

Japan: women's empowerment

SUMMARY

The world's third largest economy has not yet done enough to encourage its female talent. Prospects for women in Japan are excellent in terms of literacy, enrolment in primary and secondary education, and healthy life expectancy. However, the picture changes if we look at women's reduced participation in political and professional life. In 2016, three women ascended to top political jobs in Japan: Tomomi Inada was appointed Minister of Defence; Yuriko Koike was elected Governor of Tokyo; and the Democratic Party elected Rehnō Murata as its President. These may be signs that Japan's conservative political culture is starting to open up for female politicians. Meanwhile Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's 'Womenomics' programme aims to promote women's empowerment and 'create a society in which women shine'.

However, despite some encouraging results, much remains to be done. Issues such as the gender pay gap, maternity harassment, and a lack of childcare need to be tackled in order to increase women's labour force participation and improve their prospects of having a career with the same possibilities as their male colleagues. Women also need more job security, while the labour market rather offers this opportunity to men. A change in Japan's corporate culture might be also necessary: a departure from the prevalent model of long working hours would allow both men and women to enjoy a more adequate work-life balance and would encourage families to have more children, helping the country tackle the consequences of a fast-ageing society.



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Highlighting women's untapped potential

Japan is the world's [third largest economy](#). Meanwhile, due to its [low fertility rate](#) and [high life expectancy](#), the country is [ageing faster than any other](#) in history: [one third](#) of the population is already aged 65 or over, with an estimated rise to 42.5 % by 2050. This already gives Japan the lowest Potential Support Ratio (PSR) in the world (2.1, compared to an average of 12.9 in Africa: PSR is the number of people aged 20 to 64 divided by the number of those aged 65 and over). The declining ratio of workers to retirees suggests that there is likely to be a high pressure on fiscal and political policies for the years to come, as well as a [labour shortage](#) in sectors such as security, construction and mining, and others.

This trend could be offset through immigration, which could avert population decline. However, a traditionally predominant notion of population homogeneity and cultural uniqueness has prevented the government from developing immigration policies. An initiative aiming to attract foreign workers was introduced in May 2012, through a points-based system, but only promotes the entry of [highly skilled professionals](#).¹ The government has begun implementing a '[guest workers](#)' programme, although with much caution. Japan therefore has one of the [lowest shares of resident foreign population](#) among OECD countries.

Against this background, growing attention is being paid to women's current employment rate and the potential economic benefits of improving it. According to OECD statistics, in Japan the [labour force participation rate](#) (age range: 15-64) for women was 66.7 % in 2015, much lower than that of men (85 %, one of the highest among OECD countries). There is therefore considerable scope for improvement. As in the case of immigration, social norms, combined with economic policy, have played a major role in maintaining gender roles and a gender segregated labour market, that are at the origin of the discrimination. Men must be the 'breadwinner', while many women are discouraged from entering or remaining the labour market, particularly if they have children, in a country where combining work and family is quite difficult.

In addition, there is a [gap](#) in terms of the female-male ratio in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields. Data also reveals that the proportion of female administrative and managerial workers in Japan is lower than other countries (see Figure 1). This male-centred working culture results in a huge waste of resources, and, considering Japan's top ranking in terms of women's education (see box), an under-utilised potential. According to Goldman Sachs, closing Japan's gender employment gap would add seven million employees to the workforce and therefore potentially boost the country's output by almost [12.5 %](#).²

Japan and the gender index rankings

Different gender indexes coincide, showing that Japan enjoys a high degree of gender equality with respect to education and health, while it is much less advanced in terms of economic participation and political empowerment.

In the World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap Index](#) 2016, Japan ranks [111](#) out of [144](#) countries, the last of the most developed, and dropping ten positions in comparison with [2015](#). Tokyo features a brilliant first place in literacy rates, enrolment in primary and secondary education and in healthy life expectancy. However, the country falls well behind in terms of indicators such as female-to-male ratio of legislators, senior officials and managers, as well as women's share in the parliament.

