Women Re-traditionalized?

The Media Portrayal of Powerful Women in Japan

How does the portrayal of women in Japanese media contribute to raising structural barriers against women in Japan, especially in male-dominated platforms such as politics? In particular, newspapers were used to analyse how femininity discourses are exploited and affect powerful women who do not conform to the ideal image of women as presented by the media. In analysing the differences in the media portrayal of gender roles and the ethical protection of women’s rights, the main reasons behind women’s marginalization in different platforms were found to be not having enough women in the media industry, socio-economic agendas pursuing tangible profits over changing stereotypical gender roles, and demonizing outspoken and powerful women seeking radical changes. The socially constructed image of “ideal women” and relating their femininity to being beautiful, dependent and not too powerful is basically created by the media, which is why the media should be considered one of the causes of the social oppression of women in Japanese society.

Keywords: Media portrayal; Japanese women; motherhood; sexual assaults; female politicians

Many scholars have referred to how media coverage contributes to shaping audience mindsets, including social norms and public perceptions (Skye de Saint Felix 2020; Youna Kim 2012). The media not only raises our awareness regarding what is happening in the world, but also contributes to constructing our ideologies (Azmat Rasul 2017). Despite the many studies that raised scepticism about the media’s credibility, the latest survey conducted by the Japan Press Research Institute (2019) found that 68.9 per cent of Japanese people trust the press as a reliable source of information. Thus, I will focus on newspapers in particular because they are the most trusted media outlet in Japan. In identifying the main traits of the media’s portrayal of women, however, I will also shed some light on visual media to grasp how the main media platforms utilize gender discourses and how this affects their domestic and international audiences.

Before analysing the negative aspects of the media’s portrayal of women, we should acknowledge that the media has also positively contributed to familiarizing the society with difficult topics, especially in politics. Focusing on the hobbies and personal interests of politicians when introducing them, in contrast to basic reporting in the news media, has produced warm social images of politicians and world leaders, which consequently increases their popularity. Edwin Diamond, Martha McKay, and Robert Silverman (1993) argued that showing the then Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on Arsenio Hall’s TV talk show set the tone for his presidential campaign. The creation of celebrity politicians through the fusion between politics and entertainment has been a successful strategy not only for media to increase their views, commercials and economic profits, it has also
worked in the favour of the politicians who shared a portion of their normal life
to gain more votes because of the voters’ familiarity with them (Bruce A.
Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini 2011). This may have been the case for
Donald Trump, as Diana Owen (2018) observed, i.e., being the star of a reality
TV show is considered one of the reasons for his success in the US presidential
elections, as people were already familiar with him from seeing him on TV in
aspects other than political.

Shinzo Abe, the current prime minister of Japan, appears to be following
this same strategy, as he and some members of his cabinet have been guests on
different entertainment shows on Fuji Television. In March 2014, Abe was the
first prime minister to be a guest on the famous TV show, Waratte Iitomo,
where he talked about his hobbies, including golf, and how they help him to
relax and clear his mind. Many high-profile politicians have also been guests
on these non-political shows to try and get closer to their audience, especially
by appearing on the most popular shows, such as SMAP x SMAP, which is
hosted by the former Japanese boy band, SMAP, who invited actors, singers,
world leaders and other global celebrities to visit and cook their favourite
dishes for them. In 1999, the politician Junichiro Koizumi visited the show and
then he became the prime minister 2 years later. In 2005, Abe followed his
example by visiting the show and he also became a prime minister in the
following year. These incidents have created a rumour about the genuine
impact of the show on voters’ political behaviour, i.e., that those who get
invited to be guests are more likely to become prime ministers of Japan (News
Post Seven 2016). This rumour and its popularity among the Japanese audience
may explain why the show appeals to many politicians. In addition to prime
ministers, high-profile politicians have been guests on the same show, such as
the secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party, Shigeru Ishiba in 2013
and the current governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike in 2016.

