



How Do Women “Shine?” Exploring Professional Women’s Perceptions of “Women’s Advancement” in Japan

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Abstract

The Abe administration has introduced policies and legislation to increase women’s participation in the workforce, known as Abenomics, under the slogan “society where all women shine.” The study investigates the perceptions of professional women in Japan regarding the “women’s advancement” policy and the prevailing gender dynamics in a society known for its severe gender inequality. To accomplish this, semi-structured interviews with 30 professional Japanese women were conducted. The findings show that women perceive many barriers to “shining.” For example, the law promoting women’s participation and advancement in the workplace only applies to some women working in large companies. The number of women liable to benefit is small, so the initiative may have the unintended consequence of fueling divisions among women, highlighting the challenge of promoting women’s activity horizontally and vertically. As Japan’s economy has been stagnant for the past 30 years, it is perhaps natural that the government would implement policies to increase and exploit women’s labor. However, women are likely to be overburdened and stressed unless men’s participation in the home is substantially increased at the same time. Women face the challenges of working regular hours, giving birth, raising children, doing housework, and caring for family members. For this reason, the government and companies need to implement more family-friendly policies, such as improving social welfare policies, expanding public daycare centers, and setting up in-house daycare centers. Only when these issues are resolved will women be able to “shine.”

Keywords Japanese women · Women’s advancement · Gender equality · Women’s career

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Introduction

The slogan “a society where all women shine,” used to promote women’s empowerment under the Abe administration (2006–2007, 2012–2020), can be seen as a catchy political phrase. However, as is widely known, Japan is a society with pronounced gender disparities. The latest Gender Gap Index published by the World Economic Forum ranks Japan 125th out of 146 countries, and the ruling party in Japan, known as the Liberal Democratic Party, is also recognized as a conservative party [47]. Ando, who argues that the ruling party (LDP) represents a patriarchal household centered around a male head, interprets the abstract expression that “women shine” as referring to a society where women can work. Indeed, as explained in detail below, the policy package associated with “society where all women shine” is part of what is commonly referred to as Abenomics, which refers to economic policy [1]. Undeniably, women have been targeted to address the labor shortage, and Miura sharply criticizes the underlying reality of “women’s advancement” as actually being “maternal utilization.” This entails burdening women with the new responsibility of engaging in work on the labor market while maintaining traditional gender roles [34]. If this is the case, despite the slogan of “a society where all women shine,” the gender gap may further accelerate. While, on paper, the gender gap may decline, as observed in Taiwan, deep-rooted disparities may persist in society [15]. The law designed to promote women’s empowerment, known as the Act on the Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement, may not necessarily yield the desired effects.

This paper focuses on how professional women in Japan holding managerial positions or serving as university faculty members perceive the policy of “women’s advancement” and actual gender dynamics. Rather than providing a comprehensive explanation of the policy itself, the aim is to analyze how women perceive these changes (or the lack thereof) in relation to the context of women’s advancement and identify the specific gender gaps they face. The results expose how the slogans and policies of Abenomics do not reflect reality and contribute to the gender discourse and policymaking by revealing the harsh realities working women in Japan face and the inconsistency of policies designed to promote women’s advancement in this manner.

Research Background

“A society where all women shine,” part of Abenomics.

Abenomics is an economic policy package introduced by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his administration. It aims to address the persistent issues of deflation, low economic growth, and population decline in Japan. Abenomics is comprised of three key pillars: monetary policy, fiscal policy, and structural reforms. The importance of promoting women’s participation in the workforce as part of the Abenomic growth strategy can be attributed to the influence of Kathy Matsui. As the

Chief Japan Strategist at Goldman Sachs, Matsui introduced the concept of “Womonomics” in 1999. She provided research and data showcasing the positive impact of increasing women’s labor force participation on Japan’s economic growth. Matsui emphasized that women could enhance economic vitality and improve corporate competitiveness. She argued that having more women in managerial and leadership positions would foster diversity and drive innovation in business. Matsui’s proposals played a crucial role in Abenomics [21]. An IMF Working Paper (2012) also argued that the key to overcoming Japan’s economic stagnation was involving more women in the workplace. GDP would be higher by 4% if women’s participation in the labor force were at the same level as in the G7, excluding Italy, and by 8% if the same as in Northern Europe [40].

Based on such opinions, specific measures and laws for promoting women’s workforce participation were incorporated into the policies of Abenomics. As a result, under the slogan of creating “a society where all women shine,” the Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace (“Promotion of Women”) was enacted in 2015 and came into force in April 2016. It states that companies that have more than 301 employees (more than 101 employees from April 2022), 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 original aim was to have 30% of all managerial positions filled by women by 2020 [9]. This goal indicates that the proportion of female managers is far short of 30% in the private and public spheres. The deadline for achieving the plan was modified at the end of 2020 to 2030: the law is thus time-limited to 10 years. Hence, its effectiveness is valid until 2026.

It is noteworthy that despite the inclusive language of the slogan itself, the law specifically targets large corporations. This represents a significant limitation considering that large corporations account for only 0.3% of all businesses in Japan. Moreover, the content of the law primarily emphasizes economic aspects rather than human rights, indicating a bias towards neoliberalism, which prioritizes economic outcomes over broader social and human rights considerations. The law’s emphasis on promoting women’s workforce participation is based on the belief that increasing their presence will contribute to economic growth. While economic development is undoubtedly crucial, the law’s exclusive focus on economic benefits tends to overshadow other essential aspects, such as fostering a more equitable and inclusive society that upholds the rights and well-being of all individuals.