Meanwhile, in the 2014 [Gender Inequality Index](#) (GII) published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Japan ranked [20 of 49](#) countries enjoying 'very high human development'.

The [Gender Equity Index](#) (GEI) 2012 by Social Watch put Japan 106th among 168 countries. Its excellent performance in education is offset by the poor outcome on women's empowerment.

Legislative efforts and 'Womenomics'

The 1947 [Japanese Constitution](#) established the principle of no discrimination on grounds of gender (article 14) and the equality of the sexes before marriage (article 24). However, the 1947 [Labour Standards Law](#) provided only limited protections against gender discrimination. Following Japan's 1980 ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)), the Diet in 1986 adopted the Equal Employment Opportunity Law ([EEO](#)). The Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society ([Law No 78](#) of 1999) went further, by supporting the equal participation of both sexes in all areas of life.

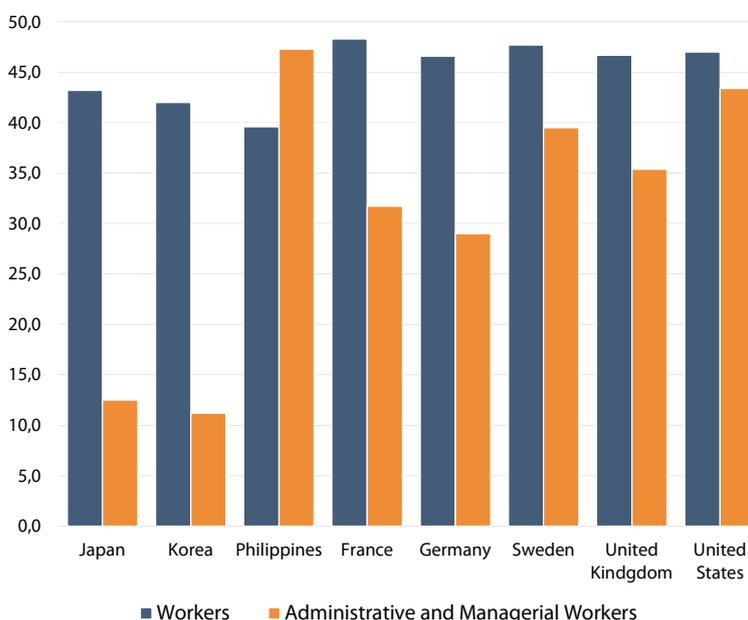
Nevertheless, implementation of equality legislation remains an issue, particularly in the area of employment. The archipelago's companies succeeded in eluding the provisions of the EEO by setting up a dual career track, dividing job applicants into two groupings, and de facto establishing a gender bias. Women apply most often to the 'clerical track', while the 'management track' is the prerogative of career-oriented men. The law was revised in 1997 to make the EEO anti-discrimination provisions related to recruiting, hiring, assignments and promotions mandatory. For the first time, it recognised the notion of sexual harassment. However, the only penalty for companies that flouted the law was to have their names made public. A second revision in 2006 included indirect discrimination and greater protection for workers taking childcare and family leave, but according to lawyer [Megan L. Starich](#), enforcement provisions remain too weak.

'Womenomics: creating a society in which women can shine'

Since the adoption of the Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999, the Japanese government, prefectures and municipalities are required to establish a basic plan aiming at the promotion of a gender-equal society. The first government basic plan for gender equality, including 11 priority objectives, was adopted in December 2000. A new plan is adopted every five years, fixing 10-year goals. The current fourth [basic plan](#) was adopted on 25 December 2015.

