavior of girls and boys, or be unaware that their teaching practices subconsciously favor one gender over another. Adolescent preferences, too, to maintain societal norms at the school level through selecting males in leadership positions also suggest significant challenges in Japan's transition to a "gender-equal society."

In order for gender-neutral practices to be encouraged and established, it will first be necessary to identify more comprehensively those aspects of the school environment that preserve and perpetuate perceptions of gender hierarchy and bias. Moreover, curricula and classroom instruction focused specifically on promoting gender equality is needed in tandem with legislative policies and numerical targets that aim to promote women in leadership positions across economic, political and educational sectors in Japanese society.

Laws can provide direction, but social attitudes and practices must also change in order for Japan to transform into a gender-equal society. In Japan, though, where women in senior positions are a minority, where marriage and childrearing are still promoted as more fulfilling and important for women than a career, and where messages about acceptable gender roles pervade every structure and every individual's existence, thought and conduct, achieving equality appears to be rather far on the horizon. As observers of Japan or any country have learned with other issues in the past, one should not assume that either legal provisions or public policy initiatives will immediately or even in the long term guarantee gender equality in society. Grassroots changes are needed to accomplish broad-based structural reforms in practice.

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