Miranda Mobley

Professor Schoppa

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Japan's Female Workforce: Why Management Remain Out of Reach

Imagine having worked hard for the same company all your life, engaging in hours of overtime every week, and only achieving your first promotion at the age of fifty. While that might seem absurd — or even an incentive to engage in the act of "quiet quitting" that has become a popular idea in America recently — in Japan, if you were a woman, this would be cause for celebration. Although Japan ranks fairly well in the World Economic Forum's gender gap reports for health and education its abysmal ratings for economic and political participation drag it far below other G7 and OECD countries ("Global"). In 2013, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe attempted to remedy some of this inequality through a series of policies he termed "womenomics" after a 1999 paper by Kathy Matsui ("Womenomics"). While progress has happened in some areas, such as an increase in female labor force participation rates, these policies have still failed to significantly increase the amount of women in managerial positions: as of 2023, the percentage of women in managerial positions in Japan is still a measly 9.8% ("Ratio"). 2018 labor reforms have similarly failed to increase this number. In this paper, I will outline the efforts made to increase the percent of women in management positions, the success of lack of these efforts, and ideas for tackling this prevalent issue in Japan's workforce.

Japan's gender equality in the workforce has lagged far behind other developed countries for quite some time. In 2012, before Abe implemented his womenomics policies, Japan's female

labor force participation rates stood at 64%, slightly below the United State's 66% (Worldbank.org, "Labor force"). In an effort to combat this — and spurred on by Japan's stagnating economy — Prime Minister Shinzo Abe set forth these policies that were meant to, in his words, allow women to "shine" (Asahi Shimbun, "Women"). These policies included setting targets for female workforce participation rates to rise to 73% and female managerial positions to 30%, respectively; ending the excessively long wait-time for childcare services; expanding parental leave and encouraging fathers to take paternity leave; revising the tax and social security system; and encouraging private firms to hire and promote more women (Chanlett-Avery and Nelson, "Womenomics in Japan: In Brief"). While some of these policies have succeeded in meeting their targets, others have fallen far short. Critics have also suggested that these policies are also far insufficient for what Japan actually needs if it wishes to revive its economy and falling birth rates (Crawford, "Abe's Womenomics Policy"; Dalton, "Womenomics, 'Equality' and Abe's Neo-liberal Strategy").

On the optimistic side of things, womenomics has admittedly achieved some progress. Female participation in the workforce is indeed up, soaring to 75% in 2022 (worldbank.org). This rate has now surpassed the United State's 68%, and is close to or better than many other OECD countries. Furthermore, the childcare waitlist has dropped from its record high of over 26,000 children in 2017 to 2,680 in 2023 (Statista, "Number of children waiting to be accepted to day care centers in Japan from 2014 to 2023"). The rate of men taking paternity leave has also increased, up to 17% in 2022 (Statista, "Percentage of men taking parental leave in Japan from 2013 to 2022"). These successes do show hopeful progress that Japan is beginning to make towards equality.

The tax and social security systems have also seen some reforms. Previously, women with a spouse who worked full-time would count as a dependent and obtain the same pension and healthcare benefits as her spouse. However, this only held true for women who made less than 1.1 million yen (about $7k USD) per year. After that, women had to pay into the social security system themselves and were no longer on the pension plan. In essence, this punished women for working. A woman wishing to supplement her husband's income with her own would, if she made above the 1.1 million yen per year, actually end up losing money. Only with a higher salary (the equivalent of around $9k USD per year) would she actually come out the better for having begun to work — and working the necessary hours to earn that salary might be more than a housewife, expected to do all the chores and childcare, would be able to do. The tax reform policy attempted to change this disincentive by raising the cap from 1.1 million yen to 1.5 million. While it is at least a step in the right direction, it has still failed to significantly increase the amount of full-time female workers in Japan.

Unfortunately, each of these seeming successes also contain counterarguments for how they do not truly help the situation in the way they purport to. For instance, while the female participation rate is up, what many American journalists praising Japan and haranguing the United States for these numbers fail to add is that the majority of female workers in Japan are non-regular employees. Japan's 2020 Labor Force Survey revealed that 56% of women listed themselves as such (Statistics Bureau of Japan). Non-regular workers in Japan have low pay and little job security, especially in comparison to the life-time employment guarantee and seniority-based wages that full-time employees at large firms in Japan enjoy. As such, in times of economic downturn, these women are the first to feel its brunt, for without the security of life-time employment, they are the first to be laid off. Moreover, although Japan's Equal

Employment Opportunity Act forbids overt gender-based discrimination, many women are passed over for the full-time worker track *(sougoushoku)* as well as for future promotions, on the basis that many women will either quit or go part-time to raise their children (Yamaguchi, "Japan's Gender Gap"). These rates of part-time employment also explain how, despite the increasing rates of labor force participation rates in Japan, there has been only a slight increase in the amount of women in management positions. Almost all promotions come from this full-time worker track, so many women are disqualified from promotion from the very moments they are hired.

