

## Women conspicuously missing from Japan's elections

By Julian Ryall

Gender stereotyping, lack of financial and party support, an unfavorable electoral system and discrimination in the male-dominated society are blamed for the lack of women in Japanese politics. Julian Ryall reports.



As Japan prepares to go to the polls on Sunday, July 10, for elections to the Upper House of parliament, women are conspicuous by their absence.

Few of the candidates handing out fliers close to stations are female, while shouting slogans from the top of election "battle buses" seems to be the preserve of middle-aged men in grey suits. Even on the poster boards erected in public spaces, women are vastly outnumbered by the ingratiating grins of male candidates.

Of the 389 candidates running for the House of Councilors on Sunday, just 96 are women. That is a decrease of nine from the last election to the Upper House three years ago.

At present, just 38 of the 242 seats in the chamber are occupied by women, a mere 15.7 percent. Those figures are even worse in the Lower House, where 45 of the 475 seats are held by women, just 9.5 percent.

Bottom of the G-20 members

Japan ranks 155 of the 193 member countries for female representation in its lower house, according to a study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, a body that facilitates worldwide parliamentary dialogue. Japan is also at the very bottom of the Group of 20 nations.

"There are a number of very clear reasons why women are so dramatically underrepresented in politics in Japan," says Emiko Hirano, head of the international section of the New Japan Women's Association, an organization dedicated to political and social reform in the East Asian nation.



Japanese women face discrimination both in politics as well as in the business world, say rights activists

"One of the basic problems is gender stereotyping, while the electoral system that we have makes running in an election very difficult for a woman," she pointed out.

To run in a national campaign requires a deposit of ¥3 million (26,957 euros, \$29,870) - which is not refunded if a candidate fails to attract a minimum number of votes.

"That's an extremely high hurdle because women are generally not independently wealthy and it's particularly difficult for women who run as an independent and do not have the support or financial backing of a party behind them," Hirano added.

Japan's single-seat constituencies, combined with a system of proportional representation, also conspire to hinder women's access to the corridors of power, Hirano believes. Introduced purportedly to give voters a clear choice between two parties, the system has in reality served to reinforce the nation's two largest parties and marginalized all other political movements.

### Entrenched discrimination

Chie Matsumoto, a labor union activist, firmly believes that entrenched gender discrimination is a fundamental problem in Japan.

"It's the same in politics as it is in the business world here, with the glass ceiling limiting women's careers," she told DW.

"Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that he intended to let women 'shine' in Japanese society, but he has done nothing that is in conflict with the very conservative attitudes

of his party," she said. "One policy they announced was three years of maternity leave for new mothers; that's not advancement because the traditional belief is that mothers should stay with children for the first three years of their lives."

Indicative of the government's attitudes toward women, Matsumoto says, was the poorly thought-out campaign to promote equality and women's rights. The poster accompanying the campaign showed a line of politicians who would be in the vanguard of improving women's lives.

Every one of them was a man.

"It should have been obvious but it's clear that they just don't understand the issues that are important to women," said Matsumoto.

And it's not as if women have failed to make the grade as politicians in other nations, she stressed.

Margaret Thatcher became British prime minister as far back as 1979 and Hillary Clinton may win the race for the White House later this year.

And even in East Asia, where male-dominated societies are perhaps considered the norm, Matsumoto pointed out, Park Geun-hye became president of South Korea and Taiwan last year elected Tsai Ing-wen as president.

Japan's failure to elect a representative number of women to its national parliament - a problem that is replicated at the city and regional levels across the country - means that issues that are of importance to women are frequently ignored.

Equal pay is still not guaranteed in Japan, sexual harassment in Japanese companies continues to be overlooked, there are shortages of places at daycare centers for working mothers and financial support for raising children is limited.

#### **Voices not reflected**

"Women's voices are not reflected in politics, but there are other ways to achieve that, such as changing the mindset of our male politicians and the way that the government operates," said Hirano.

"It is true that we need more women, but if we can change gender perspectives and encourage gender equality, then that will be effective as well," she said.

But Matsumoto says she is not optimistic.

"If Japan was going to have a gender revolution, it would have happened already," she said. "It has happened in Taiwan and South Korea, but nothing has changed here. It's 2016 already and the idea of a female Japanese prime minister is simply unimaginable," she said. "That's pathetic."