



# Harassment of Male Assembly Members



A survey was conducted to clarify the reality of harassment against male assembly members. According to the survey, “all male assembly members who cannot drink alcohol experienced acts that fall under power harassment, such as being forced to drink. As for acts of victimization during political activities and election campaigns, similar types of victimization were reported by female assembly members, such as being subjected to false rumors or smear flyers, and being victimized during street speeches.”

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## Hamada Mari, Representative of Stand by Women

It is only recently that “harassment in the political field” has become an issue in Japan. One of the triggers was the “Revised Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field” enacted in 2021, which mandated the central government, local governments, political parties, etc. to take measures against sexual harassment and maternity harassment (political parties are obliged to make efforts). As a result, the media reported on the issue, local assemblies made efforts to address the issue, and the reality of harassment, which had been made invisible as a cost of participating in politics, began to come to light. According to the Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office (CAO) “Research report on barriers to women’s political participation” (2021), 65.5% of women and 58.0% of men experienced harassment from voters, supporters, assembly members, etc. while considering or preparing to run for office, and 57.6% of women and 32.5% of men experienced harassment during assembly member activities or election campaigns. Various surveys have confirmed that female assembly members are more likely to be harassed than male assembly members, and previous research on politics and harassment has explained this in terms of it being “a way of excluding women who are trying to enter what has been seen as a male political field.”

Against this background, there has been an interview survey on harassment of female assembly members, but no similar survey could be found for male assembly members. However, since the alleged

sexual assaults by the late Johnny Kitagawa (1931–2019), founder of the talent agency Johnny & Associates, became a major news story in 2023, male assembly members have told me, “Men are also being harassed, so please investigate.” As the harassment of female assembly members has been highlighted, male assembly members may have become more aware of harassment and have begun to recognize the events in front of them as harassment. Some said that the daily media coverage of the fact that “men are also victimized” made it easier for them to speak out on these issues.

The number of assembly members in Japan’s city, town and village assemblies (2023) is 29,135, of which 24,002 (82.4%) are men and 5,133 (17.6%) are women, with the overwhelming majority being men. Understanding the actual harassment situation of male assembly members, who make up more than 80% of local assemblies, is essential to eradicating harassment in the political sphere. In addition, local assemblies are facing a shortage of manpower, and from the perspective of revitalizing assemblies, it is necessary to clarify the barriers to entry into the political field and continued membership of assembly members not only for women but also for young men. Therefore, we conducted an interview survey with the aim of clarifying the actual harassment situation of male assembly members.

## **Survey summary**

In this survey, interviews were conducted on 29 people between October 19, 2023 and April 30, 2024. All survey subjects were men, and the survey targeted current assembly members of city assemblies, which have the most assembly seats among local assemblies. Of these, seven were chairpersons and three were vice chairpersons at the time of the interview. The remaining 19 were almost all new assembly members, with 17 in their first term and two in their second term. Of the 10 chairpersons and vice chairpersons, five were in their fifth term, two in their fourth, and three in their third. In terms of age (at the time of the interview), one was in his 60s, three in their 50s, 11 in their 40s, 11 in their 30s, and three in their 20s, meaning that two-thirds of the respondents were newcomers. As a result, the majority of the respondents were younger than the average age of city assembly members (male assembly members are 59.3 years old). In the first place, younger people tend to be more vulnerable to harassment, and previous research has also shown that assembly members who have been elected fewer times are more vulnerable to harassment (Alliance of Feminist Representatives 2022, Hamada 2021). The respondents are largely people with characteristics that make them more vulnerable to harassment.

In addition, the marital status of the respondents was three unmarried and 26 married. The party affiliations were: 12 from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) (including those who were independents at the time of candidacy but became LDP members after being elected), 2 from Komeito, 1 from the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, 1 from the Japan Innovation Party, and 13 independents. Of these, 17 belonged to the largest faction in the assembly. The assembly members surveyed belonged to assemblies all over the country, from Hokkaido to Kyushu, but the details of the region are not specified because they may lead to the identification of individuals based on their characteristics or case details.

## **Distinction from the private sector**

First, we would like to confirm how male assembly members perceive harassment. When asked during the interview survey whether they had thought harassment existed in the political sphere, 26 people (89.7% of the total respondents) answered “I thought it existed,” 2 people (6.9%) answered “I thought it

might exist,” and 1 person (3.4%) answered “I didn’t think it existed.” The only person who answered “I didn’t think it existed” expressed surprise, saying, “I didn’t think it would be this bad. I thought there would be more of a gentlemanly relationship. The environment at assembly is very different from the private companies I’ve worked in.”

