

The Issue of Gender Equality in Japan: Breaking Down Barriers and Empowering Women

持続可能な社会の実現に向けた課題を
ジェンダー平等の視点で考察する

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Abstract

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are at the forefront of discussions on how to improve our lives and well-being and to promote sustainability and equality for all. The SDG number 5 states the importance of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Japan has been identified as a country that needs to improve its gender disparity in a number of international surveys. This paper argues there is an ideal path Japanese women are expected to follow and such traditional norms largely affect social practice in Japan. Women are limited in career opportunities and forced to play multi-roles both inside and outside the home. In line with changing societal attitudes, women's views and experiences must be taken into account when forming policy. One of the keys is to increase the number of female political leaders, since current policies tend to favor the status quo and focus on preserving traditional gender roles. Finally, we argue that it is important to overcome traditional attitudes toward women that are still common in Japanese society if the country is to thrive and contribute as an inclusive democracy on the international stage.

Keywords: gender issues, female in leadership positions, political participation of women, Gender Equity Index

Introduction

Recently, gender issues have been making headlines in Japan. The first female city council member was harassed by a male colleague in Kagoshima, and another female candidate was pressured to give up on running for the council. Before the period of Japan's rapid economic growth, women's work opportunities were limited. A typical woman got married and stayed home to raise the children, while the male was the sole breadwinner. This was the life of a typical Japanese woman, with the notion that a woman belonged in the home. After the bubble economy burst in the 1990s, Japan entered three decades of negative growth defined by far-reaching

change in society whereby a sole breadwinner was no longer enough to support a family and women's roles expanded as they entered the workforce.

In recent years, women who had been oppressed by social conflicts have begun to speak out in an effort to create a society in which it is easier for them to work. Inspired by the #MeToo movement, a Japanese woman started her own movement, #KuToo, to show her pain in being forced to wear high heels to work. In this paper, the authors examine the barriers that Japanese women are facing and the reasons why the gender gap is difficult to close in Japan. They also consider future directions regarding policy on creating a society in which women

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and men are able to thrive on equal terms.

The importance of understanding ‘traditional’ norms

Gender disparities in Japan still need to be improved despite the country being the world’s third largest economy. In the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report released by the World Economic Forum, Japan was ranked 116th out of 146 countries, and this low ranking has been getting attention from the international community. We claim that the cause of the low ranking of Japanese women in the Gender Equity Index stems from lack of understanding of the role that women should play in a modern society by government officials, and policy that is designed to improve the position of women in society actually works to preserve current gender roles.

One of the characteristics of gender division of work in Japan is affected by ‘traditional norms’³⁾ A comparison of housework and childcare-related time for couples with children under 6 years of age shows that in 2016 for dual-earner households, wives spent an average of 160 minutes per week on housework and 167 minutes on childcare, while husbands spent an average of just 13 minutes on housework and 29 minutes on childcare. For households with a gainfully employed husband and an unemployed wife, the wife spent 222 minutes on housework and 296 minutes on child care, while the husband spent 7 minutes on housework and 33 minutes on child care.

A woman's primary role is considered as taking care of the family and being a good mothers and wife. The Japanese female labor force participation rate can be represented as an M-curve. Women participate in the labor market until they get married or/and have a child and are then expected to prioritize their families.⁴⁾ (Figure 1). During the period of raising children, the rate of female workers declines and once childcare ends they eventually return to the labor force. However, women miss a crucial time to obtain experience at work when they are younger. Aulia, B. and Iskandar, K. (2021)

