

# Political Targets: Womenomics as an Economic and Foreign Relations Strategy



Linda HASUNUMA

April 2017

The Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental and a non-profit organization.

As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience. Using an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

With offices in Paris and Brussels, Ifri stands out as one of the rare French think tanks to have positioned itself at the very heart of European debate.

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.

ISBN: 978-2-36567-711-0

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2017

Cover: © Filipe Frazao/Shutterstock.com

#### **How to quote this document:**

Linda Hasunuma, “Political Targets: Womenomics as an Economic and Foreign Relations Strategy”, *Asie.Visions*, No. 92, Ifri, April 2017.

#### **Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

#### **Ifri-Bruxelles**

Rue Marie-Thérèse, 21 1000 – Bruxelles – BELGIQUE

Tel.: +32 (0)2 238 51 10 – Fax: +32 (0)2 238 51 15

Email: [bruxelles@ifri.org](mailto:bruxelles@ifri.org)

**Website:** [ifri.org](http://ifri.org)

# Author

**Linda Hasunuma** is an Assistant Professor of Government at Franklin and Marshall College and earned her Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has published on the subject of Japan's political institutions, decentralization reforms, and gender politics. Dr. Hasunuma is part of the 2012-2014 cohort of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation's U.S.-Japan Network for the Future Fellows program, and received fellowships from the Social Science Research Council, the Sasakawa Foundation, and the Aratani Foundation. She has been an invited speaker at Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins University, Haverford College, the University of Zurich, and the World Affairs Council; and served as discussant at workshops on Japanese politics at Columbia University, the US-Japan Research Institute, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. Among her latest publications are: "Japan Tries to Promote Women's Rights, But Cultural Norms Get in the Way" Commentary for *World Politics Review*, Oct. 12, 2016 and "Gender Gaiatsu: An Institutional Perspective on Womenomics" in the *US-Japan Women's Journal*, October/November 2015 issue, volume 48.

# Abstract

Four years have passed since Prime Minister Abe launched his Three Arrows of reform – “Abenomics” – to revitalize Japan’s economy. The first arrow targeted monetary policy; the second fiscal policy, and the third structural reform – including a measure aimed at reducing barriers to women’s participation in the labor force; this part quickly became known in the media as “womenomics”. This paper provides an overview of this womenomics strategy, and shows how a plan designed to mitigate Japan’s demographic crises and labor shortages also evolved into a foreign relations strategy to help manage Japan’s reputation abroad on gender equality.

Demographic and economic pressures make it imperative for the Japanese government to employ more women as its population ages and shrinks, but Japan has been under great international pressure over its disappointing record on women’s equality as well. What began as an economic strategy about women became also a foreign relations strategy that could help the Japanese government reframe the narrative and its reputation as a country that fails its women; it has also faced increasing criticism and even condemnation from human and women’s rights activists and organizations for its position on the Comfort Women issue. Womenomics is also a public relations strategy for the government to signal to other countries, financial and international institutions, investors and rights organizations, that it is taking action on two important fronts: economic reforms and gender equality. The inclusion of women can provide economic and political benefits to Japan.

Although the government has missed many of its intended targets, womenomics has made an impact, and helped to center Japanese women on the national and international stage. It may not have produced substantive changes over four years, but it will undoubtedly be an important part of Shinzo Abe’s legacy as prime minister. To stay on course, Japan must make womenomics a long-term strategy – one that does not lose momentum when Abe leaves office.

# Table of contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>WOMENOMICS AS A RESPONSE TO THE DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS AND LABOR SHORTAGE</b> .....	<b>8</b>
A gender-biased labor market .....	9
The political attempts to reform the labor market.....	11
<b>WOMENOMICS AS AN INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY</b> .....	<b>14</b>
International pressures on Japan’s gender-equality record .....	14
Womenomics as a response to international pressures .....	15
<b>WOMENOMICS IN THE JAPANESE CONTEXT: A WORK IN PROGRESS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Adjusting the targets: a more realistic womenomics agenda.....	18
Women’s slow political empowerment.....	23
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>SELECTED REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>27</b>

# Introduction

In 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe unveiled his “Three Arrows” of economic reform to revitalize Japan’s economy. The first arrow targeted monetary policy; the second fiscal policy, and the third structural reform. These “arrows” were meant to make Japan’s economy more resilient and globally competitive, but it was what was included in the third arrow that immediately captured the interest of the media: the goal of increasing the number of women in Japan’s workforce to stave off the country’s impending labor shortage. The Three Arrows became known as “Abenomics” in the press, and even though the third arrow includes other important measures, about the TPP and agricultural reforms, because of the part that included measures to reduce barriers to participation in the workforce, the media began to refer to this part of the third arrow as “womenomics.”<sup>1</sup>

This is Abe’s second time to serve as prime minister. He had served for one year from 2006-2007, and left because of illness. Perhaps, because he felt he had not finished his work then, he came back in 2012 with a plan of action. In 2012, he reintroduced himself to Japan and the world as a leader committed to creating a stronger and independent Japan. Economic reforms and employing women’s labor would help achieve those ends at home, and women would be mobilized to carry out this greater national goal. Abe thus endorsed the term “womenomics”, originally coined by senior Goldman Sachs analyst Kathy Matsui, who claimed in her 1999 report that Japan could see a 13% increase in economic growth by including more women workers. Matsui was the lead author on several womenomics reports, and her ideas inspired Abe to adopt such policies when he became prime minister again in 2012 (Matsui, 2006; Takeda, 2015). Japan’s demographic realities make it imperative for any economic and structural reform strategies to address its impending labor shortages. Immigration and women’s labor, combined, can and will help, but the

---

1. According to Hiroko Takeda, in Abe’s speech at Davos, he said he wanted to increase women’s labor force participation “from 68% to 73%.” The following reports were issued by Goldman Sachs, with Kathy Matsui as leading author: *Womenomics: Buy the Female Economy*, 1999; *Womenomics: Japan’s Hidden Asset* (2005); *Womenomics 3.0: the Time is Now* (2010), and *Womenomics 4.0: Time to Walk the Talk* (2014). See Takeda, 2015: [www.psa.ac.uk](http://www.psa.ac.uk) (accessed January 2, 2017).

government is choosing the less controversial option of employing more women rather than foreigners.

