

Diversity on the Plate: The Quest for Inclusion and the Challenges of Providing Halal School Meals in Japan

Abstract: Japanese public elementary school lunch (*gakkō kyūshoku*) programs play a vital role in providing affordable, nutritious meals while fostering communal dining and food education (*shokuiku*). However, these programs often fail to accommodate religious and cultural dietary needs, leaving many Muslim students unable to participate fully. Adhering to Islamic dietary laws means avoiding non-halal foods such as pork, gelatin, and alcohol-based seasonings. Without national policies for religious accommodations, Muslim students must rely on home-packed meals, which can lead to social exclusion and additional burdens for families.

This study examines the systemic and cultural barriers that hinder the integration of dietary diversity in Japan's school lunch programs, focusing on case studies in Tatebayashi City (home to a large Rohingya Muslim community) and Sakai Town (which introduced a pilot halal lunch program). Drawing on historical analyses, family experiences, and interviews with school officials, the paper explores how parents and schools navigate—or struggle to navigate—religious dietary needs.

Introduction

JAPANESE PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL lunch (*gakkō kyūshoku*) programs have long been a cornerstone of the nation's educational system, offering affordable, nutritious meals, respect for food culture, and healthy eating habits. However, these programs often overlook the needs of children with cultural, religious, or health-related dietary restrictions, posing significant challenges for affected families. For Muslim children, adhering to Islamic dietary laws means avoiding non-halal foods such as pork, gelatin, and alcohol-based seasonings like mirin and sake. Without national policies to address these needs, Muslim students are frequently excluded from the shared experience of eating communally and must rely on packed meals from home—a practice that can isolate them from their peers and place additional burdens on their families.

This lack of accommodation stands in stark contrast to the comprehensive measures introduced to address food allergies. While allergy guidelines provide clear frameworks for schools, religious dietary needs remain largely unaddressed, leaving individual schools and teachers to navigate these challenges

Findings reveal that institutional inflexibility, administrative compartmentalization, and Japan's emphasis on uniformity in public services create significant challenges for implementing halal meal options. Unlike the well-established allergy accommodation guidelines, religious dietary needs remain an unresolved issue left to individual schools. Furthermore, efforts to introduce halal meals face logistical constraints and social backlash, as seen in Sakai's case.

To address these issues, this paper proposes practical recommendations, including community-led halal catering with government subsidies, revising nutritional standards to allow for more flexibility, and adopting an accommodation model similar to allergy policies. Additionally, incorporating religious literacy into school curricula can foster greater awareness and acceptance of dietary diversity. By embracing inclusive policies, Japan's school lunch program has the potential to better reflect the nation's evolving multicultural landscape while maintaining its core educational and nutritional values.

independently. This gap reflects broader issues in Japan's approach to multicultural coexistence, where diversity remains an underexplored aspect of educational policy.

This paper seeks to reveal the current state of Japan's school lunch system as it relates to dietary diversity, underscoring that these challenges are not merely a matter of schools or local governments versus Muslim families but rather a shared struggle faced by all stakeholders. By examining historical trends, family experiences, and case studies from Tatebayashi City in Gunma Prefecture and Sakai Town in Ibaraki Prefecture, the study aims to shed light on the systemic and cultural barriers that hinder the integration of dietary diversity into school lunch programs.

Drawing on the works of Eriko Kishiyama and Hidehisa Kurotaki (2021) and Yōko Shimizu (2023), the paper begins with an exploration of the historical and structural development of Japan's school lunch system, emphasizing its dual role as a nutritional and educational tool. It also employs Melissa L. Salazar's (2007) concept of school cafeterias as political spaces, framing lunchrooms as arenas where cultural and social boundaries are negotiated. This lens highlights the

complexity of balancing Japan's emphasis on uniformity with the realities of an increasingly diverse society.

The case studies focus on Tatebayashi, home to a significant Rohingya community, and Sakai, where a local initiative to introduce halal meals encountered both success and backlash. These examples illustrate the dual burdens borne by Muslim families and school authorities in addressing dietary diversity. Finally, the paper concludes with actionable recommendations to foster an inclusive school lunch system that accommodates the needs of all stakeholders and promotes multicultural coexistence in Japan.

While school lunch programs have been widely studied in food studies and anthropology, research on how Japan's highly standardized *kyūshoku* system accommodates (or fails to accommodate) religious dietary restrictions remains largely absent especially in English scholarship. By addressing this gap, this study not only provides empirical insights but also contributes to theoretical discussions on food, identity, and the politics of commensality in educational settings. Furthermore, Japan's *shokuiku*-centered approach to school meals presents a compelling case for understanding how national food ideologies intersect with the realities of an increasingly diverse student population.

From Nutrition to Nation-Building: The Overview of Japan's School Lunch System

The Japanese school lunch program originated in 1889 in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture, at Chūai Elementary School. Initially introduced as a safety net to support children from impoverished households, it provided essential nutrition at a time when many families struggled to meet basic dietary needs (Kishiyama and Kurotaki 2021: 27; Shimizu 2023: 43–44). During the Taishō period (1912–1926), significant improvements in primary school enrollment rates led to the inclusion of children with various physical and mental challenges. In line with the broader “Taishō Democracy” movement, which emphasized human rights and child welfare, school lunches expanded their role beyond poverty alleviation to address the general well-being of students (Kishiyama and Kurotaki 2021: 27).