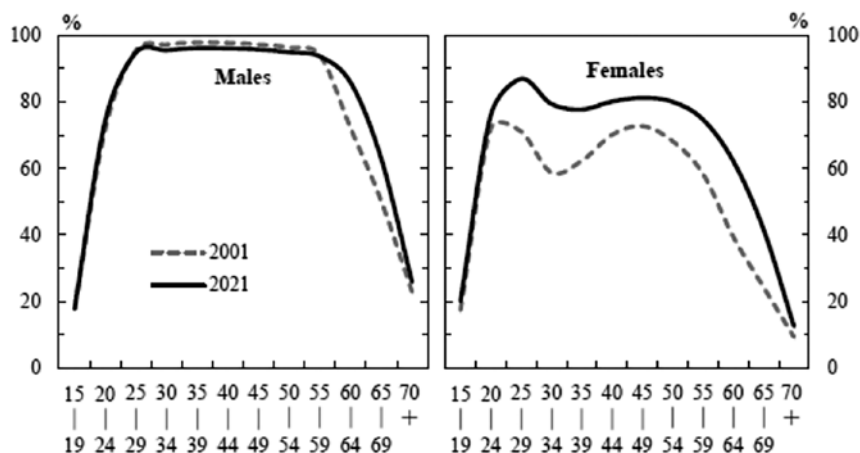
points out the reason for the low number of females in management positions is because of insufficient knowledge and experience that they would have gained if their career plans had not been interrupted. In 2020, the proportion of non-regular female workers in the 15-24 age group was 27.4%; the 25-34 age group was 34.3%; the 35-44 age group was 49.6%; the 45-54 age group was 56.6%; the 55-54 age group was 66.7%, and those of the over 65 age group was 82%. The proportion of female non-regular workers increased with age in subsequent years.⁵⁾ This explains when women want to return to the labor market after raising children or taking care of the elderly members of her family; most of them have already missed numerous career opportunities.

These embedded traditional norms regarding gender roles have also created discrimination not only in hiring practices of companies, but also across all sectors, including education. In 2018, it became public that a medical university had been making it difficult for female applicants to pass the entrance exam by grading female candidates harshly compared to their male counterparts, or even failing them entirely. These scores had been manipulated for years. Other similar scandals soon followed. Behind this was the concern that the careers of female physicians tend to be shorter than their male counterparts.⁶⁾ Female medical students did not intend to practice medicine for long periods of time and were likely to take extended maternity leave or leave the profession once they married and had children.⁷⁾ The ratio of male to female physicians in 2020 was 77.2% and 22.8% in Japan.⁸⁾ It is the lowest proportion among OECD countries (except Mexico). Latvia and Estonia show the highest share of female doctors 74%, Australia 43% and USA 37%.⁹⁾ One official of Tokyo Medical University that restricted female incoming students was concerned that this would have a negative impact on the affiliated hospitals. After graduating from a university, it is common for students to work at hospitals affiliated with the school from which they graduated. This exam scandal was covered on the news not only in Japan but also around the world.¹⁰⁾

Due to the prolonged economic downturn in Japan, women are having to stay in the workforce longer. According to Statistical Handbook of Japan 2022 , as

the enhancement of legal policies in order to balance working and child raising, the M- curve has grown gradually flatter.

Figure 1: Labour Force Participation Rate by Gender and Age Group¹²⁾



Source: Statistics Bureau, MIC.

While it is true that the government has adopted a variety of policies to promote women's advancement in society, evaluations of these policies are still controversial in terms of controlling their own lives. This is because the Japanese economy has been stagnant since the 1990s, and it has become more difficult to secure work.¹³⁾ As a result, women are now expected to contribute to the family financially as well as to raise children.

Allowing women to build their careers and not interrupting them due to marriage or child rearing should be a priority for policy makers. These days, the declining birthrate in Japan has become a serious issue and the government has introduced various support programs to increase the birthrate; however, the concern can not be easily solved. Yamada (2019 cited in Nishimura, T. (2020)) points out that countermeasures to Japan's low birthrate were based on the social customs and values of Western countries and ignores the inherent values of Japanese society. Policies that are effective in one society are not necessarily effective in another society.

Many women are therefore confused by being expected to perform so many roles such as to: get married, have several children, do housework, and keep working after giving birth. It can be said that policy makers must understand the reality of the multitude of tasks that women are faced with and come up with realistic solutions.

The lack of female participation in politics has been criticized in terms of whether women's voices are being reflected in policy. The next section will discuss several case studies of female participants and candidates in the political process in Japan and the reason why politics in Japan tends to discourage female participation in running for office.

Barriers to Women's Political Candidacy

Differences between urban and rural areas of Japan in terms of people's view towards female politicians needs to be taken into account when considering women's political ambitions. One of the reasons why there are

less females in a leadership role is because they do not wish to be leaders. The reason why women hesitate to take a leadership role is that they feel no matter how hard they try their efforts won't be recognised and they lack role models,¹⁴⁾ especially female political figures.

