1 Introduction: Comparative perspectives on gender in Japan and Norway

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Gender equality in Japan and Norway

Both Japan and Norway are advanced economies with highly developed technological infrastructures. They ranked highly in the United Nation's 2020 'Human Development Index,' which lists Norway at the top and Japan at 19th out of 189 countries and territories (United Nations, 2020). Japan's ranking is the second highest (after Hong Kong) among East Asian countries. Most importantly for the focus of this volume, we note that both the Japanese and Norwegian governments have been making concerted and sustained efforts to promote gender equality at all societal levels.

These two nations, however, differ significantly in terms of historical, cultural, geopolitical and socio-economic backgrounds. We cannot ignore the fact that Japan scores much lower than Norway when it comes to achieving gender parity in economic and political participation as evidenced in the WEF's 'Gender Gap Report' (2021). In line with this, Norway is often portrayed as a pioneer nation in gender equality. Indeed, gender equality is also claimed to be at the core of the Norwegian cultural identity (Danielsen et al., 2013; Gullikstad et al., 2016). Japan, on the other hand, is better known for its lack of gender equality and emphasis on separate gendered spheres, as exemplified by the extensive application of gender segregation. This is somewhat surprising, given that it is a wealthy, secular country with a highly educated population. Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis, and the subsequent closure of children's schools, has widened the gender gap in Japan, accelerating the domestic demands and decreased employment opportunities for women. The pandemic has also had a negative impact on gender equality in the Norwegian context. As Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg declared in her speech about COVID-19 to the *Reykjavik Global Forum – Women Leaders 2020*, 'The pandemic's impact on women has been evident in our own country as well. We see that unpaid care work at home is not evenly distributed between men and women. Women spend more time than their partners on household chores and taking care of their children, no matter how much they work outside the home' (Thorbecke, 2020).

While Japan and Norway are ranked very differently in WEF's 'Gender Gap Report,' aspects of the Norwegian labour market complicate this polarised picture of 'good' and 'bad' or 'pioneer' and 'backward' states in regard to gender equality. For example, the Norwegian labour market is highly gender-segregated along occupational lines (Reisel *et al.*, 2019), and Norway is among the countries with the largest STEM gender gaps in education (Stoet and Geary, 2018). And, while Norway is considered to be a bastion of gender equality, it has a long history of ignoring its problems with domestic racism, including widespread social mistrust of non-Western immigrants, a bias it shares with Japan.

A few words on the definitions of gender and gender equality are in order. Certainly, feminist and queer theory, LGBTQ activism and legal innovations have complicated conventional notions of gender. However, many of the sources explored in this volume, from laws and public policies to the popular culture of TV comedies and advertisements, uphold a normative view of a cisgendered binary. Families tend to be defined as comprised of a male-identified father married to a female-identified mother, who typically raise two children. Nonetheless, our volume strives to include analysis of the experiences, legal challenges and resistances of those who do not conform to this binary.

This volume also shows how definitions of 'gender equality' have changed over time in Japan and Norway, both reinforcing and challenging historical beliefs, concerns for national identity and welfare, and individual human rights. The aim of this anthology is to understand how gender is intertwined in the dimensions of family and home, education, media, sexuality and reproduction by comparing these issues across the two countries. In doing so, we take an open approach to the notion of gender equality, noting the changes in its definition in the two contexts and exploring the ways in which gender equality has been inflected globally. This exploration aims to capture cross-cultural similarities and differences, with cultural meaning-making in focus. In this introductory chapter, we start by outlining this comparative approach before contextualising the overall study by looking at broad historical and sociodemographic dimensions around gender in both Japan and Norway. We conclude by introducing the individual chapters.

Exploring gender equality in Japan and Norway: The challenges and opportunities of cross-cultural research

This volume investigates the forms and contents of gender equality from a localised and historicised perspective, taking into account the concept's complexity and fluidity. Such an approach interrogates universalist assumptions and understandings of gender equality and assumes that gender intersects with other socially differentiating categories such as sexuality and socio-economic class (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Davis, 2008; Manalansan, 2006;

Purkayastha, 2012). Writing about the challenge that qualitative researchers face when attempting to reconcile complexity, detail and context, especially when undertaking cross-cultural research, Mangen refers to the crucial importance of ‘reflexivity,’ by which is meant ‘the ability of researchers to take stock of their actions and their role in the research process’ (Mangen, 1999, p. 110). Mangen deferring to Silverman’s recommendations (1993) comments that when undertaking cross-cultural research, where attempts at ‘wide contextualization’ are often insufficient to provide adequate understanding of the phenomena being investigated, researchers should avoid being tempted by ‘polar explanatory opposites’ and be open to multifaceted analysis (1999, 110). In examining gender equality across Japan and Norway, we too strove to be open to comparative perspectives which did not pit both countries as polar opposites in terms of gender equality. Rather, we sought to remain open to the many paradoxes of equality and the challenges common to both countries, whether it comes to areas like work–home balance, restrictions on assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) or the lived experience of trans people.

Salway et al. (2011) point to other potential challenges which cross-national comparative research brings into play including developing meaningful conceptual frameworks adapted to both contexts and avoiding generalised or essentialised categorisations within national contexts in the interest of synchronisation. They also caution against the tendency to produce analyses at the superficial level that reinforce independent country descriptions rather than generating integrated insights. Additionally, we need to remind ourselves that in some chapters due to the fact that the researchers and most of their interview participants, especially in Japan, were able to speak English, our interviewees had experiences of gender that may be distinct from the majority of those in Japan.

At the same time, Salway et al. (2011) assert that there are many ways in which cross-national comparative research can potentially strengthen the rigor and utility of research by researchers engaging in both ideological and methodological reflexivity. They also point to the potential of such research to raise awareness of the social and historical contingency of conceptual and methodological frameworks, as well as direct more attention to the need for research that has to take on board wider geopolitical contexts (Salway et al., 2011). Cross-national research also allows researchers to look at familiar data from new perspectives, questioning fixed groups and categories and engaging in analyses which take into account local, national and global impacts on specific phenomena (Salway et al., 2011). When employing such multi-layered analytical perspectives, cross-national research teams benefit from productive exchanges of ideas and experiences, which often result in conceptual and methodological innovation (Salway et al., 2011).

The starting point of this book occurred through such an exchange of ideas and experiences between two research teams. It is part of an ongoing collaborative project entitled *Norway–Japan: Bridging Research and Education*

in *Gender Equality and Diversity*, which is funded by the Research Council of Norway (2020). Most of the researchers contributing to this volume are affiliated either with the Center for Gender Studies of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU, Trondheim) or the Institute for Gender Studies (IGS) at Ochanomizu University (Tokyo). These authors have a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including gender studies, sociology, anthropology and film studies. The collaboration has proved productive for several reasons. Namely, the project has increased awareness of the socially and historically embedded nature of gender equality, enhanced our appreciation of the need to take into account both localised perspectives within Japan and Norway as well as wider sociopolitical and geopolitical considerations, and, finally, drawn our attention to critical reflectivity in terms of our methodological choices.

As a result of the exchange of ideas across research teams, most of the chapters are co-authored by both Japanese and Norwegian researchers, while others have been authored by a researcher from one national context with feedback from researchers in the other context. The researchers engaged with a variety of data, including questionnaires, interviews, governmental documents, advertisements and films. We have used different comparative methods, including generating parallel data in both countries, comparing similar types of data (such as policy documents relating to similar thematic areas) and comparing cultural products which shared themes. For example, for Chapter 7 on women in academia, Norwegian researchers interviewed academics in both Japan and Norway on their career trajectories, using the same interview guide. While the research was mostly undertaken by researchers from Norway, Japanese colleagues helped with the recruitment of informants and interpretation of results. In Chapter 10 on trans experiences in Japan and Norway, another interview-based chapter, the Norwegian interviews were conducted alone by the Norway-based author, while in Japan the two authors conducted the majority together.

In the chapters based on documentary or media analysis, language constraints necessitated that Japanese and Norwegian researchers worked on each data set separately. As Mangen (1999) notes, the linguistic dimension of cross-cultural research cannot be disengaged from the cultural context, nor from the specific way the discipline(s) involved have evolved within the national context. Chapter 12 on ARTs for example brought together two specialists in reproduction in both national contexts, who analysed policy and media documents in Japan and Norway, before identifying points of common concern and interest.

