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No Momentum for Change:
A Look into the Gender Gap of
Employment and Shifting Perspective
of Women Working in Japan

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Introduction

The discourse on the gender gap in employment is predominantly discussed in developing countries. However, developed countries also face the same problem with different intensities, despite the high number of people who have completed higher education. Women in developed countries still face unequal pay hidden within the triumph from the high rate of women participating in labour (Kunze, 2017; Taylor, 2017). In 2017, the OECD reported that women in developed countries still earn less than men despite their entitlement to university degrees (Taylor, 2017; Kochhar, 2023). The official report from the OECD Council's Ministerial Meeting in Paris 2017 shows the different progress of each country in closing the gender gap in employment and education. For instance, Finland, which is regarded as the top performer country with the lowest gender gap in education (-16.4%), at the same time marked as the bottom performer country due to the high rate of gender pay gap (19.6%) (OECD, 2017). Meanwhile, Japan shows data with a positive correlation to the trend. Japan, as a leading country in education across Asia¹ with a low gender gap rate of -2.7%, has also been one of the bottom performers with a high gender pay gap of 25.9% (OECD, 2017). These findings make it important to investigate how the gender gap in employment persists among developed countries, especially in Japan.

1 Data from EAG (Education at Glance) 2023 collected by OECD, the percentage of 25-64-year-olds in Japan who attained a bachelor's or equivalent tertiary education degree is one of the highest among countries with available data. (34.8 %, rank 2/46, 2023) (OECD, 2024). South China Morning Post (SCMP) also noted Japan as one of the top-ranked education in Asia along with Singapore, Hongkong, and South Korea (Agence France-Presse, 2023).

In 2019, Daichi Mishima in Nikkei Asia wrote that Japan witnessed more women working but opportunities remained unequal, where women still positioned in unequal positions² compared to men (Mishima, 2019). He described that despite more women involved in the workforce, they occupy non-standard jobs³. In 2021, the labour participation rate in Japan indicated an increase. Observed by gender, the rate was 71.3% for males (down 0.1 percentage points from 2020) and 53.5% for females (up to 0.3 percentage points from 2020) (The Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). Two years later, in 2023, the number of women participating in labour generally rising across age groups (Saito, 2024). However, the “M Curve” phenomenon, which is shaped from the number of women who quit from work in their 25 and then back to work in 35-40, persists despite the increase of number.

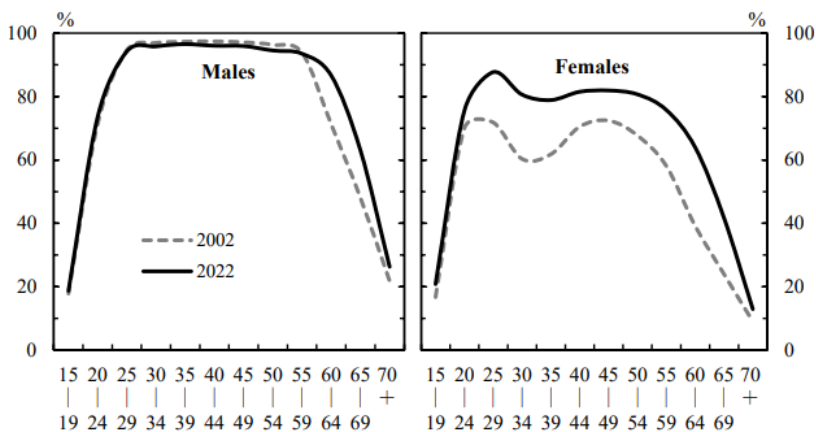


Figure 1. Labour Force Participation Rate by Gender and Age Group (The Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2023)

Note. The graph shows the different patterns of workforce participation among Japanese men and women, which indicates a gap in employment opportunities.

2 Daichi Mishima describes unequal positions as the gap of opportunity faced by Japanese female workers to occupy productive positions, such as managerial. This gap of opportunity leads them to occupy part-time or freelance positions.