Twenty-seven out of 29 assembly members (93.1%) said they had experienced harassment. The remaining two (6.9%) said they had not experienced harassment themselves, but were aware that people around them had experienced harassment. In addition, many of the survey respondents pointed to a lack of awareness and differences in awareness of acts of harassment, such as “the standards of what constitutes harassment are different for men and women,” “men are not aware that they are being harassed,” and “even if it is harassment, male assembly members often do not think it is a problem.” If they are not aware of what constitutes harassment, it is difficult to understand the significance of the acts they have experienced and to recognize them as a crime. Also, if a person is unable to properly identify the harassment they are experiencing, they may unconsciously engage in actions that make others uncomfortable. After the interviews, one person emailed me with the following thoughts: “During the interview, I realized that I may be tolerating harassment to a great extent. I joined the rural assembly thinking that there would be a lot of harassment from the beginning, so I think my sensors were insensitive. This means that I might be doing a lot of harassment, and I realized once again that this might be a bit of a problem.” Having this sense of crisis is very important in order to avoid committing acts of abuse.

## **Number of terms and age, the invisible power structure of assemblies**

Next, let’s look at the factors that make male assembly members more vulnerable to victimization. Research on harassment of female assembly members has identified the number of terms served as a factor that makes them more vulnerable to victimization (Hamada, 2021 and Okura, 2022), but what about male assembly members? When 12 assembly members who had served two or more terms were asked whether the level of harassment had changed since their first term, all 12 responded that it had. Eleven of them felt that the level of harassment had decreased since their first term, citing reasons such as “It’s more widely known that I can’t drink alcohol,” “People trust me more, and I’m less isolated because I have more allies.” On the other hand, opinions were also found such as “There is no particular difference between those in their first and second term in terms of being more vulnerable to harassment, but the type of harassment they experience has changed” and “The pressure to get married increased in my second term as I got older.” The job of assembly member is based on the assumption that pay and status remain the same regardless of length of term, but in reality each assembly has its own rules based on length of term, such as not being able to hold a position in an assembly unless one has served many terms, and different priorities for testimony in an assembly. Power harassment is considered to be verbal and physical behavior that stems from superior-subordinate relationships in the workplace, but the power dynamics among assembly members in assemblies can also be influenced by their years of experience. In fact, first-term assembly members confirmed that term functions as a measure of power within assemblies, saying, “Whether you’ve served one term or ten terms, everyone has the same title, position, and compensation. But it’s also true that the power differs depending on the term,” and “Even though age and term are numbers that have no legal meaning, they have a stronger influence [in the assembly] than in other organizations.”

Other elements of “winning by landslide” also emerged as a backdrop to the damage. Among the respondents, six assembly members (20.7%) were elected with the most votes when they first ran for office, and all of them received verbal and physical pressure from fellow assembly members immediately after their election. For example, immediately after becoming an assembly member, senior assembly members told a person who won the election with the top number of votes, “‘You were elected by getting the most votes, but once an assembly member is elected, we are all on the same level.’ ‘The number of votes doesn’t matter, and the assembly members are on the same level,’ and ‘You may have come in first, but that doesn’t matter in the assembly. It is the number of terms and the age that matter.’ I was often told this by people from the same party, not by people from other factions, and it was my first experience, but there was a lot of male jealousy.” The hearing investigation suggested that the background to such behavior was not only that the presence of new assembly members with high vote counts was a threat to senior assembly members, but also that the customs of the assembly, such as precedent-based practices and the way things are done based on unwritten agreements, fostered an atmosphere that “first-term assembly members should obey senior assembly members.”

### **Pressure to get married and forced drinking**

Of the respondents, three (10.3%) were unmarried, one in their 20s and two in their 30s, but all emphasized “pressure to get married” as the type of harassment. They said they were constantly told by voters, supporters, and assembly members that “you should get married soon,” “you must get married,” and “you should get married first.” One assembly member said he was exhausted by a supporter repeatedly telling him, “If you don’t get married by the next election, we won’t support you.” All three expressed the view that it is difficult to deal with people who say things with good intentions and kindness, saying, “Because they are said with good intentions, I am afraid that it will cause friction in my relationship, so I cannot argue with them strongly.” On the other hand, the extent of their mental burden was evident in comments such as, “It’s mentally hard to be told that over and over again,” and “If I don’t get married, they’re going to keep telling me things like that. It’s really none of their business.” As to why people pointed out their marriages, the three gave the following common reason: “There is a belief among supporters that if you get married, your wife’s activities will lead to votes.” In some areas, there is still a strong belief that the wives of assembly members should appear in public, greet people, and help with election campaigns, and we could see that they are expected to have “the presence of their wives” as election workers.