The current government has also mainstreamed gender equality into its wider strategy. 'Creating a society in which women shine' is one of the slogans Prime Minister Abe has used to promote women's empowerment, as part of the [Japan Revitalization Strategy](#). This policy has been dubbed '[Womenomics](#)' by analysts,³ to make a parallel with the

Figure 1 – Percentage of female workers and female administrative/managerial workers in selected countries



Data source: [Women and Men in Japan 2016](#), Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office.

three-arrow '[Abenomics](#)' economic policy, and at present the term is even used by the government. Tokyo has acknowledged that [3.15 million women](#) would like to work, but cannot. In order to exploit this potential power, the government has outlined 'Key Performance Indicators' as goals to achieve in the medium term:

1. Target 30 % female representation in leadership positions across Japanese society by 2020;
2. Lift the female labour participation rate between the ages of 25-44 from 68 % in 2012 to 73 % by 2020;
3. Raise the percentage of women returning to work after their first child from 38 % in 2010 to 55 % by 2020;
4. Boost the supply of childcare facilities with the aim of reducing numbers of children on day-care waitlists (22 741 children as of April 2013), by 2017;
5. Increase the percentage of fathers who take paternity leave from 2.6 % in 2011 to 13 % by 2020.

Through the 'Womenomics' programme, which has evolved since 2013, Abe's government has made genuine attempts to tackle the issue of women's empowerment, with some encouraging results. However, considerable scope for improvement remains, and the programme has also drawn criticism.

Critical views of the mainstream approach

[Hiroko Takeda](#), a professor at Nagoya University, thinks that 'Womenomics' reforms are a continuance of initiatives of previous governments. For instance, the 30 % target had already been introduced in 2003 under the Jun'ichirō Koizumi government through a decision of the Gender Equality Promotion [Headquarters](#) (set up in 1994, chaired by the Prime Minister and composed by all ministerial members). These reforms are basically part of a neoliberal reform, aiming at revitalising the economy after several years of slow growth and filling gaps in the labour force. However, the message to Japanese women remains basically traditional: 'to be a good reproductive agent while engaging in paid employment to an extent determined by market standards'. Genuine gender empowerment is not the goal: structural inequalities embedded in the gender hierarchy within the labour market in Japan are not addressed. If an increasing proportion of Japanese women actively participate in the workforce, this increase is largely in part-time or irregular positions. Today, only [43 % of women](#) have a permanent job, compared with 78 % of men. In 2014, 12 % of men were part-time employees, against [37.2 %](#) of women. In September 2015, the Diet approved a revision to the Worker Dispatch Law, which [according to its detractors](#) allows for temporary contracts to go beyond a previous three year limit. As most temporary jobs are held by women, this new legislation will mostly affect them. A leading feminist thinker, sociologist [Chizuko Ueno](#), affirms that the deregulation of labour has led many women to become 'irregular workers', unable to apply for protection under the labour legislation on anti-gender discrimination.

According to [Vera Mackie](#), these reforms leave the gendered division of labour untouched: 'the idea that domestic work is women's responsibility remains unchallenged'. She also claims that the gradual opening to immigrant domestic workers may only benefit elite professionals able to afford such assistance, and not substantially help those women who can only find part-time jobs when they return to the workplace after their children have grown. [Chelsea Szendi Schieder](#) criticizes Abe's 'trickle-down' approach, focused on benefiting women in terms of access to top position in corporations, but not addressing the hardships experienced by non-regular workers, nor taking account of women's unpaid care work.