Although the media contributes to familiarizing politicians and making
their agendas more appealing by introducing their human side to the public,
gender scholars do not necessarily agree that the media introduces male and
female politicians similarly. Instead, they found that media coverage is biased
when portraying women. Kate Manne (2019) noted that media publications are
heavily biased by gender stereotypes, which hinder women in challenging men
in the male-dominated platforms. Leah Hutton Blumenfeld (2020) mapped out
the differences in the media’s portrayal of men and women, especially for
those who seek powerful positions. Blumenfeld (2020) argued that while the
portrayal of male politicians is premised on the assumption that they can be
imperfect while trying to achieve their goal (e.g., Trump, Berlusconi and
Kavanaugh), female politicians are rarely forgiven for their human mistakes.
Moreover, other studies have identified differences in the media’s portrayal of
different women based on their political affiliations: i.e., conservative women
who criticize radical women are more likely to be portrayed positively
compared with women who challenge male authority (Jen Kim 2016; Manne
2019).
These differences can be seen not only in the real world, but also in fictional media. Some studies have focused on how powerful women are portrayed in movies and how their success and powerfulness are conditioned with not surpassing their male counterparts. For example, Bollywood movies tend to portray female politicians as being sexy and beautiful more than being powerful or accomplished; instead of empowering women, this strengthens patriarchal ideologies in which women are presented through the male gaze (Rasul 2017). The media presents powerful and accomplished women; however, their images are conditioned by keeping their femininity intact (Margaret Gallagher 2002) and “without overtly rebelling against men” (Yannu Chen 1998; Kim 2012, 19). As a result, instead of seeking liberty from conventional gender norms and stereotypical roles, the media is re-traditionalizing (Kim 2012) new gender norms for powerful women that reframe them based on their appearance and sexuality.

However, powerful women who have already demonstrated their abilities and succeeded in challenging men in their male-dominated platforms are portrayed differently. Hilary Clinton is a significant example of this type of woman: e.g., the US media has portrayed her as being “man like”, “a monster” or a “cyborg”, which destroyed her viability as a presidential candidate (Linda Horwitz and Holly Swyers 2009; Jessica Ritchie 2013). In the same context, powerful female politicians in Japan who have won landslide victories over their male opponents, such as Yuriko Koike, the first female governor of Tokyo, have been victims of negative campaigns. For example, Koike was described as “dressed as a woman, but a hawkish man” (BBC 2016) and “a woman past her prime in thick makeup” (Rich 2016). This way of portraying powerful women reflects the cultural anxieties about the place of women in the political realm and their “perceived ability to destabilize gender itself by collapsing distinctions between the categories of male and female” (Ritchie 2013, 114).

Japan is no different when it comes to portraying women. This paper explores the complexity of utilizing femininity discourses in Japanese media. While the term “ryosai kenbo” (a good wife and a wise mother) honours mothers and housewives by idealizing them as how Japanese women should behave, the expression is also used against the same women by trivializing their domestic roles, e.g., labelling them as “3 shoku hiron te suki” (3 meals and a nap for free) (Yoko Kunihiro 1997, 54) in reference to women’s “stress-free” lives while jobless. Nevertheless, working mothers were also stigmatized for being accomplished at their jobs and how they balance their job responsibilities and their families is often questioned.

Beginning with the general landscape of Japanese media, this paper will discuss how women’s rights are not treated as an independent variable. Instead, in constitutional laws and penal codes, women’s rights are merged within the framework of human rights. However, the code of ethics that should ethically regulate the content of the newspapers also experiences the same problem because these guidelines were written from a male perspective and are clearly gender-biased when writing about male and female issues, such as sexual
assaults and extramarital affairs. This paper will illustrate the bias in portraying working mothers, victims of sexual assault, and powerful female politicians, and how these women experience structural barriers because they do not conform to the ideal behaviour of *ryosai kenbo*, which expects women to be full-time dedicated housewives dependent on their husbands.

However, this paper does not claim that all Japanese women suffer from these mis-portrayals or degrading representations. Rather, the paper focuses on powerful women who tend to bring radical changes to the social structures of Japanese society. These women are negatively portrayed in the media, which presents them differently from the socio-culturally accepted image of Japanese women. This paper argues that introducing powerful women in this negative way impacts not only men but also women because the female audience would prefer to refrain from following these “negative examples” and seek social acceptance. Embedding femininity discourses and merging them with the culture of acceptance is what makes powerful women or women who seek radical change stand alone because they dared to challenge the deeply rooted gender norms in Japanese social structures.