Japan has one of the fastest-aging populations in the world, and its population is also shrinking because of its declining fertility rate. Since it has been reluctant to change its citizenship and immigration policies, womenomics provides the next best solution to addressing the labor shortages. However, this strategy has evolved into a valuable foreign relations policy and public diplomacy tool. International pressure from the United Nations, OECD, and organizations that document and report on comparative rankings for gender equality, such as the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Report, have forced Japan to respond, regain control of the narrative and improve its international reputation on women's equality.

Before Abe, previous governments tried to address the aging and shrinking crises by focusing on programs that would help improve the fertility rate. Tax incentives and other campaigns tried to encourage couples to have more children.<sup>2</sup> For example, in 2010, the Japanese government's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare launched its Ikumen campaign and revised parental leave laws to encourage fathers to take time off. Ikumen means men who take active roles in ikuji (childrearing), but it also sounds very much like "ikemen", which means "handsome men". This campaign tried to help change attitudes about fatherhood and the division of domestic labor (Ishii-Kuntz 2015). The Gender Equality Bureau also promoted ikumen in 2011, so womenomics embodies some of the earlier efforts by ministries to address the impending demographic crisis and labor shortages.<sup>3</sup> Another example of pre-womenomics is the initiatives Koizumi used in 2001-2006, when he was prime minister, to increase the numbers of women in elected offices and the labor force. During the Koizumi administration, committees were established, within the prime minister's office, dedicated to the task of studying work-life balance.<sup>4</sup>

Previous administrations also tried to make adjustments in pensions and retirement policies, and offered tax incentives for couples to have families, but Abe is the first prime minister to specifically include and target women's labor as a part of his nationwide economic reform strategy, and to make it both a domestic and international relations policy.

---

2. C. Haub. "Japan's Demographic Future", Population Research Bureau. May 2010. [www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org).

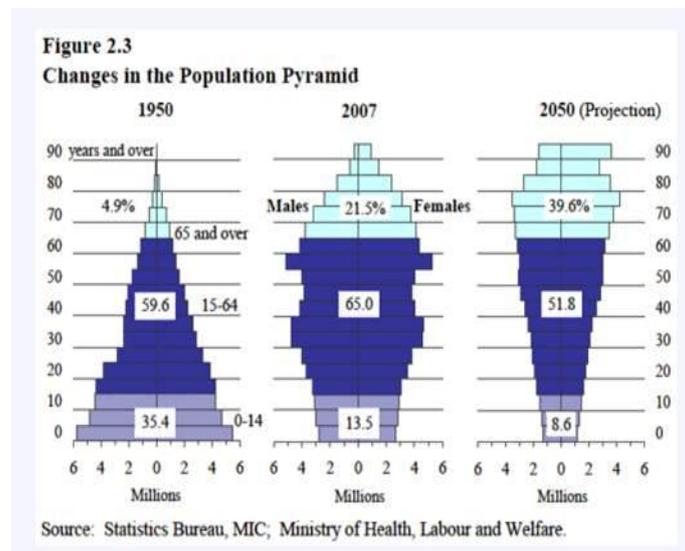
3. I. Nakatsuka "Facts and Measures for Work-Life Balance in Japan", November 17, 2011. [www.gender.go.jp](http://www.gender.go.jp).

4. See Hasunuma (2015).

Now that it is 2017, we have four years to look back upon and evaluate the womenomics agenda. What did it achieve, and where did it fall short? What more should be done, and what are the implications for Japan's government and economy, and its women? Womenomics is not just about women's labor, but a global diplomatic strategy that is shaped by political and business interests, and responsible for managing the image and narrative of Japan on women's issues, gender equality, and rights. It has failed to meet many of its targets, and may not have produced the outcomes feminists hoped for, but it did reset the national debate and discourse by centering women's employment in its main economic reform strategy.

# Womenomics as a Response to the Demographic Crisis and Labor Shortage

Japan faces a demographic crisis. Data shows that it has one of the fastest-aging populations in the world. It is ranked first among countries in the proportion of people aged over 65, and, by 2100, 35% of its population will be over 65.<sup>5</sup> Already, since 2015, 33% of its population are over the age of 60. This means that Japan faces severe labor shortages that will jeopardize its long-term economic health. The Japanese government must act swiftly to manage these demographic pressures, which are a combination of decreasing fertility, as more and more Japanese postpone marriage or forgo having children, and longer life expectancy.



Source: *The Statistical Handbook of Japan, 2016, p.13*

5. "Population Ages 65 and above (% of total)," "The Case of the Shrinking Country: Japan's Demographic and Policy Challenges in 5 Charts." April 11, 2016 in "OECD Insights: Debate the Issues", <http://oecdinsights.org>.

