

# Gender inequality in Japan: The status of women, and their promotion in the workplace

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## Abstract

The Constitution of Japan, enacted in 1947, states that gender equality and human rights must be maintained and guaranteed. The constitution was ratified prior to the publication of the UN Declaration on Human Rights of 1948. Nevertheless, Japanese society is presently faced with a high level of gender inequality. In the field of diplomacy, the proportion of Japanese female ambassadors is 3%; in the House of Representatives, the proportion of female politicians is 10.1%. These numbers suggest that women are presently being excluded from decision-making processes – meaning that women's opinions are not being reflected in society, potentially leading to serious violations of human rights. This paper attempts to analyse and verify the reasons for this high level of inequality in Japan, which can be assumed to be deeply rooted in social norms. Using official statistical data, as well as detailed information describing the situation society faces, I analyse the gap between government policy concerning the rights of women and social reality.

**Keywords:** Japan, gender inequality, female managerial rate, public opinion, Abe Shinzo administration

## Introduction

The *Constitution of Japan* was enacted in 1947 and states that gender equality and human rights must be maintained and guaranteed. The document came into existence prior to the *UN Declaration on Human Rights*, which was created in 1948. It can thus be claimed this was a progressive step at the time. Nevertheless, Japanese society is highly unequal from a gender perspective. According to the Global Gender Gap Report by the World

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Economic Forum, Japan was ranked in 111th place from 144 countries in 2016, and in 114th place out of 144 countries in 2017 (World Economic Forum, 2016 and 2017). This gap appears clearly in the diplomatic and political spheres, as well as in the labour market in higher positions. In the field of diplomacy, the proportion of female ambassadors is only 3%, while the proportion of women in the House of Representatives is 10.1% (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018; The House of Representatives, Japan, 2018). These numbers suggest that women are largely excluded from decision-making processes. If this is true, then women's opinions are not reflected in society, potentially leading to serious human rights violations.

This paper aims to analyse the background of the significant gender gap, which is presumably caused by social norms that are deeply rooted in society. Japan has adopted the UN Declaration on Human Rights, and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1985. Furthermore, the current Abe administration is actively promoting the involvement of women in social life and work. An exploration of the cause of the gender gap and the political implications of this is therefore a meaningful research aim. The following sections of the paper present the current position of women in society using statistical data, and explore and analyse the reasons for these outcomes by referring to earlier research and public opinion surveys that were conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and the Cabinet Office.

### **The status quo position of Japanese women in Japanese society**

The Act on the Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace came into force in April 2016, supporting the Abe administration's strategy for strengthening the female workforce. According to this law, companies which have more than 301 employees, as well as central and local governments, are required to draw up and publish a plan for increasing the employment of women in managerial positions according to specified targets: the aim is to have 30% of all managerial positions filled by women by 2020 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2016: 28). This goal indicates that the proportion of female managers actually falls far short of 30% at the present time in both the private and public spheres. Several concrete examples of this fact exist: First, the proportion of female civil servants at the national level in 2015 was 17.6%, and in senior positions only 3.1% (OECD, 2015: 7). According to the Cabinet Office, the proportion of female national civil servants newly hired in 2018 is 33.9%: an increase from the 24.6% in 2008. Among them, women who were taken on as *Sogo-syoku* (i.e. as

career-track civil servants with prospects of promotion) is 32.5% in 2018, while it was 21.7% in 2008. However, the proportion of women in managerial positions (deputy directors of divisions) was only 4.4% in 2017, up from 1.9% in 2008. It is important to note that a career-track national civil servant will usually be promoted to the position of deputy director of a division within around 10 years, while other national civil servants may need more than 20 years to reach such a position. Thus, about 20% of women who entered the national civil service in 2008 would be expected to be deputy directors of divisions in 2018, yet the actual figure is less than 5% (Cabinet Secretariat, 2018, 1-2).

To examine the situation of private companies next, a survey from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2018) may be consulted. According to the findings of this survey, the proportion of women in regular employment in private companies is 24.9%, of which *Sogo-syoku* (with prospects for promotion) is 18.5%. Even when female managers are present in companies, the ratio of female managers to male managers is unbalanced. Some examples: at companies with more than 5000 employees, the female managerial rate is 6.2%: while it is also 6.2% for companies with 300 to 999 employees (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2018: 1-8). Using an illustration of the situation at multinational corporations, the percentage of female employees in the Sony Group at the end of fiscal 2016 was 29%, and women in managerial positions 24%. However, the figures significantly vary domestically and internationally – the proportion of female employees at Sony in Japan is 21%, and the share of women in managerial positions 7%. Therefore, the total figures for female employees, including managerial positions, in Sony is affected negatively by the situation in Japan where the headquarters of the group is located (Sony, 2017: 114-116).