Gender Inequality and the Labor Market

Despite implementing the Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace since 2016, it can be argued that gender inequality in Japan has not significantly improved in recent years. Several international indices measure gender equality, the most representative being the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index (GGI), the UN Gender Development Index (GDI), and the Gender Inequality Index (GII). According to the latest results, Japan ranks 125th out of 146 countries on the GGI, 55th out of 167 countries on the GDI, and 24th

out of 162 countries on the GII. These rankings reflect the fact that fewer than 10% of parliamentarians are women, and the proportion of women in senior positions is small. Although more than 72% of women work, more than half do so part-time. As a result, women earn 43.7% less than men on average. In addition, even among couples working full-time, wives are responsible for more than twice as much housework and childcare as their husbands on average, indicating the large gender gap in unpaid work. Without eliminating this disparity (in housework, childcare, nursing care, etc.), progress in this area is unlikely [12, 47].

In the political arena, the proportion of women in the House of Representatives is 9.9%, and in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, only 7.7% [42]. In 2020, women accounted for 44.3% of the total working population, and women's labor force participation rate (the percentage of the population aged 15 and over in the labor force) was 53.2% (71.4% for men). Of the former, 45.6% were working full-time, compared to 77.9% of men. Only 27.2% of the working population in full-time regular employment is female. The largest share of female full-time regular employment is 43.0% in *Ippan-shoku* (non-career track positions) and 36.0% in *Sogo-shoku* (career-track positions). In contrast, the biggest share of male full-time regular employment in all job categories is 52.8% in *Sogo-shoku*. Of all employees employed in *Sogo-shoku*, women account for only about 20%. As for management positions, 52.8% of companies have female manager/s in managerial positions equivalent to section chief or above, but nearly half of all Japanese companies have no female managers. The proportion of large companies (with 300 or more employees) with female managers (section head and above, including board members) is about 7.3% [31, 32].

These figures for high-level female participation are lower than those of other developed countries. The main reason for the situation in Japan is that until the Equal Opportunity Law was enacted in 1987, women (except for some teachers and nurses) had no choice but to engage in marginalized labor (i.e., simple secretarial and clerical work), and many of them retired upon marriage. Companies employed a track-by-track hiring approach even after the former law was enacted. As mentioned above, the marginalization of women in the workforce has not been eliminated, with the majority of women in *Ippan-shoku* and the majority of men in *Sogo-shoku* (where advancement is expected). As Walby (2004) points out, this may partly be because equal opportunity laws take men's life patterns and norms as their baseline and are not designed to eliminate deep-seated gender inequalities [46]. In addition, as noted above, norms concerning the gender division of labor (men work "outside," women stay home) persist. In Japan, it is common for women to adopt a working pattern called the "M-curve," whereby they withdraw (sometimes temporarily) from the labor market, primarily due to marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth. Specifically, around 90% of unmarried women aged 25 to 44 are employed, whereas the labor force participation rate decreases to approximately 70% for married women [31]. However, it is not necessarily the temporary exit of women from the labor market due to pregnancy and childbirth that is the primary cause of their lower-status positions within corporations. Yamaguchi, who studied gender disparities in the labor market for many years using mathematical models, found that the number of women university graduates with a managerial position is less than half that of men high-school-graduates [48]. The study also found that women university

graduates' educational background is considered relevant for obtaining a managerial position but less so for men. Furthermore, according to Yamaguchi, the proportion of female full-time employees who occupy section manager or higher-level positions that is reached only after 26–30 years is achieved by male full-time employees within 5 years, and the proportion of such higher-level positions that female full-time employees occupy after spending their entire working life at a company is achieved by male full-time employees within 11–15 years. This situation discourages women from working, and many use marriage and pregnancy as reasons to exit the workplace [48]. Kawaguchi also empirically demonstrated that there is a 5% “marriage penalty” on Japanese women’s wages (adjusted for length of service and type of employment). This is a phenomenon not seen in other countries [18]. Accordingly, as the quantitative research showed, the current gender gap in the labor market is the result of the existence of values and norms that involve customarily discriminating against women based on the inherent attribute of gender, combined with the complex intertwining of changes in the life course of men and women, such as marriage and childbirth, and sources of motivation for working.

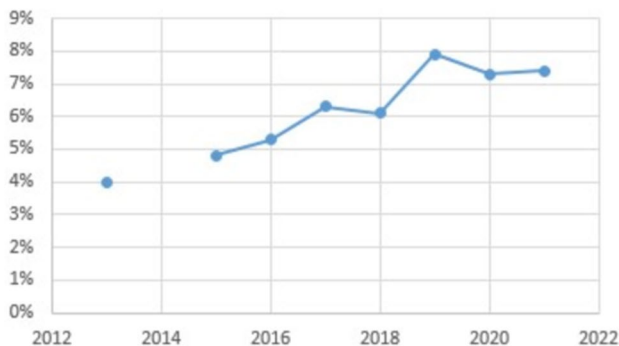
The Paradox of Women’s Advancement Policies: the Potential for Change Through Corporate Implementation

As is widely known, Japan’s economy has stagnated since the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s. As the IMF pointed out, it is natural that Japan should look to use its underutilized women’s labor force effectively. However, this “women’s success” approach is part of an economic- and policy-driven growth strategy and does not advocate improvements in women’s status or human rights. Japan’s welfare system is family-oriented, and the “Japanese-style welfare system” is very similar to the “male breadwinner model” of modern society, in which women are expected to be shadow workers. As mentioned, there is a significant gender gap in the labor market, and welfare policy is based on the assumption that the “family” (as specified in the name of the Japanese model but meaning women) is the primary caregiver. Japan’s social security system exhibits a pronounced bias towards elderly care, with family support benefits such as family allowances and childcare services being relatively lower than international standards. This suggests the implicit understanding that women should shoulder the burden of unpaid labor to compensate for these disparities. In the current circumstances, the objectives of Abenomics’ women’s advancement, which entail a strong commitment to labor force participation, can be seen as inherently contradictory. Given the strong resistance to accepting immigrant workers and the limited presence of professional nannies in Japan, achieving the comprehensive marketization of care to address this issue is also practically unfeasible [20, 38, 41]. Notwithstanding women’s participation in the labor market, if there had been significant progress with men’s participation in household responsibilities, such issues would have been mitigated. However, the lack of progress in men’s involvement in domestic duties is not unique to Japan, as it is observed in various countries despite the significant promotion of women’s labor force participation. Hochschild argues that while there has been some success in encouraging women’s

labor force participation, there has been insufficient progress in promoting men's participation in family responsibilities, which she calls a revolution that has come to a standstill [14].

Regarding the gender gap in the labor market, as explained earlier, the most significant factor is the inherent ascription of gender. According to Kawaguchi, Japanese companies' employment systems and customs are defined by strategic rationality, path dependency, and institutional inertia, which is difficult to change. Due to these phenomena, small and medium-sized companies imitate the systems of large companies. To break out of this state, externally enforcing changes that are more rational (but presently incompatible with the existing system) is required [18, 48]. Small and medium-sized companies may follow if large companies implement and institutionalize external conditions such as the "Women's Advancement" policy of Abenomics and related laws. Fukasawa notes the characteristics of Japan's weak state involvement in welfare services that guarantee companies' direct control over employment and argues that companies are in a position to take proactive measures to achieve gender equality [8]. Based on these considerations, the Law for the Promotion of Women's Advancement that came into effect in 2016 has the potential to fundamentally reshape the situation regarding gender equality, even if it has a strong neoliberal flavor [44]. Nevertheless, based on the numbers displayed in Graph 1, it is challenging to assert the successful accomplishment of Abenomics' objectives regarding female managerial representation in large corporations.

While there appears to have been a slight increase since the implementation of the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace, it is evident from the graph that the target of reaching 30% is far from met. It can be contended that setting a goal of increasing female managerial representation from less than 5 to 30% within 5 years was somewhat unrealistic. However, while dramatic changes may not be expected, the slogan of "a society where all women shine" and the actual enforcement of the law, whether positive or negative, have been continuously reported on in the media. Large corporations were required to act, regardless of their agreement. The changes, or lack thereof, in corporate awareness regarding the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the



Graph 1 Women in managerial positions in large corporations (%). [23–31] Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan

Workplace and how women perceive these changes, which may not be reflected in the numerical data, are important to explore. In line with this, the following primary research question was defined.

- To what extent does policy for supporting women’s advancement, especially the Act on the Promotion of Women, contribute to improving gender equality and the realization of a society where all women can “shine,” as perceived by women who are the target of the law?

Methodology

For this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen, which offer a balance between consistency and flexibility when exploring novel phenomena. Data collection took place between January and December 2019 [22, 35]. Respondents included 30 professional women: 10 working in business associated with a career track, including media-related and public administration sectors, and 20 university faculty members familiar with gender issues. Most respondents were single. Their ages varied widely; the youngest was in their early thirties, and the oldest was approaching sixty (30–39, $n=8$, 40–49, $n=10$, 50–59, $n=12$). As described, women on the career track and university lecturers are rare. The proportion of female university faculty members in Japan is 25.9%, including assistants (17.7% for professors), and it is rare in Japan for university faculty members to give interviews. Thus, the data that was collected may be considered valuable [12]. It should be noted that most interviewees are women who grew up in relatively liberal families and were well off both educationally and financially, having many wealthy housewives as friends. It should also be noted that this sample represents a specific group in relation to the broader population of women in Japan. Thus, the limitations of the study must be noted. It is also important to consider that many university faculty members within the sample possess expertise in gender issues. Therefore, when analyzing the data, it is necessary to consider data bias and avoid generalizing conclusions as more widely representative. However, the women within the sample represent the primary target audience of the Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace, which makes them a relevant and suitable sample for this study.

Before starting the interviews, a description of the research was given to the interviewees; informed consent was obtained (which included an assurance of confidentiality regarding participants’ identities and personal information) and permission to record the interviews. Ten questions were asked regarding participants’ perceptions of the gender gap and women’s working issues. For example, “How has the gender gap in Japanese society changed over the generations?” “Can you give some examples of male participation in housework and childrearing?” “Why are there so few female managers in Japan?” and “Will companies implement the Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace, and how long will it take to achieve the targets?”. (The interview guide can be found in the “Appendix”.) The average interview took less than 1 h. The snowball sampling method was used to identify potential respondents.

Interviews were primarily conducted in company customer service rooms, university laboratories, and a few quiet cafes. Half of the interviewees' workplaces were located in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, half in the Kansai region, and one in Chubu.

The interviews were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), a method used to explore and interpret patterned meaning across datasets. Reflective thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and helps identify people's experiences, views, and/or perceptions of social processes that influence and shape phenomena: it is well suited to the research question. Reflective thematic analysis can help answer the research questions under investigation and identify meaningful patterns within the dataset. These patterns should be confirmed through rigorous data familiarization, data coding, and the meticulous development and revision of themes. The analytical process consists of the following steps. The interviews were first transcribed to increase familiarization with the data. This phase involved multiple data readings and immersion in the content. The purpose was to gain a deep understanding of the dataset and begin to identify potential issues relevant to the research question. Repeated reading of the data was performed actively, analytically, and critically, prompting thoughts about its meaning. In the second phase, simple labels (codes) were generated to identify data related to the research question. Coding was conducted throughout the entire dataset, allowing for the extraction of and inquiry into all relevant data. Codes served as building blocks of analysis, akin to bricks or tiles when considering themes as walls or roofs. The third phase marked the initial stage of theme generation. Potential themes were identified, and codes were matched with these latent themes. Similarities and overlapping sections of codes were collapsed or clustered to form coherent and meaningful patterns. In the fourth phase, emerging themes were associated with coded data and the entire dataset for verification and revision. In the fifth phase, themes were refined, defined, and named. The scope, specific content, and characteristics of the central themes in the analysis were clearly defined and given appropriate names related to the overall narrative that the analysis portrays [2, 3]. In this study, four main themes were identified under the topic of "current working issues": (1) unwelcoming environment; (2) time adjustment; (3) men's "help" in unpaid work; and (4) division among women. A deeper analysis of these topics is included in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

Working Issues for Women in Different Situations

As described above, reflective thematic analysis was used to develop four main themes concerning "working issues" for women in different situations. The direct quotations below are anonymized using respondent numbers 1–30, but occupations and age groups are identified (e.g., Interviewee_1, works at university/business/public administration, age group).

Theme 1: Unwelcoming Environment

Most interviewees said that women are excluded from the male networks that pervade the workplace and that there is an environment and atmosphere that is not welcoming to women. Such networks involve informal, non-institutionalized connections through which important information is shared. For example, promotions are announced at after-work drinking parties (also known as “nominication” [drink + communication in Japanese]), golf outings on weekends, and other entertainment events. Therefore, women excluded from homosocial situations are disadvantaged in terms of promotion. Related excerpts from the interviewees’ narratives follow.

The Japanese way of working is to work more than eight hours a day, and in addition to that, many people go to an “After Five” [a place for relaxing after work] for drinks. During that kind of drinking, you can communicate deeply with your boss and colleagues and get important information. Women with children cannot go to drinking parties. (Interviewee_14, works at university, 50s)

If I were a man, I would have more (male) friends. It’s strange to describe my colleagues as friends, but I think I could have obtained more information and networks. (Interviewee_30, works in business, 40s)

If you don’t hear such detailed know-how unless you go out for a drink, it’s difficult [in terms of work]. Women, especially if they have a family, can’t always participate. (Interviewee_15, works at university, 40s)

After all, there is a men’s network, and women are excluded from it, and I think there is a point where you can’t enter the circle of conversation from the beginning. Nominication still exists in Japan, and somehow the roots of the next plans for [...] promotion [become clear] through such connections. I think it is difficult [for women] to enter such a unique world. (Interviewee_17, works at university, 50s)

Although communication outside of work in informal settings involves private conversations, it cannot be separated from work-related interaction and information exchange [7, 19]. In other words, there is an information gap between female employees who cannot participate in off-the-job communication and male employees who can and do. Women therefore lack the information and opportunities for communication required to strengthen their relationships with their supervisors and colleagues. In addition, both parties deploy excuses for not being able to participate in such events (whether unconsciously or consciously) based on their gender roles (e.g., because they “have a family” or “have children to take care of”). However, the following excerpts reveal some differences that cannot be easily captured by the standard reference to gender roles.

If a woman were to replace a man in a higher position, such as president or manager, there would be some kind of backlash. I don’t think this would be the case if a man were to replace the president. (Interviewee_15, works at university, 40s)

From a system perspective, I feel that it's easier for male bosses to do things and for men to do things according to their leadership positions. Japanese people may have a sense of opposition to changing that. I don't think men are as reluctant to let one or two women join an organization that used to have only male members. But I feel they are very reluctant [to let women] become [the] majority. (Interviewee_10, works at university, 40s)

I think women welcome it [women becoming managers]. However, it is a fact that men don't want to receive instructions from women. It is difficult. (Interviewee_17, works at university, 50s)

What men think is also a significant factor. Of course, even if women do their best, it is still difficult as long as there are still people who [wonder] why we have to listen to what women say. No matter how much ability a woman has, it is very difficult if men are emotionally [closed to women only due to their gender]. (Interviewee_28, works in business, 50s)

Respondents indicate that women perceive that they are not welcome as equals to men at work, especially when promotions are involved. This has been found to be due to sexism (simply because they are women) rather than because of any factors associated with established gender roles. Yamaguchi claims that gender explains the disparity in who is promoted (estimated at 30%), although this cannot be expressed precisely [48]. Our interviewees also seemed to be aware of such an atmosphere at workplaces. In such an environment, women are expected to work harder than men and work in a more masculine way to obtain promotions. More than half of the interviewees claimed that it is difficult to become a manager unless one works as well as or better than a man, meaning that outstanding ability, a willingness to work long hours, and a drive to work despite being an unwelcome presence are prerequisites for women employees who strive to "shine." Interviewee_10 (works at university, 40 s) used the example of the US presidential election in 2016, stating that even in the USA, where women play a more active role than in Japan, a female president could not win the election, and claimed that in Japan it is even more difficult for women to be accepted.

In addition to the above, many interviewees expressed resentment as they perceived that women are not welcome within male circles and expressed the view that men do not know how to support their female bosses and are confused about how to deal with them. Again, this suggests that management positions are male-gendered.

Interviewee_20 (works at university, 40 s) mentioned that a female student who had completed a doctoral course had told her, "I don't think I can get married anymore since I have decided to go on and get a Ph.D." The former suggested that this is because women (are forced to) recognize that the more educated they become (i.e., more educated than the average man), the more likely it is that they will be in such an (unmarriageable) situation. Interviewee_25 (works in business, 50 s) stated how the only female board member of her company had completed her higher education in the USA and the UK, and said of other women in high positions, "I see that most women in top management in large corporations were educated overseas, not in Japan." However, she also stated that "I have never felt discrimination," yet she worked in a corporate culture that remained male-centered and felt that she (as a

woman) needed to be “bilingual” and “have a doctorate from a famous foreign university” to be promoted; she also felt that achieving this would be impossible (and had no ambition for further promotion).

For men, however, obtaining a higher education abroad and a doctorate or other degree are not prerequisites for promotion. For women, the gender penalty associated with pursuing a career is giving up on marriage, childbearing, and other private pursuits. Women are not encouraged to pursue careers, but if they are educated to far above the average level and are committed only to their work, this may be accepted. This claim is supported by the fact that nearly 70% of Japanese women in managerial positions are unmarried or married but have no children (compared to about twenty percent of men) [43]. The position of the interviewees in this research was similar: almost all of them were single. However, like Interviewee_25 (works in business, 50 s), some post-feminist opinions could be identified (i.e., overconfidence about gender equality, claims that gender equality has already been achieved and that only capable women should be selected for positions or this would amount to reverse discrimination). The existence of the contradiction between “not feeling discrimination” despite clear evidence of discrimination was typical of all the other interviewees who expressed postfeminist views. Women who have grown up in liberal families and enjoy relatively equal gender status in Japanese society, like many interviewees, may believe that they have not experienced discrimination due to the latter’s structural (hence) “invisible” nature.

