

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

Japan's gender inequality puts it to shame in world rankings

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When it comes to gender equality, Japan has no shortage of distressing figures.

The statistics that are most often used to illustrate the nation's dismal status in this respect are the United Nations Development Program's Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which gauges equality by tracking women's participation in politics and business.

In 2007, Japan's GEM was ranked 54th out of 93 countries, compared with Australia's 8th ranking, Germany's 9th, Canada's 10th, Britain's 14th and the United States' 15th. Among Asian peers, Japan's rank was significantly lower than Singapore's (16th), while China and South Korea both trailed Japan at 57th and 64th, respectively.

Women in power are particularly few and far between, with only 9.4 percent of parliamentary seats here being occupied by women, which puts the nation in the disgraceful position of being ranked 131st out of 189 countries surveyed.

Things are not any rosier in the private sector, where, as of 2006, women made up only 10.8 percent of all subsection chiefs (*kakari-cho*), 5.8 percent of section chiefs (*kacho*) and a mere 3.7 percent of department heads (*bucho*). And as for female researchers, Japan's 96,000 represent only 11 percent of the total.

Life is even harder regarding careers in science or

technology. A 2007 study by the Japan Association of National Universities found that only 2.5 percent of professorial posts in science departments across national universities were occupied by women — with a mere 1.8 percent in agricultural departments and just 1.1 percent in engineering departments.

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Girls are turned off early. A 2005 report on education by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) said that, among 100,000 young employees, the number of male university graduates in Japan with science degrees was 1,656, above the OECD average of 1,398, but the corresponding number for women stood at a paltry 372 — less than half of the OECD average of 858. The report noted that many women lose interest in mathematics by age 15.

Exactly why fewer women succeed in science careers has often been a topic of contention, and even of volatile debate worldwide, not just in Japan.

Then-Harvard University President Lawrence H. Summers caused an international uproar in January 2005 when he said that "innate differences" might explain why women are behind men in science and mathematical careers.

In reality — as opposed to that arcane and flimsy explanation — experts point to the extremely long working hours required for research, and the

shortage of nurseries and other forms of child-care support for researchers. The lack of female role models and leaders in science fields has also made it hard for young students to envision a career in science.

Then there is the "attractiveness" factor. As robotics expert Yukiko Nakagawa points out, "Girls are considered 'uncute' if they go on a date to a science museum and if they know more about the exhibits there than boys."

But are women and science really such a bad mix?

This week's TIMEOUT, which marks the United Nations International Women's Day on March 8, profiles some of Japan's brightest stars in the fields of science, technology and medicine, ranging from geophysics and cancer treatment to biodiversity and robotics.

The six professionals interviewed, each from different fields, and each with their own marital/family situations, share episodes of their day-to-day struggles, their aspirations and their dreams.

Through their lives and words, these six women illuminate beyond any shadow of a doubt the fact that there are now almost no limits to what women can achieve — including in fields they have long been considered unsuited for.

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