Conclusion: Comparative perspectives on gender equality in Japan and Norway: Reflections and lesson learnt

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Exploring gender equality

The aim of this anthology was to understand how gender is intertwined in dimensions of family and home, education, media, technology, sexuality and reproduction in Japan and Norway by comparing these issues within and across the two national contexts. In doing so, we have approached the notion of gender equality from an open perspective, exploring the different forms and contents it embodies, over time and with reference to the wider global context. This chapter will reflect on the convergences and divergences we have found in all the dimensions explored, focusing especially on social and cultural conceptions of gender equality in Japan and Norway, as they were brought to light in this anthology. We will also discuss the empirical, methodological and theoretical lessons learned from the different explorations. We conclude with wider reflections relating to welfare and policy in both countries.

Reflections: Chapters in review

While the statistical comparisons outlined in the introduction suggest a stark difference in the status of gender equality in both countries, we suggest that our volume – which adopts qualitative approaches, supplemented by some quantitative studies – provides a much more complex and nuanced picture. The explorations of gender equality undertaken in this book break down any potentially reductive polarisations of the status of gender equality between Japan and Norway. We can illustrate this complexity with reference to several chapters which reveal a complex interplay of convergences and divergences across the two cultures. The chapter on trans and gender-diverse experiences in Japan and Norway, for example, showed that despite ostensible difference in trans rights, the maintenance of cisnormative institutional and cultural values is rife in both contexts. Informants reported a pervasive sense of non-belonging – nationally, socially and, for most, physically.

In other chapters, we find convergences along several dimensions, alongside differences, which are often differences of *degree*. This was the case in chapters dealing with the dimension of work-life balance, as explored in the chapter on academia, which looked at the career trajectories of women and men professors in Japan and Norway. Here we find that in both contexts, male and female academics had to endure precarious job situations and found their domestic work and care situation challenging. However, domestic and care chores were much more challenging for women in both contexts, especially for Japanese women. Significantly, Japanese women also reported gender discrimination in academia, which was not the case reported by their Norwegian counterparts.

Other chapters also illustrate the complex interplay of convergences and divergences, such as in the area of reproductive rights. The chapter on Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) revealed strikingly similar patterns of legislation in both national contexts but a complex of similar and different motivations underlying them. This chapter explored the historical development of ARTs in Japan and Norway. In both Japan and Norway, a similar clear divide existed between the legality of sperm donation and the prohibition on egg donation. However, a radical change took place when both countries legalised egg donation within a similar timeframe – 2020 (Japan) and 2021 (Norway). The arguments in favour of such a change in both countries were simultaneously similar and different. In Japan, these included arguments relating to the low birth rate but which never deferred to the issue of gender equality or human rights. In Norway, the argument that more children were needed was also found in Parliamentary debates, but much more emphasis was placed on women's individual rights for access to treatments that are available worldwide.

All the chapters referred to in the anthology were the product of a complex process of cooperation between researchers in Japan and Norway, as described in our introduction. As noted there, cross-national research presents both pitfalls and many potential benefits. In terms of pitfalls, as Mangen (1999) asserted, researchers may face linguistic and cultural challenges in engaging with data from the other national context. This was the case in the chapter about masculinity in the Samurai film and Viking series. Both authors were from the Norwegian university, and despite being familiar with masculinity studies in Japan, they still had to rely heavily on Japanese colleagues for understanding the cultural nuances of the Japanese film script and for their invaluable knowledge of the wider generic phenomena of Samurai films in Japanese culture.

Challenges were also experienced when researchers from one context used methodological or theoretical approaches which their research partners were not so familiar with, or which were not so commonly used within their nationally inflected disciplinary field. However, our approach was generally to embrace these divergences and to accept that cross-cultural

research must be able to leave room for differences, as well as to acknowledge the added value these differences confer. This is the case in the fatherhood chapter, which triangulated qualitative and quantitative methods – an approach which is less common in Norwegian gender studies, but which brought added depth and breadth to the discussion of fatherhood. This chapter achieved this added value by constructing and applying a multi-sample structural equation analysis developed by the Japanese researcher to both Japanese and Norwegian contexts. The chapter looked at how intersectional dimensions such as employment status, education and age predict men's gender ideology and influence men's childcare involvement. The results meant that new knowledge about Norwegian fathers was generated thanks to the statistical model proposed by the Japanese researcher. The chapter concluded that Japanese men who have younger children and whose spouse's income is higher are more likely to be involved in childcare, whereas, for Norwegian fathers, their childcare involvement was not influenced by these sociodemographic factors.