Finally, a couple of the chapters discuss cultural phenomena. In Chapter 8, two Norwegian researchers compared two historical comedies that parody modern men's working and domestic lives in Japan and Norway. A Japanese colleague assisted the authors in their study of the Japanese film by providing an English transcription of the script, details on the historical

background, feedback on their interpretations of the films and wider knowledge on the generic antecedents of the Japanese filmic genres involved. Such collegial dialogues across all the chapters were crucial to engendering the new perspectives which cross-cultural research affords.

Gender equality in Japan and Norway: A brief historical review

The year 1970 marks the beginning of Norway's second wave feminist movement, as it was the year the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights organised its first large meeting in Oslo (Danielsen et al., 2013). In the following months, many women's groups formed across Norway, increasingly attracting media attention. These groups discussed various issues, including women's housing problems and labour force participation. Although the issues were diverse, the second wave feminism increased women's solidarity across different layers of the population by encouraging women to join forces to realise gender equality. Representing a different sensibility of women, these widespread movements marked a significant departure from the first wave feminism, which had had a limited impact on Norwegian society (Blom et al., 2005).

In 1970, a new women's liberation movement called 'Woman Lib' emerged in Japan from the New Left and radical student movements of the late 1960s. This movement was in sync with radical feminist movements in the United States and elsewhere. The activists forwarded a comprehensive critique of the male-dominated nature of modern Japan, arguing for a fundamental change in the political-economic system and culture of the society. What distinguished them from previous feminist movements was their emphasis on the liberation of women's sexuality. They did not aim for equality with men, but rather focused on the fact that men should also be liberated from the oppressive aspects of a patriarchal and capitalist system. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 was ratified by the Japanese government in 1985.

The brief overview of the history of feminism and the related movements reveals striking similarities between Norway and Japan. In both nations, though gender equality and women's rights were considered important agendas since the mid-19th century, women's suffrage was not introduced until the first half of the 20th century. Additionally, in both countries, it was the second wave feminism which fervently pushed for women's rights and gender equality. These similarities are especially noteworthy given the differences in the degree of gender equality in contemporary Norwegian and Japanese societies.

Structure of the volume

This book is organised according to contributions that address various dimensions of gender-related issues in Japan and Norway. It is divided into five parts, plus an introduction and a concluding chapter. Altogether, there

are 14 chapters that focus on issues related to gender in Japan and Norway. These chapters all share the common theme of looking at gender issues from comparative perspectives.

Given that the home is perhaps where many of us initially encounter gender roles, PART I analyses how strongly notions of gender are embedded in Japanese and Norwegian domestic spheres. This is thematised in a review of the historical literature as well as in the chapters on contemporary domestic issues such as fathers' participation in childcare and housework. PART II analyses how gender is intertwined in education in both contexts by presenting a historical overview of the relationship between gender and education, home economics education, feminist educators' attitudes towards pedagogy and academic career trajectories of women. PART III covers gender as it is portrayed in films and advertisements. Specifically, the chapters engage with the framing of masculinities in Viking and Samurai comedy films, and in television advertisements' presentations of the balance between a newly emerging kind of work and home life during the COVID-19 in Norway and Japan. PART IV presents issues related to sexuality, fertility and assisted reproduction. In particular, it analyses the modes of political positioning of trans people, the meanings of fertility and family planning and the development of regulations concerning assisted reproduction technologies in Japan and Norway. In PART V, we present a dialogue between two senior feminist scholars in Japan and Norway, reflecting on their involvement with feminism from their coming of age to their arrival into academic posts, and to holding positions of academic leadership within gender studies.

This volume itself may be only a small step toward our goal of studying various dimensions of gender-related issues in Japan and Norway. Nonetheless, it is a significant departure from previous studies that examined gendered practices in everyday life in only one societal context or regional framework.

