

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)

DIJ Study Group



April 16, 2026, 6.30 pm (JST) / 11.30 am (CEST)

Female Mayors and the Practice of Local Leadership in Japan

Stefanie Schwarte, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München/ DIJ Tokyo

As of February 2026, women hold only 4.3 percent of Japan's mayoral offices. This figure reflects the country's well-documented challenges with gender equality in political participation: Japan has drawn global attention for its persistently low ranking in international gender equality indices, such as the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report (118th out of 148 countries in 2025). Although there has been a gradual positive trend over the past decades, the number of female legislators remains limited at both national and local levels, and the number of female mayors is particularly low. Directly elected by voters, mayors occupy a prominent position in Japanese local politics. They can shape local policies and advance individual agendas, making them key drivers of local change. This situation raises an important question: how do female mayors perceive their roles and contributions within their local communities and the broader political landscape?

Drawing on interviews with female mayors as part of my doctoral research, this presentation aims to produce a contextually grounded understanding of how they perceive and perform their political roles. The analysis proceeds on three levels. First, through narrative reconstruction, I examine what female mayors say about themselves, their trajectories, their role, and their gender. Second, through structural interpretation, I explore how institutional and cultural environments define or constrain what is politically possible for these leaders. Third, drawing on representation theory, I analyze how the mayors' practices relate to broader concepts of political representation. Through this multi-layered approach, I seek to explain how female mayors navigate and reshape gendered structures through everyday political practice, and to situate their individual perspectives within broader debates on gender and political representation in Japan.

Stefanie Schwarte is a PhD candidate at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, specializing in gender and politics in Japan with a focus on local governance. Her research interests encompass the political representation of women, female political leadership, and the deliberation of gender equality policies. She also explores related themes such as the political representation of young people and the influence of demographic change on youth political engagement in Japan. Since February 2026 she has been a PhD student at the DIJ Tokyo.

About:

The DIJ Study Group is a forum for scholars from all disciplines conducting research on contemporary or modern Japan. The event is open to all. This session is organized by Sebastian Polak-Rottmann.

This is a public event. Please be aware that audio-visual recordings may be made, stored, and published during and after the event.

Hybrid Event:

On-site participation: please register via email to polak-rottmann@dijtokyo.org until April 15, 2026.

Online participation: please register via our webpage.

Venue:

Online and DIJ Tokyo: <https://www.dijtokyo.org/access/>