In line with this, and as Salway et al. (2011) noted, there are many ways in which cross-national comparative research provides added value. They also point out that such research can strengthen both the rigor and utility of research since such work tends to prompt researchers to engage in both ideological and methodological reflexivity. Such ideological reflexivity will be discussed at the end of this conclusion when we take a step back and look at the ideological differences underlying Japanese and Norwegian state policies as related to gender equality. However, more relevant to our individual chapters is the contention that cross-cultural research raises awareness of the need to take on board both the sociopolitical contingencies of the local histories as well as wider social and political contexts and understandings (Salway et al., 2011). This is the case in the chapter on the Japanese and Norwegian home, which focused on cultural understandings of the home. On the one hand, this chapter looked at the particularities of both national contexts from the 19th century onwards, engaging with such national phenomena as the housewife schools which were set up in Norway from the 19th century, and the contents of the Meiji Civil Code (1889) which reinforced paternal authority within the family. On the other hand, the comparative dimension also compelled the authors to consider the broader cultural understanding of the home in much wider Western and Eastern historical perspectives, relating to global phenomena such as modernity, industrialism and capitalism.

State ideologies

Finally, we return to broad ideological strokes referred to above, looking at state ideology in both contexts in the light of some of our overall findings. While this volume interpellates a range of convergences in forms and/or

contents of gender equality across both contexts, it also points to some fundamental differences between the two contexts that derive from its governmental systems. While the Norwegian and the Japanese governments both have stated aims to improve gender equality, the fact that Norway has an advanced welfare state (which has been associated with the concept of state feminism) means that the value of gender equality has for decades been systematically applied to a range of policy areas, especially family policy. Within the framework of the welfare state in Norway, family policy is the most important way to become gender equal. In Japan, we also find a focus on gender equality in government policy but the level of importance placed on it is not high relative to Norway. In recent years, the Japanese government has been implementing many policies with the aim of achieving better gender equality in a range of areas, such as welfare provision for elder care and single parents. However, in the following we look at why the Japanese policies relating to dimensions of equality may not have been improving the lives of its citizens to the same extent as gender equality and other equality policies have done in Norway.

There are several reasons we can identify that could explain why gender equality policies have not had an optimal impact on the daily life of Japanese citizens. One reason for this is that while Japan can to a certain extent be considered to be a welfare state, its welfare system is not as extensive or far-reaching as its Norwegian equivalent. Secondly, gender equality policies in Japan have not been as radical as those in Norway. While for example the Japanese government has encouraged more women to join the labour market by creating policies to promote women's active participation in society, in Norway more radical approaches have been favoured, such as a quota system to encourage more women to be part of corporate boards. A third reason that might explain why gender equality policies in Japan may not be so effective in practice is that Japanese citizens may not feel entitled to welfare policies as much as Norwegian citizens do. This lack of a sense of entitlement relative to Norway may partly be explained in relation to the Norwegian tax system. Norwegians pay high taxes, which in turn makes them feel that they are owed welfare benefits, which is not the case in Japan. An additional factor, as discussed in the home chapter, is that Japanese and Norwegian citizens have very different relationship to the private spheres. Japanese citizens are very protective of their private spheres and reluctant to reveal any private issues which might suggest that they need welfare. This is especially the case when it comes to sensitive issues such as domestic violence, but also when it comes to other areas such as poverty, meaning that some individuals may find it difficult to admit their need for welfare benefits. The degree of entitlement is different: In Norway welfare is associated with rights, while in Japan welfare is inflected with failure and shame.

The idea of gender equality

Perhaps the most glaring difference that emerged from this volume is the different relationship Norwegians and Japanese people have to the very idea of gender equality. In Norway, gender equality does not need to be defended or reflected on. It is part of the fabric of social and political society. In Japan, gender equality is more of an issue, rather than something that is taken for granted. This is illustrated, albeit on a light-hearted level, in Chapter 8. In this chapter, gender equality is presented as an ideal in the Samurai film, whereas in the Viking series it is presented as an idea that is so pervasive and 'extreme' that it has become laughable.

Finally, turning back to the global statistics that opened our volume, we note that the Japanese government's relation to both understandings and policies of gender equality is highly influenced by Japan's relatively low rankings in global surveys relating to gender equality. These rankings have made a difference in how politicians perceive gender equality and in the belief that they, put simply, 'need to do something about it.' The impetus for change in gender equality is thus impacted by Japan's perception that it needs to improve its global image. Surveys such as the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report (2021), in which Japan was ranked 120th (while Norway was ranked second), means that the government is sensitive about global data. The Japanese government has made moves to revise policies accordingly, but in doing so they are responding to outside pressures rather than being concerned about making gender equality happen for its own sake. In Japan, therefore, the government to some extent pays lip service to gender equality. And while the Norwegian government may also respond to external pressures, it actively keeps up its global image as a model of gender equality, even going so far as to invest funds into exporting gender equality to other parts of the world. So, in both Japan and Norway, gender equality is a matter not only of policy and practice, but also of perception, image and, by default, a question of self-interest.

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