

Revisiting the First and Second Sexism in Japan

Deborah Giustini and Peter Matanle

2018 has been a pivotal year for women worldwide. Revelations of harassment, assault and rape by powerful men indicate that everyday sexism is being taken seriously. Yet there is still so much to do. In Japan too, 2018 saw women's lives changing, revealing both the light and shadow of normative assumptions about men's and women's attributes, capabilities, and roles.



On 24 August, first lieutenant Misa Matsushima realised her dream of becoming Japan's first female fighter pilot. In the context of Japanese society's complacent acceptance of a gendered workplace, Matsushima's achievement is indeed a victory, but it's perhaps a pyrrhic one. For if all that has been achieved is that a woman is now working like a man in a male endeavour – battlefield combat – then it is at best a conservative victory.

Surely this is not what feminism asks men and women to take on. Wouldn't a truly feminist outcome have been the elimination of the need to employ any battlefield combatants, male or female? What Matsushima's story represents, we contend, is the terrible difficulty we all face in understanding what sexism is, when it occurs and where the obstacles lie in navigating a route through to genuine equality between women and men.

No (work)place for gender equality

Despite more than thirty years of legislative progress, beginning with the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunities Law – and 1997/2006 revisions – as well as recent initiatives such as the government's Gender Equality Bureau,¹ gender equality in the Japanese workplace remains at best an aspiration. It's not hard for women to get jobs in Japan; however, access to core and senior roles is heavily restricted – just one third are in regular employment, compared to two thirds of men – and progress comes at a slower pace than international competitors.² While women have achieved considerable gains in health and education,³ gender segregation at work remains entrenched and discriminatory barriers to advancement persist.

Numerous indicators point to women's subordinate status at work. Ranking Japan 110th among 144 countries for gender

equality – below Guinea and above Ethiopia – the World Economic Forum emphasizes Japan's limited achievements thus far; an urgent problem acknowledged by the government, which rather ambitiously aims to increase the proportion of female decision-makers to 30% by 2020. Currently just 13% of managers are women,⁴ and women's salaries are still 25.7% lower than men's for equivalent work,⁵ the third widest gender pay gap in the OECD. What's going wrong?

Although overt workplace discrimination is illegal, what stands out is the progressive decline in the quality of women's employment as they pass through adulthood, while male employment quality improves. In essence, the everyday practice of men's and women's work in organisations and society is gendered – formally and informally – hence disparities widen with age, even as women gain the experience, knowledge and skills that employers value. Why?

Inequality is structured from the beginning of people's working lives. It is already well known that workers are assigned by mutual consent to managerial or clerical career tracks, and this decision is based on gendered normative assumptions about personal attributes, capabilities, and expectations. Crucially, the managerial track requires a strong commitment to organisational working practices and cultures as a requirement for progression. This includes location transfers, very long working hours, sudden overtime demands, routine evening meetings for core team members, and late night team building and client entertainment, often featuring smoking and heavy drinking.

These workplace activities, and the (self-)selection of those who perform them, are as much based on assumptions about women's capabilities and needs as they are about men's. The outcome is a progressively gendered organisational hierarchy, where many women opt for clerical track and part-time roles in anticipation of childbirth and rearing, or later withdraw altogether.

And if a woman does seek re-entry into the labour force she will often feel 'punished' by having access only to lower paid and lower quality employment than if she had remained childless in her original organisation.

Hence, women's employment outcomes in Japan are on most conventional measures inferior. Women have less access to long-term career formation, occupational specialisation, and progression opportunities, and consequently they earn less. Just as women are assumed not to be able to transfer suddenly, or participate in late night client entertainment, so organisations expect that men can and should perform – or withstand – those duties and pressures by dint of their gender, if they are to succeed and earn more.

Do men really want to work extremely long hours, be separated from their loved ones for long periods, damage their health by drinking excessively in smoke-filled environments, and suffer physical and mental stress from lack of sleep, just because they happen to be men? Why do organisations assume that it is okay to drive their male employees routinely to forsake full participation in the opportunities and duties involved in household formation? Are not these assumptions, and the workplace and societal outcomes they produce, also sexist?

The first and second sexism in the Japanese workplace

Alongside what he calls the 'First Sexism' – the most egregious and widespread sexism worldwide and perpetrated against women – philosopher David Benatar argues that there is a hidden 'Second Sexism', against men, which contributes to persistent structured gender inequality.⁶ Hence, Benatar argues, sexism against men should also be acknowledged and dealt with; that the principle of universal justice requires that equality for women can only be brought into existence within the context of equality for everyone.

The Japanese workplace has long produced sexist outcomes against women, and efforts

have correctly focused on establishing equal opportunity for women. But let's start to unpack what equal opportunities constitutes. Does it mean that, alongside the achievement of equal pay and access to core and senior roles, women will gain the opportunity to work unreasonably long hours, or be posted for years to a distant location? Is this a form of equality that women want, or is it something that neither women nor men would wish for?

When asked why they 'choose' part-time employment, Japanese women – particularly mothers and middle-aged women – commonly cite that it gives them control and flexibility over their working hours, a strong indication that they prefer not to work under the conditions that the majority of working men endure. This is a 'Hobson's choice'. Many women would prefer the challenge and self-development that comes with full-time long-term regular employment – and the accompanying salary – but feel those roles are inaccessible because they are unable to commit to the employer's demands. Similarly, many men would participate more in family formation, but feel unable because of workplace demands and the responsibilities of being principal earner.

Equality for women and men

The government is pushing on a piece of string; its policies don't achieve what policy-makers ostensibly intend, and likely never will. Technically and legally core and senior roles are open to female employees. But the majority of women won't or can't occupy those roles because of the customary obligations they entail. Indeed, since most men don't want to work like Japanese men, why would women want to?

What is needed for genuine workplace equality to be achieved, therefore, is a set of career pathways for people to realise their own visions for themselves regardless of gendered assumptions about the 'nature' of women and men. In addition to trying to establish equality for women, why not also work from the direction of trying to establish equality for men, with the intention that the workplace becomes more attractive to both genders?

Deborah Giustini Researcher in Sociology, The University of Manchester. Deborah's research interests are in the sociology of work and feminist political economy, including the analysis of gender and social inequalities in working practices in East Asia and in Europe
deborah.giustini@manchester.ac.uk

Peter Matanle is Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies and Director of Research and Innovation at the School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield <http://sheffield.academia.edu/PeterMatanle>

Notes

- <https://tinyurl.com/jpgender>
- <https://tinyurl.com/parityAP2018>
- <https://tinyurl.com/wwf2018gendergap>
- <https://tinyurl.com/jpgender2>
- <https://tinyurl.com/oeecdGender2017>
- Benatar, D. 2012. *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell