

# Awareness and Perceptions of Gender Issues and 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**

In America, feminism is still a current and widely discussed issue. However in Japan, that is not the case. This study asks female college students about their perceptions and awareness of feminism, while also discussing what feminism is and has done in both countries. This capstone follows four issues that are a part of feminism, Voting Rights, Government Representation, Workplace Equality, and Reproductive Rights, and based on the survey results received, conclusions were made about how they have impacted the two countries.

## 1. Significance of the Study

We grew up during the “Girl Power” age. During our childhood we were exposed to empowering concepts for women. During our study abroad trip new questions about feminism outside of the United States were raised. Since we felt that Japanese women may have not been exposed to the same concepts as we had we wondered how they perceived feminist concepts. 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** and they are:

1. The need to recognize and disseminate the historical exploitation and oppression of women.
2. The goal of improving women’s social standing while working toward equality for all genders and groups.
3. The active criticism of traditional intellectual pursuits and gender ideologies (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016).

On the perceived characteristics of feminists, the positive terms used are: desirability, sexiness, confident, and independent. The negative characteristics are: undesirability, plainness, stubborn, and angry. From this we were able to understand that individuals are likely to change their identification as Feminist/Non-Feminist depending on their exposure to positive or negative characteristics about Feminists (Redford, et. al, 2016). In a comparison of opinions about feminism, feminists opinions on feminists was that they support gender equality, are female, and they have positive personal characteristics. According to non-feminist opinions, feminists

support female superiority, dislike men, have negative personal characteristics, and discriminate based on gender. The points that they agreed on were that feminism promotes gender equality in society and rejects traditional gender roles (Houvouras & Carter, 2008).

### **3.2 Voting Rights**

Japan is behind the U.S. in terms of women's right to vote and ability to stand for election in government positions. In America, women received the right to vote in 1920, and for Japan it was in 1946 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018; IPU Archive Women's Suffrage, 2018).

### **3.3 Government Representation**

193 countries are ranked on their equal representation in government positions, and America is ranked 100th, which is rather low. Japan is ranked even lower, at 158 (Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments 2017). In America, women in political roles inspire female citizens' political engagement and also increase women's political knowledge. In Japan, women candidates are seen as morally superior to their male counterparts and are seen as agents of change focusing on social issues, however they are still seen as lacking in political ability.

### **3.4 Workplace Equality**

In America, the Title VII law prohibiting employment discrimination was passed in 1964. However, Japan's equivalent law, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, was not passed in Japan until 1986 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018). Some of the benefits of workplace equality laws was the elimination of height and weight requirements, rules against hiring mothers, as well as the denial of overtime pay and work to women. After the laws were passed, both America and Japan saw a rise in the employment rate of women (Bartlett, 1994; Economist, 2016; Vogel, 1990).

### **3.5 Reproductive Rights**

For Japan and America, there was a large difference in their reproductive rights. When America got the Birth Control Pill in 1960, more women wait to marry and have children, instead opting to go to and finish college. This increased the number of women in the workplace, as well as the number of annual hours worked by women. In Japan, the Birth Control Pill was not introduced until 1999 (Bailey, 2006). The Pill also did not have an effect on women's careers

and birth rates. The Birth Control was thought well of by women in Japan, but they were more concerned about the possible side effects and this made them hesitant to take The Pill (Kihara,2001; Negishi, 1999).