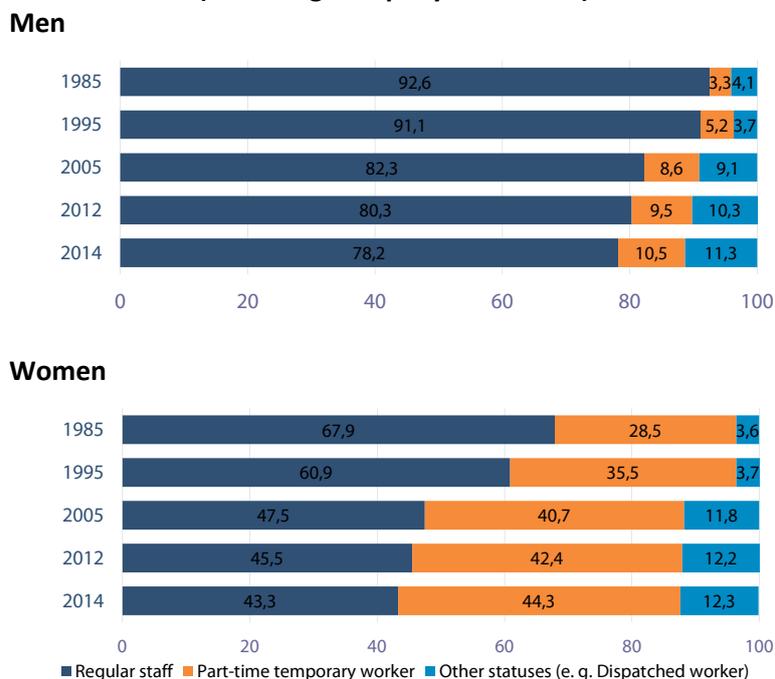
Progress and challenges

Women's political participation

The picture of gender inequality is reflected in the political sphere. Japan ranks 157th of 192 countries in women's political participation according to the [International Parliamentary Union](#). With less than 10 % in the House of Representatives (the lower house), Japan is at the bottom of the ranking on share of women in parliaments among [OECD countries](#).⁴ Despite Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's pledge for 'Womonomics', and his efforts to engage more women in his cabinet, at present, following the [resignation of two](#) female ministers in

October 2014, only three Ministers in Abe's [18-member cabinet](#) are women. At [local level](#) women make up just 4.3 % of prefectural governors and 2.1 % of mayors. Considering the 30 % by 2020 target set by the government, this has only been achieved for membership of advisory councils and committees at national and council level; in many other sectors the target achievement appears unlikely.

Figure 2 – Employee composition ratio by employment status (excluding Company Executives)



Data source: [Women and Men in Japan 2016](#), Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office.

A new female 'troika' in Japan

In a period of no more than six weeks between August and September 2016, three women suddenly took high level jobs in the Japanese political arena, suggesting that the conservative political culture may be changing in a traditionally male-dominated country. **Tomomi Inada** was appointed Minister of Defence; **Yuriko Koike** was elected Governor of Tokyo; and the Democratic Party elected Rehnō Murata (usually known as **Rehnō**) as its President. All three are hinted at as a possible successor to Shinzō Abe, which would make one of them the first ever female Prime Minister of Japan. The impact of these appointments for wider gender equality in the political sphere remains to be seen. Analyses highlight that overall, progress in this area has been quite modest: whilst the percentage of women at director level in ministries and government offices attained a record of 3.5 %, the reality is that the government failed to meet its goal of 5 % by the end of 2015. In the private sector, the ratio of female managers is stagnant at 10 %. Acknowledging the difficulties, the Cabinet has moderated its ambitions in its fourth basic plan, establishing a goal of 7 % of women as directors in ministries and government offices by 2020, or 15 % of women directors in local government and private companies.

Women's economic participation

In February 2013, companies were invited to disclose gender-related statistics in their corporate governance reports. In April 2013, Abe asked *Keidanren* (the Japanese Business

Federation) to proactively appoint women to executive and managerial positions, starting with the appointment of one female as a board member. *Keidanren* drew up action plans for women's participation in April 2014, encouraging member companies to draw up and publicise their action plans. At the same time, parental leave benefits were raised, from 50 % to 67 % of wages prior to taking leave, for a period of six months.⁵ In August 2015, the Diet adopted an [Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace](#), which aims at promoting the participation and advancement of women in the labour force taking into account, among other things, the respect of women's choices with regards to their work and family life balance. Government agencies, local government and private sector corporations with more than 300 employees will have to collect and analyse gender and employment data on their staff, and publish their action plans to improve gender equality with concrete objectives and measures.