The Japanese media landscape and the situation of women

Japanese media play a marginal role in embedding gender roles in the Japanese society as the “ideal” image of what the Japanese family should look like. Examples of print media that perpetuated such images and criticized gender equality were the *Shoron* and *Shokun* magazines and the *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper (Ayaka Suzuki 2019). Suzuki (2019) argues that the severe criticism against women who advocated for gender equality escalated in these print media platforms especially after the gender equality law was passed in Japan in 1999. Various newspapers and magazines, including *Sankei Shimbun*, which has the sixth highest circulation among newspapers in Japan, have been labelling women who supported the legislation of this law as rejecting Japanese traditional culture, destroying the core of Japanese family and losing the sense of what is masculine or feminine (Suzuki 2019). This gender conservatism has been basically perpetuated by the print media with help from some conservative federations, such as Nippon Kaigi’s *Nippon Josei no Kai* (i.e., women’s assembly). Ironically, conservative women are more likely to be portrayed positively on these platforms for criticizing radical women who challenge male authority (Kim 2012).

Meanwhile, women are often portrayed as lacking knowledge and incompetent in visual media, especially entertainment shows. The most famous female TV entertainers with the highest incomes are those who are labelled as “*obaka-kyara*” or stupid characters (Rosemary Dawood 2018). The *obaka-kyara* women are either beautiful women who pretend to have almost no knowledge about anything or those who are not as beautiful as their counterparts and are included in these shows to make fun of themselves or to be mocked by middle-aged men in studios for their “stupidity” (Dawood
A half-Japanese, half-Bangladeshi model, Rola is known by the Japanese audience for being an *obaka-kyara* who makes funny Japanese mistakes that a native Japanese speaker would never make and saying “okay” to whatever is said to her even if she does not fully understand. The California-based model participates in many international and political activities, including signing petitions to stop building a new US military base in Okinawa Prefecture’s Henoko district. However, newspapers like *Asahi Shimbun* were more concerned about how Rola’s political opinions would affect her future career as a Japanese entertainer who should refrain from disclosing her political opinions (Momoko Kamiya and Miyamoto Shigeyori 2019).

The Japanese media not only embeds gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies in the Japanese society, it also has a psychological impact on women in relation to their aspirations in a culture of acceptance and how they want to be perceived by the society. Although the Japanese media’s emotional impact is overshadowed in the mainstream literature, it is imperative to raise the subject while analysing Japanese media and its impact on women because women may prefer to refrain from expressing powerful and challenging positions as it will make them look less feminine (Gaye Tuchman 1979), while they may accept assisting roles because they are socio-culturally accepted as being feminine. This culture of acceptance also plays a pivotal role in Japanese society, especially around sexual assaults. Only 4 per cent of women in Japan report their sexual assaults because they do not want to be portrayed as victims on TV or newspapers and bring shame to themselves and their families (Dawood 2018). Needless to say, this silence and shyness constitutes an indispensable moral behaviour in the ideal image of Japanese women, which is why women prefer not to report sexual assaults to be socially and culturally accepted as “nice women”.

Two factors influence women’s status and how they are portrayed in the Japanese media: i.e., the proportion of women employed in the media industry and the socio-economic organization of Japanese media. The media industry is considered a male domain where women are only given assisting roles and very few women had a leading position in the industry. According to a survey performed by the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (2020), female journalists comprise only 21.5 per cent of the media workforce; however, there are no women at Nihon Shinbun Kyokai (NSK; The Japanese Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association), which is responsible for regulating and monitoring all newspapers and print media to ensure that they follow ethical standards to protect and promote media’s common interests (NSK 2020). The lack of women employed at the regulatory authority might explain why most of the stories that we read or watch on Japanese media are actually presented from a male perspective (Pamela J. Creedon and Yulia S. Medvedeva 2020). The paucity of women in the Japanese media industry is one of the reasons for the reporting of rapes criminalizing women and upholding the attitudes and actions of rapists by normalizing and justifying sexual assaults or dismissing them. Women who aim to be journalists or be involved in media organizations in Japan have been told that they must work “like a man” from day to night and
they must work based on the measurements that their male seniors set for them to follow (Dawood 2018).