In the 1930s, the school lunch system became an integral part of Japan's social policy, particularly in response to economic hardships caused by poor harvests and the global Great Depression. In 1932, the Ministry of Education issued directives to provide government subsidies for school meals, specifically targeting malnourished and underprivileged children (Kishiyama and Kurotaki 2021: 28; Shimizu 2023:

44). By 1934, this initiative had expanded to serve over 380,000 children across 11,000 schools nationwide. These early programs not only provided sustenance but also sought to address broader social inequalities (Kishiyama and Kurotaki 2021: 28).

Following World War II, Japan faced severe food shortages, leading to widespread malnutrition among children. In 1946, school lunches were reinstated with the support of international aid, including donations from organizations such as LARA (Licensed Agencies for Relief in Asia) and UNICEF. These programs supplied essential nutrition through bread, powdered milk, and simple side dishes (Kishiyama and Kurotaki 2021: 28). The School Lunch Act (*Gakkō Kyūshoku Hō*), enacted in 1954, formalized school lunches as a national initiative. This law established a framework to promote children's physical and mental development while improving public dietary habits through education. It also introduced government subsidies to ensure the program's sustainability, transitioning school lunches from emergency relief to a standardized component of daily education (Kishiyama and Kurotaki 2021: 29).

The program is guided by Article 2 of the School Lunch Act, originally enacted in 1954 and substantially amended in 2008, which outlines its key objectives: promoting health through proper nutrition, fostering dietary understanding and habits, enhancing social skills through communal meals, encouraging respect for nature and life, acknowledging the contributions of those involved in food production and provision, promoting cultural appreciation of food, and providing insights into food systems. These objectives reflect the program's multifaceted role, which extends beyond nourishment to encompass education, cultural preservation, and environmental awareness. Central to these objectives is the philosophy of *shokuiku*, or food education, which aims to cultivate a deep understanding and appreciation of food, its sources, and its cultural significance. The 2008 revision further emphasized traditional food culture, cooperative spirit, and respect for life and nature, reinforcing the importance of norms and values in school lunches (Yamanouchi and Shikata 2021: 30). Consequently, lunch periods are not merely breaks but structured opportunities to instill these principles, making *shokuiku* a cornerstone of Japan's approach to school meals.

Another significant development in the school lunch system followed a tragic incident in 2012 in Chofu City, when a child with a severe milk allergy suffered a fatal reaction after mistakenly consuming a dish containing powdered cheese. This prompted the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) to issue new guidelines in

2015 to address food allergies within school meal programs. The Guidelines for Food Allergy Management in School Lunches (*Gakkō Kyūshoku ni okeru Shokumotsu Arerugī Taiō Shishin*) introduced protocols for minimizing risks and ensuring the safety of children with dietary restrictions, underscoring the evolving need to address diverse student needs (MEXT 2015).

In Japan, the average cost of school lunch was ¥4,688 (approximately \$31.40 USD) per month as of May 2023. It is customary for students to eat the same menu together in their classrooms, with meals typically served by the students themselves. In the meantime, the operational structure of school lunches in Japan has also undergone changes. Two primary models exist: self-operated kitchens (*jikōshiki*) and centralized meal centers (*kyūshoku sentāshiki*). Self-operated kitchens, located within schools, prepare meals onsite and deliver them to classrooms, allowing for freshly prepared meals that maintain optimal temperature and quality. This model also provides an opportunity for students to observe the preparation process, fostering a deeper connection to their meals. However, the costs associated with equipment, facility maintenance, and staffing make this system increasingly challenging for municipalities to sustain.

Centralized meal centers, by contrast, prepare meals for multiple schools from a single location. While this model is cost-effective and efficient, it often compromises meal freshness and menu variety due to the constraints of mass production. The shift toward centralized systems, driven by budgetary considerations, has raised concerns about the ability to accommodate diverse dietary needs, including those of Muslim students requiring halal meals.

Understanding the evolution of Japan's school lunch programs highlights their dual role as both a nutritional and educational tool. However, as Japan's demographic landscape becomes increasingly diverse, there is a pressing need to address the limitations of current systems. Ensuring that these programs evolve to reflect and accommodate the diverse needs of all students is essential for fostering an inclusive environment that upholds the values of equality and mutual respect.

Muslims in Japan and the Becoming of Public School Lunch as a Political Space

In the past, the self-perception of Japan as a culturally homogeneous society (*tanitsu bunka*) was widely circulated both domestically and internationally, despite the historical presence of ethnic minority groups such as Koreans and Chinese

(Tsuneyoshi 2004: 56; Motani 2002: 226). These groups, often referred to as “oldcomers,” have long resided in Japan but remained largely excluded from dominant narratives of national identity.

Since the 1980s, however, a new wave of immigrants—commonly referred to as “newcomers”—has arrived, contributing to Japan's increasing ethnic and religious diversity. Despite this demographic shift, the Japanese government does not officially use the term immigrant (*imin*) in its policy discourse and lacks a comprehensive immigration or social integration policy. As a result, responsibility for immigrant inclusion—particularly in the field of education—has often fallen to local governments.

Scholars have pointed out various forms of exclusion faced by immigrant children in the Japanese public school system (e.g., Motani 2002; Takenoshita et al. 2013). It has also been argued that inadequate institutional support may lead to practices that marginalize these students, resulting in school drop-out even during the compulsory education period or discouraging enrollment in high school (Sakuma 2006).

Among these newcomers are Muslims, whose presence in Japan has become increasingly visible in recent decades. Japan's Muslim population has steadily increased, with the number expected to have reached around 350,000 as of early 2024 (Tanada 2024). Among them, approximately 294,000 are foreign nationals, with the largest groups by country of origin as follows (rounded figures): Indonesia (130,000), Bangladesh (24,000), Pakistan (24,000), Malaysia (7,000), Turkey (6,300), Afghanistan (5,800), Uzbekistan (5,000), Iran (4,200), Egypt (2,000), and Nigeria (2,000) (Tanada 2024). While not all Muslims in Japan are immigrants—some hold Japanese nationality through birth or naturalization—many maintain transnational ties, including through intermarriage or familial connections abroad.