3 Namie Nagamatsu defined ‘Non-Standard Workers/Jobs’ as traits that are opposite to that of the ‘standard’ worker, who is a full-time, permanent, and dependent worker (Nagamatsu, 2021). Kambayashi (2017) also defined the meaning of non-standard jobs using the phrase ‘unfavourable working conditions,’ indicated by popular narratives among Japanese people such as ‘part-time’, ‘contract’, or ‘temporary worker agency’.

One main contributor to this increasing number is the Womenomics⁴ policy asserted by former prime minister Shinzo Abe. In promoting the policy, Shinzo Abe encouraged women to take a role in increasing national economic productivity and to fill the gap within the national labour shortage using his repetitive phrase ‘It is time for women to shine’. Moreover, the Japanese government also witnessed a moderate increase in women pursuing higher degrees in university in the last 13 years, reaching 1,3 million in 2022 compared to 2010, which was only 1,1 million (The Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2023). This progress allowed women to be eligible for strategic positions at work.

However, despite carrying the title of a developed country, the increasing number of women participating in the workforce in Japan does not always indicate gender equality. Japanese women still face structural barriers to obtaining fair wages and a less discriminative working culture (Wakana, 2021). For example, when a mother decides to return to work after giving birth and child rearing at age 40, they still get paid less because the wage is decided based on how many years an employee has been working in the company. Despite the fact that they reached age 40 to 50, the seniority-based wage does not apply to them. Moreover, it is also difficult for them to get promoted. As promotion is only open for employees who have worked for the company for more than 5–10 years, female employees automatically do not qualify due to ‘motherhood penalties’ such as early quitting or leaving their jobs due to giving birth and child-rearing (Nagamatsu, 2021). This phenomenon raises the second question of why, despite more females in the workplace, does not accelerate the change inside the employment system. Instead, the inequality remains.

This paper argues that despite the increasing number of Japanese women obtaining higher degrees, historical trajectories of how the Japanese management style is formed affect women’s participation in labour, and the changing view of women working in Japanese society partially promoted by the government with its Womenomics contribute to hinder radical change for gender equality at work. The historical trajectories include the implementation of the idea that men were the

4 Womenomics refers to a policy echoed by late PM Shinzo Abe to enhance Japanese women’s participation in productive sectors such as corporate managerial and high-ranking public officials. Womenomics is also regarded as one of the solutions formulated within Abenomics to stimulate the current stagnant economy (The Government of Japan, 2014)

breadwinners and women as housewives during the Edo era, heavily influencing Japanese people to limit women's participation in strategic positions and equal their pay to men (Kasuya, 2005). The Japanese government, however, lately promoted a policy for women to participate in labour and fulfill the talent pool called 'Womonomics' (The Government of Japan, 2014). Nevertheless, Womonomics is a 'token' policy to overcome labour shortage. This produces a situation where Japanese women focus on making themselves employed rather than breaking the inequality inside the employment system and work culture. This is combined with competitiveness during job hunting. Making 'utilization of women' as resonated through Womonomics sounds more acceptable than bringing equal opportunity for women in the workplace, and concerns are focused on individuals. Hence, a voice for gender equality does not seem a worthy idea and eventually prevents Japanese women from asserting this agenda.

Gender Work Segregation within Japanese-Management Style: A Historical Review

There are two economic shifts in Japan that contributed to more women being involved in the workforce but less change in gender equality. First, the expansion of white-collar jobs started in the Edo period. In Japan, white-collar jobs at least became frequent after the World War, when Japan enjoyed skyrocketing economic growth with a bubble economy (Susato, 1969). However, historically, the work of white-collar jobs essentially started during the Edo period. Takatoshi Mitsui, a Japanese merchant and industrialist, opened draper shops in Edo (now Tokyo) and Kyoto in 1673. After profiting from these draper shops, he developed money-exchange shops that provided merchants loans and even expanded the shop to Osaka. Following the death of Takatoshi Mitsui, his family developed the shop as a holding group that ran both a draper and money-exchange business, the Omotokata. With the demand for accounting skills, Mitsui began to recruit youngsters to be trained and later employed in the company. Young boys entered the shop as *kodomo* (apprentice) and were promoted to *tedai hira* (full-fledged clerical employees) in five or six years; in another eight or nine years, they would be promoted to *tedai myomoku-yaku* (full-fledged executive employee) (Kasuya, 2005, p. 228). The system applied by Mitsui was then adopted by Japan Inc. and

then named a Japanese-management style characterized by life-long employment and a seniority-based wage system. This system includes the bonus culture, initially developed by Mitsui after its establishment as a bank. As a consequence, the bonus is again paid according to the position held by each employee. Strategic positions such as executive and director acquire more bonuses than those in clerical positions.