However, the problem of the representation of women in the media industry goes beyond affirmative action theories because increasing the proportion of women employed in the media industry does not necessarily mean that women will be better represented in the media and the stereotypical norms will change. Socio-economic factors direct the media agenda for increasing views; therefore, achieving tangible economic profits is what matters regardless of the media contents or how people are portrayed. These profits are only achieved when the media contents meet with what the audience wants to consume (Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick 2015). In contrast, unlike cognitive dissonance approaches, these institutions would do the opposite and create programs or write articles that have different ideas about social norms in case they sensed that the audience might react positively to irrelevant contents discussing taboos or unconventional behaviours (Patti M. Valkenburg and Jochen Peter 2013).

**Motherhood in the newspaper media**

The complexity of analysing media discourses in Japan in relation to women lies in the conflict of using the same terms positively and negatively. For instance, the role of women has been positively idealized since post-war Japan within the term *ryosai kenbo*, where women were portrayed as dedicated wives and mothers. The Japanese society puts pressure on all women to strive to achieve this ideal image through the media. Even in the bestselling manga and its animated versions on TV, *Sazae-san* and *Chibi Maruko-chan*, female characters are often portrayed wearing their aprons as an indication of their femininity, motherhood and gender roles, which are deeply embedded in Japanese society. This perception of gender roles presented by the media has internalized these images as the ideal image of a Japanese family and suggests that being a mother and housewife is the most important task for Japanese women (Hideko Takeyasu 2014). However, following these idealized gender roles does not make these women into perfect mothers because the same idealized term also implies that such women are less conscious about the outside world and live comfortable lives while relying economically on their husbands as the main breadwinners (Yumiko Mikanagi 1999). This trivialization of full-time mothers makes them feel less confident because of the perception of having only a supportive or secondary role (Hisako Kondo 1996).

Meanwhile, working mothers are also criticized for not dedicating all their time to their families. In other words, full-time housewives are expected to care only for the household and child-rearing while other mothers with socio-political aspirations are considered to be neglecting their assigned roles.

The complexity of portraying motherhood in the Japanese media lies in the idealization of the image of mothers only when they are full-time dedicated
women for their husbands and children. However, when the same mothers have ambitions, or seek to achieve an accomplishment in their lives, they are criticized for being “too powerful” (Fran Martin and Tania Lewis 2012, 61). Their femininity is at stake when they decide to join the rat race, fight for their rights, strive for equality or prioritize their material well-being and occupational mobility over their marriages and childcare (Kim 2012). An advertisement from *Domani*, a monthly magazine for women, is a significant example of this conflict where working women embrace their femininity while fulfilling their socially constructed roles. The advertisement came with a completely irrelevant message contrasting with what the magazine claims to promote, i.e., the lives of working mothers. The advertisement said, “*hataraku onna wa, kekkyoku nakami, osu de aru*”, which can be translated as “working women are actually men on the inside”. Feminists, women’s rights advocates and gender scholars’ critiques of this advertisement were withering. Kazue Muta, a professor of gender studies at Osaka University, commented that these advertisements were outdated statements that criticize women for thinking like men or aspiring to have the same positions and power equality as men (J-Cast News 2019). Both types of women, i.e., full-time housewives and working mothers, are socially oppressed for not being up-to-date and understanding about the outside world or for having ambitions and seeking occupational mobility, which makes them appear less feminine to the men whom they challenge.