#### 4. The Study

##### 4.1 Demographics

30 Female Japanese University Students (Age 18-30)

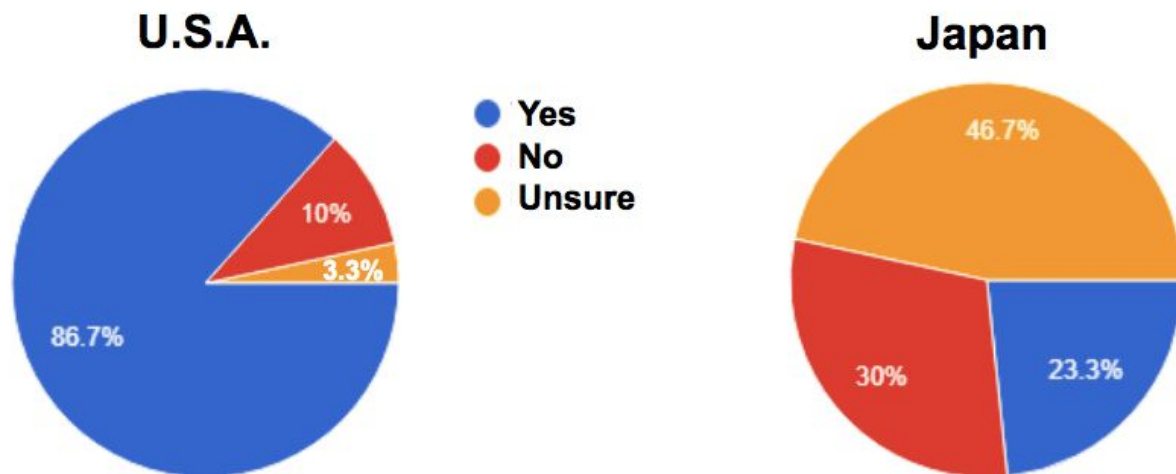
30 Female American University Students (Age 18-30)

##### 4.2 Research Method

Google Forms survey, done in English and Japanese

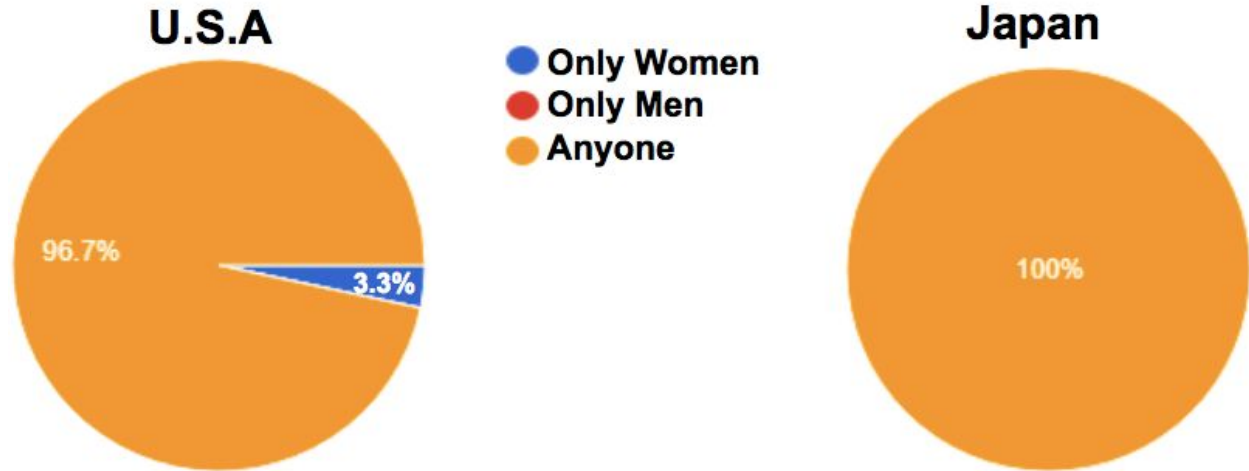
##### 4.3 Background Questions

Graph 1: Do you consider yourself a feminist?



We found that Female college students in the U.S.A. are significantly more likely to identify as a Feminist (Graph 1).

Graph 2: Who can be a feminist or promote feminism?