This growing presence has been accompanied by developments in infrastructure supporting religious practices. While there were only fifteen mosques in 1999, this number had risen to over 113 by March 2021, including large complexes in major cities and smaller prayer spaces in suburban areas (Asahi Shimbun 2023). Similarly, the availability of halal food has expanded significantly, with large halal grocery stores emerging in suburban areas to cater to Muslims and a broader audience interested in international cuisine.

Non-Muslim Japanese nationals have also shown increasing curiosity about their Muslim neighbors, as reflected in a proliferation of books focusing on Muslims in Japan (e.g., Okauchi 2023; Suzuki 2023). These publications often delve into topics such as burial practices and mosque construction, highlighting both the challenges and contributions of the

Muslim community. This heightened visibility points to a gradual process of cultural adaptation and mutual learning between Muslims and Japanese society. However, it also underscores the ongoing struggles faced by Muslims as a religious minority in a predominantly non-Muslim society.

Despite improvements in visibility and infrastructure, Muslim families in Japan continue to face significant challenges in reconciling their religious practices with dominant societal norms. Sociologist Shuko Takeshita (2008), in her study of families with Pakistani fathers and Japanese mothers, highlights struggles such as maintaining Islamic dietary laws in school lunches, observing prayer and fasting in secular school environments, and wearing religious clothing like the hijab. Children often experience identity confusion, caught between their Japanese upbringing and Muslim heritage.

These family-level dilemmas reflect broader structural issues within Japan's education system. Educationist Hideki Maruyama (2007) similarly points to the lack of institutional support for Muslim students—citing inadequate halal food options, rigid school rules, and limited cultural sensitivity, particularly toward Japanese Muslim families. He advocates for grassroots, teacher-led efforts to foster inclusion and views Muslim children as potential agents of a more pluralistic society.

While access to halal food is gradually improving, it remains inconsistent outside major cities. Japan's cultural emphasis on homogeneity continues to exert subtle pressure on Muslims to adapt or compromise, with school lunches serving as a daily site of negotiation between faith and conformity. Although measures to accommodate food allergies have been standardized, no equivalent national guidelines exist for religious dietary needs. As a result, decisions are often left to individual schools and teachers. In practice, most schools either provide detailed menus highlighting allergenic or haram items (such as pork) or ask families to prepare packed lunches (Yamanouchi and Shikata 2021; Yamanouchi 2022).

In response, Muslim families have adopted varied strategies. Some parents create “copy school lunch (*kopī kyūshoku*)” that replicate the appearance of school meals using halal ingredients, hoping to prevent their children from being bullied (Yamanouchi and Shikata 2021; Yamanouchi 2022). Others, hindered by language barriers, prepare entirely original packed lunches every morning.

Takeshita (2008) documents similar experiences through testimonies of Muslim mothers, one of whom observes: “Japanese schools have an atmosphere where it is better to be like everyone else, eating the same lunch and wearing clothing similar to other children's. My children can't receive special treatment at elementary school like they did in preschool” (Takeshita 2008: 211).

Echoing this, an online survey conducted by the author in 2023 found that 75 percent of 148 Muslim respondents reported facing significant difficulties with school lunches in Japan. One participant recalled:

I came to Japan when I was in the fourth grade of elementary school. At first, I did not understand Japanese, so I did not realize that I was being bullied for bringing my own lunch. As I began to understand Japanese better and better, I became aware of the bullying and felt that I was different from everyone else, and I really didn't want to bring my lunch box to school during lunch time. (anonymous, translated by author)

This testimony illustrates how dietary restrictions intersect with broader issues of identity and social inclusion. For this child, the lunch box became a symbol of their otherness, exacerbating feelings of alienation within a system intended to promote unity.

Anthropologist Naomichi Ishige, a pioneering figure in the study of food culture in Japan, famously posits that “humans are animals that engage in commensality” (Ishige 2005: 1). Commensality, broadly understood as eating together, has been analyzed both as a social practice and as an analytical concept for exploring various social functions, including—but not limited to—the creation and maintenance of social bonds (Jönsson et al. 2021). School lunches in Japan exemplify this practice, as children eat the same meal in their classrooms, often taking turns serving one another. While this communal dining fosters unity, it also creates challenges for those unable to partake fully due to dietary restrictions.

Salazar (2007) demonstrates how school cafeterias function as more than just spaces for eating; they are political spaces where cultural norms, peer hierarchies, and social belonging are negotiated. His analysis of school cafeterias in the United States reveals how children of Mexican origin navigated their identities through food choices, often experiencing exclusion due to dietary differences. Applying this perspective to Japan, school lunches similarly serve as arenas where cultural conformity is reinforced. For Muslim children, the absence of halal options forces them to navigate a home-school divide, mirroring the struggles faced by other minority groups in multicultural societies.

However, Japan is not alone in grappling with the complexities of religious dietary accommodations in public schools. Research from Europe highlights similar tensions between food, migration, and integration. In the United Kingdom, Alison Twiner, Guy Cook, and Julia Gillen (2009) examined how Muslim parents and students navigate the challenges of halal meal provisions in British schools. While some local authorities and schools have introduced

halal meal options, their study found that misunderstandings, lack of communication, and institutional resistance often prevent effective implementation. Similarly, Roberta Giovine (2014) analyzed school meals for Muslim children in Italy, revealing that despite the growing Muslim population, the absence of halal options fosters a sense of exclusion and impedes social integration. In Denmark, Martha Sif Karrebæk (2014) demonstrated how food practices—such as the distinction between rye bread and halal food—serve as cultural markers, shaping in-group and out-group boundaries among students. These studies emphasize that dietary accommodations are not simply logistical matters but are deeply embedded in broader debates about multicultural coexistence and national identity. Japan’s case, therefore, is not unique in its struggle to balance uniformity with diversity.