The adoption of Mitsui's employee management into the Japanese-management style expanded white-collar workers, especially after World War II. Following the development of Japan Inc. and overseas business expansion, Japanese companies located in Japan played the management role. Meanwhile, the operative aspects, such as manufacturing, have been terminated outside Japan. As a result, there are more opportunities for white-collar jobs than blue-collar jobs. As practiced by Mitsui, white-collar jobs include managerial and clerical positions. The clerical position is identical to repetitive work, while the managerial involves mobility that possibly challenges the employees to develop their skills. Unfortunately, according to an article by **Komatsu Kyōko from Nippon.com**, work segregation inside white-collar jobs is highly gendered in Japan. Women are often allocated to clerical work due to the idea that women are suitable for work that does not require much thinking and that only a small number of them successfully hold managerial positions. College-educated males tended to be assigned to departments that handled loans and made sales to customers; thus, they received opportunities to develop their skills and careers through regular personnel changes. On the other hand, female workers tended to receive limited promotions and salary increases because they were required to take on internal supportive jobs (Nagamatsu, 2021, p. 197). The limited promotion for women in higher positions at work is strengthened by some stereotypes attached to women. There is less urgency for women to work because of the conservative idea that women should become housewives and men should work (Osawa, 2019). The idea also contributes to the perception that women in managerial positions would not benefit the company because of the "M Curve" graph, which means that women are less productive due to giving birth and child-rearing. Hence, adopting the Japanese-management style does not fully benefit women.

Second, labour shortages. Since 2009, Japan has suffered from a labour shortage. The aging population and less interest in young people marrying intensified the issue (Steinberg & Nakane, 2011). The Japanese government was urged to hire foreign workers, especially from developing countries, to fill the gap (Ganelli & Miake, 2015). This issue also encourages some companies to hire the elderly and mothers as non-regular employees (Inoue, 2024). They work as part-timers, receive minimum wage, and have less security. If we put aside the quality and the differentiation between standard and non-standard, which highlight the security of workers, more mothers going to work instead of staying at home will add to the number of women working. Hence, it gives the first impression that the labour shortage makes women start to work. However, they are bound inside the gendered employment system. The government, through Womenomics, gradually lifts Japanese women's position in the workforce, especially mothers, by allowing them to occupy regular jobs. However, this termination is still based on the broader issue of labour shortage, not gender inequality concerns.

Changing View on Women Working and The Authority Gesture

During the post-World War II era, the conservative idea that women should be housewives in Japan gradually changed, along with the fact that more Japanese women could pursue knowledge. Several famous female figures in Japan, such as Masa Nakayama, Mayumi Moriyama, and Yuriko Koike, have helped to inspire Japanese women to pursue career aspirations. One prominent idea is Womenomics. The idea of Womenomics was initially proposed in 1999 by an investment strategist at Goldman Sach Japan, Kathy Matsui (Matsui, 2007). She proposed the idea of utilizing women to revive the stagnant Japanese economy. Until Abe was in power, this idea was finally adopted. Along with his ambitious 'Abenomics', Abe put Womenomics as one of the third arrows, which is structural economic reform (Song, 2015). Looking at the economic stagnation of the last decade, Abe included women in solving the main issue, the labour shortage. He wanted women to fill the gap inside the talent pool. During his tenure, Abe's policy has successfully increased the number of women working in Japan from 1.8% to 6.9% in 2013 (The Government of Japan, 2014). As Kathy Matsui described in her article, she believes fewer women participate in the workplace due to inadequate

diversity issues. Public or private companies do not promote diversity and work-life balance for female employees (Matsui, 2007). As a result, there is a distinct lack of female role models in Japan. Furthermore, the goal of empowering women in the workplace does not seem to be what companies think. For many Japanese companies, ‘equal opportunities’ means ‘using women’s abilities to the full’, but it does not necessarily imply equality between women and men (Lam, 1993, p. 216). Thus, again, Womenomics does not fully target the gender inequality issue but for economic growth.

