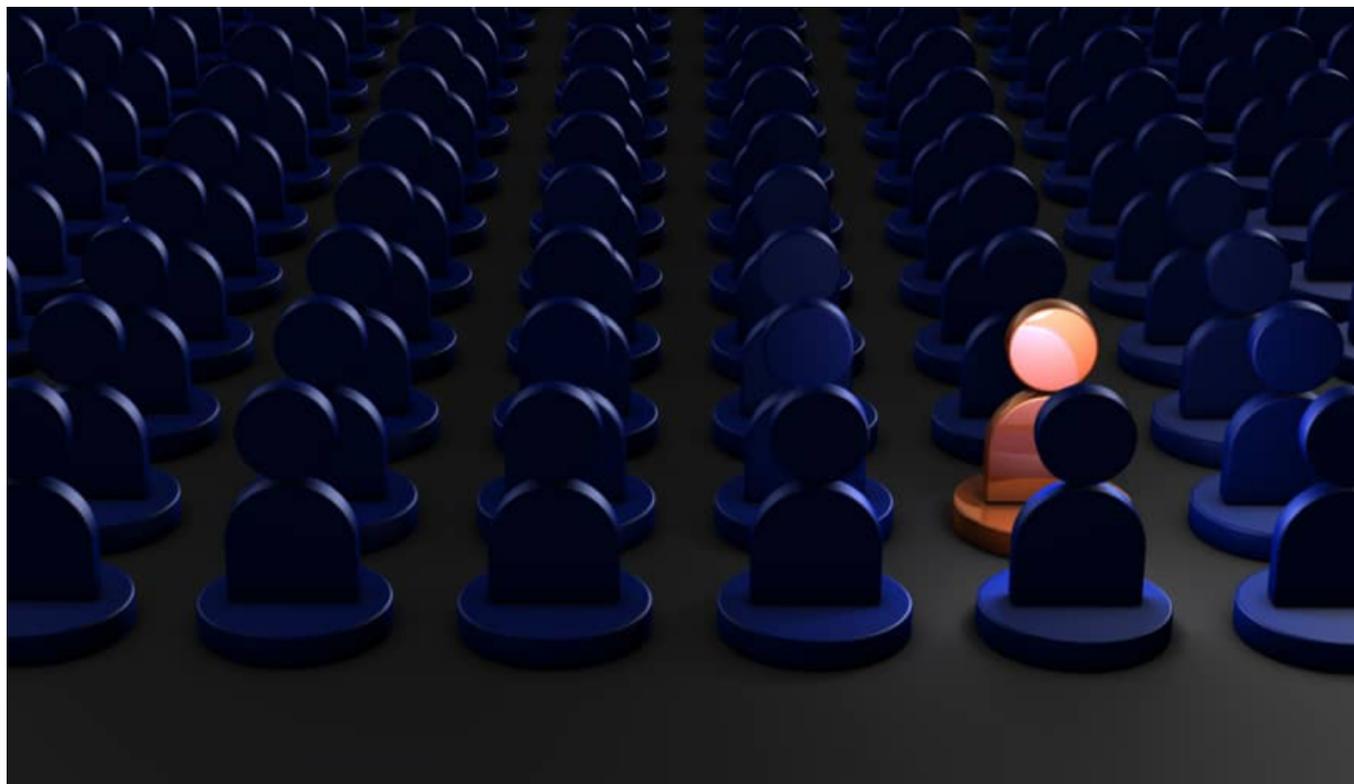


Japan an underdeveloped country for women

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A low ranking in economy and politics has dragged down Japan's position in the world gender gap index. | GETTY IMAGES

Among the 149 countries covered in the latest world gender gap index, Japan's position improved slightly from 114th a year ago to 110th. Still, Japan remains the lowest among the Group of Seven nations and 16th among the Group of 20 countries — ahead of only South Korea, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

According to Sophia University professor Mari Miura, Japan's poor standing in women's participation in politics and the economy — 125th and 117th, respectively — drags down the nation's overall showing. While Japan is not so bad in education (65th) and health (41st), it won't be able to climb the ladder unless the gender gap in politics and the economy is resolved.

Despite its rich industrialized economy, Japan has yet to achieve much progress in equality between men and women. As a cosmetics firm's ad once said, Japan is an "underdeveloped" country in terms of gender equality.

A scandal that surfaced last year left even more women disappointed. Even in the field of education, it was found that women had been severely discriminated against — in entrance exams for medical schools. The issue that came to light at such schools uprooted the notion that education opportunities are equal for everyone. Tokyo Medical University was found to have given additional points to the test scores of male applicants to deliberately reduce the number of women entering its medical school. An education ministry survey prompted by the scandal showed that in nearly 80 percent of the 81 universities polled, the success rate of men was higher than that of women in entrance exams for their medical schools over the past six years.