Problems facing women’s rights in the print media

The contents of print media in Japan, especially when portraying women, are not controlled rigorously (Dawood 2018). Constitutional laws do not articulate any significant articles regarding the protection of gender neutrality and women’s rights specifically. Article 21 of the Japanese constitution is the only article that mentions the media in terms of prohibiting censorship and protecting the freedom of communication. From the same perspective of protecting the freedom of expression, the Japanese penal code also includes a few articles that stipulates protecting reputation, such as Article 176, which states that the person who commits any indecent act upon a man or woman including assault or intimidation shall be punished by imprisonment with hard labour for not less than 6 months. Also articles 177, 178, 222 and 223 are also concerned with physical and moral intimidation, which includes threatening others’ lives, bodies, freedom or reputation. The Japanese penal code includes a separate chapter focused on defamation and moral assaults, called “crimes against reputation”, in which there are set of punishments for those who defame others by alleging false information in public. However, there is no law that articulates the protection of women’s rights and reputations or what words are prohibited when portraying or writing about women.

In addition, no law directly checks the contents of published articles to ensure whether they are gender-biased or not (Dawood 2018). The only
organization in Japan responsible for checking print media is the NSK. Nevertheless, the NSK does not set any regulations that controls the contents published by magazines and newspapers because they also encounter the same problem of deciding what can be categorized as freedom of expression or not. However, NSK (2000) has provided “shimbun rinri”, a code of ethics for newspapers,¹ which is concerned only with editing and the ethics of the publishing process.

Most of the rules outlined in the code of ethics emphasize the same concept using different terms, which is why media scholars criticize the code as being an abstract guideline that is focused more on the publication process and economic profits than on the contents (Teruko Inoue 1995; Toko Tanaka 2012). The code does not cover women’s rights and how to portray them, it only introduces a general, easily exploited outline. There is no doubt that moral ethics are important; however, other articles should be more concerned with the content published and how to control the publication of biased or sexist articles. Furthermore, there is no emphasis on how to grant freedom of expression without any interference in people’s rights or articles that mention sexism, gender bias and sexual objectification, or anything that might have a negative impact on the audience’s mindset in terms of their social morals, beliefs and views. Therefore, this ethical code fails to set a baseline for freedom of expression and women’s rights. As a matter of fact, NSK checks published articles based on this code of ethics; however, many problems emerge, such as sexual contents or prostitution advertisements, which cannot be resolved because they do not directly violate NSK’s code of ethics. Therefore, all NSK can do is to “advise” the offending publishers but the decision whether to retain the content or not is up to the newspaper or magazine concerned (Inoue 1995).

Reporting sexual assaults in Japanese newspapers

When Japanese newspapers portray sexual affairs, including rape, adultery or other extramarital affairs, they commonly always shed light on the female party in the situation, such as what she was wearing or how she seduced her partner and, if she was married, how this accident is going to affect her marriage and her children. “Goukan” is a word that refers to rape in Japan and although this term is mainly used to refer to sexual crimes, Japanese newspapers like Kyodo Shim bun have changed their writing style guides to prefer the use of the words “fujo bouko” or “violence against women”. This change, as Chizuko Ueno (1996) observed, will soften the criminal’s guilt and social responsibility, and lessen the situation by making it sound as if the

¹In the English version of the NSK guidelines, this expression is translated as “the canon of journalism”.

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sexual violence refers to a quarrel rather than a physical assault. In portraying sexual assaults, Japanese newspapers generally tend to mention all of the details about the female victim, including her former sexual experience, her age, job and marital status, while male rapists are barely portrayed with the same close attention to details. This skewed reporting might be considered as a human rights violation that humiliates the victim or constitutes a second rape of her reputation, especially if the victim is dead and cannot defend her rights. Japanese newspapers have criminalized victims and victimized criminals in multiple cases, which can be recognized from the reporting style or by referring implicitly to such questions as why the victim went with the criminal in the first place and whether she was dressed decently or not. Meanwhile, the newspapers may portray the criminal as a victim of social instability as in the case of the four rapists who raped and killed Junko Furuta, who was described by the newspapers as the “concrete-encased high school girl”. The newspapers portrayed her four rapists as victims of social brutality and lack of discipline because their absent mothers did not take care of them (Haruko Kadono 1990; Chinatsu Nakayama 1991).