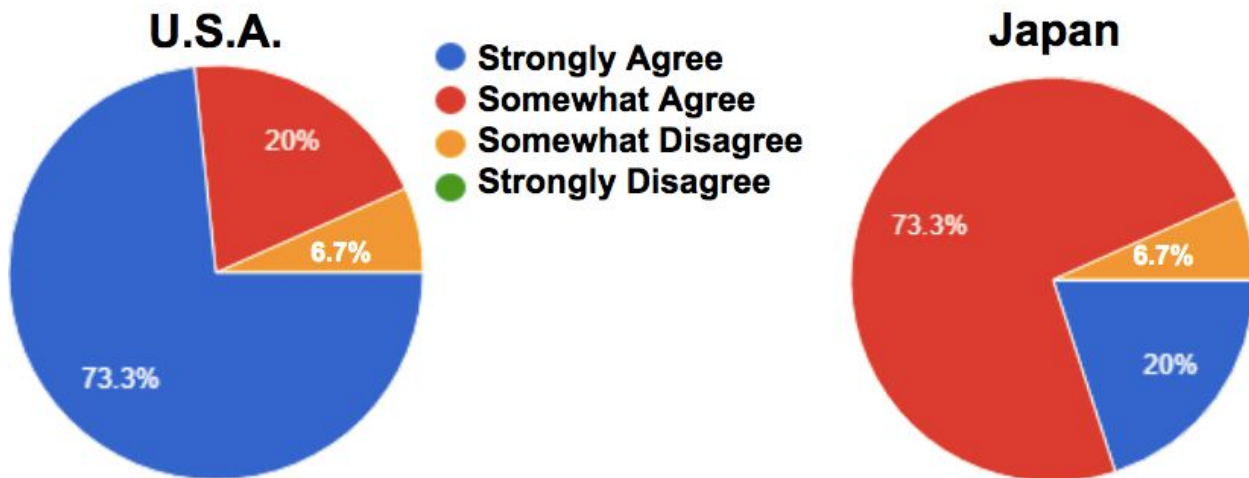


We found that Japanese and American female college students agree that anyone can be a feminist or promote feminism (Graph 2).

## 5. Research Findings

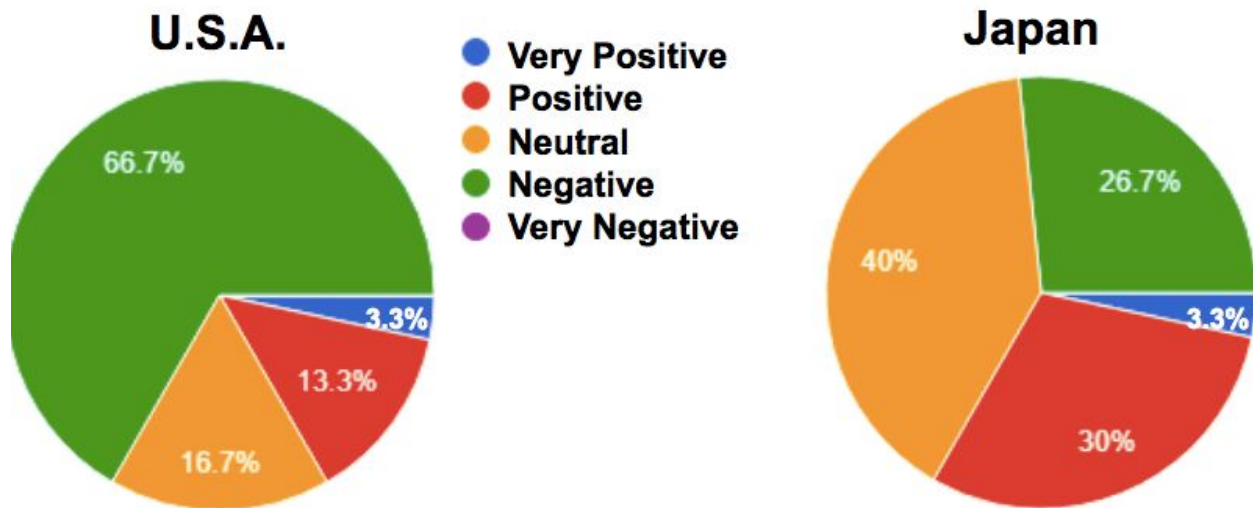
### 5.1 Research Question 1

Graph 3: Do you agree that feminism promotes positive self-esteem for women?



According to the responses we got, the majority of female college students in Japan and the U.S.A. agree that Feminism promotes positive self-esteem for women (Graph 3).

Graph 4: How do you feel being a feminist is perceived?



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 (Graph 4).