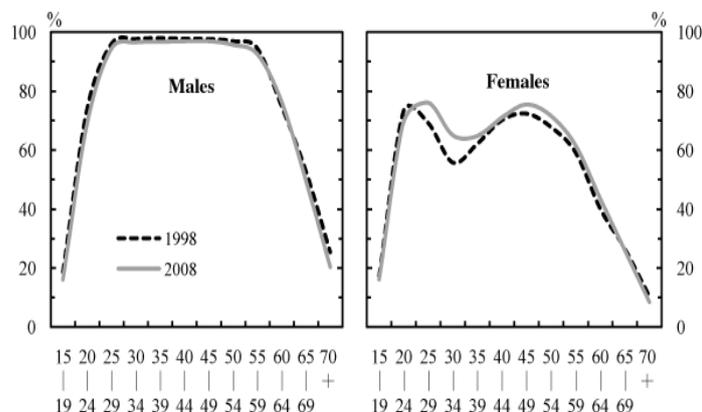
## A gender-biased labor market

Women face a stark choice in Japan when it comes to choosing a career or family. Because of long working hours and seniority issues, a woman who wishes to advance in her career finds it hard to balance work with family. Many women thus choose not to have children. Those that do and hope to return to work or stay in the labor force face considerable challenges in finding adequate and affordable childcare, and flexible working hours. Time taken away from work to go on maternity leave also handicaps women from being able to enter or return to jobs that reward continuity, long hours and seniority.

As a result, Japan experiences what is called an M-Curve phenomenon, whereby women are in the workforce in fairly high percentages, exit upon marriage and childbirth – leading to the decline or first hump in the graph – and then return when the children are older, but to part-time jobs, with little opportunity for advancement; this accounts for the second hump, and thus the M Curve effect (see figure below). The M-curve has begun to flatten a little as more women return to the workforce. In Japan, women’s labor is gendered and concentrated in what some call the “pink ghetto” or “pink collar” work: work that is part-time, flexible, and lacking mobility.

### The M-Curve

**Figure 12.1**  
Labor Force Participation Rate by Sex



Source: Statistics Bureau, MIC.

Source: *The Statistical Handbook of Japan, 2016*.

Moreover, women face additional incentives not to return to the labor force because of the lack of daycare facilities and the long hours required for most professional advancement, including the expectation to work overtime. The number of daycare centers in 2004 was 22, 570, and these were at 97.1% capacity. There is still a long list of wait-listed children, especially in urban areas, which have greater numbers of working women.<sup>6</sup> In February 2016, a blogger vented her frustration at the lack of childcare options and how this had forced her to quit her job. Her angry blog post was directed at the prime minister himself and was shared over 50,000 times online. It captured the daily struggle of working women in Japan as they try to work and support their families. For a government intent on employing women to boost its economic growth and manage its shrinking workforce, childcare should be the number one priority. There are over 23,000 children on wait-lists for childcare, and babysitters are not widely available. If they are, they are very expensive. This reality on the ground when it comes to trying to find childcare, especially in public daycares, contrasts with the national and international image projected to show a Japan dedicated to promoting women's participation in the labor force.<sup>7</sup> Where are the additional facilities and workers to provide care?

Japan's corporate culture rewards long working hours that include overtime and socializing after work hours, and seniority is an important norm that is valued and rewarded.<sup>8</sup> This work structure was originally developed to support Japan's post-war model of economic recovery and growth, which depends on a gendered division of labor. Men work outside the home as "salary men" in full-time and lifetime employment, while women manage the housework and care for children and the elderly. The economic and labor market structures were designed around this gendered construction of the family and the male breadwinner. Accordingly, a spousal income tax was established in 1961 to benefit families (tax credit of 380,000 yen or 3,126 euros a year) with mothers that only worked part-time. It penalizes dual-income families, and can pose a barrier to women who want to return to work full-time after having a child. Women can work, but can only earn up to a fixed amount of 1.03 million yen (8,478 euros) a year.

---

6. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare report, "The Status of Day Care Centers," April 1, 2005.

7. L. Nonomiya and S. Oda, "Blogger's Viral Tirade on Daycare Puts Abe on Backfoot", *The Japan Times*, March 15, 2016, [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp).

8. For example, see: L. Lewis, "Japanese still Suffer 'Death by Overwork' as Long Hours Persist", *Financial Times*, October 9, 2016.

## The political attempts to reform the labor market

The original targets of womenomics were designed to “enable women to realize their full potential” and for “overcoming the declining birthrate.”<sup>9</sup> The governmental plan called for a “a society where women can shine” through efforts such as improvements to the environment for raising children, including by increasing the number of daycare centers, improving work-life balance, ensuring better working conditions for women and mothers, and promoting positive action toward appointing women to executive and management positions.

Two significant improvements were made under Abe in the areas of parental leave and daycare (Coleman, 2016). Because of reforms passed in 2013, if both parents take leave, they can have up to 14 months. Individually, parental leave is more generously covered in the first six months, at two-thirds of one’s wages, and then one-half of one’s wages for the next six months. The government also tried to prioritize the expansion of daycare facilities by raising taxes, but that depends on the politics of the consumption tax in Japan. In any case, small improvements have been made, but enforcement is weak and most of the measures are voluntary. In cities such as Yokohama and Kawasaki, there are local government subsidies for childcare centers, and firms such as Shiseido, with a relatively high percentage of female employees, established its own childcare facility.

In the workplace, voluntary measures have been adopted by many firms to help their employees’ better balance work and family. Sony and the Japan Rail companies are providing onsite childcare, and telework options. Telework was promoted after the great earthquake of 3.11, and thus far NTT, Fujitsu, Softbank, and other companies have experimented with this to promote more flexible working hours.