Family and home

In the chapter 'Gender and Home in Japan and Norway: Considering the Past and Contemplating the Future' (Ch. 2), Guro Korsnes Kristensen, Priscilla Ringrose and Masako Ishii-Kuntz address the gendered meanings typically ascribed to the home in the two national contexts. To explore this question, they conducted a review of a wide range of contemporary research publications and media in Japan and Norway. They also describe the history, changes/transitions and present situations concerning the home to show that gender and home are closely intertwined in both countries. In particular, they draw attention to the differing amounts of time fathers and mothers devote to housework and childcare, suggesting ways in which social campaigns and cultural mores have promoted equal participation as an ideal.

Masako Ishii-Kuntz's 'Caring Masculinity: Fathers' Childcare in Japan and Norway' (Ch. 3) focuses on gender equality in the home as demonstrated by fathers' involvement in childcare and housework. Analysing various publicly available nationwide data on men and women's participation in domestic chores in both countries as well as web survey data collected in 2020, the author finds that Norwegian men are more likely to be involved in childcare compared to their Japanese counterparts. In both countries, however, it is also shown that mothers are likely to be the main provider of childcare. Reasons for these persistent gendered practices at home are discussed by taking into account similarities and differences with respect to cultural and sociodemographic characteristics in the two countries.

Education

Ryoko Kodama, in 'Education and Gender in Japan and Norway from Historical Perspective' (Ch. 4), describes historical research trends in gender and education in Japan and Norway. In Japan, although gender as analytical concept shaped research generally in the 1980s, its introduction to educational research specifically was delayed because of a myth that gender equality had already been realised in post-war Japanese education. The author analyses statistical data collected by the governments on education in the two countries to show the gender gap in university enrolment and major fields, teacher ratios in preschools to universities and their salaries. In 'Creating More Equal Partnerships: Home Economics Education and Gender Equality in Japan and Norway' (Ch. 5), Jennifer Branlat and Junko Sano present the history of Home Economics education in Japan and Norway. Based on its history as a segregated subject for girls and young women, they ask how the subject area in its current form contributes to reducing inequalities within the home and the role it has to play in promoting a gender-equal society in the two countries. This chapter is based on qualitative interviews with teacher practitioners and university-level faculty in teacher training, as well as on analyses of teaching plans and curricular texts in both Japan and Norway.

Jennifer Branlat's contribution, 'Teaching with Feminist Values: A Dialogical Narrative Analysis of Gender Studies Educator Narratives' (Ch. 6), examines gender studies education in Japan and Norway, a topic on which little research exists in either country. To compare feminist educators' attitudes towards pedagogy, Branlat conducted in-depth interviews with professors in gender studies. She covered issues such as teachers' and students' motivation for working or learning in the gender studies field, uniqueness of and the challenges faced by the field, the relations of gender studies to broader society and the kinds of pedagogy needed for today's society against the gender backlash. Branlat also questions whether a theoretical framework grounded in feminist pedagogy can be used transnationally to tackle these questions. In 'Making it in Academia: A Study of

Career Narratives of Men and Women Professors in Norway and Japan' (Ch. 7), Vivian Anette Lagesen, Guro Korsnes Kristensen, Siri Øyslebø Sørensen and Derek Matsuda examine the career narratives that emerged in their in-depth interviews with men and women professors in Norway and Japan to shed the light on the gendered dimensions of academia in the two countries.

Media

In 'Masculinity in Contemporary Viking and Samurai Comedies: "It's Not Really Me, That Fear-Based Leadership Style Stuff"' (Ch. 8), Jennifer Branlat and Priscilla Ringrose analyse two recent popular productions, the sitcom series *Vikings/Vikingane* (created by Jon Iver Helgaker and Jonas Torgersen, 2016) and the film *Samurai Shifters/Hikkoshi Daimyo* (directed by Isshin Inudô, written by Akihiro Dobashi, 2019) to illuminate crises of masculinity in Norwegian and Japanese popular culture. Both comedies serve to defamiliarise contemporary societal pressures on men by staging them in a past dominated by militaristic, hegemonic hierarchies. But whereas both comedies are concerned with the unattainable imperatives of modern 'caring,' 'sensitive' manhood, the Norwegian series focuses on its 'excesses' while the Japanese comedy more light-heartedly affirms its egalitarian values.