Shiori Ito is a Japanese journalist who became famous on media platforms for filing a lawsuit against Noriyuki Yamaguchi, a former Washington DC bureau chief for the Tokyo Broadcasting System after he raped her while she was drunk in April 4, 2015. Instead of focusing on what happened to her, the Japanese newspapers focused more on what she wore on that day and how she left the top buttons of her shirt undone during interviews (Shiori Ito 2018). This reaction demonstrates how the Japanese media creates social stigma around outspoken women who are willing to defend their rights and break the culture of silence that prevails in sexual assaults. This also explains why Ito was vilified on social media by men and also by women who questioned her national identity and loyalty for Japan because “true” Japanese women would never speak about such shameful things in public, which was one of the factors undermining her credibility (Aya Takeuchi 2018). The cultural perception of rape in the Japanese society is still male oriented. It is still a taboo to use the word “rape” in newspapers, where it is often replaced by “violated” or “tricked”, especially if the victim was underage.

In contrast, sexual affairs related to female politicians are not treated within the same “culture of silence” context to that of rape for ordinary women. On the one hand, Japanese newspapers tend to publish a picture of the female politician with teary eyes or bowing to her voters as an indication of her regret and disappointing her voters’ trust. On the other hand, these newspapers rarely publish a picture of their male counterparts, even if they were prominent male politicians (Dawood 2018). The way Sankei Shimbun (2017a) and Jiji Press (2017) reported the sexual affair in 2017 between the female politician

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Junko Furuta’s body was discovered in a concrete drum after she was tortured and raped, which is why the media called her the concrete-encased high school girl.
Eriko Imai and Ken Hashimoto, an assemblyman from the Kobe Municipal Assembly, is a typical example of the double standard underlying the unfair portrayal of female politicians. Imai is a former pop idol from SPEED, a Japanese band, who turned to politics after she won a seat in the 2016 Upper House election through proportional representation. The newspaper mentioned Imai’s former career and name in their headline, i.e., “idol-turned-lawmaker Imai apologizes for affair with Kobe Assemblyman” (Japan Times 2017), which implies a hidden narrative that Imai is not in her right place, is still immature and is still acting the same way she used to do when she was a singer. In contrast, the name of her male partner Ken Hashimoto is not included in the title and he is only referred to as “the Kobe Assembly man”. Although the newspaper mentioned Hashimoto’s name later in the article, the cover picture was of Imai alone and she was also the one who apologized publicly for betraying those who trusted her and for damaging her ideal image as a working single mother. When they referred to Hashimoto, however, the same newspapers did not mention anything about his past relationships or the impact of the sexual affair on his voters and those who trusted him in the Kobe constituency. Instead, they portrayed him as the assemblyman who suddenly found his idol, so it was hard for him not to fall in love with her. The newspapers focused on Imai’s public apology and never questioned why Hashimoto did not do the same thing and why he did not regret what he did in a proper manner.

Japanese newspapers play a pivotal role not only in terms of providing information to their readers, but also in shaping their perceptions and ideologies based on what they read. If the newspaper has a gender bias, this means that the reader also will be subconsciously affected and thus women will suffer from more gender discrimination in the society. For instance, the newspapers tend to mention the marital status of women when talking about them, e.g., “a 28-year-old single lady”. Utilizing gender discourses in a discriminating way is also clearly seen in the portrayal of powerful women or women who have succeeded in getting a position that is normally occupied by men. Newspapers normally portray such women as a “josei hatsu”, i.e., “first female”. This language refers to the woman’s gender instead of the qualities and qualifications that led her to obtain such a position. Furthermore, newspapers tend to add gender descriptions to jobs when talking about women while barely using them when addressing men in the same situation. For example, a female teacher, a female politician or a female secretary is how the newspapers describe the women who work in these positions when writing articles about them, while men are simply called teachers, politicians or secretaries. While it may be acceptable to refer to women by their gender when

3The Japanese journalist Ryutato Nakamura has also justified Hashimoto’s situation by being Imai’s biggest fan since she was a member of SPEED at the entertainment show “Bikingu” on August 2, 2017.
a woman wins a position that is usually dominated by men, such as the first female president or the first female governor. However, the media’s gender biases in portraying women are clearly evident when attributing gender to positions like teachers and secretaries, where women comprise more than 60 per cent of the workforce.