Womenomics also set additional targets to increase women’s representation by up to 30% in Japan’s national and local governments, the bureaucracy, and other traditionally male-dominated fields such as the sciences, academia, medicine, and law by the year 2020. These targets mirrored the Basic Plans of the government’s Gender Equality Bureau in the categories and targets. Some ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance, have tried to recruit more women graduates since 2013, but not all ministries were unified in trying to hire more women. A cultural shift

---

9. “Basic Policies for Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform,” June 14, 2013. [www5.cao.go.jp](http://www5.cao.go.jp)

and changes in attitudes about housework and childcare are necessary for these other practices and norms in the workplace to shift.

Another issue is the spousal income tax. The LDP and Komeito have proposed a bill to reform the tax, but the new ceiling on income that can be earned is not significantly higher. Abe instructed the government to re-evaluate this law in 2014, but it was tabled in the legislative process because it would mean a tax increase for many families with stay-at-home moms. It is politically difficult to raise taxes, but to raise them on families with a stay-at-home mom resulted in push back as this tax reform was seen as going against traditional and conservative family values about motherhood. The original tax was set up to support families with a stay-at-home mother and salary-man father, but of course, this is no longer sustainable, especially under the new imperatives of the womenomics and Three Arrows agendas. A decision is expected by April 2017 regarding how this will factor into the government's proposed economic reform agenda for the next couple of years. Passage of this law would be a step in the right direction and an achievement that the Abe administration could claim as evidence of its commitment to reducing barriers to women's participation in the workforce, but it will be a challenge to pass through the legislature.<sup>10</sup>

Because of this media attention and political discussion about womenomics, there have been some perceptible shifts in advertising and the priorities of various ministries and firms. For example, the *Ikumen* campaign includes commercials and posters with images of men doing childcare and household chores.<sup>11</sup> There has been an attempt to make the womenomics conversation more inclusive by educating men about what they can do to make it more possible for women to stay in or return to the workforce. However, at the end of the day, it is the attitudes of the gatekeepers in the political and economic system – party leaders, employers, and managers – that will ultimately determine how successful these womenomics initiatives are. There are certificates of recognition and targets, but no mandates. It simply cannot happen overnight, especially when the vast majority of party leaders and managers are older men who benefit from the existing power structures. It will take steady effort and many more years to bring to fruition, and cannot happen in a vacuum; these cultural shifts occur together with shifts in attitudes in the media, family, and society.

---

10. KPMG Japan Tax Newsletter, December 14, 2016: "Outline of the 2017 Tax Reform Proposals," p.18-19.

11. K. Mizukoshi, F. Kohlbacher and C. Schimkowsky "Japan's Ikumen Discourse: Macro and Micro Perspectives on Modern Fatherhood", Japan Forum, vol. 28, No. 2, 2016? p.212-232. Published online: 17 November 17, 2015.

Since Prime Minister Abe does not have a history of advancing feminist or gender-equality policies, many felt skeptical and questioned his true motives. One assumption was that Abe's goals were to create a much more independent, self-reliant, and stronger nation state by tapping into a valuable and well-educated human resource – Japan's women – rather than immigration and foreigners to rejuvenate and strengthen Japan's economic growth in the future.<sup>12</sup> This agenda obscures the benefits of immigration and incorporating existing immigrants into the labor force, even though both women and immigrants are needed to mitigate a problem of this magnitude. No matter how many more women join the labor force, women alone cannot solve Japan's economic problems and labor shortages in the long run, but they can make an impact.

Others dismissed his agenda as mere window-dressing and symbolic gesturing to the international community that Japan was attempting to do something to make its economy more robust and less of an investment risk.

---

12. Currently, Japan has 2.23 million immigrants, according to the Ministry of Justice. The top three countries for immigration to Japan are China, South Korea, and the Philippines.

# Womenomics as an International Strategy

## International pressures on Japan's gender-equality record

Japan's concern for its reputation in the international community as a risk for investment and a laggard in gender equality (Coleman, 2016) is also an important factor that helps us understand the timing and nature of Abe's womenomics platform. Scholars have documented the role of international pressure on Japan's positions on women's equality and women's issues (Flowers, 2009; Chan-Tiberghien, 2004; Gelb, 2003). For example, Chan-Tiberghien's work showed how international pressure resulted in the inclusion of birth-control-pill coverage in Japan in 1999 – five years after Japan was criticized for not having such a provision when it participated in the UN International Conference on Population and Development back in 1994 (Chan-Tiberghien, 2004, p.2).

International pressure also increased with the annual reports on gender equality and the global media's spotlight on the deeply complicated and bitter Comfort Women issue relating to memory, history, and reconciliation between Japan and South Korea. The term "Comfort Women" refers to the women who served as sex slaves for the Japanese military during WWII. This historical source of contention between Japan and Korea has deepened resentments on both sides. The Koreans demand an apology and acknowledgement from Abe, and atonement for these wartime injustices. The Japanese, however, dispute that the women were forced into service. It has become a highly politicized issue that draws out some of the darkest sides of Japan's right wing.

Abe would prefer to move on. He has defended Japan's interpretations of the Comfort Women issue and stated Japan's arguments against the claims made by South Koreans and other Asian women's and human rights groups. It is this shift in the Comfort Women issue from a historical issue between Japan and South Korea to an international one about women's rights and human rights that brought fierce international scrutiny and condemnation from many activists, governments, and organizations (Hasunuma and McCarthy, draft 2016). This may have put pressure on Abe to step up Japan's gender-equality initiatives. Not only

would they benefit the economy, but also Japan's public and international relations and reputation (Coleman, 2016).

Womenomics may have begun with a focus on labor and economic issues, but it then expanded to include global gender equality as well as development targets and commitments. In a sense, it seemed as if Abe wanted to redeem Japan's record and reputation on women's rights and equality by showing political and financial leadership and investment on these issues abroad.