With Chihiro Wada and Roger A. Søraa's contribution, 'Work-Life Balance and Equality Observed through Advertising during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan and Norway' (Ch. 9), we move into one of the most recent and urgent situations surrounding gender equality, namely the gendered (re)distribution of domestic labour amidst the rise of home office. They investigate how advertisements geared to national audiences represent Japanese and Norwegian households' ways of dealing with the balance between a new kind of work and home life. Specifically, they examine how advertisements envision balancing working at home during the pandemic while accomplishing necessary housework and caregiving. The authors focus on the presentation of certain domestic tasks as gendered, analysing how gender intersects narratives about the balance between work and home in everyday life.

Sexuality and reproduction

Exploring gender equality from a different perspective, France Rose Hartline and Kei Ishimaru's chapter, 'The Struggle to Belong: Trans and Gender-Diverse Experiences in Japan and Norway' (Ch. 10) compares the collected interview narratives of trans-identifying people from Norway and Japan. They analyse the individuals' modes of political positioning and experiential sense-making amidst the changing political climate of their respective countries. By comparing the two contexts for how trans people view

institutional conditions for security and reshape their experiences in restitutive ways, the authors show how the globalising trans movement's ideologies are translating into practice in Norway and Japan.

In 'A Matter of Gender (In)Equality? Public Discourses on Declining Fertility Rates in Japan and Norway' (Ch. 11), Guro Korsnes Kristensen and Yukari Semba explore the meanings that are ascribed to fertility and family planning when these issues are discussed publicly in Japan and Norway, asking whether and how gender and nation are made relevant to these debates. This chapter is theoretically situated within the field of biopolitics and population control, and the data material consists of newspapers and other news media items in both Japan and Norway published between 2018 and 2021. The authors identify three issues inciting public fears concerning fertility and family planning in Norway – the low fertility rate among ethnic Norwegians, high fertility among the immigrants and the environmental problems associated with global population growth. They also discuss how the declining birth rate in Japan is attributed to delayed marriage by women and the concomitant rise in the maternal age at childbirth.

Merete Lie and Yukari Semba, in 'Assisted Reproduction with Donated Eggs and Sperm: A Comparison of Regulations on Assisted Reproduction in Norway and Japan' (Ch. 12), examine the development of Norwegian and Japanese regulations concerning assisted reproduction with donated gamete (eggs and sperm) within a feminist theoretical framework. Debates about reproduction imply explicit and implicit discussions of gender difference, sexuality, heteronormativity and the question of what constitutes a family – a field with marked differences but also similarities in the two countries. In both Japan and Norway, a clear divide has existed between the legality of sperm donation and the prohibition on egg donation. A radical change took place when both countries legalised egg donation from 2020/2021. Analysing data consisting of official government documents, announcements and reports from academic and professional groups, and information from newspapers and other news media on political debates, the authors explore the ways in which cultural notions of gender, gender difference and gender equality in the two countries have influenced the debates and resulted in the recent amendments of legal regulations and professional guidelines.

Dialogue

'Becoming a Feminist Academic in Japan and Norway: A Dialogue with Professors Masako Ishii-Kuntz and Agnes Bolsø' (Ch. 13), facilitated by feminist scholar Jennifer Branlat, breaks with the academic format of the previous chapters and offers a discussion between two senior academics regarding their personal views on feminism, academia and gender equality in Japan and Norway. In this dialogue, Agnes Bolsø and Masako Ishii-Kuntz reflect on their long academic careers, engaging in a thought-

provoking conversation on what feminism has meant to them and how it has impacted their different life stages. Coming of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s in different national contexts, each was influenced by the second wave feminism. Taking up issues such as sexuality, class, nation and power relations, they describe how feminism has represented a transforming energy along their journeys.

Conclusion

In 'Comparative Perspectives on Gender Equality in Japan and Norway: Reflections and Lesson Learnt' (Ch. 14), the editors reflect on findings, convergences and divergences between the two national cultures which the book has brought to light, discuss theoretical and empirical lessons learned and make practical policy recommendations. Furthermore, they consider lessons learned about cross-national and interdisciplinary research in this highly politicised field.

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