The portrayal of female politicians in Japanese newspapers

The public are often interested in knowing about the family life of married politicians and the love affairs of single politicians (Liesbet van Zoonen 2005). Japanese newspapers and weekly tabloids tend to focus more on scandal-driven stories about politicians from a neo-liberal perspective because they bring more economic profits. This “infotainment” (Owen 2018, 110) increases the purchasing rate because readers are curious to know more about the personal lives and secrets of their politicians. This curiosity drives these media platforms to look desperately for scandalous stories about politicians to increase their sales. Shiori Yamao, a member of the House of Representatives of the Constitutional Democratic Party in Aichi Prefecture was forced to tender her resignation from the party amid allegations of an extramarital affair, after the weekly tabloid Shukan Bunshun carried an article alleging that the then 43-year-old mother Yamao had been meeting in secret with Rintaro Kuramochi, a 34-year-old lawyer, about four times a week. The magazine questioned how this affair could affect her personal life as a wife and a mother, and also affect the voters in her constituency. This news not only negatively influenced her personal life, it also gave right wingers known as “nettoyo”, the opportunity to doubt the transparency of the voting process and whether her victory over her male rival Junji Suzuki from the Liberal Democratic Party was valid or not (Sankei Shimbun 2017b). The nettoyo exploitation of this extramarital allegation stirred controversy and destroyed Yamao’s political image as a prominent adversary to the prime minister Abe and also her credibility as a political representative by doubting that her electoral victory might have been rigged in her favour and thus she unfairly won the elections.

On the one hand, the Japanese newspapers’ framing of a female politician not only depends on the qualifications of the politician herself, but also goes beyond her career to her family and her social relationships to show whether she is fulfilling her family roles as well as her political ones. On the other hand, male politicians are rarely scrutinized for being good husbands or wise fathers.

Another trait of the Japanese media when portraying female politicians that it tends to emphasize their appearance, including their clothes, fashion, makeup and beauty, over their efforts, achievements or even their struggle against their male counterparts during elections. Renho Murata, the former president of the Democratic Party, had her bra size listed on her Wikipedia page, while Yuriko Koike, the current governor of Tokyo, was asked during the gubernatorial election about the type of cosmetics and sunscreen lotions that she was applying to her face (Dawood 2018). This contradiction between
the portrayal of male and female politicians during elections shows some
hurdles related to gender differences that female politicians encounter. Sexism
and misogyny in politics are not limited to how female politicians are
portrayed during elections, but also extends to the sessions of the assemblies,
as exemplified in how women are treated even after winning a seat in the
parliament.

On 22 November 2017, Yuko Ogata, a Japanese lawmaker from the
Kumamoto Municipal Assembly, was forced to leave the chamber after her
colleagues objected to her presence with her 7-month-old baby, although Ogata
clarified that as a parent, she had a problem because there was no one to leave
her child with, which was why she had decided to bring him with her to the
session. Her colleagues were not tolerant to her circumstances and the
Assembly chairman, Yoshimoto Sawada, asked her to leave her seat before the
session. However, female politicians breastfeeding their newborn babies while
fulfilling their roles as politicians have already been witnessed by many
assemblies around the world, such as the case of Larissa Waters, an Australian
Greens politician, who spoke about black lung disease, which affects coal
miners, while breastfeeding her 3-month-old baby, Alia Joy. International
newspapers, including Australian newspapers, have described this as being
“historical” (BBC 2017; Erickson 2017). These newspapers portrayed her
positively as a symbol of women’s empowerment and described her daughter
as a cute regular attendee of Australia’s Senate.

However, the case was totally different at the Kumamoto Municipal
Assembly. According to the Asahi newspaper, Sawada delayed the session
until Ogata could find a friend of hers who could look after her son until she
finished her session at the assembly. Furthermore, when Sawada offered an
apology to other members for the delayed start of the session, the members
commented that he was not the one who should be apologizing, but Ogata
(Baseel 2017).