Theme 2: Time Adjustment

Even when couples work together and are both full-time employees, women adjust their hours to take care of the housework, childcare, and other unpaid work. This is a norm in society and companies, and men and women alike have typically internalized this attitude to the division of labor. Almost all the interviewees mentioned that women adjust their working hours somehow.

The younger generation (of males) is doing more (housework and childcare), but in the end, the share is not 50-50 at all. There is still a tendency for women to take responsibility for these tasks, and many women have internalized the idea of adjusting their jobs to make time for housework and childcare. (Interviewee_24, works in business, 30s)

In my department, I have colleagues who are married and have children. They are in the same company here, yet my female colleagues work shorter hours [finish early]. So, they start at nine o’clock and finish at four p.m. in order to pick up their children, put them to bed, and bathe them. (Interviewee_25, works in business, 50s)

My sister earned more than her husband, and although her husband is a public servant in a childcare support division, he didn’t take any childcare leave. So, my sister was dissatisfied that she ended up taking it. (Interviewee_4, works at university, 30s)

In Japan, a hard-working culture still exists, and I have the impression that women who can’t work as hard as they want to are being left behind. If

a woman chooses to work shorter hours and has to go home to pick up her children or take care of the housework, she is seen as having no desire or the upward mobility required to become a manager (Interviewee_9, works at university, 30s).

There is an unspoken understanding that women are responsible for adjusting their working hours by reducing them or taking time off to undertake personal matters, a situation that women accept despite their frustrations. However, adjusting work hours is a barrier to promotion and reinforces the sense of being “unwelcome,” as described in Theme 1, leaving female employees marginalized and unable to pursue a career track.

Interviewee_24 (works in business, 30 s), who works in the media industry, lamented with dismay and indignation that “Japan is a society that is very cold toward women”: women are responsible for childrearing and nursing care, only 20% of fathers pay child support after divorce, and the latter is reduced to a personal problem and not socialized. She also said that once a woman gets married and has a child, she is limited regarding which departments she can belong to, primarily since employees of the mass media, including newspapers, often work early in the morning or late at night. Accordingly, the former are pushed onto the “mommy track” department, not into a so-called “flower [prestigious] department” or the “career track.” “Even if a woman wanted to work there [in such a more prestigious department], she would be told by the company that mothers can’t do it.”

It is clear that women are prevented from moving up the ladder because they are required to adjust their working hours, or it is assumed that they will have to.

It is not only members of the older generation that embrace the traditional gender division of labor, as described above. Interviewee_20 (works at university, 40 s), who conducts an annual survey of her students on their life course, found that although no female students say they will stop working after marriage, more than half say they will “support their husbands in the background” or “I don’t know what will actually happen.” About 10% of male students each year say that they want their wives to stop working and devote themselves to housework and childcare after marriage, and the majority seem to respect their wives’ wishes, saying that they will leave it to their wives to decide. However, male students’ image of the life course does not include them doing housework and childcare. The university where Interviewee_20 (works at university, 40 s) works is a difficult-to-enter private university in the Kansai region, from which both male and female graduates go on to work for well-known companies. Even among these students, male students have a patriarchal value system, and female students have a specific “progressive” image of working women based on the gender division of labor and perceive their life course as involving “working” and “housework” as well as “childcare.”

Contemplation of *Theme 2* in relation to *Theme 1* reveals a cruel situation. Women who begin their careers as full-time employees are not welcome to follow a career track because of their gender, which involves the assumption that they will need to adjust their working hours. In contrast, the government promotes the slogan of women “shining at work,” and the media proclaims this: it touts the image of the so-called “superwoman”—a woman who builds a career at work and happily

manages housework and childrearing. In reality, however, women are burdened in multiple ways [14], and have more or less internalized norms about the traditional gender division of labor. Even though “balancing work and family” is not only a women’s issue, the issue of time management reveals structural gender imbalance: the basic assumption is that the latter is a women’s issue.

Theme 3: Men’s “Help” in Unpaid Work

Just because they are working and making a living does not mean they should avoid non-work-related chores.

As mentioned earlier, according to Hochschild’s “stalled revolution,” women’s participation in the labor market is inextricably linked to the problem of managing housework and childcare [14]. As stated earlier, even among full-time dual-earner couples, wives are responsible for more than twice as much housework and childcare as their husbands, and there is a significant gender gap in unpaid labor [12]. However, according to a cabinet office household survey conducted in 2018, nearly 60% of male respondents agreed that “it is natural that men also do housework and childcare,” and more than half of the interviewees told us that “there has been a change in men’s participation in housework in terms of their awareness. However, the current situation concerning men sharing household chores and childcare does not reflect this attitude [4].

Well, I think it’s [men’s participation is] relatively common in terms of household chores, like taking out the garbage, or in terms of [being with] children – like playing with the kids or giving them a bath. (Interviewee_17, works at university, 50s)

So, most fathers try to spend time on weekends, which you didn’t see in the past. They want to participate. Well, they want to play, play with the kid. (Interviewee_8, works at university, 50s)

When the child is small, members of the younger generation of men take them to nursery school. (Interviewee_27, works in business, 50s)

I often see fathers taking their children to nursery school on bicycles and other vehicles [...]. I don’t think this was very common 20 years ago. But now I get the impression that about two or three out of every ten fathers take their children to the daycare center, so I think things have changed. (Interviewee_28, works in business, 50s)

All interviewees talked about changes in men’s participation in housework and childcare, both large and small. However, as noted above, what emerges is that the disparity between men’s and women’s household chores remains.

The overwhelming majority of the interviewees stated that “taking out the trash” was the typical household chore undertaken by men. In addition, most interviewees said that dishwashing was done occasionally, and cooking was not done at all. According to Family Values in East Asia (2006), Japanese men do very little housework, regardless of their wives’ employment status. Surprisingly, even when the wife is employed and the husband is unemployed, the latter’s participation in

household chores does not increase. Fifteen years since these findings, the situation does not seem to have changed [49].