Especially In rural areas, there is a strong tendency for the custom of men who are the organizers of the community and relatives to become council members over several generations. In many cases, there are hurdles for women to run for a city council, with the attitude such as "you are just a woman". There are numerous instances where family members do not allow women to run for local elections. For example, Ms. Kamigaki, a native of Izumi City, Kagoshima Prefecture, returned to her hometown after graduating from a junior college in Fukuoka Prefecture, and became involved in community activities. Having formed a committee for the city's PTA and exchanged views with the city's Board of Education, she became a member of the city's Gender Equality Roundtable and participated in meetings of the Cabinet Office. In 2010, after consulting with her husband, she decided to run for city council. She discussed the idea with her husband's father, who had taught at a local junior high school for a long time and was well known, but he was furious, saying that he would never allow it. Despairing that the issue stemmed just because she was a female, she decided to abandon her candidacy. She left her hometown and moved to Kanto in 2015, where she became involved in supporting the lower house election in 2017. Unlike the countryside, the enthusiasm of the volunteers was incredible.¹⁵⁾ Even if a female candidate appeals to others regarding her political views and aims to be elected by not relying on the three *ban-s*, they are often unsuccessful.

In another case, for the first time in the 2019 municipal election, two female councilors ran for the Tarumi City Council in Kagoshima Prefecture, which until then had no female councilors. One of the female candidates, Ms. Takahashi, was runner-up. She reflected on being told, 'You have a harsh attitude', and/or 'You are just a woman'. In Tarumi city, just like other country cities,

city council members are positioned as representatives of the community and there is a tendency for the entire community to support them. Ms. Takahashi "conducted an election that did not rely on her family or blood relations," and traveled around the city in her campaign car. She recalls, "I wanted to appeal to the community and broaden my support, but grassroots politics is difficult in a country town".¹⁶⁾

Some councils are unopposed to women running in local elections, yet often no women run. In Aomori Prefecture, there is a council with no female council members and where nobody votes, with the election result pre-determined beforehand by the top male village leader. Rokkasho Village, where the spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant is located, has had no female council members since 1947, when records began to be kept. Villagers say this is because "there is a deep-rooted custom that male council members who serve as the organizers of the community and relatives become council members across generations".¹⁷⁾

There are cases where even if a female candidate is elected, she will face various difficulties. Ms. Ikeda was elected as the first female member of the Tarumi City¹⁸⁾ Council (in Kagoshima). This was the first time in twenty-years that a woman had run for city council, and Tarumi was the only city in Japan that had no female council members. During the city council election, Nobuo Kawagoe, a city council member of the Liberal Democratic Party, said, "I don't have high expectations for female council members. In fact, I think it is more difficult to work with them. If you say the wrong words, you may be accused of power harassment or sexual harassment."¹⁹⁾

Female Political Candidate Success Stories

In recent times, there are hints of change regarding female candidate participation in the political process in Japan. In 2022, the first female ward mayor, Satoko Kishimoto, was elected in the Suginami ward of Tokyo in 2022. She returned from Belgium two months before the election and conducted a campaign centered on

policy discussion rather than *dobuita* elections, and won the election making her the third female ward mayor in Tokyo's history. Her winning was also the result of the support of the *Residents Association for a Resident-friendly Suginami Ward Mayor*, a group of residents who felt threatened by the fact that plans for the road expansion project in front of the station and the abolition of the children's center were being implemented under the then three-term male mayor, without fully listening to their concerns. She saw many similarities between the activities of *Restoring Democracy from Local Autonomy*, a political organization that she had been involved with in Europe and the efforts of Suginami Ward. She decided to run for office, convinced that her experience might be able to help her bring about change. There was no room for vote harassment against a candidate.²⁰⁾

Mayor Kishimoto says that this may be due to the fact the election campaign was conducted during the Corona Disaster where meetings were restricted, but also the campaign was not based on the three *ban-s* but rather centered on policy discussion.²¹⁾

To broaden support and sympathy toward the position of women through policy, elections centered on policy discussions make it easier for women and young people with little political experience to participate in politics. Mayor Kishimoto said that *dobuita* elections centered on three *ban-s* place a heavy burden on one candidate in terms of time and energy. If policy discussions take center stage, these burdens will be lessened, the citizens become enlightened and engaged and it will better promote participation in local politics. A similar situation can be found in Kanagawa Prefecture, which has the second highest ratio of female councilors in Japan. Oiso Town and Kamakura City also have in common a climate in which residents are active in spontaneous activities and do not prevent candidacy based on gender, which is also the case in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Active participation in local activities is one of the factors behind the increase in the number of female councilors.²²⁾

