

## Japan's Lagging Gender Equality

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## **Japan makes progress, but continues to drag its feet on gender equality in STEM fields**

**Miwako K. Homma<sup>1</sup>, Reiko Motohashi<sup>2</sup> and Hisako Ohtsubo<sup>3\*†</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biomolecular Science, Institute of Biomedical Sciences, Fukushima Medical University School of Medicine, 1 Hikariga-oka, Fukushima, Fukushima 960-1295 Japan, TEL: +81-24-547-1660, E-mail: mkhomma@fmu.ac.jp.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Agriculture, Shizuoka University, 836 Ohoya Suruga-ku, Shizuoka, Shizuoka 422-8529, Japan, TEL: +81-54-238-4831, E-mail: armotoh@ipc.shizuoka.ac.jp.

<sup>3</sup>Advanced Research Institute for the Sciences and Humanities (ARISH)

Female Scientists Support Office, Nihon University

12-5, Goban-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan 102-8251, TEL & FAX : **+81-03-5275-9616**

E-mail: [ohtsubo.hisako@nihon-u.ac.jp](mailto:ohtsubo.hisako@nihon-u.ac.jp)

† Current Address: Research Institute of Pharmacy, School of Pharmacy, Nihon University, 7-7-1 Narashinodai, Funabashi, Chiba 274-8555, Japan, TEL: +81-3-3812-3622, +81-47-465-5340,

E-mail: ohtsubo.hisako@nihon-u.ac.jp

\* Correspondence to: Hisako Ohtsubo, **E-mail: ohtsubo.hisako@nihon-u.ac.jp**

Japan is well qualified as a country that promotes scientific advancement, such as iPS cells developed by Dr. Shinya Yamanaka, [a Nobel laureate in 2012](#). Nevertheless, it lags behind other developed nations in areas such as gender equality. The percentage of female scientists\* is at 13.8%, the lowest among developed countries (1). Why is Japan so slow in maximizing the potential of female scientists in STEM? To answer this question, Consortium, called EPMEWSE\*\* have conducted a comprehensive survey since 2003, and have published the results every five years. (2, 3)

Results show there are simply too few women in positions of authority to provide well-qualified female scientists to participate in career-enhancing activities. Secondly, there is unconscious bias on the part of male scientists evaluating their female colleagues. Finally, female scientists often avoid competition and underestimate their ability, leading to passivity when seeking leadership roles.

Since 2011, the Japanese government is attempting to improve the situation, through a five-year program\*\*\* targeted at accelerating the numbers of female scientists and their promotion rate at 12 research universities. A mid-term evaluation of the program's impact showed a significant increase in female faculty, particularly in positions of greater responsibility in several universities (4, 5). The program gives university leaders a clear path to unlocking the potential of female scientists, and helps pave the way with affirmative action, reserving positions for women.

Will these government measures have a long-term effect on the ratio and roles of women in STEM fields? Leadership remains an issue; and changing the academic climate in Japan will also require proper enforcement of regulations by deans and department leaders.

EPMEWSE will publish the results of its 3<sup>rd</sup> survey on gender equality this year, which will evaluate how the situation and consciousness have been improved by the support of government and institutions.

## References and notes:

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\* In this letter, “Scientists” refer to professionals trained in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

\*\* EPMEWSE was established in 2002 to promote gender equality in science and engineering, consisting of 67 professional STEM societies in Japan.

\*\*\*This program is called “Supporting Positive Activities for Female Researchers” initiated in 2009 by MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan) under “the 3rd Science and Technology Basic Plan (FY2006-FY2010)”.