Concerning childcare, interviewees perceived that men are highly aware of their (limited) participation. The typical form of male participation in childcare is perceived as “taking children to nursery school” but not picking them up. This may be because, as mentioned in relation to Theme 2, picking children up, which requires adjustments at the end of the working day, is typically done by mothers, while “dropping off,” which does not affect work, can be handled by fathers. The interviewees also claimed that “weekend leisure” is another major area of male involvement in childrearing. The emphasis on men’s involvement in fun and enjoyable activities with children is not unique to Japan [17, 50]. Relatively few surveys have specified fathers’ participation in housework and childcare, although a survey by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation in 2020 found that “bathing” was the most common childcare activity undertaken by men on work days, followed by “play with kids,” roughly in line with the interviewees’ narratives. Even so, less than 50% of men help with “bathing,” and less than 40% “play with kids.” Regarding housework, 58.8% of men take out the trash, which is thus typical of Japanese men’s contribution to housework. These findings indicate the highly disproportionate sharing of housework and childrearing and are evidence that Japanese men are more liable to provide their partners with “help” instead [16].

Interviewee_29 (public administration, 40 s), who works for the gender advancement division of the executive branch of a large city, asked married couples to write down their daily household chores at an event. While husbands tended to name a few specific tasks such as “taking out the trash” and “washing dishes,” wives tended to list many “unnamed household chores” such as “planning the menu and cooking,” “looking over the children’s school information and preparing for tomorrow,” “replenishing toilet paper,” “PTA meetings,” and so on. “Unnamed household chores” is a term that spread widely in Japan after a Daiwa House Industry survey on attitudes toward household chores in 2017 revealed that many husbands do not recognize “unnamed household chores” as household chores, but that most of them are done by their wives [6]. For women, housework is continuous and integrated into their daily lives, whereas it is ad hoc and completable for men. Additional time spent on such “unnamed” chores does not show up in data about time spent on housework and childcare in surveys. When men remain “helpers” and do not take the initiative in housework and childcare, they are free-riding because this leads to women spending less time at work and more time on housework and childcare. Related dissatisfaction and a sense of unfairness were clearly perceivable in the interviewees’ tone and comments and their welcoming of the positive change in men’s attitude to and actual participation in housework and childcare.

Theme 4: Division Among Women

As mentioned earlier, the slogan “a society where all women shine” may seem to be aimed at all women, but the actual number of women who can benefit from the Women’s Promotion Act is limited. This is because the law targets a very limited set of women: full-time employees in large companies who are expected to be promoted

to more senior positions. Furthermore, the term “working women” is also broken down into three broad categories: women who are full-time employees of large companies, women who work for small and medium-sized companies associated with limited benefits, and women who work part-time. Almost all interviewees had concerns about the widening gender gap and the loss of a sense of togetherness among women. For example, Interviewee_9, who works in a private, not very challenging women’s university where almost all graduates end up working at nursery schools or kindergartens, had the following to say about the future career paths of her students.

I always ask students in class whether they want to continue working in the future. When they hear this, more than half of the students say, “I want to continue working because I’m worried about my (future) husband’s income [i.e., whether it will be enough].” They say they want to take up professional positions and work (in this case, as nursery-school teachers). However, they also say they would like to work part-time instead of full-time. This is the trend again these days. (Interviewee_9, works at university, 30s)

The latter interviewee said that students have a typical “M-curve” vision of the future, involving them becoming housewives and returning to work part-time (rather than being career-oriented). However, this is because salaries are low, not because of any desire to avoid having a career. For example, many graduates become childcare workers, but due to the hard work and low pay, they prefer to focus on their families and work part-time rather than try to balance a career and private life. Conversely, students who get their teaching licenses and work in elementary schools “get paid more the more they work, and there is a maternity leave system in place to some extent, so they envision returning to work using the system rather than quitting,” Interviewee_19 (works at university, 50 s) claimed. This is a marked difference from the life-course image of Interviewee_20 (works at university, 40 s) (as described in *Theme 2*), who perceived that all female students wished to continue to work after graduation at large companies and after marriage (while still internalizing the traditional gender division of labor). The latter indicates that division among women occurs even when they are students before they start working.

Interviewee_17 (works at university, 50 s) discussed the phenomenon of emerging division among women, saying that before the enforcement of the equal employment opportunity law, “the experience of being a woman” was, to some extent, commonly shared and discussed. However, since the enforcement of the equal opportunity employment law, “elite employees” often continue work but remain single or without children, while women who have jobs associated with the *Ippan-shoku* track quit when they get married. As a result, women who had once been uniformly discriminated against felt the loss of a sense of unity related to sharing similar experiences and working hard together. Moreover, with employment paths becoming even more diverse, women’s lifestyles are also diversifying, and the world, as seen by women in regular jobs and those in non-regular employment, is becoming completely different.

I have the feeling that the number of powerful women who have been able to obtain positions has increased over the past ten years. I think it is pos-

sible and good for those in full-time employment to create such careers and protect their families, but I feel that the world of those in non-regular employment is too different from the world the [former] live in. I also have the feeling that the world is divided up [for women], so I think it is difficult for women to cooperate with each other in society. (Interviewee_17, works at university, 50s)

Since the Act on Promotion of Women targets large corporations, the number of women who benefit from it is minimal. It thus has the effect of widening the gap between women. Why, then, is the slogan employed to suggest that all women can be active? About half of the interviewees interpreted the slogan in the following skeptical way.