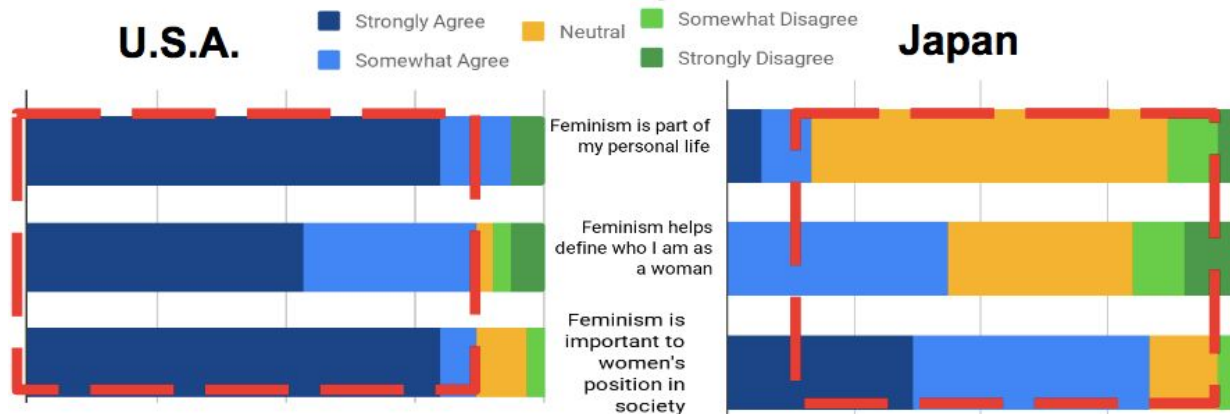
Graph 5: What characteristics do you think describe a feminist?



In these word clouds, we have the different answer sent in by the participants. For the American side, the top five words are: Strong, Equality, Independent, Outspoken, and Rebellious.

For Japan, the top five words were: Gender Equality, Women’s Rights, I don’t know, Equality, and Strong. From this, we determined that Japanese students believe that feminism is about gender equality and the U.S.A. is mostly concerned with the empowerment of the individual woman as strong or independent (Graph 5).

Graph 6: For the following statements please check your extent of agreement



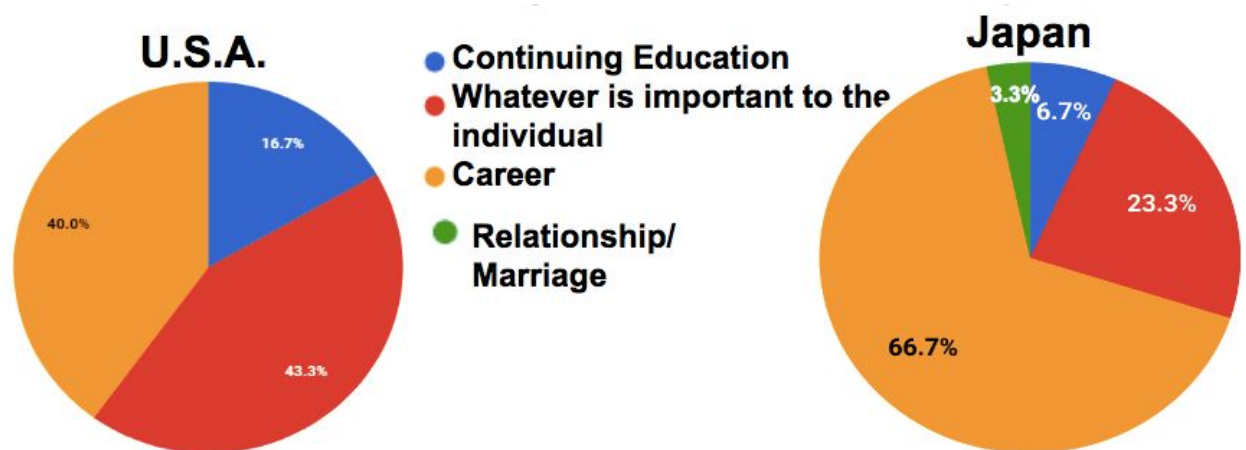
From the answers we received on these statements, we were able to determine that a majority of American students agree that feminism is part of their personal life while majority of Japanese students do not. Japanese and American students agreed that feminism helps define who they are and is important to women’s position in society (Graph 6).

