

Awareness and Perceptions of Feminist Concepts by U.S. and Japanese Female College Students

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Abstract

Over many generations American women have been empowered by feminist movements and have pushed for gender equality and freedom from oppression. While in the United States the topic of feminism is prevalently and openly discussed, often we overlook the unique perspectives of the feminist movements in other countries. We administered a survey to American and Japanese Female University students in order to answer the following questions: What do female university students perceive about feminism? What are the ongoing equity issues for women in their society that need to be addressed? We found that Japanese female college students felt feminism was viewed positively but felt that it did not apply to their daily life. Almost completely opposite, the Americans thought that being feminist was seen negatively, but they felt it important to their current selves. Japanese and American students agree that there is inequality between men and women. Additionally, female students in both countries are very concerned about equality in the workplace and maternity leave while only American students recognize issues concerning reproductive rights. American students frequently discuss equality issues in their day to day, however, Japanese students discuss it only a few times a year.

Introduction

Feminism is a popular topic in the United States. Women in the United States and around the world have many equality problems. Through our education here in the U.S. we know that American expectations for how to solve gender inequality are not universal and also depend on the culture of the society the inequality exists in. Women of other cultures also think on feminism, gender equality, and what their solutions are with their own perspectives.

1. Significance of the Study

It was the “Girl Power” age during our childhood and we were exposed to feminist concepts such as that women could do and be anything they choose. During our study abroad trip

new questions about feminist ideas outside of the United States were raised. We wondered how Japanese women perceive feminist concepts since we felt that they may have not been exposed to them in the same manner as we had. We want to understand what female university students perceive as feminism and if there are still ongoing equity issues for women in society that need to be addressed.

2. Research Questions

1. What do female university students perceive about feminism?
2. What are the ongoing equity issues for women in their society that need to be addressed?

3. Research Background

3.1. Defining “Feminism”

Feminism maintains three General Ideologies: the need to recognize and disseminate the historical exploitation and oppression of women, the goal of improving women’s social standing while working toward equality for all genders, and the active criticism of traditional intellectual pursuits and gender ideologies (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). Studies show that feminism is related with positive traits such as desirable, sexy, confidence, independent etc, and negative terms such as undesirable, plainness, stubbornness, angry etc. Individuals are likely to change their identification as Feminist/Non-Feminist depending on their exposure to positive or negative characteristics about Feminists (Redford, Howell, Meijs & Ratliff, 2016). A study summarizing the views of the feminist and those who are not feminist found that people who identify as feminists replied that feminists are: women, they recognize that they support gender equality and are a positive person. On the other hand, people who identify as non-feminists recognize that feminists will support female superiority, dislike men, and they will discriminate based on gender. However, both groups agree in promoting gender equality in society and rejecting traditional gender roles (Houvouras & Carter, 2008).

3.2. Voting Rights

Women in the United States earned the right to stand for election in 1788 and the right to vote in 1920, in comparison Japanese women earned the right to stand for election and the right to vote at the same time in 1946. Japan was very behind the U.S. in terms of women's right to vote and ability to stand for election in government positions. The U.S. is ahead of Japan in terms of representation. However, out of the entire list of 193 countries, the U.S. and Japan are closer together than at first glance. (See Figure 1)(Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

Figure 1: Percentage of parliamentary seats in a single or lower chamber held by women

3.3. Government Representation

Women's participation in government positions in Japan and the United States is consistent in that women participate in politics in both countries. Overall women in politics have a positive effect on society (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). However there are differences, in the United States there is a perception that female politicians stimulate the political involvement of female citizens and contribute to increase and inspire women's political knowledge while in Japan they are seen morally superior to men and as agents of change focusing on social issues. Despite these positive effects, in Japan women politicians are still seen as lacking political ability (Lee, J. & Lee, K., 2016).