I am very skeptical whether any politicians sincerely believe in a society that respects women. (Interviewee_14, works at university, 50s)

What is the role of women [in relation to this slogan]? The basis of this [...] is to secure the labor force, isn't it? Rather than motivating women to help support the labor force and inspire them to work, [the policy is grounded in] the fact that the country will not be able to run if they do not work. The law itself as a labor policy does not respect human rights, but rather, somehow, it is [designed] to support the growth of the country and to somehow use the labor force of women as [growth] potential. (Interviewee_9, works at university, 30s)

I think that companies have reached a point where they cannot sustain their business without having more women, so I am sure that they will move in that direction [promoting women's success]. However, some people think that promoting women's activities is good for upper-class women, that is, for women who work for large companies or aim for managerial positions, but the law is meaningless for women who work part-time or irregular jobs. Without [...] correcting the disparity, it will only create fragmentation among women. (Interviewee_24, works in business, 30s)

Abenomics is a policy, strategy, and set of regulations focused on the economy. However, despite the slogan of creating "a society where all women shine," only a very small percentage of women will actually benefit from it, and those who are left out may feel burdened by their low wages, housework, and childcare, as well as the need to "shine." As long as the gender gap associated with the family and household is not eliminated (in addition to the gender gap in the labor market), the fundamental problem is gender inequality. However, dissatisfaction may grow when women who do not "shine" see women "shining" at large companies where they are promoted and have fulfilling private lives. They may also feel guilty about their own inability to shine.

Divide-and-conquer policies have been used throughout history. Our interviewees were concerned that women are being divided. These frustrations circulate only among women, preventing them from complaining to the ruling class—that is, to men.

Consideration of the Four Themes and Future Scenarios

In investigating the various problems of working women, the research has examined four independent and interconnected themes. For a woman to be active in society, she first needs to be hired for a Sogo-shoku position at a large company. She will only be able to have a career that a man of average ability could obtain if she works more and if she remains single or has no children until retirement age and has more ability than an average man. However, this way of working is far from “shining.” It is sometimes said that there are no women in management positions because women themselves do not want to be promoted, although the number of women who could take up these roles is limited. Is there a chance to improve the current situation? The following section discusses this issue and makes recommendations based on the four themes using the interview data.

The Need for Role Models

The lack of individual and company-level role models is one factor that prevents women from fully engaging in the labor market. More than half of the interviewees mentioned the absence of role models and the need for them. For example, suppose a female worker who has just started working learns that the female managers at her company are characterized by working more than men, being single, and not having children. This may not represent the ideal image of her own life. Furthermore, even women committed to their work may shy away from promotion if they see that female managers are struggling and being pushed out of the male circle. For example, Interviewee_26 (works in business, 50 s), who works in media relations, has found that extreme, career-focused “role models” can negatively affect women’s willingness to be promoted.

This raises the question of what kind of role models are needed. The only positive role model was mentioned by Interviewee_19 (works at university, 50 s), who stated that “some female managers were promoted in Toyota-type companies to support women’s activities, and I think this was the time when those who came to the company but also had a family entered the core of the company.” She added, “They are being treated differently to their male bosses. I hope that this will become a model for other companies.” The current proportion of female managers at Toyota is less than 3%, and this case is the exception to the rule [45]. The fact that such a model is finally emerging at a significant global company like Toyota suggests that it will take time for other Japanese companies to adopt it. Instead, it is likely that more model cases of male managers balancing family participation and career will be needed.

Interviewee_23 (works in business, 50 s), who works for a foreign-affiliated company, demonstrated a sense of responsibility and a desire to educate the younger generation about the potential diversity of work styles by sharing her own experience of being a manager and her company’s style of working with managers. However, men, especially corporate managers, executives, and politicians, need to be further educated. As Yamaguchi concluded, it is not that women are unmotivated, but rather that they become discouraged by the various barriers they face simply due to their being women [48]. Simply put, the key to increasing the proportion of women in

management is avoiding gender discrimination. Creating workplaces where female employees are not excluded from networks but are allowed to participate in workshops and management training, just like other male employees, and where women are welcomed as a matter of course, would naturally solve the problem. In connection with this, our interviewees made the following comments.

I think it [the solution] should be something like training for managers. They should make it possible for women to participate in such activities, and they should also have someone like a mentor. (Interviewee_13, works at university, 30s)

For example, what kind of work does it take to become a chief, a section head, or a general manager? Companies should set up an examination system, and whether it is a woman or a man, if they pass the examination or pass a training session, they should be appointed to a position. (Interviewee_18, works at university, 50s)

I think it [involves] lifelong study. I think it is essential to create a place where women can study. It is really a steady process, but I personally think that creating a place where women who have the same perceptions and goals can gather and study is the most important thing. (Interviewee_21, works in public administration, 30s)

Digging deeper, it appears that women themselves want equal opportunities and more cooperation among women. As mentioned in *Theme 4* regarding the division among women, this means that women themselves are looking for unity among women, not only in society but also within their companies.

The Need for Flexibility

As mentioned in relation to *Theme 2*, women who are indirectly forced to adjust their working time are, paradoxically, forced to work outside of the workplace, and have no control over this, such as when picking up their children and cleaning up after dinner. In addition, according to Hochschild, women are more likely than men to feel responsible for balancing work and family. They routinely think about household chores, such as the timing of appointments with doctors and when children's friends are coming over, etc. Such psychological and organizational work increases the time spent on "nameless chores." In contrast, men are more likely to participate in relatively enjoyable childcare activities (i.e., more time-controlled childcare using leisure time that does not interfere with their own work), such as weekend leisure or playing with their children on weekdays. Partly for this reason, Japanese women have less sleep than women in any other OECD country [14, 39].

Many interviewees supported the introduction of a flexible working hours system, which may be one of the best solutions to the current challenges. Considering that some women are already forced to work shorter hours, sometimes apologizing for leaving work to pick up their children, implementing a flexible working schedule that allows them to adjust their work hours would be very appealing. However, it is undeniable that without substantive reforms (rather than simpler reforms to men's "awareness" of their participation in household chores), such a flexible

system would eventually reinforce the current gender division of labor by becoming a means for women to support their families further. Furthermore, if women do more behind-the-scenes work, more men will free-ride on women's labor and focus on their work, and the household wage gap will further widen. Presently, the dominance of male workers in the labor market continues to occur at the expense of female workers [13]. In this context, it is clear that the promotion of women's participation in the labor market needs to be coupled with the elimination of the gender division of labor, or in other words, with men becoming more involved in the management of the household.