Finally, the (non)representation of women in the political field is also remarkable. Women occupied 10.1% of places in the House of Representatives following elections in October 2017, putting Japan in 158th place from 193 countries. Among them, the proportion of women in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party is even lower, at 7.77% (House of Representatives, Japan, 2018).

### **Discussion and analysis**

From the data above it can be seen that the presence of Japanese women in public positions declines and almost disappears as one moves upward along the ladder of seniority. The asymmetry of the proportion of regular female employment to that in

managerial positions suggests conflict with the principle of equal opportunity as a human right.

To analyse how Japanese citizens feel about the current societal situation, a public opinion poll concerning the promotion of women was conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2016. According to the related data, concerning the question "In (which) occupations and positions should be number of women be increased?", 58.3% of respondents chose "Diet members, and local council members", while 47% of respondents selected "Managerial positions in corporations." Regarding opinions about working women, more than 50% of male and female respondents agreed with the statement that it is better for a woman "to keep her occupation even if she becomes a mother," but as many as 26.3% believed that it is "better for her to leave her job when she becomes pregnant, and get a job again when the child gets older." Just over eight percent (8.4%) agreed that it is "better for her to have a job [only] until she becomes a mother," while 4.7% agreed that it is "better for her to have a job [only] until she gets married." Only 3.3% agreed with the statement that "it is better for females not to have a job". These results suggest that public opinion is generally in favour of women's participation in society and their obtaining important positions, even in the field of politics. However, the following finding also reveals a prevalent opinion that is generally undisclosed: 40.6% agreed with the statement that "Husbands must work outside, and wives must stay at home". The reason for this is mainly because this arrangement is considered better for children: it is hard for mothers to reconcile work with housework, childcare, and nursing care for the elderly. Moreover, 32.8% of those who opposed the above statement that "Husbands must work outside and wives must stay at home" said they disagreed "Because it is possible to continue working while combining housework, childcare, and nursing care for the elderly" (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2016: 9-15). Thus, while welcoming the advancement of women in society, society expects that unpaid domestic work such as childcare and housework should still primarily be done by women. This belief is reflected in the reality that about 60 to 70% of women actually quit their jobs after marriage or childbirth – an issue of serious concern. The main reason why large numbers of women quit their jobs is revealed in the following data from 2005: 40% of women who quit work when married answered "I had no confidence that I could work 'standing together'", regardless of whether this involved full-time or part-time work ('standing together' here refers to the prevalent situation of women who are largely expected to take care of almost all the housework, leaving no time for a paid job). Some women also answered "There is no understanding

about working away from home from husbands and their relatives," a situation which suggests that women need "permission" from their husbands or their husbands' families to work after marriage. Ten percent of respondents said that "There was a marriage/retirement system in the company" (implying basically that women who got married 'had to quit') (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2005: 126-131). This information, taken together with the opinion poll from 2016, suggests that the current situation of Japanese society has not changed so much as it may seem on the basis of some of the survey responses cited above.

In fact, the participation of Japanese men at home is the lowest of any G7 country, and much lower than the OECD average: according to the OECD, in 2014 Japanese women spent 225 minutes per day on housework and childcare, while Japanese men spent an average of 31 minutes per day (the OECD average is 208 minutes per day for women and 90 minutes per day for men). The OECD data itself is mixed: both full-time and part-time work, regardless of gender, are merged. However, the surveys and analyses of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare found there is no significant variation in the time women spend on household assignments that can be associated with their occupational status (such as absence from work, full-time work, part-time work, etc.) (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2001; 2011: 11-12). Women are responsible for most housework and raising children, regardless of their employment situation: full-time housewives as well as women who have a full-time job do most of the unpaid work at home.