Why then do women choose to raise children, knowing that such a decision will sacrifice their career? And why must it sacrifice their career in the first place? This expectation of women as the primary caretakers for children and the elderly is pervasive and multi-faceted. The 専業主婦 *(sengyou shufu;* full-time housewife) ideal in Japan, echoing the earlier saying 良妻賢母 (*ryousai kenbo;* wise wife, good mother), culturally encourages women to work at home and take care of children and elderly parents. The resultant society ends up creating a vicious circle for Japanese women. Women feel both that they should raise their children themselves, as well as that they have little to no career opportunity anyway. This leads them to quit or drop to part-time work. Because of that, employers' expectations of women's lack of workability are reinforced, and they become less likely to promote or hire women full-time. As a result, women become that much more willing to drop out of work, and the cycle continues.

The *sengyou shufu* ideal also puts all the pressure on women as caretakers, while putting little to none on men. Although Japan's rate of paternity leave is up from a mere 2% in 2013 to 17% in 2022, a government survey found that 35% of new fathers wanted to take paternity leave,

but felt they could not due to a fear of career-related repercussions (Crawford). Meanwhile, 2017 OECD statistics show that Japanese women do, on average, more than 5 times the amount of housework and care-related activities that Japanese men do (OECD Family Database). In fact, these statistics show that, despite women spending almost half the amount of time that men do on paid work, they spend slightly *less* time on leisure activities. Even though, on average, women are working less paid hours, they are still working more than men. The only difference is their pay. The gender inequality in childcare and domestic work hints at why many women are either unwilling or unable to match their male counterparts in full-time employment. A woman could not possibly hope to match her male counterparts in the area of paid work while maintain the same amount of unpaid labor she already carries. Therefore, if women are to step into the workforce as full-time laborers equal to men, men must pick up some of the domestic slack.

In further attempts to help this situation, in 2018, the Abe administration enacted labor law reforms, the first in 70 years. Among other things, the Work Style Reform Law caps overtime work at no more than 45 hours per month and 360 hours per year, although that can be extended to 100 hours per month and 720 hours per year with special permission (Ohta, "Japan Enacts Work Style Reform Law"). It also claims to enforce equal treatment between regular and non-regular employees, as well as requires employers to ensure that employees take their paid leave time. The new law does two main things for female workers. Firstly, it attempts to reform parts of the Japanese work culture which Japanese women have historically found distasteful and which have influenced their desire not to be full-time workers (Dalton). The new cap on overtime hours and the incentive to have employers, rather than employees, initiate PTO, takes promising steps at finally shifting the punishingly long hours that full-time employees in Japan

must suffer through. If Japanese work culture continues this shift, women will hopefully be more and more willing (and able) to work, and work more.

Secondly, because the majority of female workers are non-regular, the equal treatment between regular and non-regular employees will hopefully help to equalize sexism and wage gaps between Japanese men and women. However, although this legislation seems promising, in reality, it does little to assist in the real source of the wage gap. According to Kazuo Yamaguchi, the primary cause of the gender gap has little to do with the large amount of female non-regular workers ("Determinants of the Gender Gap"). Rather, the bigger issue is the wage gap within full-time employment. Yamaguchi states that this accounts for "more than half" of the wage gap. Therefore, the Work Style Reform Law has failed to tackle the biggest problem causing wage inequality. Once again, Japan's policies have addressed some smaller and related issues to the root of workforce gender inequality, while avoiding the biggest problem.

Thus, we move on to the biggest failure of Abe's womenomics policy so far: the continued lack of women in management positions. Abe's target for 30% of management positions to be filled by women by 2020 has remained laughably low, still stuck at 9.8% in 2023 (Nippon). Why is this? I believe the main issues are two-fold: institutional and domestic. I have already briefly discussed the domestic part of this; in Japan, women are expected to take on the vast majority of housework, childcare, and eldercare. These expectations severely limit the amount of hours a woman can give to her job. Glenda S. Roberts, in her article based off of interviews conducted on thirteen Japanese white-collar workers, demonstrates the sacrifices a Japanese woman must make if she wishes to maintain both a household and a full-time job ("Leaning out for the long span"). One woman recounts being forced to work so much overtime that she could not get home in time to make dinner for her children and instead had to prepare

dinner in the mornings, then enlist the help of her mother-in-law to heat it up for her children. Another woman lost several pounds and suffered mental health problems from being forced to work long shifts overtime and then spend hours every night helping her children through bouts of asthma. Both women were married; both women remained unaided by their husbands. While such stories are, of course, anecdotal, they corroborate with societal expectations regarding women's gender roles, as well as the aforementioned statistics in terms of men's willingness to take paternity leave and do housework. While men such as these two husbands remain unwilling to assist their wives in domestic tasks such as cooking and tending to sick children, these women will be forced to either do everything themselves or collapse under the pressure.