Overall female labour participation is growing (from 60 % in 2010 to 66.7 % in 2015); day-care availability is rising; companies have begun to share gender-related information. However, there is considerable scope for improvement. For instance, too many women still end their careers after giving birth to their first child: [70 %](#) stop working for a decade or more. They may return to the workplace when the children are older, but mainly as part-time workers. Women's labour-force participation in Japan therefore demonstrates an [M-shaped curve](#), in contrast to advanced western countries (although similar to South Korea's, even deeper curve).

One of the factors behind this pattern is discrimination against pregnant workers, better known as 'maternity harassment' (*matahara*), which is a major issue in Japan. According to a [survey](#) conducted in September-October 2015 by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, almost half of part-time workers were told they were 'causing trouble' or should retire, while 20.5 % were dismissed.

Lack of childcare leads many women to stay at home. While the Japanese population has begun to [shrink](#), the number of children on waiting lists for day-care is [not falling](#), due to the rise in working parents caused by decades of economic stagnation.

A number of women also have to add the [care](#) of older relatives to child rearing responsibilities, which also prevents them from joining the labour force. Relatives living together (spouse, child, child's spouse), make up 61.6 % of main caregivers, and women account for [68.7 %](#) of them. This situation is also due to a shortage of nursing care facilities, a worsening problem in a fast-ageing society. One aspect of the problem is that the nursing profession implies tough working conditions, long working hours and low wages, resulting in high turnover. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare estimates the number of '[latent nursery teachers](#)', those who are qualified but refuse to return to work, at 760 000.

Japanese **fiscal** and social systems are based on the assumption of a family with children where a **single-income earner** (the man) works. A household head (basically, male) can claim a dependent (female) exemption (¥380 000, around €3 275), provided the dependent's annual revenues are less than ¥1.03 million (equivalent to around €8 880). Maintaining this low level of income allows the dependent to claim a national pension and avoid paying any premium. Companies pay higher salaries to men if their wives stay at home, however, the system has become anachronistic as double-income households have today overtaken single-income ones.

The Japanese social system encourages the maintenance of a [gender wage gap](#) in favour of men, the third highest in the OECD, after South Korea and Estonia. While the data for 2014 amounted to 26.6 %, these relate to full-time employees. As many women in Japan

today occupy part-time positions, the real gap is likely to be higher, and also contributes to a gender pension gap. Moreover, in a country which tops the world ranking in terms of [life expectancy at birth](#), women (87 years) outlive their husbands (80 years). Women make up [70.5 %](#) of people aged 85 and over, and therefore become more easily dependent on the state welfare system. Of the population aged 65 or over living alone, [80 %](#) are women (divorcees or widows). Women are also more inclined than men to fall into poverty: 25 % of the female population over 75 years is affected by poverty, against 20 % of men. Women represent [70 %](#) of those living in nursing homes.

Outlook

[Behavioural changes](#) have occurred in Japanese society in recent decades. Society's attitude toward women's participation in the labour market is also changing: the latest Cabinet Office survey finds that [54.2 %](#) of respondents are in favour of the idea that women should continue to work after maternity. A government-run public opinion poll on a gender-equal society in October 2012 showed that [69.9 %](#) of respondents considered that men are given preferential treatment in Japanese society.