In one of her interviews with Tokyo newspaper, Ogata commented that she
wanted to deliver a message to the Kumamoto Municipal Assembly that
childcare is still considered as a private problem related only to women and
that society does not offer any help to make it easier for working mothers. In
all the Japanese articles that covered this incident, no single article referred to
her husband and where he was or what was his responsibility as a parent to
share childcare with Ogata. Nevertheless, most of the newspaper coverage
focused on either Ogata’s attitude and the reasons behind bringing her child to
the Kumamoto Municipal Assembly or portraying the anger and dissatisfaction
of her colleagues in the session because of the 40-minute delay caused by her
need to find someone to leave her child with and not following the assembly’s
laws and regulations (The Mainichi 2017). The newspapers mentioned nothing
about the hurdles that Ogata as a working mother faces in her career and how
Japan is not well prepared to implement women-friendly policies where
mothers can work efficiently.

The discussion of child-rearing and Ogata’s attitude in the Assembly
without referring to the role of her husband succinctly shows how stereotypical
gender roles, such as considering that childcare and household tasks are the
mother’s responsibilities, are still deeply embedded in the mindset of Japanese
society. This hinders women’s involvement in the decision-making process and
shows the hurdles facing working mothers in Japan amid the increased number
of women joining the workforce, especially in politics. The newspapers did not
refer to the main problem or the message that Ogata wanted to deliver through
bringing her baby to the session: i.e., the inadequacy of State-funded day care
services. Ogata’s message also revealed how Japanese working women suffer
from a dysfunctional day care system, because mothers must wait for their turn
in very long waiting lists until they get accepted at a day care centre. More
importantly, Ogata implicitly referred to the failure of the government,
especially the Womenomics initiative that was launched by the Abe Cabinet to
encourage more women to enter the workforce and provide a place in day care
for every child by the year 2020. As of 2020, it seems that this initiative was
another failure following Prime Minister Abe’s declaration that the government
will not be able to increase the proportion of women’s representatives to 30 per
cent by 2020 as promised.

The unfair portrayal and degrading representations of powerful women,
politicians in particular, and the utilization of gender discourses in a scandal-
driven way explains the misogyny experienced by female politicians in the
political spectrum. For example, in electoral races when two women run
against each other, the competition it is labelled as “onna no tatakai” i.e., a
women’s battle, or blaming their political mistakes or attitudes on their gender,
such as when current Deputy Minister Taro Aso commented on the female
lawmaker Mayuko Toyota who physically assaulted her secretary and called
him “baldy”, saying that “she is a woman after all!” This normalization of
sexism, misogyny and degrading representation of female politicians in
Japanese newspapers is what makes the readers accept the biased coverage of
female politicians and consider them as invaders of the political realm.
Consequently, this increases structural barriers against women with political
aspirations (Susan J. Carroll 2009).

Conclusion

The re-traditionalising of gender roles in the Japanese media stems from
conditioning women’s power and occupational mobility based on their
femininity and being too powerful while demonizing outspoken women who
dare to challenge cultural norms.

The degrading representation of women goes to the paucity of female
journalists in media industry, their complete absence from the NSK, which
monitors media contents and sets the ethical regulations for publishing
processes, and the media’s socio-economic agendas, which prioritize tangible
profits over fixing gender stereotypes that are deeply embedded in Japanese
social structures. The social oppression experienced by powerful and
outspoken women in Japanese society is related to how they are portrayed in
newspapers based on their outfits and the way they speak, which goes against
the ideal image the media sets for women as being shy, quiet and dependent.
This media portrayal creates structural hurdles and social oppression against
women because of these portrayals, especially of female politicians’
extramarital affairs and news genuinely focusing on female politicians, her
family, future career and her attitude towards her voters, while less is reported
about male politicians and their gender is barely scrutinized. Because of this
negative portrayal of powerful women, a large majority of women in Japan
would prefer to be discriminated, socially oppressed, seek social acceptance
and be seen as being feminine enough. Substituting serious journalism for
scandalous coverage of female politicians, demonizing outspoken women who
raise their voice in asking for their human rights in sexual assaults, and
focusing on women’s gender, appearance and beauty over their qualifications
and potential, has weakened the Japanese media’s role as the watchdog of
society and made women prey to Japan’s social brutality and patriarchal
culture.

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