This division of labour by gender is a phenomenon that may be found in any country, but the gap in Japan is significant enough to stand out. While women in Japan are expected to do both paid work and unpaid work, men are only expected to engage in paid work. Considering this fact, it is understandable that many women are forced to quit their jobs. An IMF Working Paper (2012) pointed out that the key to escaping Japan's economic stagnation may be found in the female labour force, although the Japanese situation has not improved a lot – and although the situation conflicts with the current policy towards women of the Abe administration (Steinberg and Nakae, 2012: 1-6). Meanwhile, the situation overseas has changed. In the 1970s, the employment rate of Japanese women was 50%, whereas in the Netherlands it was only 20%. The situation reversed by 1990, and the Netherlands presently has a women's employment rate similar to that of the other countries of Northern Europe. Accordingly, it can be said that there has been an improvement in part-time workers' rights in the Netherlands. Even taking the

OECD as a whole, Japan still ranked in the middle in the 1980s for women's employment, but other countries then overtook Japan, and the country has not caught up yet (Steinberg and Nakae, 2012: 26-27; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2014: 8-9). This means that Japan's situation has stagnated, while other developed countries have improved in terms of women's rights and women's participation in society. Rostow (2000), who is widely known for his work on *The Stages of Economic Growth*, stated in a late study that it is crucial whether the fertility rate in Japan increases as this will greatly affect economic growth. However, a higher fertility rate would require a novel form of consensus between men and women which would involve increasing the participation of the latter in the workplace and increasing the amount of work that the former do at home. If nursery schools were established at workplaces and women were better respected as mothers in workplaces, while men shared housework and childcare at home, the fertility rate could be increased (Rostow, 2000; 297-307). As claimed above, however, respect for mothers in their workplaces is clearly lacking in society in Japan, since 60-70% of women actually quit their jobs after they marry/become pregnant.

Moreover, it is questionable whether women quit their jobs to be wives and mothers on a voluntary basis. For example, Yamaguchi (2017) pointed out that nearly 70% of women who quit their jobs due to marriage/childbirth do so because, in reality, there is no hope of continuing to work. Yamaguchi also found that female full-time employees take 26-30 years to obtain the same managerial positions that men achieve within five years, and that female full-time employees after a lifetime spent at a company rise to positions which men reach within 11-15 years. For individuals of the age of 35 to 39 years, during which time promotions to managerial level begin to increase, the proportion of (university graduate) female managers is less than half that of male managers who have only graduated from high school. Yamaguchi stated that social opportunities and rewards are determined by Japanese society not according to "achievement" but rather "ascription." In other words, Yamaguchi claims that when women face this reality after they join labour markets, they lose their motivation to work – and that this is the hidden and real reason for quitting after childbirth or during pregnancy (Yamaguchi, 2017; 60-71). Seeing the obvious gap between Japan and overseas in terms of the situation at national companies like Sony, as described above, what Yamaguchi concludes appears to be valid: the clear existence of greater inequality in Japan compared to abroad is real.

There is a low turnover rate (less than 2%) for women aged 25 to 39 in the field of national civil services. This means that few women in these positions quit their jobs following marriage or childbirth (National Personnel Authority, 2012). However, as stated above, the number of female managerial positions in the national civil service is low. The existence of 'invisible inequality' is thus suggested. If equality existed, female national civil servants in senior positions, as well as the proportion of female ambassadors, would be greater than it is at the present. Together with the case of women who work in the private sector, this point should be deeply considered so that Japanese women's rights are not infringed upon by the phenomenon of ascription.

### **Conclusion, and political implications**

The sections above illustrate the current status of Japanese women, with an explanation of why they are in such a position. The government advocates the necessity of "active female success" and public opinion appears to favour this, but the widespread norm is still that women should play their main role at home, while paid work is only available in low-status positions for women – thus it can hardly be said that equality exists.

Ironically, the female politicians who are in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party are represented in even smaller proportions than female politicians more generally, thus the Abe administration's "active female success" policy seems to be neither persuasive nor feasible. Following this path, it will be difficult to reach the target of having women in 30% of all managerial positions by 2020. As can be seen from the OECD data, public opinions, and Ministry of Health and Welfare data, one of the reasons for the absence of the representation of women in society is the lack of participation of men in familial settings. In brief, what is needed is awareness-raising about male roles: the need for this is also mentioned by Rostow. Policy-making needs to incorporate this goal. If men are actively involved in childrearing and housework, etc., they will be more liable to become conscious of the demands placed on the parties who are responsible for raising their families, and thus to see women as equivalent partners. It will take such a positive development before real equality for both female and male increases at a societal level.

Considering the data which have been presented above, it can be said that the resolution of the issue of gender inequality in society in the near future will be challenging for Japan. However, as Japan has adopted the *UN Declaration on Human Rights* and ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*, the task of promoting a more equal society is an urgent one.

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