

BOOK REVIEW

**Sexual Harassment in Japanese Politics. By Emma Dalton. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 239 pp. \$109.99 (cloth), ISBN: 9789811637940; \$109.99 (paper), 9789811637971.**

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Sexual harassment and violence against women in politics are widespread phenomena around the world. Feminist scholars have investigated the patriarchal structure that causes and perpetuates such phenomena and have explored better institutional responses to prevent their occurrence. In *Sexual Harassment in Japanese Politics*, Emma Dalton, an expert on Japanese politics and women, reveals the Japanese social structure that normalizes sexual harassment and silences women's voices by interviewing forty-four women local councilors. For any woman living in Japan, it is a "radical act" to speak up against sexual violence, and her book shows that the situation is not so different for women councilors. The book demonstrates the legal, cultural, and political factors that create a culture of silence and suggests the necessity of stronger anti-sexual harassment legislation based on the concept of human rights as well as a cultural shift toward equal sexuality between men and women.

Dalton uses the framework of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP), which is defined as "1) aggressive acts aimed largely or solely at women in politics; 2) because they are women, often using gendered means of attack; and 3) with the goal of deterring their participation in order to preserve traditional gender roles and undermine democratic institutions" (Krook 2017, 78). The profound consequences of VAWIP include "the silencing of women's voices from the political landscape" (26) and "sending a message to women politicians and to the broader society that women do not belong in politics" (27). As women still make up only 10 percent of the lower house of the Diet, many obstacles remain for women to run for office in Japan. Dalton's analysis of VAWIP helps us understand why Japan lags behind in gender equality. The sexual harassment that women councilors experience "reminds them of their second-rate status in the gender-hierarchy" (98). Such "symbolic violence" is forceful enough to shatter the political ambition of women and girls.

The book reveals the Japanese legal background surrounding sexual harassment and violence, which is depicted as an “institutional betrayal.” Japan is one of only three OECD countries that do not have a law that criminalizes sexual harassment. Private plaintiffs must make claims only in terms of tort law violation. The Employment Equal Opportunity Law requires employers to prevent sexual harassment in their workplaces, but the legal definition of sexual harassment is narrow, and its enforcement is not strict. As for sexual assault, “force and coercion are regarded as normal behaviors in sexual intercourse according to Japanese law. It is codified into law that if a woman does not forcefully resist her attacker, the assault is not rape” (55). Such structural misogyny shapes victim blaming, thus leading to a culture of silence that allows perpetrators impunity. The relatively slow and inactive #MeToo movement in Japan can partly be understood by such disadvantageous legal structures for the victims.

In politics, it is not uncommon for women councilors to face sexist heckling, infantilization, cyberbullying and threats, stalking, and being taken to “sex venues.” The book highlights various cases from Dalton’s rich interview data. She also demonstrates women councilors’ typical responses to sexual harassment, which include denial, self-blaming, repression, and coping strategies. Many do not recognize their experience as harassment in the first place. When they speak out, they are blamed or criticized for seeking publicity. Thus, on many occasions, women councilors adopt a coping strategy, which, in turn, results in blame for those who lack such skills.

Dalton’s analysis successfully demonstrates why and how sexual harassment has been normalized in Japanese politics. Identifying institutional and legal misogyny is the first step; placing women’s typical responses in a cultural context is another step toward conceiving a better preventive scheme.

In Japan it is often thought that male harassers do not understand what they are doing and often forget their superior status. However, Dalton dismisses such a view and argues that “romantic or sexual pursuit by a man in a superior position of a woman in an inferior position might be regarded as entirely natural and a turn-on for both involved” (102). She warns that it is not just power dynamics in the workplace but power dynamics between men and women that causes sexual harassment. So long as women’s sexuality is “a male constructed sexuality—one of subordination in the sexual hierarchy—and most women, therefore, behave accordingly” (185), Dalton suggests that an even stronger anti-harassment law is still insufficient to prevent sexual harassment. Her analysis shows that we need to connect women’s political participation and gender equality in *sexuality*. When the hypersexualization of girls is prevalent in advertisements on subways and in other public spaces, how can we expect women to be treated as respectful and equal colleagues by their male counterparts? The deep cultural transformation of sexuality is thus indispensable to achieving gender parity in decision-making.

Dalton’s book is useful not only for scholars of Japanese and Asian politics but also for anyone who is interested in violence against women in politics, as it effectively unveils complex interactions of culture, law, and politics that shape how women navigate hostile environments to survive. It will also be read as a

reference point for a considerable time to gauge what has changed and what has not. After the book was written, the Gender Parity Law was revised in 2021, requiring local assemblies and the Diet to prevent sexual harassment. One prefectural assembly has already issued an ordinance to eradicate harassment, and many assemblies provide harassment prevention seminars. The degree to which the culture of silence has changed under such new circumstances needs to be investigated in the future.

## Reference

Krook, Mona Lena. 2017. "Violence against Women in Politics." *Journal of Democracy* 28 (1): 74–88.

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