Yet, while Japan shares these global challenges, its approach to food in educational settings is shaped by a uniquely strong emphasis on food surveillance and ideology. As Anne Allison (1991) argues, food in Japan—particularly in the context of school and childcare—is not merely about sustenance but is imbued with ideological expectations. In her ethnographic study of Japanese kindergartens, she describes how bento boxes serve as an “ideological apparatus” that reflects maternal devotion and social expectations. A child’s ability to finish their bento is often tied to perceptions of “good mothering,” placing immense pressure on mothers to craft aesthetically pleasing and nutritionally balanced meals. The bento is not simply a container of food; it is a carefully curated message about care, discipline, and social belonging.

This intense scrutiny over food extends beyond home-packed lunches to the *kyūshoku* system. Unlike in many Western countries, where children often have the option to bring their own meals without social consequence, Japan’s emphasis on uniformity and communal eating means that deviations from the prescribed meal—whether for religious, cultural, or medical reasons—are highly visible and sometimes stigmatized. The ideological weight of *shokuiku* further reinforces this expectation, framing school meals as a means to instill national values, shared dietary habits, and respect for food culture. In this environment, dietary accommodations are not merely an issue of policy but a challenge to deeply ingrained social norms surrounding food, conformity, and identity.

By situating Japan’s school meal policies within these broader theoretical and cross-cultural discussions, this study highlights both the universal and uniquely Japanese dimensions of the challenge. While struggles over halal school meals reflect broader global debates on religious accommodations, Japan’s approach to food—where eating is not just a personal or cultural act but a moral and social one—adds another layer of complexity.

Case No.1: Tatebayashi, Gunma Prefecture

Tatebayashi provides a unique lens through which to explore the challenges and adaptations of public school lunch systems in addressing dietary diversity. With a population of approximately 73,750 residents, including 4,088 foreign nationals as of December 2024, the city is home to a notable Rohingya Muslim community. While official statistics are unavailable, it is estimated that over 90 percent of Japan’s approximately three hundred Rohingya individuals reside in Tatebayashi. Additionally, the presence of two mosques built in 2003 and 2006, along with several halal shops, suggests a growing Muslim population in the area.

The settlement of the Rohingya in Tatebayashi is commonly understood to be connected to earlier waves of Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslim migration to the region. Many of these migrants became involved in the used-car export business, a prominent industry in Gunma Prefecture since the 1990s. Through shared religious ties and social networks, Rohingya families found employment opportunities and a support system within these preexisting Muslim communities, contributing to their concentration in Tatebayashi. It is important to note that while “Rohingya” often connotes statelessness or refugee status, not all members of this community in Japan have applied for or been granted refugee status. Their legal statuses vary, including those on different visa categories. This specific community was chosen for this study due to the author’s prior engagement in humanitarian support for Rohingya refugees, which provided long-standing connections and field access. While the focus on the Rohingya reflects this positionality, the findings reveal structural challenges that are shared by Muslim communities more broadly across Japan.

The author conducted face-to-face interviews with representatives of the Tatebayashi City School Lunch Catering Center on December 28, 2022, and December 26, 2023. Additionally, interviews with Muslim mothers residing or previously residing in Tatebayashi were conducted via Zoom. Two current residents were interviewed on November 17, 2022, and one former resident was interviewed on November 21, 2022. Since then, communication has continued through social media and messaging apps, allowing for ongoing but fragmented updates and insights into their experiences. Over the course of one month, the three mothers were asked to share photos of the lunches they prepared for their children as frequently as possible. They also provided detailed information on the costs and time required to prepare these meals.

Discussion with the Center: Systemic Challenges and Religious Dietary Needs

Tatebayashi's school lunch system relies on a centralized public catering center that prepares approximately 3,400 meals daily for all eleven public elementary schools in the city. This system reflects the broader trend in Japan toward centralized meal preparation, prioritizing cost-efficiency and standardization. While the center accommodates dietary needs for students with certain allergies, the same level of support is not extended to those with religious dietary restrictions.

According to data provided by the catering center, nine students in Tatebayashi require specific accommodations for allergies: one student brings a packed lunch while eight receive allergy-friendly meals (egg-free options) prepared by the center. For another one hundred students with less severe allergies, detailed menus are distributed to help them identify and avoid allergenic ingredients. In contrast, around one hundred students, primarily Muslim, bring packed lunches for religious reasons, including adherence to halal dietary practices. These students are concentrated in two elementary schools, reflecting a geographic clustering of the city's Muslim population. Despite their larger numbers compared to students with allergies, there are no national guidelines or policies addressing religious dietary needs, leaving schools and the catering center to manage these cases independently and inconsistently. Typically, families are asked to indicate on a form prior to enrollment whether their child will require school lunches or not, with little to no opportunity for negotiation regarding accommodations.

During discussions with the catering center, representatives emphasized that religious dietary accommodations cannot be equated with food allergy measures. Allergies are seen as "life-threatening" conditions requiring immediate and precise management to prevent severe harm. In contrast, religious dietary needs, while significant, are not viewed as posing immediate physical risks. This distinction underpins the systemic prioritization of allergies over religious practices, reflecting a cultural and operational framework that deprioritizes non-lethal concerns, no matter how deeply meaningful they may be.

