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The Changing Women's Rights in Osaka

This May, I was asked on the AP Japanese exam's conversation assessment, “日本にいる間、気を付けなければいけないことは何だと思いますか” (“What do you need to be careful of during your time in Japan?”). With no time to think, the first thing I answered was, “I think as a girl I should be worried about being picked on by suspicious men on the train.” Originally wanting to talk about Osaka's traditions and cultural identity, my lack of research gave me a warped version of Japan. I had wrong assumptions about women's health and safety; I thought it wouldn't be as openly discussed or supported as it is here in the United States. However, during my trip, I quickly realized that Japan is making important and visible strides in addressing those important issues for women.

Some of my very first standout observations were at the schools we visited and temporarily attended. Visiting Higashi High School only a few days after we arrived, I was wowed by all the colourful posters on the walls. Among these, one was promoting an event that said “Girls Meet STEM,” an event connecting junior high and high school girls with companies and universities to interest them in the possibility of going into STEM. STEM is a male-dominated field in any country, and being president of my school's own Girls Who Code club, seeing this poster highlighted the progress Japan is making to address the gap in their country. Other posters in Abeno High School illustrated another perspective: support for young women's health in the school environment. Outside their health office, many posters decorated the bulletin boards. Among them, posters on getting the HPV vaccine, help lines and support groups for sexual assault, and resources for teens undergoing pregnancy stood out to me. They offered help and resources for people undergoing those struggles. Posters like this create a positive and supportive environment for issues like those mentioned. It's also especially important that these topics are being taught to girls at such a young age, as it makes them informed to be able to use that information in the future and continue the chain of support and resources. Lastly, there were conveniently placed menstrual products inside of a white box close to the mirror in the girl's bathroom. Here in the US, I've witnessed and experienced menstrual products in bathrooms getting misused and played with, causing inconveniences when I actually needed to use them. So seeing them in Japan not being misused was a good experience.

The medical advertisements weren't limited to just schools, either. Speaking of the HPV vaccine, one time in the train station a whole row of pillars fitted with screens displayed an advertisement on getting one. I even consistently saw one advertisement for it on the train. They all mentioned “子宮頸がん” (cervical cancer). Just like in school, in public I was seeing de-stigmatization of topics that are important for the personal health of women. Advertisements extended to talking about topics I thought would also be taboo in accordance with my original assumptions—IVF, gynaecologists, and STD testing. Around the city, in lots of train stations or while casually walking, I saw many “Women's Clinics” advertisements. Taking pictures to document everything I saw in public, there were so many that I eventually stopped picturing them. In many countries, topics like reproductive health and gynaecological care can be somewhat taboo, with discussions often shrouded in discomfort or privacy. However, seeing Osaka's placement of these Women's Clinics ads in public spaces highlights a cultural shift towards destigmatizing women's health issues.

Osaka didn't hold back on support for mothers either. I encountered numerous posters and signs offering information about diaper vending machines, mother rest areas, and advice on how to navigate public transportation with a stroller. . Witnessing mothers carrying 2 or even 3 children on a bike going to school and back home, I just thought about how important it is for things like those I saw in Japan to be provided to mothers working hard for their family. The diaper vending machines offer a cold drink on a tiring day and emergency diapers for babies if needed. Resting places are great for sitting down or breast-feeding babies in the middle of a busy mall like the one I saw the sign in. Helping on strollers in the train too is essential for reducing the stress of travelling with young children. It ensures that parents, especially mothers, don't feel isolated or overwhelmed when navigating the city. These thoughtful accommodations reflect a deep cultural understanding of the challenges families face and highlight the importance of public spaces being inclusive and supportive. In a bustling environment like Osaka, where life moves fast, such initiatives not only ease the burden on parents but also promote a sense of community and shared responsibility. Providing these resources is a reminder that supporting mothers is not just about convenience—it's about dignity, care, and ensuring that every parent feels valued and empowered.

Lastly, about public transport, one of the top things I was looking forward to doing was riding the women-only car on the trains. It didn't disappoint. At first, both of us forgot it

existed, but after getting into a routine about a week into our trip, Jessa and I started using it. It became a place of comfort when going home later in the evening or during rush hour. Even in the subway line where women only cars are enforced exclusively during weekdays, people respected it. Though there was usually at least 1 man riding in it, this was usually only another tourist, and it still didn't take away from the experience. Jessa and I both ran when the train came specifically to make it onto this train car. Though the experience could possibly be worse in other parts of Japan, from what I witnessed, the women-only car system is definitely important and effective for creating a safe space for girls like us on the train. I never had to worry about what I said in the AP exam; I felt safe.

Going to Osaka proved that my assumptions I had were wrong. Though it could be reflecting only parts of Japan, my time in Osaka showed me that Japan is turning up and is becoming better for women. Over the past few years, women's rights have become a more prevalent topic in society, and Osaka is participating in that trend in a good way. After the trip, I learned about Shiori Ito and the #KuToo movement—similar to the #MeToo movement here in the US—protesting against women needing to wear heels in the office space. Progress is happening, even if change takes time. The visibility of women's health initiatives, support for working mothers, and growing conversations around gender equality reflect a shift in attitudes. While there are still challenges to overcome, like political representation, I think Japan is already in a great position and moving in the right direction. My trip not only challenged my assumptions but also gave me hope that these small but meaningful things will continue to ripple throughout society, not just in Osaka.