The Discrepancy Between the Attractive Slogan and Reality

Almost all interviewees thought the Promotion of Women law and women's advancement policy would have some positive impact, but achieving specific goals would not be easy. The remaining few were skeptical of the law's influence, and none of the interviewees perceived it as likely to be completely effective. As seen from the four themes, the obstacles that working women face are multifold, and creating the ability for them to "shine" is complex. Another reason for skepticism about the impact of the law is that there are no sanctions associated with it; thus, it is solely the employer's responsibility to "try harder" and to "cooperate," making it unenforceable.

However, in some cases (such as that of Toyota, as mentioned above), a minimal number of female managers are being appointed (albeit a not statistically significant number) who are married and have children—this is a change from the conventional situation (i.e., having unmarried and childless female managers), and is due to the law. As Kawaguchi wrote, if large companies with influence promote such reforms, more small and medium-sized companies may choose to follow suit [18].

It is clear, however, that many interviewees see the slogan and the law as trying to put women to work cheaply for economic reasons. The attempt by conservative ruling parties, as criticized by Miura and Ando, to exploit women for their own convenience may have resulted in the emergence of contradictory slogans or be perceived as such by the interviewees themselves. Additionally, the labor shortage in Japan is evident to everyone, and women may perceive that the government intends to embellish attempts to address the labor shortage as if it were for the benefit of women in an attempt to entice them into the labor market. In the past, socialist countries encouraged women to enter the labor market, promoting "women's liberation" and "gender equality" through women's masculinization and the de-sexualization of roles. However, as soon as the unemployment rate declined, women were laid off through parental leave and ostensibly for pro-family reasons [36, 37]. Many interviewees sensed the danger of women's choices being influenced by state policies in this way. However, as Fukasawa has claimed, companies are directly involved with employers rather than the government and are in a position to implement positive measures to achieve equality [8]. Accordingly, how companies promote the "active participation of women" is key to the law's impact. Further research may be

conducted to identify the intention of companies to promote women's active participation in society.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This paper has examined women's perceptions regarding the extent to which the Act on the Promotion of Women and its policy contributes to improving gender equality and realizing a society where all women can "shine." The state's growth strategy is associated with the slogan "a society where all women shine," but it was found that women perceive that there are many obstacles to this. The Act on the Promotion of Women targets only some women who work for large companies. The number of women who benefit is small; thus, it may have the unintended outcome of fueling division among women, clearly showing the challenge of promoting women's "activity" horizontally and vertically. This concern is acknowledged by the actual target group of the law, namely, women, this study's interviewees. This finding is arguably the highlight of this study. Nevertheless, since this law and slogan target women but require direct action from companies, it suggests the following research agenda. While there has been only a minimal increase in the representation of women in managerial positions based on numerical data, investigating how companies are actively promoting women's advancement from the former's perspective would be a valuable complement to this study.

In conclusion, the implementation feasibility of the Act on the Promotion of Women, accompanied by its grandiose slogan, is almost non-existent. Moreover, as revealed by the four themes identified in this study, it has become evident that even large corporations lack the necessary foundations for women to thrive and succeed. While many interviewees perceived that male participation in household chores and childcare has increased, they also acknowledged the gap between perceptions and reality. Similarly, although many recognized that the law and slogans have facilitated greater discussion of women's issues, substantial improvements are scarcely identifiable. Instead, the disparity between ideals and reality has become more pronounced, implying that the notion of "women's advancement" cannot be deemed a success. As Japan's economy has been stagnant for the past 30 years, it is perhaps natural that the government would implement policies to increase and exploit women's labor force. However, women are liable to be overburdened and stressed unless men's participation in the home is substantially increased simultaneously. Women face challenges working regular hours, giving birth, raising children, doing housework, and caring for family members. For this reason, the government and companies need to implement more family-friendly policies such as improving welfare policies, enriching public daycare centers, and establishing in-house daycare centers. Only when these issues are resolved will women be able to "shine."

The contradictory reality behind the attractive slogan has been brought to light, but since the target date for achieving the goal of the Act (increasing the female managerial rate to 30%) is 2030, there is a chance that the situation may improve. Therefore, those interested should keep an eye on developments, bearing in mind

that the few positive cases identified (such as that of Toyota, as mentioned earlier) may spread.

The findings of this study may catalyze policymakers and stakeholders to confront reality and devise strategies for improvement but also represent a valuable contribution to regional studies, specifically in comprehending the gender dynamics within East Asian societies. While the study centers on Japan, the issues pertaining to women's social status and gender equality are pervasive across the entire East Asian region. Through this research, scholars from diverse East Asian countries and regions can gain profound insight into analogous issues while concurrently deepening their understanding of Japan's cultural context and distinctive characteristics, thereby enriching their comprehension of the broader cultural milieu of East Asia as a whole.

Appendix

Questions for Interview:

1. How has the life of women changed over the last decade(s) in Japan (workplace, political life, family, media, attitude)?

2. Has there been any generational shift (your parent's age, your age, your kids' age)? And if so, why did this happen? Is there any discrimination towards women in society?

3. Do you see any shift in fathers/husbands' active participation in the lives of their family (kid/s, doing housework)? What are the main characteristics of this process? What are typical examples (of male tasks)?

4. What are the main reasons for women's underrepresentation in general economic life and managerial positions in particular?

5. The Act on the Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace came into force in April 2016. Is it an effective means of increasing women's participation in the economy? Why is it useful/not useful?

6. How far will companies comply with this law? If it is difficult for them to do so, why?

7. How many years will be needed to reach the target (i.e., 30% women in management)?

8. What are other useful means of supporting women managers?

9. What do you think of the acceptance of women's situation and social change in Japan, generally?

10. Do people welcome the law and are companies increasing the number of female workplace managers?

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Declarations

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