

A Competitive Girl Speaks her Mind

A headline on a morning news show caught my eyes. The chief of the Tokyo Olympics had expressed annoyance towards women in his speech, stating that “women talk too much” because “they are competitive”. What was wrong with women being “competitive”, I wondered. Why was it annoying when women talked too much? Even though I knew this man was not addressing me in his speech, I nonetheless felt my lips tightening as if the comment really had been made about me, about my passion for making speeches, about my ambitious personality. At the same time, my face took on a competitive shade of red as it occurred to me that I lived in a country where people responsible for representing the nation were instead degrading women in public.

When it comes to eliminating gender equality, Japan is one of the least advanced countries in the world. The 2021 Global Gender Gap Report announced by the World Economic Forum ranked Japan 120th out of 156 countries. This statistics is indeed a shame; however, I feel that what is even more shameful is that most people in Japan do not register the seriousness of the matter.

It isn't a secret that very few women in Japan occupy positions of leadership. In the field of politics, no more than 10 percent of the Diet's lower house members are female -- the percentage falls well below the global average of 25.5 percent. As for corporations, the average ratio of female managers in companies across Japan last year was no more than 9 percent; the government's goal of reaching 30 percent by 2020 had effortlessly evaporated. Nevertheless, Japan's main trigger for eliminating gender gaps has not yet been pulled. In fact, there are people who assert that women speak too much when they are, in truth, lacking fair and adequate opportunities to speak in public. This seems a worrying sign that most

Japanese people are unconsciously acknowledging that women, even should they enter the upper echelons of power, ought to remain yes-men to men.

When I left my home that morning I paid attention to the small moments of everyday life, the countless scenes in which we Japanese people are accepting gender inequality without knowing it. Take a look at the advertisements for household products; it is always the mother with a troubled frown on her face until a male hero comes in with the product to save her day. Most people do not find anything wrong with this scenario, yet when you really think about it, there *is* something wrong about it. A mother staying at home to do the housework while the father is out working is one typical example of the gender stereotypes that leads to dismissive comments in boardrooms, to the dreams of brilliant young girls undreamed. Even in the traditional kanji used in everyday writing, there are elements which symbolize discrimination against females. The kanji which means “servant” or “slave”, for example, is written with an element which represents females.

I believe that one reason for why Japan is having a difficult time trying to realize and thus narrow gender inequality is that the idea of male domination has been closely woven into the traditions of this country. It has become a part of our lives over the course of history. Women must be neat and polite while equipped with obedience to follow men -- this concept is, to some extent, the basis of Japanese traditional culture.

Then, you ask, do we have to get rid of traditional Japanese culture in order to achieve gender equality in this country? My answer is no. It may be so that as long as we preserve traditional Japanese culture, the idea of male domination will also remain. However, accepting a culture and accepting gender inequality are two separate subjects; we *can* preserve traditions while extricating gender inequality from them. The first step in doing this is to realize that aspects which are discriminatory towards females are interwoven into our traditions and are affecting our lives even today, without simply swallowing everything as

“tradition”. If we see a man making groundless complaints about the competitiveness and talkativeness of women, it is our time to speak up, to act as a nation. I am positive that Japan is capable of combating the inequalities faced by females; all we need is for more people to realize the little things, so that we can take one big step forward.