The catering center also stressed that religious accommodations are not as straightforward as simply providing meals that meet dietary requirements. Japan's school lunch program is deeply rooted in *shokuiku*, which emphasizes locally sourced, seasonal ingredients and adherence to strict national nutritional standards. Representatives argued that offering halal-compliant meals as an isolated solution would

undermine the educational goals of *shokuiku*. For example, serving meals that are technically halal but lack cultural or nutritional alignment with the program's principles would conflict with its broader purpose of fostering respect for nature, food systems, and shared dietary habits. This deeply ingrained philosophy creates a structural barrier to integrating religious accommodations into the existing framework.

Concerns about the workload on classroom teachers were also central. Teachers play a unique role in Japan's school lunch system, overseeing mealtime activities while managing accommodations for students with allergies. Expanding this responsibility to include religious dietary needs would further strain their already demanding schedules, often leaving them with little time to eat their own lunches. This practical challenge was presented as a key reason for the resistance to implementing religious accommodations.

The catering center highlighted its own operational constraints, particularly the increased demands on food sampling (*kenshoku*) that would come with halal meal options. Sampling currently ensures food safety and quality, but accommodating religious guidelines would require additional testing and oversight, significantly increasing the workload for catering staff. While the center acknowledged this as a challenge, it framed the issue of teacher workload as a more critical barrier.

Administrative compartmentalization also emerged as a significant obstacle. While menus for allergy-friendly meals are created by city-employed nutritionists, standard menus are determined at the prefectural level. This division of responsibilities makes coordinated efforts to address religious dietary needs particularly challenging. The lack of integration between local and prefectural authorities exacerbates delays and creates confusion about where decisions should be made. This vertical administrative structure (*tatewari gyōsei*) not only hinders flexibility but also makes it difficult for individual catering centers to innovate or address unique community needs.

When discussing fairness and inclusivity, the catering center questioned whether prioritizing accommodations for Muslim students would be equitable. They noted that other groups with specific dietary needs, such as those stemming from non-Muslim religious practices or less severe allergies, might also seek similar accommodations. Additionally, they highlighted the diversity within the Muslim community itself, pointing out that interpretations of halal practices vary. The lack of clear guidelines for addressing these variations makes it difficult to design a universally acceptable solution. These concerns, combined with the absence of national policies, leave schools and catering centers uncertain about how to proceed.

As a potential interim solution, the center suggested community-driven approaches, such as partnering with local halal food providers or Muslim organizations to offer catered meals. However, while this could address immediate needs, it shifts the burden away from public services, which are meant to ensure equity and accessibility for all students, regardless of their background. Such approaches risk perpetuating systemic exclusion rather than addressing the structural barriers inherent in the current school lunch system.

In summary, the discussions revealed a multifaceted challenge. On one hand, deeply embedded philosophies like *shokuiku* and operational constraints limit the flexibility of the current system. On the other, societal and structural barriers, such as the absence of national guidelines and the variability within religious practices, complicate efforts to accommodate dietary diversity. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive reevaluation of how Japan's school lunch programs can adapt to an increasingly diverse population while upholding their educational and nutritional objectives.

Struggles of the Muslim Mothers: Different Ways of Navigation

In prior research, it has been noted that dietary restrictions based on religious beliefs are often perceived as less critical than food allergies. This disparity arises from the understanding that while allergies can pose life-threatening risks, the consequences of consuming foods prohibited by religious laws are nonlethal (Kurokawa 2022: 59). This systemic bias is evident in Tatebayashi, where approximately one hundred Muslim children bring packed lunches due to the lack of halal options, yet no systemic accommodations have been

implemented. In addition, there have been reports of cases where Rohingya children were bullied or harassed by their peers simply because they brought different lunches (Jōmō Shimbun 2023; Mainichi Shimbun 2020). This highlights the urgent need to implement measures to address the situation.

To understand how Muslim mothers in Tatebayashi navigate this situation, interviews were conducted with six mothers of Rohingya children. Most of these mothers are first-generation Rohingya immigrants who arrived in Japan in the 1990s or later. Unlike longer-settled Muslim communities from Pakistan or Bangladesh, the Rohingya community in Japan is smaller, less institutionally recognized, and often marked by precarious legal status. While some women themselves hold valid residence visas, several noted that their husbands or other family members were either on provisional release from detention or had overstayed their visas. These legal insecurities not only constrain access to social services but also create an atmosphere of uncertainty that shapes everyday decision-making—including school-related matters.

Compared to second-generation Muslim families with more established cultural and linguistic capital, these Rohingya mothers are often navigating the Japanese education system for the first time, with limited fluency in Japanese and few support networks. Their position at the intersection of legal vulnerability, cultural difference, and institutional neglect highlights the need to consider not only religion but also migration history and socio-legal status when analyzing the challenges surrounding school lunch inclusion.

In what follows, I focus on three of these mothers—A, B, and C—each of whom represents a different strategy for addressing their children's dietary needs within the public school lunch system.



FIGURE 1: A meal arranged in containers including rice topped with small dried fish, frozen potato side dishes, and grapes. Photo by A, November 14, 2022.



FIGURE 2: A meal of rice with vegetables, simmered fish, and grapes arranged in metal containers. Photo by A, November 11, 2022.

A's Case

A, a thirty-five-year-old mother, studied Korean at a university in Yangon, Myanmar, and also speaks English, making her one of the more highly educated and multilingual members of her community. She came to Japan in 2010 on a student visa to study Japanese and now holds a work visa, although she is not working due to her recent childbirth. While raising three children, including two elementary school-aged children in Tatebayashi, she continues to pursue the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N1, the highest level of the standardized Japanese language exam.