3.4. Workplace Equality

In 1963 the United States passed the Equal Pay Act and Title VII in 1964 giving equal pay and workplace equality for women (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018). Problems such as discrimination of height and weight, discrimination against working mothers, and not giving overtime work, etc were eliminated by the American Equal Pay Act and workplace equality from Title VII. Additionally the employment rate of women also increased (Bartlett, 1994; Economist, 2016; Vogel, 1990). But in Japan the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was passed in 1986 which gave women more equality but no guarantee of equal pay. In 2016 the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace was passed in Japan to address issues of women not receiving pay raises, promotions and also low hire rates. The following graph shows how the employment rate of women in Japan and the US improves with the passage of these laws. It should be noted that the women's employment rate fell sharply in 1973 in Japan due to the bubble burst.. The United States is shown in the blue line, it falls sharply 2000 to 2010 because of the economic recession. However, as can be seen from this graph, it is clear that Japan has far lower female employment rates than the United States (See Figure 2) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

Figure 2: Employment to population ratio, ages 15-24, female (%) (nat'l estimate)

3.5 Reproductive Rights

Contraceptive pills were approved in the United States in 1960 and Japan in 1999. Since the approval of this contraceptive pill, in the United States women became able to work and go to school without worrying about when to have children, the timing of marriage and timing of educational opportunities. The employment rate of women also improved in the years following the approval of the birth control pill in the U.S..(Bailey, 2006)。 In Japan, there was no change in employment rate or fertility rate despite the birth control pills approval. Japanese women received the birth control pill positively however they remained vigilant about possible bad side effects of the pill, thus lowering their willingness to try it. (Kihara,2001; Negishi, 1999).

4. The Study

4.1.Demographics

In this study, we surveyed 60 university students. This includes 30 Japanese females and 30 American female students.

4.2. Research Method

We created a questionnaire form in Japanese and English and gathered data online with google forms.

4.3. Respondents Background

In response to the question of whether participants think they are a feminist or not, American female college students found that they identified themselves as feminists about 4 times more than female college students in Japan (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

In response to the question of whom can be a feminist and who can promote feminism, female college students from both countries have agreed that anyone can become a feminist or promote feminism (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Who can be a feminist or promote feminism?

5. Research Findings

5.1. Research Question 1 :What do female university students perceive about feminism?

The majority of female college students in Japan and the U.S.A. agree that Feminism promotes positive self-esteem for women. The two groups essentially have an opposite response. (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: To what extent do you agree that feminism promotes positive self-esteem for women?

In Japan the perception of being a feminist is perceived by almost half of the surveyed students as neutral in comparison to the USA where more than half of the students see it as negative. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: How do you feel being a feminist is perceived?

When asked to describe a feminist in three words, American student's top 5 words were strong, independent, equality, rebellious, and outspoken. For Japanese students their responses were gender equality, women's rights, "I don't know", equality, and strong. So overall Japanese students believe that feminism is about gender equality and the U.S.A. is mostly believe with the empowerment of the individual woman as strong or independent (See Figure 7).

Figure 7: What characteristics do you think describe a feminist?

A majority of American female students agree that feminism is part of their personal life while majority of Japanese students do not agree. However, Japanese and American female students agree that feminism helps define who they are and is important to women's position in society. (See Figure 8).

Figure 8: For the following statements please check your extent of agreement

We discovered that Japanese female students answers are split in half when asked how often they think about major advancements for women's rights, while a majority of American students think often about the major advancements. (See Figure 9).

Figure 9: How often do you think about major advancements for women's rights?

When asked what should be the priority for women after university, 66% of the Japanese students answered career followed by 23 % under individual interests. American female students are split between career and Individual interests. Additionally, Japanese students make a small mention of prioritizing a relationship or marriage which does not appear from the American respondents. (See Figure 10).

Figure 10: Which of the following do you think should be the first priority for a woman post graduation from university?

Furthermore, Japanese students believe that feminist movements have been ineffective (40%) or neutral (56%) compared to 73% of American female students feel that feminist movements have been effective. (See Figure 11).