Focusing on the utilization of women to boost economic growth also fades the fact that gender inequality is actually ‘nurtured’ at the government level. Womenomics missed the opportunity to what Mark Crawford called a ‘break the glass ceiling at the highest reaches of government’ (Crawford, 2021). Besides Abe Shinzo’s ambitious support for women to work, he showed paradoxical and conservative views regarding women’s participation in politics. He raised the issue of female succession to the Throne of Japan, decreasing the number of females in his cabinet and fewer females represented in the Diet (Kodama & Gakuto, 2019; Osimo & Cogan, 2022). During his period in office, Abe was known as a high-profile leader on the international stage. However, he never brought women’s issues to the list. Abe’s approach toward gender equality was reactive rather than proactive (Osimo & Cogan, 2022). Less awareness that Womenomics is a public good also contributes to why Womenomics is interpreted in a narrow view. The political landscape characterized by Abe’s bias is further adding challenges to mainstream gender equality in the government. The attempt was once proposed by Doi Takako from the Democratic Party of Japan for the Diet to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. However, her legacy and her party were immediately wiped out due to her alleged ties to DPRK or North Korea (Cho, 2003). The pitfall of the DJP undermines the political balance. The lack of a strong center-left opposition party after the implosion of the Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) led by Doi Takako has meant that there is no longer a strong alternative government-in-waiting to compete on the basis of a more progressive program (Crawford, 2021, p. 11), such as feminism.

No Momentum for Change

These changes within Japanese society and the political landscape could be more favorable to trigger momentum for Japanese women to assert changes inside the employment system. There is no chance to focus on it. Japanese women face competitive job hunting even when they are still college students (Yoshiko, 2016). Since graduating from university is no longer entitled to a high-paid job due to more talents in the job market commonly graduating from college, they are trying hard to be beyond qualified. This behavior led to development focusing on oneself instead of collective development. Combined with an employment system that is more favorable for men, the mindset to get a job despite the inequality seems like an uttermost position than no job. Hence, the labour shortage is an opportunity for a wider gate to enter the workplace. Even if they demand equal opportunities from companies, companies will assert that women accept and conform to the male working norm, which requires them to work continuously without interruption (Lam, 1993, p. 218). This unrealistic expectation of women demanding equal opportunities somehow makes women feel a drawback from challenging the company's rules. Moreover, it is hard to trigger the sense of this unfairness because there are fewer female labour unions in Japan. The highest achievement of Japanese women in the labour union may be Tomoko Yoshino's appointment as the first female leader of the Japan Trade Union. Also, Doi Takako was the first female party leader and opposition leader. Nevertheless, it is too soon to say that the rise of female figures will lead to better assertiveness. Men established the trade union. Thus, the change may be slower than expected.

Conclusion

Multidimensional changes in the social, political, and economic aspects of Japan after the post-World War bubble economy and the lost decade do not make gender equality in the workplace a priority. Instead, it distanced Japanese women from the view that the current employment system does not benefit them. The historical trajectories of the Japanese management style have successfully formed a vested perspective in Japanese society regarding gender work segregation. Furthermore, a change of view on women participating in labour is seen as an economic motive rather than an aspiration to provide equal positions at work

for women. Pragmatist gestures from the government to solve gender inequality at work also contribute to slowing the progress of change. A lack of collective awareness also makes it harder to put strong pressure on companies and the government, which resulted in the emergence of influential female leaders coming from either independent or elite groups, making the pathway for Japan to achieve a low gender gap in employment one of the developed countries is slower than expected.

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