A's husband, originally employed in the car-dismantling industry, now also runs a barbecue restaurant and is known as a shrewd and assertive entrepreneur. His success, however, comes with long hours—he is rarely home, leaving A to shoulder most parenting responsibilities alone.

Originally unfamiliar with nutrition, A began watching Japanese television programs about food and health, motivated by a desire to provide her children with meals comparable to the school lunches they cannot eat. Each morning, she spends around ¥600 (\$4 USD) and twenty-five minutes preparing bentos. Although she initially included ethnic dishes like curry, she now avoids strong-smelling spices out of concern that her children might be bullied. Instead, she prepares nutritionally balanced meals with fruits and vegetables inspired by Japanese-style lunches, though her own versions are typically simpler and less elaborate than the aesthetically refined Japanese bentos often featured in media.

Her children often express a desire to eat school lunch, and A occasionally tries to recreate school menu items at home, though she finds unfamiliar dishes difficult. She learns how to cook Japanese food from YouTube but sometimes struggles to imagine the intended taste as she has never eaten many of the dishes herself. She feels burdened by the daily routine of lunch-making but has not approached the school directly—partly due to her lack of confidence in Japanese, and partly because she believes that mothers with older children should take the lead in negotiations.

Despite her hesitations, A is deeply engaged in efforts to improve the situation. She regularly participates in online meetings organized by the author, including the discussion with a city council member. A is a diligent student in the author's Japanese class and is also attuned to broader societal trends. She has expressed concern about the recent rise in xenophobic rhetoric during Japanese elections, which adds to her caution in speaking out publicly.

Additionally, A has traveled abroad and compared Japan's halal food infrastructure with other countries. On a trip to

Thailand, she was impressed by the availability of halal-certified products in convenience stores, lamenting Japan's relative lack of such options. She expressed hope that Japan might one day offer a similarly accessible and inclusive food environment for Muslims.

B's Case

B, a forty-year-old mother, arrived in Japan in 2012 on a spouse visa. She studied computer science at a university in Yangon and understands English, though she relies more heavily on it than Japanese in her daily life. Her husband runs a car-dismantling business, and B supports his work in an assistant-like capacity while also raising two children aged seven and ten, who attend elementary school in Tatebayashi.

She fondly recalls the time when her children attended a preschool that provided halal meals, which she also enjoyed during a trial lunch day for parents. After entering elementary school, however, her children were no longer able to eat school lunch—an experience that initially shocked her. Nevertheless, she accepts the situation and believes her children understand their dietary limitations.

B spends about ¥370 (\$2.50 USD) and twenty-two minutes each morning preparing lunch. Unlike A, she does not attempt to replicate the school menu; instead, she prioritizes simplicity and focuses on foods her children will actually eat. While she understands the nutritional value of vegetables, she avoids including them when she knows her children will leave them uneaten. Her approach is grounded in practicality: Since school lunch is just one of three daily meals, she sees no need to overthink its nutritional content. Her children have occasionally received comments from classmates that their lunches “smell different,” though they have also been complimented at times.

B avoids interactions with other parents and consciously distances herself from opportunities for engagement. For example, although she participates in PTA activities, she chooses tasks that require no verbal exchange, such as monitoring children's safety on their way to school. This aversion to social interaction also explains why she has never considered negotiating with the school about introducing halal school lunches. She prefers to remain in the background, avoiding even low-stakes conversations in school settings.

Although she previously attended Japanese classes at a community center for three years, these were discontinued during the COVID-19 pandemic, further limiting her opportunities to build language skills and connect with others.



FIGURE 3: Lunch boxes containing bread rolls and rice balls wrapped in seaweed. Photo by B, September 9, 2022.

C's Case

C, a thirty-three-year-old mother who arrived in Japan in 2002 and acquired Japanese citizenship, lives in Tokyo after relocating from Tatebayashi. Her five children, aged two to twelve years, attend a school with a self-operated kitchen (jikōshiki), which provides detailed menus akin to those for allergy accommodations, marking non-halal ingredients in red. This system allows C to prepare substitute meals only on days when prohibited items are served, significantly reducing her workload compared to preparing complete packed lunches daily. On average, she spends ¥250 (\$1.70 USD) and sixty minutes per meal.

The substitute meals she prepares closely replicate the school menu, using halal-compliant ingredients. For instance, when nikujaga (meat and potato stew) is on the menu, she replaces pork and mirin with appropriate substitutes to align with halal dietary laws (as shown in the photo). This approach ensures her children can enjoy meals similar to their classmates.

For C, school lunches carry meaning far beyond convenience. She sees them as a vital opportunity for her children to eat vegetables they usually refuse at home, thanks to the communal atmosphere of mealtimes. More importantly, school lunches are one of the few chances for her children to engage with Japanese food culture, as she rarely cooks Japanese dishes at home and such experiences are otherwise limited to eating out.



FIGURE 4: Packed lunches prepared in two metal lunch boxes, with rice, cooked chicken, and sponge cake. Photo by B, September 12, 2022.

C's proactive preparation began eight months before her eldest child entered school. Recalling how she herself was bullied in childhood for bringing a lunchbox, she was determined to prevent her children from experiencing the same alienation. Although the school ultimately decided it could not provide halal meals, they offered a compromise by sharing detailed menus with clear ingredient labeling. C has since maintained ongoing communication with teachers and the school nutritionist, suggesting feasible accommodations. For example, she successfully lobbied for the replacement of gelatin-based yogurt with a gelatin-free alternative, which is now served to all students.