The significance of women's participation in politics is

not to be ignored, and it is also necessary in breaking the vicious cycle of male-only policy making. Mayor Kishimoto says that the most important qualities for a politician are "the ability to imagine people in a different position from oneself and the humility to keep learning from the parties concerned about inconveniences they do not know about, and since being sympathetic of others is the essence of political work, it is a job suited to women".²³⁾ At the Asia Pacific Women and Politics Conference, organized by the Asia Pacific Center for Women and Politics, a group of legislators and NGOs from Asian countries, the conference recommended that with women's political participation, corruption, secrecy, and the state of the bureaucracy can all be improved. In addition, gender differences in policy selection are cited as a reason why the number of female legislators should be increased. There are group-specific interests and priorities, and it is necessary to seek solutions based on women's unique perspectives and sensitivities, which are more closely related to daily life in an aging society with a declining birthrate.²⁴⁾ In the National Diet and local councils, the percentage of women among veteran elected officials is lower than that of men.²⁵⁾ This means that women are less likely to be appointed as committee chairpersons or cabinet members. If they can gain experience through successive terms, increase their competence as legislators, and fulfill their responsibilities in key positions, it would present advantages moving forward and lead to long and fulfilling careers in the political sphere. However, today's Japanese system makes it difficult for women to participate in politics until after they have finished raising their children, and as such in this respect, women are at a disadvantage when it comes to career development as lawmakers.

Final Thoughts

In recent years many nations have taken steps to promote gender equality, although many challenges remain. Japan is no exception. The authors lived overseas for many years and wondered why Japan has taken so long to come to terms with the fact that it lags behind other countries in terms of promoting gender

equality and improving the lives and status of women. If we had not lived abroad, we would never have questioned the situation Japanese women are in.

Future issues include correcting the disparity in thinking between rural and metropolitan areas and educating children about political participation. The #MeToo and #KuToo movements, for example, have brought together women who never had the courage to speak out before, and have given them confidence that they can bring about change. It is necessary for women to take part in activities from a young age in which their individual voices are heard and respected and can gain the support and respect they deserve. It is also important for young women to be taught to express their own opinions, to speak up and to engage in discussions with their peers, both male and female express their collective opinions, and to learn the importance of seeking change and improving their living environment.

Finally, there is a tendency for the focus of attention on gender inequalities in Japan to come from outside rather than within. The authors insist that it is important to implement policies at both the national and local level that respect traditional values in the community and actually work to implement such changes, such as promoting women to get involved in the political process so that they can become future leaders and role models for young women. And it is also necessary to work at the grassroots level with local communities to break traditional views of the role of women in society and encourage people to speak up and demand change. It is important to take small steps that add up to make a significant change over time.

Annotation

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- 4) Aulia, B. and Iskandar, K. (2021)
- 5) Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (2022), "danjyo kyodo sankaku hakusyo reiwa 3-nenban" [The White Paper on Gender Equality 2022], Daiisho shuugyo wo meguru jyoukyou [Section 1: Situation of Employment]
- 6) Wheeler (2018)
- 7) same as 6
- 8) Ratio of male to female physicians in 2020 is Male 77.2%, Female 22.8% in 2020, data from Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/ishi/20/index.html>
- 9) OECD (2021)
- 10) BBC News (2018) Tokyo Medical University apologies for changing female exam scores, Asahi Shinbun (2018) Tokyo Medical University lowered female examinees scores since 2011, and other newspaper and broadcasts
- 11) Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan Statistics Japan, *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2022*, p.142
- 12) Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan Statistics Japan, *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2022*, <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/pdf/2022all.pdf#page=1>
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- 15) Akiyama Kuniko. (November 11, 2022), *Josei no Rikkoho ni Omoigakenai Kazoku no Kabe Shutsuba wo Dannen, Kokyoo wo Dete Ima Omou* [Unexpected Family Obstacle to a Woman's Candidacy: Giving Up Running for Office, Leaving the Town and Now Reflecting on It]. *Asahi Shimbun Digital*. <https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASQBX554LQBSULZU005.html>
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- Female City Council Member was Elected]. Tokyo Shimbun, April 22, 2019.
- 18) Tarumi City is located in Kagoshima Prefecture, the southernmost of seven prefectures on the southern island of Kyushu.
 - 19) Nozaki Tomoya. Heta na Koto Iu to Sekuhara: Jimin Shigi no Hatsugen ni Hihan. [Saying the Wrong Thing Can Lead to Allegations of Sexual Harassment: Criticism of LDP City Council Member]. Asahi Shimbun Digital. April 23, 2019.
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