



Gender-based Harassment in Japanese Institutions: A Soft Policy Response Aimed at Normative Change

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Abstract

Japan is one of the world's safest and most economically privileged countries, yet its gender-equality ranking regularly appears among the lowest of the G20 states. The reasons for this gap lie in centuries old, traditional norms and political policies that still exert considerable pressure on women to conform to narrowly defined lifepaths. While greater freedom now exists for women, the institutional barriers within commercial and political institutions have ensured that their representation at the highest levels remains marginal. Driven initially by economic pressures to encourage more women to enter the work force, there is a growing understanding in Japanese politics of the barriers that women face and the measures that must be taken to remove them. In contrast to Western states, however, Japan favors a gentler approach that seeks to encourage change from the bottom up, rather than through a stricter, top-down regulatory approach. This paper outlines the nature of the problems faced by female executives and politicians in Japan, how the government has sought to address these issues, and the signs that have so far arisen that the policies are producing the desired results.

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