The annual global gender-gap reports and rankings by the OECD, UN, Inter-Parliamentary Union, and World Economic Forum constitute international mechanisms for scrutiny, assessment, and accountability; they document Japan's progress or lack thereof. These international reports create additional pressure or "gender *gaiatsu*" (pressure from abroad) on Japan to move forward on gender equality. With the global discourse on women's rights and the Comfort Women, Japan has received intense criticism for being behind on women's equality (Hasunuma, 2015). Although womenomics was specifically about deploying women workers to stave off the shrinking labor shortage, through Abe's speeches it also took on political and international diplomacy dimensions.

## Womenomics as a response to international pressures

Abe hosted a global summit for women and gave an address to the United Nations to announce Japan's commitments to promoting gender equality at home, and around the world. It surprised many that this politician with a record of supporting more traditional and conservative values would become a champion of women's equality and put women on his domestic and international policy agenda. The Abe of 2006-2007, when he first served as prime minister after the tenure of Junichiro Koizumi, did not support feminist or gender-equality policies, but rather pushed ahead with conservative family policies consistent with the values of his right-leaning base.<sup>13</sup> It was clear, then, that Abe and his base believed that woman's primary role is to be a good mother, staying at home for the critical first three years of a child's life (Coleman, 2016). Many political observers were rightfully skeptical of the motivations and nature of his womenomics strategy, and it was seen primarily as a way to help Japan's economy and firms by providing more women workers rather than opening up to

---

13. See Yamaguchi (2014), Hiroko Takeda (2015 unpublished draft online), Ayako Kano (2011 and 2016), and Liv Coleman (2016) for their analyses of the conservative backlash against feminism in Japan.

immigration. Rather than an agenda to advance women's rights or equality in Japanese society and the workplace, it was primarily seen as serving national economic interests.

The Abe of Japan post-2012 is more globally oriented. The focus on the international audience and Japan's reputation seems to have created favorable conditions for such policies because women could help Japan deal with its economic pressures at home, promote an image of economic stability to international investors and the finance community, while also responding to diplomatic pressures over Japan's record on women's rights and human rights.

Evidence of this dual strategy or "Womenomics Diplomacy" (Coleman, 2016; Hasunuma, 2015) was first seen in Abe's address to the United Nations in September 2013.<sup>14</sup> He emphasized the importance of promoting gender equality and economic opportunities for women in developing regions – thus promoting Japan as a leader of gender-equality initiatives. He also committed resources and staff so that the Japanese government could host the World Assembly for Women (WAW) summits, involving high-profile women leaders in business and politics from around the world. On the international level, Japan began a campaign called the "Power of Women", with Abe addressing the UN in September 2013 to promote an international community in which "women shine." That platform includes many targets to improve women's health in developing countries, agriculture and economic development.<sup>15</sup>

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and the main business federation, Keidanren, were deeply involved in the planning and hosting of the World Assembly for Women (WAW). This shows that big business and international interests sought to promote the image of a Japan that invested in women and women's equality. The current author has shown how MoFA, Keidanren, and JETRO shared similar policy proposals about women workers and economic growth – ones that mirrored the womenomics agenda. In particular, there is a strong push from big business and MoFA on these issues.

In late February, the first all-female mission from Keidanren went to the US to create awareness about the economic importance of womenomics, and reminded everyone that womenomics is part of an

---

14. "Japanese Leader Advocates 'Womenomics' in Address to UN General Assembly", [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

15. "Japan's Initiative Regarding Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality: Toward a Society in Which All Women Shine." Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. [www.mofa.go.jp](http://www.mofa.go.jp).

economic growth strategy.<sup>16</sup> There was less discussion about the political representation aspects, and more emphasis on mentoring and sponsorship of junior women in firms and industries, and the ways in which technology could be better harnessed to change the work culture and hours. This indicated a shift from the global agenda to re-emphasizing womenomics as primarily an economic-growth strategy. Even before this mission, NPOs such as J-Win and its founder, Yukako Uchinaga, established senior-junior women mentoring programs in management. Womenomics is only as effective as the individuals, firms, and institutions that make a sincere commitment and effort to experiment with new, more flexible work policies, and to invest in daycare, telecommuting, or training programs for women.

With Abe's renewed commitments to womenomics in the past two years,<sup>17</sup> womenomics has evolved into an umbrella term for describing Japan's efforts to promote gender equality both at home and abroad. It has become the signature policy of a prime minister who was once known more for his conservatism and traditional family values, but whose name is now associated with a plan for women's empowerment in Japan and around the world. Although the first two years gave pause to political experts because substantive policy changes were slow to come, the past two years, and the last year in particular, have given us more signs of progress. Ultimately, we cannot be cynical and write off womenomics because of its shortcomings within the space of four years, since movement on such policies takes time. Many were skeptical and knew that the 30% targets were unrealistic, but the government has since adjusted the targets, and remains committed to following up on its commitments, and tracking its progress.

---

16. "Keidanren Report, 2015". [www.keidanren.or.jp](http://www.keidanren.or.jp). See also Y. Haruno, "Women's Diplomacy", Messages from Keidanren Executives. October 2016, [www.keidanren.or.jp](http://www.keidanren.or.jp).

17. From his 2015 address to the World Assembly for Women. <http://thediplomat.com>.

# Womenomics in the Japanese Context: A Work in Progress

## Adjusting the targets: a more realistic womenomics agenda

In the most recent announcements and reports of the government and its Gender Equality Bureau, women remain central to the economic revitalization strategy. Yet, in 2016, the government had to lower its targets to more realistic numbers.<sup>18</sup> The Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality, published in 2016,<sup>19</sup> lists the newly adjusted targets, and sets a goal of reaching parity in women's participation in the labor force by up to 77% in 2020. Men currently make up about 80% of the workforce, and the gender gap in labor-force participation is slowly closing.