While the women singled out in Roberts' article managed to maintain both their full-time job and their household, Roberts admits that their situations were atypical. The firm these women work at offers quite generous accommodations, such as on-site daycare and up to five years of maternity leave if they have three children. Yet even then, the article shows the immense struggle that these women have gone through, taking years off to raise children and losing out on promotions because of it, losing sleep, and suffering physical and mental health issues because of it. If these women, functionally the elite of Japanese women with their full-time employment at a major firm, still rely on years of leave and the assistance of their mothers-in-law or other family members to keep their jobs, children, and sanity all intact, then other women have barely any chance at all. The domestic claims on Japanese women and the failure of Japanese men to help need to change if women are to maintain full-time employment in Japan.

Changing work culture is also necessary. While the 2018 labor reforms did introduce a cap on overtime hours, that cap is not nearly sufficient to significantly reduce the overtime employees are already working. Because, historically, men have been able to work long overtime

while women have not been due to familial duties, continued allowance — and expectations for — long hours of overtime only continue to push gender inequality in the workforce. Either overtime must drop, or the expectation for women and not men to take care of the family must. Ideally, we would see both.

In addition to the domestic division of labor, women also face institutional discrimination at firms in Japan. In Japan, two main employment "tracks" exist: the dead-end clerical track (一般職, *ippanshoku)* and the general track (総合職, *sougoushoku).* The general track allows for promotions, and is what most men are hired under. Meanwhile, 52-64% of Japanese companies only hire women hired as clerical employees (Tachibanaki, *The New Paradox for Japanese Women: Greater Choice, Greater Inequality*). These women therefore, see their career end as soon as it has begun. Even if a woman were to be hired under the general track, however, her struggle is far from over. Roberts relates that, for a long time, having taken childcare leave counted as a strike against you in promotion considerations ("Leaning"). Because the lack of childcare services as well as the cultural expectations ensure that women, upon having children, will almost always take some sort of leave, this means that almost any Japanese woman who has children is at an automatic disadvantage against being promoted in comparison with her childless counterparts and to men. Furthermore, the articles relates one of the common factors in gaining promotions: the ability to participate in the prevalent drinking work culture in Japan. Of course, mothers who must get home to their children are unable to participate in such social networking. Once again, mothers are at a disadvantage because of their inability to participate in long social events after work hours.

When asked as to why they did not promote more women, personnel officers responded that they believed either that there were no women with the requisite experience or expertise in the firm, or that women retired too soon to be promoted (Yamaguchi 2016). Yet, in contrast to those claims, Yamaguchi's study found that very little of it had to do with a lack of female education or experience, claiming that only 21% of the gender disparity could be attributed to that. Rather, even once education, experience, and working hours had been equalized, about 60% of the disparity remained.

Some "progressive" firms have begun taking a different approach to promotion. This approach is to allow women to work normal hours while their kids are younger, then, once their kids are grown and they are able to dedicate the time to their company, choosing to promote them then. While this does seem to be at least something — after all, these firms are at least promoting women — women are often in their late 40s or 50s by the time this happens. In firms with a retirement age for managers in the late 50s or early 60s, women will therefore enjoy only a short time of increased pay, and seeing promotion all the way up the corporate ladder is even more difficult given the short timeframe these women have to work with. Meanwhile, men can gain promotions at any stage in their life and enjoy the increased pay for much longer times. Although this new approach does at least show some steps towards the goal of increased positions in management for women, it seems far too short-sighted and still far from gaining equal status with men.

To review Japanese firm's promotion policies, in Yamaguchi's words, "Gender at birth is what determines whether a person becomes a manager in Japan, not individual achievement" (Yamaguchi, "Gender Gap"). In order to equalize this gender-based discrimination, I believe the Japanese government will need to do more than simply ask nicely for corporations to promote

women. Previous policies have attempted that and failed. Incorporating blind promotion and hiring policies could be a potential step in the right direction, but the government must make such policies more than mere suggestion. As with its 2018 labor form policies which penalize businesses whose employees either take too much overtime or too little paid leave, the government should penalize businesses that show such continued discrimination in the hiring and promoting processes.

This essay has explored some of the more recent legislation in regards to female employment and the increasing attempts for workforce equality in Japan. Although Abe's womenomics policies have seen some success in meeting their targets, other goals are still far from being met. Chief among this is the lack of women in management positions. The reasons for this are many, but this essay discussed two main problems: women's culturally-enforced positions in the home doing housework and childcare, and institutional blockages in either refusing to hire women in non-clerical positions or refusing to promote them, even when they have proved to be the equal of men. As the lack of women in managerial positions remains the largest source of wage inequality in Japan, for true gender equality to be realized, these issues must be resolved. Men must shoulder more of the burden of housework and childcare, and the current government's efforts in encouraging paternity leaves rates must be only the beginning. In order to combat institutional inequality in promotion and hiring, I suggest a blind hiring/promotion system. However, unlike previous womenomics policies in regards to hiring practices, in order to truly make a change for the better, the government will need to penalize those corporations which do not fall into line. If both this cultural shift takes place and these incentives are properly implemented, perhaps we could at last begin to see equality inside these corporations.

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