Figure 11: How effective have feminist movements been in your country?

Half of American students were more likely to actively participate in various local organizations, whereas a majority of Japanese students preferred other avenues of support. To elaborate, Japanese students seem to appreciate staying in a local area when participating in feminist causes and firmly believe that there are other ways to support feminism other than getting politically involved. (See Figure 12).

Figure 12: How do you prefer to participate in Feminism?

5.2. Research Question 1 Summary

In conclusion, Female college students in the U.S.A. are significantly more likely to identify as a Feminist. Japanese college students feel being a feminist is perceived as neutral while American college students were more likely to perceive being feminist as a negative trait. In addition, Japanese students feel that feminist movements in their country have had little to no effect compared to the U.S.A., where a majority of students feel that feminist movements have been effective.

5.3. Research Question 2: What are the ongoing equity issues for women in their society that need to be addressed?

The majority of both groups agree that there is a difference in equality between Men and women. Additionally, American students seemed to have not only a stronger response but also we see answers from each answer selection. In comparison Japanese students move from neutral up to strongly agree with no appearance of disagreement. (See Figure 13).

Figure 13: Do you think there is a difference in equality between Men and Women?

When asked about their awareness of advancements in feminist history, such as voting rights, American students were overall very aware about previous advancements in feminist history while Japanese students were only somewhat aware to not aware at all. (See Figure 14).

Figure 14: To what degree were you aware of the following major advancements in feminist history

Next we asked how relevant the same issues were in their country in 2018, Japanese students had a more mixed response to the relevance of feminist issues while American students feel many of the topics are still relevant with the exception of voting rights. Also, both countries respondents expressed lowered relevance of women's voting rights in present day. (See Figure 15).

Figure 15: Which of these issues remain relevant to women in your country in 2018

We found that Japanese students discuss feminist issues only a few times a year while American students discuss much more often, with 53% weekly and 30% daily. (See Figure 16).

Figure 16: On average how often do you discuss feminist issues?

Last we gave an optional section for survey takers to input their thoughts about what other feminist or equality issues they are interested in. American students shared that they feel topics such as Intersectionality, LGBTQ+ rights, and finding solutions for sexual violence are important as the next steps to equality. In comparison, Japanese students shared in depth specifically about gender equality and not leaving men out of the progress towards women's equality.

5.4. Research Question 2 Summary

To review, female college students in Japan and in the U.S. answered that they still thought that there was inequality among men and women. Japanese students were less aware of previous advancements in equality and believed them to be less relevant to present day. Americans were very informed of previous advancements in equality and believed these topics remain very relevant. Also, American college students were very informed about gender equality, and still thought that various problems remain in present day. In addition, Japanese students shared that opportunities to talk about women's rights are very few compared to American students. American students are concerned about specific topics such as LGBTQ+ rights while Japanese students only mentioned wanting to support overall gender equality and inclusivity of men. Among the short answers, some Japanese students emphasized the empowerment of men and women equally.

6. Conclusion

Japanese student's are mainly focused on equality between men and women, which may have been a contributing factor for why they feel that feminist movements have been less effective in Japan than in America. Feminism issues have evolved into including all gender issues in the United States and have more involvement with LGBTQ+ issues and Race, but Japan feels that it is still only between men and women. We were surprised that Japanese women didn't have the same experience with feminism, however we grew up in California where gender equality is prevalent and openly discussed. To solve this we feel that beginning gender equality education for children can help further the awareness of gender equality in Japan.

7. Limitation of the Study and Future Study

Finally, with respect to the limitations of the survey, the results can't be generalized because of a our small number of respondents. Also, many of our American respondents came from the same areas in California. We focused on cisgendered women only in this survey, so in the future we would like to be more inclusive of all identities. In addition, we want to investigate

gender equality rights that we did not include in this capstone such as sexual violence issues, racial discrimination, sexuality, and the rights of LGBTQ+.

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