The table below gives an overview of the Basic Plans and targets over the years to show how things may have improved since Abe's focus on women in Japanese politics. Most of the 30% targets have been adjusted to 15% and 13% by 2020, so are much more realistic, but in some categories, such as women's political participation and representation at local levels, Japan has done remarkably better. There is a gap between the national and local levels in making progress towards the womenomics targets.

---

18. M. Aoki, "Japan Drastically Lowers its Goal for Female Managers in Government and the Private Sector," December 12, 2015, [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp).

19. The Fourth Plan for Gender Equality from the Gender Equality Bureau. [www.gender.go.jp](http://www.gender.go.jp).

### Numerical Targets and Updated Figures of the Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality, as of June 2015

Target items	Target figures (deadline)	Figures as of planning	Updated figures
Women in Lower House	30% (2020)	16.7% (2009)	16.6% (2014)
Women in Upper House	30% (2020)	22.9% (2010)	24.2% (2013)
Female prosecutors	23% (by end of fiscal 2015)	18.2% (2009)	21.4% (2014)
National public employees	30% (2020)	26.1% (2010)	31.5% (2015)
National public employees divisions for administrative officials	30%	25.7% (2010)	36.6% (2015)
Male national public employees who take childcare leave	13% (2020)	0.7% (2008)	2.8% (2013)
Male local public employees who take childcare leave	13% (2020)	0.6% (2008)	1.5% (2013)
Number of people teleworking from home	7 million (2015)	3.3 million (2008)	5.5 million (2014)
Childcare services (age under 3)	44% (2017)	22.8% (2010)	27.3% (2014)
After-school clubs for first to third grades	40% (2017)	21.2% (2010)	24% (2013)
Localities promoting family support center programs	950 cities, towns, villages (2014)	7100 (2009)	8,201 (2013)
Employment rate for women aged 25-44	73% (2020)	66% (2009)	70.8% (2014)
Rate of continued employment for women before and after delivering first child	55% (2020)	38% (2005)	38% (2010)
Training benefits for single parents	Implementation by all	81.8% (2009)	92.8% (2013)

	prefectural, city, town, and villages by 2014		
<b>Spousal violence counseling and support centers in municipalities</b>	100 (2015)	21 (2010)	74 (2015)
<b>Gender equality centers with counseling for sexual crimes</b>	At least one in each prefecture by 2015	22/47 prefectures (2010)	20 (2014)

### The Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality

Proportion of women	Current	Target (deadline)
<b>National civil service directors</b>	3.5% (July 2015)	7% (end of FY 2020)
<b>National civil service section chiefs</b>	22.2% (July 2015)	30% (end of FY 2020)
<b>Prefectural (city) civil service women directors</b>	8.5% (14.5%) (2015)	15% (20%) (end of FY 2020)
<b>Prefectural (city) civil service women section chiefs</b>	20.5% (31.6%) (2015)	30% (35%) (end of FY 2020)
<b>Private corporations women directors</b>	9.2% (2014)	15% (2020)
<b>Private corporations women section chiefs</b>	16.2% (2014)	25% (2020)
<b>Employment rate for women aged 25-44</b>	70.8% (2014)	77% (2020)
<b>Men who take parental leave, national civil service</b>	3.1% (2014)	13% (2020)
<b>Men who take parental leave, local civil service</b>	1.5% (2014)	13% (2020)
<b>Men who take parental leave, private corporations</b>	2.3% (2014)	13% (2020)

Table adapted from the "Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality", Japanese Government's Gender Equality Bureau: [www.gender.go.jp](http://www.gender.go.jp).

The table above, relating to the most recent (Fourth) Basic Plan, highlights the improvements at the local levels of Japanese government. There, women's political representation has improved noticeably, and there are more women at work and workers using telework. However, the number of women who return to work soon after having a child remains the same today as about a decade ago.

When womenomics was first announced, it was criticized for focusing on the concerns of career women – women who are better educated and considered to be elites in Japanese society, in business, law and other professions. In the latest plan, however, there is a section on helping single parents and on economic revitalization for the Tohoku area that includes women and promotes women's leadership.

There has been greater discussion of the roles of “gatekeepers”, such as party leaders, corporations, and society in promoting equal opportunities for women. It is a challenge to realize such an agenda within a few years, but Abe helped to put women front and center-stage, even if many of his initiatives may have seemed more symbolic than substantive when first launched. It is also evident that, when he tries to push parliament to consider the tax law reform or childcare expansion, these issues get tied up in the legislative process. If he really wanted to push through changes, he could do so through his advisory council, but these councils do not seem to be as committed to the womenomics agenda. Many members of Abe's base who are conservative and adhere to traditional values serve in the cabinet and on the councils, so movement and progress has been slow. One area in which improvements are being made in Japan is outside of these childcare and tax-reform issues – domestic violence. In that area, there has been enough momentum and advocacy to push through legislation and budgets.

One of the most significant improvements and substantive policy changes in the past four years has been a policy to make sure that every prefecture in Japan has at least one center dedicated to offering support and counseling for victims of sexual assault and violence. The government passed a bill and allocated funding to bring this plan to fruition; about 1.42 million dollars or 160 million yen will be used to support these centers and their services. The government's goal is to have at least one support center in each prefecture by 2020, and this target, based on the law and budget that was passed, is likely to be realized.<sup>20</sup> We would need to do deeper analysis of this policy change to trace the various actors involved over the years before and after Abe's womenomics agenda, but the fact that the

---

20. The goal is to have a center for assisting victims of sexual assault in every prefecture by 2020.

government has prioritized women's concerns probably created a more favorable environment for such a policy. Further study is required before making definitive claims, of course, but this is one meaningful outcome that benefits women in their daily lives beyond their mere economic potential and contributions to GDP.