C's ability to advocate so effectively stems not only from her fluency in Japanese, but also from the advice and support she received from a high school friend who works as a nutritionist. This network helped her build constructive relationships with school staff and strengthened her confidence to speak up. Unlike A and B, who hesitate to approach schools due to language or cultural barriers, C's case highlights how linguistic skills, social capital, and institutional responsiveness can enable successful, inclusive practices.

Encouraged by her experience in Tokyo, C extended her support to other Rohingya mothers in Tatebayashi. However, her efforts were met with institutional resistance, and unlike



FIGURE 5: A bowl of *nikujaga*, a home-cooked stew with potatoes, carrots, onions, and pieces of halal chicken. Photo by C, November 22, 2022.

in Tokyo, little progress was made. Beyond the institutional barriers, C also encountered emotional and social tensions in her leadership role. Discussions among Rohingya parents revealed divergent views. When the municipality considered making school lunches free, some parents—upon hearing that children who brought lunches from home for religious reasons might receive a subsidy—argued that halal meals were no longer necessary. Others questioned the importance of eating the same food as Japanese classmates in the first place. These attitudes left C feeling isolated and discouraged. Reflecting on these moments, she remarked, “If you haven’t been bullied for bringing a lunchbox, you might not understand how important school lunch really is.” Having attended Japanese elementary and junior high schools herself, C occupies a unique position among her peers—one that helps her bridge cultural gaps, but also renders her more vulnerable to misunderstanding within her own community. Her story vividly illustrates both the everyday efforts for inclusion and the tensions that emerge when consensus is elusive within a diverse community. Although her efforts have not resulted in structural changes in Tatebayashi, they represent

an important form of grassroots leadership—one rooted in lived experience, empathy, and a vision for a more inclusive future.

The experiences of A, B, and C reveal both shared struggles and distinct approaches in navigating the challenges of accommodating halal dietary needs within the Japanese school lunch system. These mothers do more than just react to a lack of institutional support. Through their everyday efforts—like preparing special meals or talking to school staff—they play a key role in deciding whether their children feel included or left out at school. A common challenge among all three mothers is the significant burden placed on them due to the lack of institutional support for religious dietary accommodations. This systemic gap prevents their children from fully participating in the communal experience of school lunches—a vital aspect of Japanese school life that fosters social inclusion and cultural education.

Despite these shared struggles, each mother has adopted a distinct strategy to address the issue. A focuses on modifying food from her country of origin to make it less conspicuous by avoiding the use of strong-smelling spices, which she fears might make her children targets of bullying. B takes a pragmatic approach, preparing simple and practical lunches that her children can easily finish, without attempting to replicate school-provided meals. In contrast, C modifies Japanese food itself to make it halal, using the school’s lunch menu as a guide. She prepares partial alternative meals while also engaging directly with school officials to negotiate accommodations, such as detailed menus and occasional adjustments to the school menu. These differing strategies highlight the diverse ways in which Muslim mothers navigate the challenges posed by the school lunch system, shaped by their individual circumstances, resources, and levels of engagement with the schools.

While the Tatebayashi case centers on Rohingya families, the dilemmas they face—balancing religious dietary practices with the expectations of Japan’s uniform school lunch system—are shared by Muslim communities across Japan. The choice to highlight the Rohingya stems from the author’s prior connections, but the findings point to structural issues that transcend any single group. However, the Rohingya community also faces specific vulnerabilities that may intensify these struggles. In some cases, family members—especially male heads of households—have experienced periods of undocumented residence or prolonged refugee application processes. This legal precarity can lead to reluctance in approaching schools or public institutions to request accommodations, further compounding the barriers to inclusion.

Case No.2: Sakai Town, Ibaraki

In recent years, efforts to accommodate Muslim students' dietary needs in Japanese public schools have been largely absent, particularly at the elementary level. Nonetheless, past literature reveals that such measures, while rare, have been implemented in isolated cases, predominantly in self-operated kitchen (*jikōshiki*) schools. These initiatives are often driven by specific factors, such as proximity to universities with foreign communities, a high concentration of international students, or the dedication of nutritionists passionate about promoting dietary inclusivity. Examples include offering halal lunch options alongside standard menus, providing flexible alternatives like milk-only meals, or adjusting fees for reduced consumption. However, these cases remain the exception rather than the norm. Moreover, some schools opt to stay anonymous, fearing public scrutiny or backlash, which further underscores the challenges of implementing inclusive practices on a broader scale.

Sakai, a small town in Ibaraki Prefecture, provides an illuminating case of the complexities involved in incorporating dietary diversity into Japan's public school lunch programs. With a population of 23,937 as of January 2025, including 1,537 foreign residents, the town represents a microcosm of Japan's increasing multiculturalism. Among the foreign residents are significant numbers of Vietnamese, Filipinos, Brazilians, and Indonesians, each exceeding one hundred individuals. However, these groups represent only a portion of the town's foreign population, reflecting a broader range of nationalities.

The town's centralized catering facility prepares meals for 1,349 elementary school students across four schools, along with 507 students in neighboring Goka Town. Despite its small scale, the center emphasizes *shokuiku*, Japan's food education philosophy, incorporating regional, international, and seasonal dishes into the monthly menu.