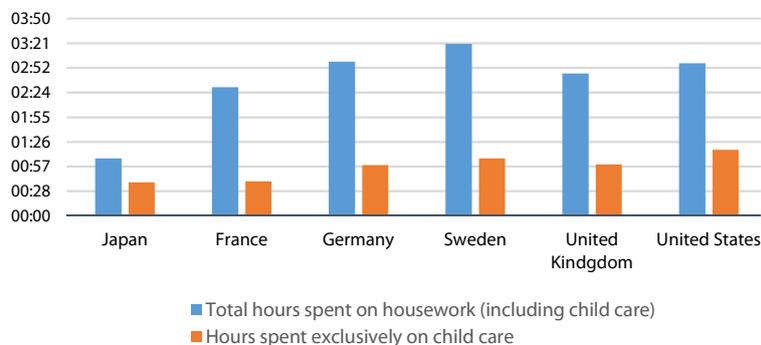
In fact, whatever the efforts by the executive and the legislator to empower women, the main challenge for the years to come is a cultural change, to strike a balance between having children and participating in the economy (and, more in general, to ensure genuine gender equality). This is difficult in a country with no legal limits on working hours and where chronically long hours and overwork are the norm. In the worse cases, this leads to labour accidents, overwork-induced death ([karoshi](#)) and suicide. The [suicide](#) of a 24 year old female employee at a large advertising agency in December 2015 has reopened the debate on *karoshi*, while compensation claims related to death from overwork are on the [rise](#).

The government seems to have acknowledged the issue. In 2016, a task force was set up to update the country's corporate culture. During a debate in the Budget Committee of the House of Councillors (the upper house) in January 2017, Prime Minister Abe confirmed the executive is committed to rectifying the overwork culture. However, Abe could not set a timeline for legislation or promise to require a minimum daily rest period. The debate was triggered by Rehnō Murata, who put forward the [EU Working Time Directive](#) (2003/88/EC) as a model to follow. A Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare panel is [considering](#) introducing a quota system as part of a two year parental leave plan that would require the participation of the father as a precondition for eligibility. However, a major problem is that Japan has a corporate culture of deprecating men who prioritise child-rearing over work. Some [experts](#) warn that a 'paternity harassment' issue prevents men from taking this possibility, therefore creating real opportunities for women to retain their job.

In addition, a switch in male attitudes towards sharing housework and childcare may have positive consequences, not only for work-life balance, but also for the birth rate in Japan. If a husband spends more time on housework and childcare, a higher chance of further children may result (see Figure 3). Immigrants could also provide assistance in terms of taking care of children and the elderly, but politicians are aware of the issue's unpopularity. However in this respect also, Japanese society is changing: according to an April 2015 Asahi Shimbun poll, [51 %](#) of Japanese support immigration, double that of a 2010 survey. The issue remains highly sensitive, however, and the response currently

proposed includes the development of [robots](#) to take care of the elderly. Meanwhile, from another point of view, a concrete tool to achieve both gender equality and to counter Japan's demographic decline could entail giving more women to access to full-time positions while reducing working hours. Notwithstanding, the evolution of labour policies in recent decades has taken another direction.

Figure 3 – Time spent on housework and childcare by husbands with a child or children under six years old (per day)



Data source: [Women and Men in Japan 2016](#), Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office.

Main references

[Women and men in Japan 2016](#), Cabinet Office, Gender Equality Bureau, 2016.

[Womenomics 4.0: Time to Walk the Talk](#), Goldman Sachs, 30 May 2014.

[All the Japan State Wants is Shining Women \(and Their Families\): Tatamae and Honne of Abe-Womenomics](#), Takeda H., Political Studies Association, 2015.

Endnotes

- ¹ This system was upgraded to a [High Skilled Professional visa](#) in April 2015. A 'Japanese Green Card for Highly Skilled Foreign Professionals' is also to be introduced.
- ² The same data envisages an increase above 18 % for Greece and above 16 % for Italy.
- ³ The term 'Womenomics' was created by Tokyo-based Goldman Sachs analyst [Kathy Matsui](#) in 1999.
- ⁴ The situation in the House of Councillors (the upper house) has improved with the mid-term elections of July 2016. Today, 50 women (20.7 %) hold a seat.
- ⁵ As of 2012, 83.6 % of women benefited from childcare leave, against a share of 1.89 % of men.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu> (intranet)

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