Graph 7: How often do you think about major advancements for women’s rights?



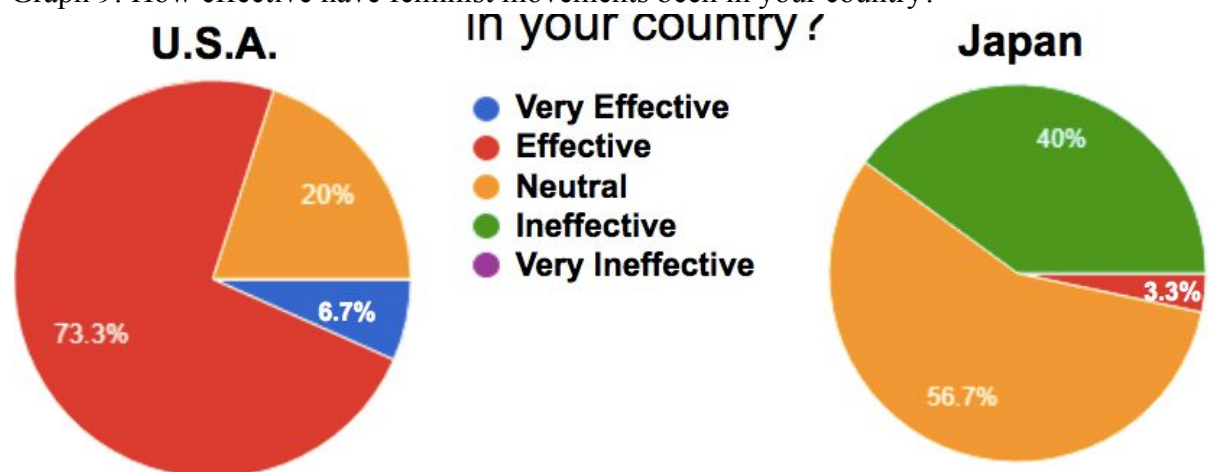
From this data, we found that Japanese female college students answers were varied, and a majority of American students think regularly about the advancements of Women's Rights (Graph 7).

Graph 8: Which of the following do you think should be the first priority for a woman post graduation from university?



According to our results, 66% of the Japanese female students felt their first priority after graduation should be a career followed by 23% for their individual interests. American female students are split between their careers and individual interests (Graph 8).

Graph 9: How effective have feminist movements been in your country?



We found that Japanese students believe that feminist movements have been ineffective



(40%) or neutral (56%) compared to the 73% of American female students feel they have been effective (Graph 9).

Graph 10: How do you prefer to participate in Feminism?



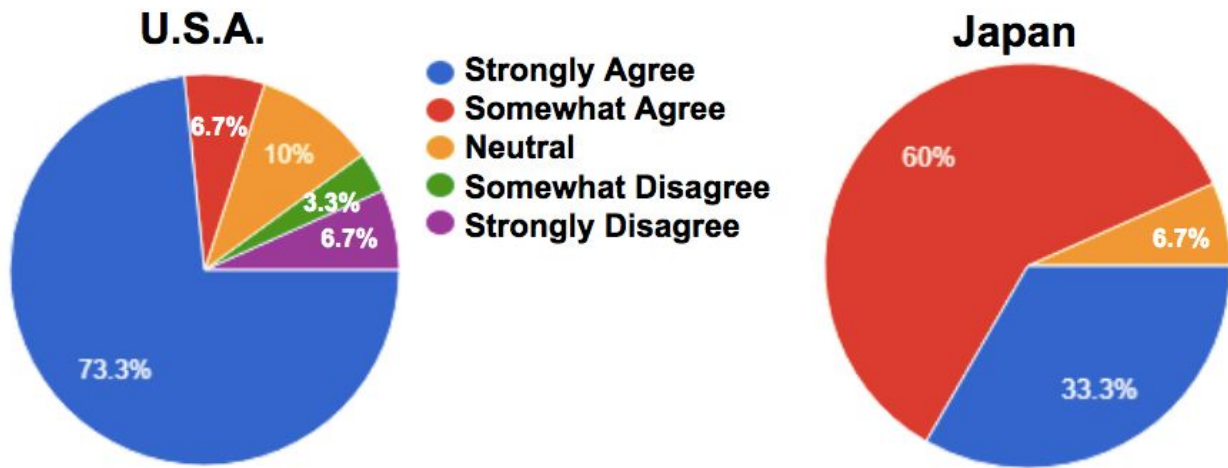
According to our results, half of American students were more likely to actively participate in various local organizations, whereas a majority of Japanese students preferred other avenues of support (Graph 10).