Surveys on harassment of female assembly members, including CAO (2021), always mention the victimization of so-called sexual harassment at the drinking table. In this survey, only one person (3.4%) reported being sexually harassed at the drinking table. All four people (13.8%) who answered “I can’t drink alcohol” in this interview talked about being forced to drink alcohol. One assembly member explained that he could not even use disinfectant alcohol, yet he was repeatedly offered alcohol by elderly voters and supporters. Comments from these four people included, “I cannot drink alcohol because I have an allergic reaction, but there is an atmosphere of ‘assembly members should drink’”; “I was urged to drink alcohol and when I refused, I was told, ‘You cannot become an assembly member unless you drink’; and, as a result of declining to drink, “my relationship with that person deteriorated, and even after I was elected, I was told that I had to train myself to be able to drink.” The remaining 25 respondents (86.2%) responded, “I can drink alcohol, so I don’t have much trouble communicating at drinking parties. On the other hand, assembly members who have been elected several times have said to me, “You can’t drink the liquor I

pour for you!” or “You’re too cocky, I’ll crush you with liquor.” At local meetings and group gatherings, there is still an atmosphere that assembly members are expected to go around pouring drinks, and there are situations where if they drink alone, they may be met with sarcastic comments such as, “Don’t you have to go around pouring drinks?”

### **Smear flyers, abusive language, tons of messages...**

As elections approach, we often hear about unfounded rumors and smear flyers designed to trip up the other party. In this survey, when we asked about experiences of receiving rumors or smear flyers, 10 people (34.5%) said they had. One chairperson said that he received a smear flyer right after he was elected, and since then he has received countless mysterious letters. Other cases included having posters and signs cut or torn down during the campaign period, being ignored by other candidates, and being forced to do traditional campaigning by senior assembly members in the name of advice that they could not refuse. In addition, interviews with female members almost always included accounts of harassment during street speeches, but it was also confirmed that male members had also been verbally abused by voters and had their opinions unilaterally imposed on them while standing in front of train stations or in public places. One assembly member in his 40s said, “In my experience, the people who approach me on the street are mostly men in their 70s or older who still think they can beat me and try to compete with me. They often say things like, ‘Do you understand?’ On the other hand, women in their 70s or older often talk to me as if I were their child or grandchild.”

According to a CAO survey (2021), among “acts of harassment experienced during assembly member activities or election campaigns,” the most frequently cited item by male assembly members was “defamation and harassment via social media, email, etc.” (22.9% of women, 15.7% of men). When a survey was conducted on online harassment of female assembly members (Ki and Hamada, 2021), it was confirmed that five out of seven respondents received daily messages from the same person containing sexually charged texts, sexual images, lectures, nitpicking of statements, comments about their age, appearance and body, questions about whether they had a boyfriend, and messages containing their own profile. Of the 29 respondents in our survey of male assembly members, only one person (3.4%) spoke about the burden of receiving such frequent contact, and the details were that a first-term assembly member would receive one-sided information from an older man on Facebook Messenger about four or five times a week at around 2 a.m. This, combined with the concentration of contacts at night, overlaps with the harm suffered by female assembly members, but it is estimated that the proportion of male assembly members subjected to such acts is lower than that of female assembly members.

In addition, there have been cases where female assembly members, especially in their first term, have been in situations where voters contact them saying they want to “meet” or “consult” with them, and when they actually meet, they are told “I just wanted to talk to you,” or “I want you to go out with me,” or they talk endlessly about unrelated topics, forcing them to be cautious about meeting with voters (Hamada, 2021). On the other hand, in our interviews with the 29 male assembly members, there were no cases of victimization due to requests for meetings from voters, and conversely, there was one interviewee who, when he received an email from a voter, approached the voter and said, “Let’s meet and talk.” In the case of female assembly members, the results of previous harassment surveys show that they are unlikely to respond in this way, and it can be said that there is an asymmetry in the hurdle of “meeting voters.”