The ministry determined that if a school makes a decision on a particular applicant's success or failure by disregarding his or her scholastic standing without reasonable grounds, or if a school uniformly treats applicants differently on the basis of their attributes such as gender, age and place of origin, the school's entrance exam should be deemed inappropriate.

In light of that standard, the ministry said Tokyo Medical University, Showa University, Kobe University, Iwate Medical University, Kanazawa Medical University, Fukuoka University, Kitasato University, Juntendo University and Nihon University acted inappropriately in their entrance exams. Among these universities, the ministry gave a score of 1.29 to Tokyo Medical University (a score of 1.0 or lower means the success ratio of female applicants is high), but the score was even worse for Juntendo University at 1.69.

Juntendo University's explanation that it augmented male applicants' test scores because women tend to exhibit better communication skills in

interviews was further disappointing. Better communication skills would make better doctors, and for women to be told that they were rejected at entrance exams because of their skills is unacceptable.

There is a deep-rooted opinion that as far as private medical schools are concerned, there should be no problem if they pronounce in advance that they would ensure more men than women pass their entrance exams. Some theorized, even in the mass media, that discrimination against women in entrance exams is inevitable because medical institutions with too many women doctors would collapse since female doctors either quit mid-career or take long leaves due to marriage and childbirth. This argument also led many women to despair.

Japan's doctors are so overstretched due to a labor shortage that 65 percent of physicians in a recent survey, including female doctors, reportedly said that they can understand Tokyo Medical University's rationale for discriminating against women in its entrance exams because (even as they call for fundamental reform of the way they work at the medical institutions), they realize that if somebody quits, the rest of the staff will suffer under a greater work burden. (See www.joystyle.net/articles/622 .)

Professor Kazuo Yamaguchi of the University of Chicago has given a clear-cut counterargument. Citing Article 4 of the Fundamental Law on Education, which says, "Citizens shall all be given equal opportunities to receive education according to their abilities, and shall not be subject to discrimination in education on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position or family origin," Yamaguchi points out that the ratio of women doctors in Japan is the lowest among OECD member countries.

He goes on to suggest that since medical institutions in other countries have not collapsed due to the presence of many women doctors, the aforementioned perception among Japanese doctors is to be blamed not on women but the fact that doctors at Japanese institutions work

unsustainably long hours.

It has also been reported that only female applicants to medical schools are asked in interviews “What will you do when you want to marry or have children?” If the same question is posed in job interviews nowadays, the employer would come under fire for sexual harassment. A woman wrote in her posting to a website for medical school applicants that she successfully passed the entrance exam by answering, “I will not marry. I will dedicate myself to a doctor’s job.” Why can’t women become doctors unless they declare that they will not marry?

Medical students themselves have raised their voices in response to arguments that seek to justify discrimination on the grounds of the status quo. Yui Yamamoto, 24, a sixth-year student in Tsukuba University’s medical school, said: “Is this something that can be justified if there is a reason for it? Discrimination is discrimination whatever may be the background. The issue of long working hours is a separate matter that should be solved by other means.”

Yamamoto and others collected signatures from some 15,000 medical students for an online campaign in two weeks and submitted them to the education ministry on Dec. 18. She stated at a news conference, “Although we students may be weak, the problem will not be solved for good if we do not raise what small voices we have.”

If the situation does not change, many women students who want to become doctors will hear their parents tell them, “Since you will not succeed in entrance exams anyhow, don’t bother trying to become a doctor.”

According to Sophia University’s Miura, fewer female high school graduates in Japan go on to university than their male counterparts — whereas the opposite is happening in most other developed countries.

The 2018 government report on gender equality shows that although the ratio of women entering universities is growing in Japan, the corresponding ratio is rising much faster in other countries. While the ratio of women entering high schools or vocational schools is higher than men's, the percentage of women enrolled in universities is 6.8 points less than men — 49.1 percent versus 55.9 percent. The gap becomes steeper in postgraduate education: Women account for 31 percent of university graduates who go on to master's courses and 33.4 percent of those in doctorate courses. Women account for only 15.7 percent of researchers in Japan (as of March 2017) — at the bottom of the ranking among OECD members.

Discrimination must be uncovered and thoroughly corrected. The education ministry must not leave a clear violation of equality in education opportunities unattended. The government is now reviewing the way doctors work at medical institutions. If it is serious about boosting the role of women in society, the government should uphold a fundamental position that discrimination is unacceptable. Government leaders should realize that many working mothers are now saying that they do not want to let their children get jobs in this country.

Journalist Toko Shirakawa is the author of books on women's issues, including lifestyles, careers and gender equality. A visiting professor at Sagami Women's University, she is also a member of the Cabinet Office panel on work-style reforms.

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