### 5.2 Research Question 1 Findings

We found that 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. 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.

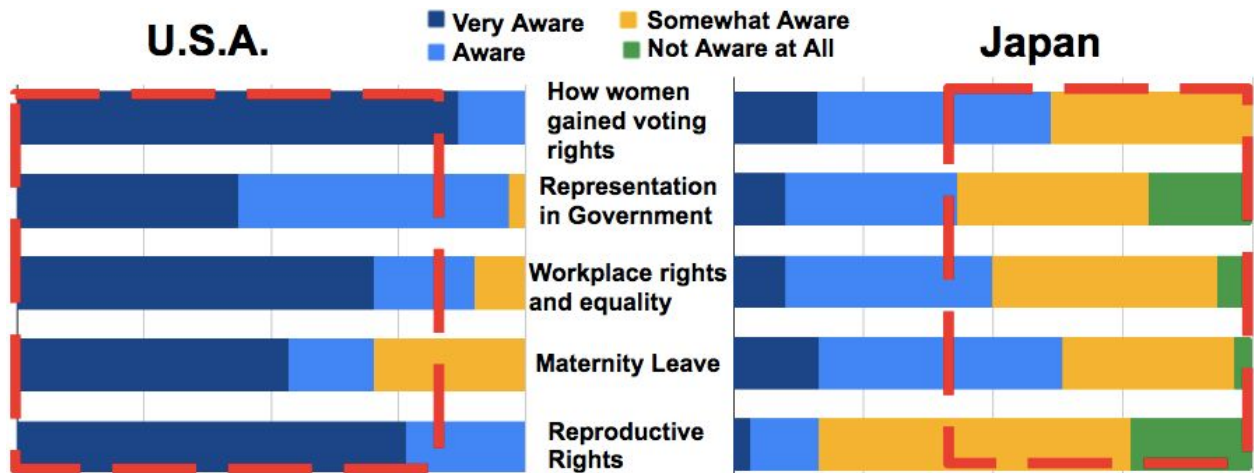
### 5.3 Research Question 2

Graph 11: Do you think there is a difference in equality between Men and Women?



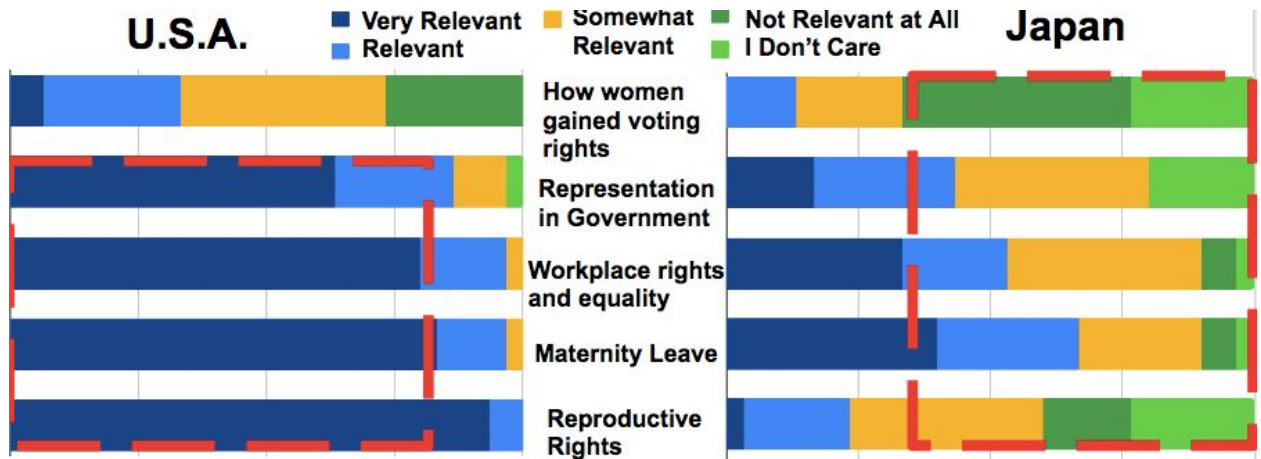
We found that the majority of both groups agree that there is a difference in equality between Men and women (Graph 11).