## Voices of male assembly members

In interviews with female local assembly members, 29.4% of them answered that they had “thought about quitting being an assembly member” because of bullying and harassment (Compiled by Gikai no Ijime Chosa Purojekuto Chiimu [the assemblies bullying investigation project team], 2022). In response to the question “Have you ever thought about quitting as an assembly member?” asked of male assembly members in this survey, 17 first-term members (58.6%) and 2 second-term members (6.9%) answered “I have never thought that far,” but 7 out of 10 chairpersons and vice chairpersons (24.1% of the total respondents) were serious enough to answer “I have thought about quitting.” It is also noteworthy that 3 out of 7 people who answered “I have thought about quitting” (10.3% of total respondents) said “I have suffered from depression.” The following is some of what was said in the interviews.

“I often think about quitting. I don’t think I can take it physically or mentally. I try to listen to all the problems I have and think I am doing my job seriously... After I became an assembly member, I became depressed, and even now I suffer from bouts of depression, but I am gradually becoming able to deal with it myself. However, I still keep medicine for gastroesophageal reflux disease at home.”

“There are many times when I want to quit. As a member of the assembly, wherever I go, I am called ‘sensei’ (a term of respect often used for politicians in Japan), and even if I want to work as a staff member in a place with problems, it is often seen as a political activity, so I can’t do the work I want to do.”

“I got depressed once when I lost an election. It’s easy to get into a situation where I can’t sleep. When people say unpleasant things to me, I’m shocked and frustrated, so I drink more.”

The results of this interview revealed some differences in content compared to the actual harassment of female assembly members. First, in the interviews the author conducted with [female assembly members about harassment](#), the majority of cases involved multiple victimization experiences that were discussed in detail, and the subjects were aware of the harassment they had experienced. However, in the interviews this time with male assembly members, many of the subjects pointed out that “men lack awareness that they are being harassed.”

In addition, while “pressure to marry” was confirmed for unmarried male assembly members, respondents pointed to the underlying “need for wives as election workers.” For similar reasons, there are probably not many female assembly members who are advised by voters or fellow assembly members to get married. On the other hand, the situation of being easily treated as a sexual or romantic object, which is characteristic of unmarried female assembly members, was not confirmed among male assembly members.

Regarding experiences of victimization at drinking tables, sexual harassment was frequently reported by female assembly members, but only one case was reported by male assembly members. However, all male assembly members who cannot drink alcohol experienced acts that fall under power harassment, such as being forced to drink. As for acts of victimization during political activities and election campaigns, similar types of victimization were reported by female assembly members, such as being subjected to false rumors or smear flyers, and being victimized during street speeches. However, the proportion of acts

reported by male assembly members is likely to be lower than that of female assembly members. The same is true for cases where voters frequently send messages over the Internet, with only one person expressing concern in this survey, confirming that the number of victims is lower than that of female assembly members. In addition, there were no reports from male assembly members of being victimized by petitions or requests for meetings that involve direct contact with voters.

In a survey of female local assembly members (Compiled by Gikai no Ijime Chosa Purojekuto Chiimu [the assemblies bullying investigation project team], 2022), 29.4% of respondents said they had thought about quitting the assembly because of harassment, etc., but in this survey, 24.1% of male assembly members said they had thought about quitting, and all of these respondents were chairpersons and vice chairpersons. At the same time, three people were confirmed to be suffering from depression, indicating the extent of the burden.

Shedding light on the harassment victimization of not only women but also male assembly members will lead to revealing the underlying nature of the assemblies and the un verbalized rules that have existed. In interviews, many people described the assemblies as “closed spaces,” but I hope that by making the reality public, a more transparent politics will be realized.

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She is currently enrolled in the Doctoral Program in Gender and Interdisciplinary Studies at the Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences, Ochanomizu University. She specializes in harassment in the political field. In 2022, she started the “Kosodate Election Hack! Project [an activity to support the child-rearing generation to become members of parliament].” In 2023, she established Japan’s first consultation service for parliamentarians, “Harassment Consultation Center for Women in Politics.” She created harassment training materials for parliaments as a member of the Cabinet Office’s study committee on the creation of “Training Materials for Preventing Harassment in the Political Field in FY2021,” and conducted numerous harassment training sessions for local assemblies. Her publications include *Josei-gi'in wo Fuyashitai ZINE* (ZINE that wants to increase the number of female politicians).”

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