The past few years have also seen various local and regional initiatives to encourage discussions and actions on gender equality, and resources provided to promote greater participation of men in housework and childrearing, including the “*ikumen*” campaign mentioned above. Though not dramatic, survey data collected by the Gender Equality Bureau documents small improvements in attitudes and knowledge about work-family balance issues, and awareness about domestic violence. Yet, at the same time, there are studies showing that women in their twenties are also interested in opting out of the career race altogether, and pursuing lives as housewives.<sup>21</sup> This may change if the choice between staying at home and working becomes less stark and less high-stakes.

Despite these small improvements and voluntary measures by both small and larger firms to accommodate working mothers and parents, what is troubling is that women's representation, at least in the Lower House, seems to have stagnated. According to the Inter-Parliamentary union, women make up only 9% of the Japanese legislature, but are doing better at local level. A new bill has just been proposed to set gender quotas for local and Diet elections.<sup>22</sup> Overall, because of the prominence of the womenomics agenda, gender equality has become part of national discourse, and some improvements are evident. The very public global accounting and monitoring of Japan's progress on gender equality also makes it hard to renege or backtrack on these commitments.

Culturally imposed barriers also exist at the individual, family and community levels about the proper roles of women as good wives and mothers. For example, there are ideas about children needing to be at home for the first three years of their lives, and gender norms about marriage and motherhood that require a woman's full-time commitment to the care of her children, home and the elderly (Coleman, 2016). A woman's place is still very much in the home and in service to her family. Until those cultural attitudes shift, womenomics cannot be fully realized, especially when there is not a critical mass of women leaders in the legislature, or

---

21. “1 in 3 Japanese Women Want to be Housewives: Poll” in *Japan Today*, September 26, 2013, [www.japantoday.com](http://www.japantoday.com).

22. “Political Parties Require an Effort to Promote Gender Equality among Candidates” [trans. from Japanese], *Asahi Shimbun*, February 24, 2017, [www.asahi.com](http://www.asahi.com).

male representatives who prioritize women's issues. On top of the low proportion of women in the Japanese legislature, those appointed to the Cabinet have been loyal partisans and more conservative in their outlook, so are not necessarily looking out for working mothers or women's rights. There are negative stereotypes about working women and career women as being more masculine and selfish, and the media and pop culture do little to change perceptions of women in the ways that they are represented in advertisements, movies and television. The recent election of Yuriko Koike as mayor of Tokyo and the media coverage of Renho Murata's leadership in the opposition Democratic Party of Japan, however, may help to challenge those stereotypes as they serve as role models.

## Women's slow political empowerment

While women's representation has improved at local and Cabinet level, with Abe's appointments, there has not been enough change in the national legislature. Under the former single-non-transferable vote (SNTV) electoral system, women's representation flatlined at about 2% for much of the postwar era.<sup>23</sup> SNTV, which was used until 1993, encouraged personalism and clientelism in Japanese politics. It was a system that made it difficult for the opposition to compete and win, and delivered legislative majorities to the LDP for 38 years. The SNTV system, with more rural than urban representation, consolidated single-party rule under the LDP. Under that system of factions, *koenkai*, and personal vote-mobilization machines, women did not fare well because it was a political system based on connections, personal relationships, and resources – which women did not usually have access to unless they inherited their father or husband's political machines. Women tend to do better where there is proportional representation, and they have done better in the Upper House, but the Lower House is where the true legislative and budgetary powers are based, so it is problematic that women do not do as well there.

According to the data on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's website on the Lower House elections, female representation in the Lower House went from 11.25% in 2009 to 7.92% in 2012, and 9.47% in 2014. Therefore, there was a very small improvement of about 1.45% after womenomics was launched. Representation rates at local level from 2012-2016 show a decline in the Lower House and increase in the Upper House, and small gains across local governments, especially in cities with larger populations

---

23. R. Christensen, "The Impact of Electoral Rules in Japan," in R. J. Lee and C. Clark (eds.), *Democracy and the Status of Women in East Asia*, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000, p.25-46.

(Martin, 2017, draft for an unpublished, edited volume). This means that gatekeepers and party leaders in the LDP and other parties are not committed to recruiting and running female candidates in the Lower House.

Only in the Upper House, where they experimented with proportional representation, could women win, but often as “bubble candidates” that “popped in and out” based on their celebrity. The last time women made an impression in the legislature was when Koizumi recruited and nominated his “lipstick assassins.”<sup>24</sup> Under womenomics, women have not fared well in their representation in the Diet, but in the Cabinet, because of Abe’s appointments, they did meet the 30% target. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union data, Japan is ranked near the bottom in women’s representation: 163<sup>rd</sup> out of 190 countries.<sup>25</sup>

Other indicators of women’s equality that evaluate countries on multiple factors also consistently rank Japan near the bottom. For an advanced industrialized country that has been a fairly stable democracy in the post-war era, Japan does not fare well in comparison. It is reminded of this shortcoming every year these reports are issued. Key problems remain in women’s access to political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity.

Please see the table below, which has summary data on Japan’s ranking in these categories from 2006-2015. These dates were picked because 2006 was the final year of Koizumi’s government and when Abe first served as prime minister, and because we also want to track improvement from when the womenomics agenda was launched in early 2013. In the latest World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report of 2016, Japan was ranked 111<sup>th</sup> out of 144 countries.