Graph 12: Were you aware of the following major advancements in feminist history?



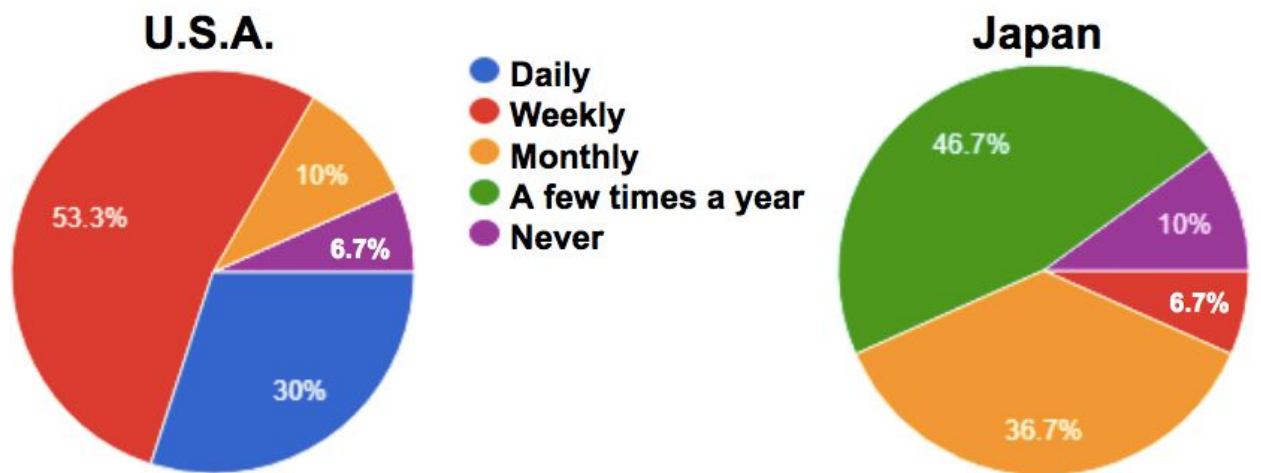
From our research we found that female students in the United States are very aware about previous advancements in feminist history while Japanese students were only somewhat aware (Graph 12).

Graph 13: Which of these issues remain relevant to women in your country in 2018



In the answers we received, it seemed that Japanese students had a more mixed response to the relevance of feminist issues while American students felt many of the topics are still relevant with the exception of voting rights (Graph 13).

Graph 14: On average how often do you discuss feminist issues?



We were surprised to find that Japanese female students discuss feminist issues only a few times a year while American students discuss much more often, with 53% discussing it weekly and 30% daily (Graph 14).

### 5.4 Research Question 2 Findings

We found that there is agreement between Japanese and American Students that there is inequality between 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. Japanese students speak less often about feminist topics than Americans. 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**

In 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. **Feminist issues** have evolved into including Gender Issues in the **America** and have more involvement with **LGBTQ+ issues**, but **Japan** feels that it is still only between **men and women**. We grew up in California where gender equality is prevalent and we were surprised that Japanese women didn't have the same experience. To solve this we feel that education as children can help further the awareness of gender equality in Japan.

## **7. Limits of the Study and Future Study**

The limitations of the study were that the results could not be generalized because of the small number of respondents. We had a Limited/ Biased group, as all of our American students were from California, and we only got survey results from female college students. If we did a future study, we would be more inclusive of all gender identifications and explore a wider variety of issues, such as Racism and Sexuality etc.

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