Sakai's leadership has explored innovative approaches to food inclusivity, engaging with external experts like Koji Fujiharu, a chef and restaurateur, who is known for his expertise in vegan and low-carbohydrate cuisines. Inspired by these conversations, Mayor Masahiro Hashimoto, currently serving his third term, advocated for dietary inclusivity as part of the town's school lunch program. During the fourth 2023 Regular Assembly Meeting, he stated:

In other countries, if you say vegan, there are proper vegan dishes, and if you say halal, there are proper halal dishes. In contrast, Japan's culture around such dietary practices is underdeveloped. While Tokyo is said to have the most Michelin-starred restaurants in the world, the awareness of concepts like halal and vegan remains quite

low. During a recent discussion, we [Mayor and Fujiharu] talked about offering dishes like vegan meals, which children with allergies could also enjoy, at least once a year as part of food education. The idea was met with enthusiasm, with [Fujiharu] even expressing interest in supervising the initiative. Currently, school lunches require children with allergies to bring their own meals or refrain from eating altogether. But if we could offer meals once a year that cater to these children, meals that are also delicious and leave other children saying, 'Wow, is this really allergy-free?'—such as gluten-free dishes—it would align perfectly with the principles of food education. (Sakai Town 2023, translated by the author)

Building on this philosophy, the catering center introduced a pilot halal lunch program in September 2024. This initiative, part of the monthly "World Menu (Sekai no Kondate) program," aimed to provide students with a learning experience about global cuisines while accommodating thirty-five Muslim students in Sakai Town and four in Goka Town. The menu featured squid tempura, tamago-don (egg rice bowl), miso soup, rice, apple juice, and frozen mandarin oranges. Halal soy sauce was specially procured, and kelp broth replaced the standard bonito-based dashi. Utensils and equipment were sanitized but not replaced, and the meal was offered only to families who provided consent. As such, the meal was not strictly halal by regular standards. For twenty-three foreign students at Sakai Town Elementary School, this represented their first opportunity to participate fully in the school lunch experience. Parents expressed gratitude for the effort, appreciating the attempt to accommodate their children's dietary needs.

Notably, it is extremely rare for a centralized catering center (*kyūshoku sentā*)—as opposed to a *jikōshiki* school kitchen—to implement such an initiative, making this case particularly unique. Media coverage brought national attention to the program, with articles in major newspapers like *Nikkei Shimbun* (2024) and *Mainichi Shimbun* (2024). However, the response on social media was polarizing, with posts critical of the initiative going viral:

There is no need to exclude Muslims, but why should Japanese people have to adapt and impose other cultures on themselves? This is suicidal for Japan. Are you stupid? It's neither right nor left—it's just common sense. Moreover, it's a religious activity and violates the Constitution.

(Ishii 2024). This post garnered forty-five thousand likes.

Forced diversity in the name of inclusion. If diversity is the goal, then Muslim children who want to eat halal food should bring their own lunches. Japanese schools are meant to educate Japanese children. It's the Muslims who should adapt. Why should Japanese people in Japanese schools be forced to accommodate halal food? Is diversity simply forcing Japanese people to endure and compromise unilaterally? This is why "diversity" and "multicultural coexistence" are often dismissed as the excuses of invaders.

(T.M. 2024). This post garnered twenty-five thousand likes.

The catering center received numerous emails and calls, some questioning the authenticity of the halal meal, while others expressed xenophobic concerns about promoting foreign influence. An official noted that while there was no negative feedback from parents, the backlash from outsiders was overwhelming, casting doubt on the feasibility of similar initiatives in the future.

The backlash highlights the persistent societal tensions between Japan's historical emphasis on homogeneity and its evolving multicultural reality. Critics often frame such initiatives as undermining traditional values, reflecting a broader unease with cultural change in a rapidly globalizing world. This resistance underscores the need for public discourse that bridges traditional cultural identity with the realities of diversity.

Conclusion

This study highlights how the principle of uniformity in Japan's school lunch system, combined with administrative compartmentalization, creates structural barriers to the inclusion of religious minorities. Institutional inflexibility, administrative compartmentalization, and Japan's cultural emphasis on uniformity in public services create significant obstacles to inclusive meal practices. Unlike the well-established allergy accommodation guidelines, religious dietary needs remain an unresolved issue, often left to the discretion of individual schools.

The contrasting cases of Tatebayashi and Sakai shed light on these challenges. Tatebayashi exemplifies the struggles of municipalities constrained by systemic inertia and limited cultural understanding, where well-meaning staff lack the tools to act within rigid vertical structures. Conversely, Sakai showcases the potential of top-down leadership to drive inclusivity through a halal meal pilot program, though its backlash underscores the societal resistance to multicultural adaptation. These cases highlight the dual necessity of structural reforms and societal education to enable meaningful change.

At the same time, the experiences of three Muslim mothers navigating these systemic gaps reveal the human dimensions of this issue. One mother strives to adapt Japanese food into halal meals despite limited resources; another prepares practical lunches to avoid cultural tensions; and a third leverages her social capital and linguistic fluency to negotiate accommodations. These personal stories underscore the everyday burdens placed on families in the absence of institutional support, pointing to the pressing need for

national-level reforms that account for both structural and personal realities.

Moving forward, several concrete steps are necessary. In the short term, municipalities could collaborate with local halal food providers to create community-driven catering solutions, supported by public subsidies to ensure affordability. At the same time, national nutritional guidelines should be revised to allow greater flexibility in accommodating religious dietary practices without compromising nutritional goals. Schools might adopt models similar to allergy accommodations by offering alternative menus—such as meals that exclude pork and alcohol—to ensure all students can participate in communal dining. Finally, incorporating religious and cultural literacy into the school curriculum would help foster empathy and reduce the stigma often associated with dietary differences.

Japan's school lunch programs now stand at a crossroads. By embracing diversity on the plate, the nation has an opportunity to redefine its educational and cultural values—fostering a society that not only cherishes its traditions but also evolves toward a more inclusive and equitable approach to shared meals in an increasingly globalized world. ☺

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