---

24. A. Faiola, “In Japan, the Lipstick Assassins Get Out the Vote,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, September 3, 2005, [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

25. Inter-Parliamentary Union data, [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org).

### World Economic Forum Gender Equality Reports, 2006-2016

Year	Overall ranking	Political empowerment	Economic participation and opportunity
2015	101/144	104	106
2014	104/142	129	102
2013	105/136	118	104
2012	101/135	110	102
2011	98/135	107	100
2010	94/134	101	101
2009	101/134	110	108
2008	98/130	107	102
2007	91/128	94	97
2006	70/115	83	83

*Source: World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap reports from 2006-2015*

More studies need to be conducted, but, with greater representation of women in local politics in Japan, such as Yuriko Koike's election as the Governor of Tokyo, Renho Murata as the head of the Democratic Party of Japan, and Abe's appointment of Tomomi Inada to his Cabinet as the Secretary of Defense, we may see more sustained focus on women's issues, and discussions about the role of women in electoral politics. His appointment of conservative women to his Cabinet, however, does not bode well for womenomics as these women tend to want to preserve tradition and the role of women as wives and mothers in families. Having more women in the Cabinet is not very meaningful if they are not committed to helping advance policies to promote women at work.

# Conclusion

Four years on, it is clear that womenomics will be part of Shinzo Abe's complex political legacy, and that, whatever the domestic and international political considerations, by making women workers central to his reform strategy, and then expanding women's opportunities and representation from the labor force to academia, industries, law, the sciences, and all levels of government, he has had an impact on Japanese women, society, and the cultures and norms that govern businesses. A great deal of work remains, and such cultural changes take time and even generations, but womenomics has made women a priority in a country where women have not been central to economic or political policy debates. Womenomics also shows us how international pressure on economic gender equality and human rights can move the government toward taking action to improve rankings in these areas, and the country's image and reputation in the international community. Womenomics is a story about how the changing international policy discourse on women's and human rights has helped to spread norms about women's equality in Japan and how, once again, women can be mobilized to strengthen the Japanese nation-state and economy. Japan seems to be better at responding to international pressure because vested interests – in this case, Abe's conservative base and appointed officials – contest and push back as he tries to advance policies to help women work.

Womenomics thus shows that the inclusion of women is not only important to Japan's future economic health and stability, but to its international reputation. Women are also more important electorally as these policies related to women are now policies on which politicians seek to take up position and claim credit. As women become more important to parties and elections, substantive policy changes will hopefully follow. What we are seeing is a shift from decades of women's exclusion in the economy and political system to their inclusion; achieving their full economic and political inclusion will take years, but womenomics has contributed to making this shift possible.

## Selected References

Abe, Yukiko, "The Effects of the 1.3 million Yen Ceiling in a Dynamic Labor Supply Model", *Working Paper*, Graduate School of Economics and Business Administration, Hokkaido University, November 2005: [www.econ.hokudai.ac.jp](http://www.econ.hokudai.ac.jp).

Chan-Tiberghien, Jennifer, *Gender and Human Rights Politics in Japan: Global Norms and Domestic Networks*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp.42-46, 127.

Chen, Emily S., "When Womenomics Meets Reality," *The Diplomat*, October 2016: <http://thediplomat.com>.

Christensen, Ray, "The Impact of Electoral Rules in Japan", in Rose J. Lee and Cal Clark (eds.), *Democracy and the Status of Women in East Asia*, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000, pp.25-46.

Coleman, Liv, "Will Japan 'Lean In' to Gender Equality?", *The US-Japan Women's Journal*, No. 49, May 2016.

Fensom, Anthony, "Asia's Boards: Where are the Women?", *The Diplomat*, March 16, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com>.

Flowers, Petrice R., *Refugees, Women, and Weapons: International Norm Adoption and Compliance in Japan*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Gelb, Joyce, *Gender Policies in Japan and the US, 2003*, London/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, p.4-5.

Isshi-Kuntz, Masako, "Fatherhood in Asian Contexts", in Stella R. Quah (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Families in East Asia*, 2015, p.164.

Kano, Ayako, "Backlash, Fight Back, and Back-Pedaling: Responses to State Feminism in Contemporary Japan", in *International Journal of Asian Studies* 8, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, No. 1, 2011, pp.41-62.

Kano, Ayako, *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention on Sex, Love, and Labor*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2016.

Mizukoshi, Kosuke, Florian Kohlbacher and Christoph Schimkowsky. "Japan's *ikumen* Discourse: Macro and Micro Perspectives on Modern Fatherhood", in *Japan Forum*, published online November 17, 2015.

Nakatsuka Ikko, “Facts and Measures for Work-Life Balance in Japan”, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, November 17, 2011.

OECD, *OECD Economic Surveys: Japan*, April 2013, p.25: [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).

“How Does Japan Compare?”, in *OECD Employment Outlook 2014*, 2014, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).

Song, Jiyeoun, “Boosting Female Employment as the Institutional Pillar of the Third Arrow of Womenomics.” *Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies*, Chicago, March 26-29, 2015.

Takeda, Hiroko, “All the Japan State Wants is Shining Women (and Their Families): Tatemaie and Honne of Abe Womenomics,” *unpublished draft* (2015): [www.psa.ac.uk](http://www.psa.ac.uk). Accessed January 2, 2017.

Yamaguchi, Tomomi, “‘Gender Free’ Feminism in Japan: A Story of Mainstreaming and Backlash”, in *Feminist Studies* 40, No. 3, 2014, pp.541-72.



**ifri**

institut français  
des relations  
internationales

