

## Between Reproduction and Production: Womenomics and the Japanese Government's Approach to Women and Gender Policies<sup>1</sup>

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This article examines in detail the Abe Shinzo government's policy initiative to promote women's active social and economic participation. The initiative has been developed incrementally since 2014, being informed by the notion of "womenomics." Womenomics is an idea compiled by investment bank strategists, which essentially locates the expansion of women's labor participation as a means to stimulate national economic growth. In this sense, the Abe government's policy-making exhibits continuity with that of previous governments, including the DPJ governments, sharing what Ian Holliday calls the "productivist paradigm," a characteristic of social policy in East Asia. Although the Abe government's policy-making has evolved in response to the critical feedback offered by the opposition parties and academic experts, the fact that the productivist paradigm still remains firmly in the Abe government's policy-making concerning women's labor raises some questions over its efficacy, as the government reform of labor regulations (in particular, the introduction of the principle of equal pay for equal work and the reduction of working hours)—the crucial reform agendas to achieve the policy goal of promoting women at the workplace—may be compromised due to economic concerns at the side of the state and industry.

### Keywords

womenomics, women and gender policy, Japanese politics, gender equality, productivist paradigm

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### Introduction

Japan as a country has long been known for its high degree of gender inequality in the areas of political and economic participation. Then, the year 2014 saw a sudden flood of

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1 This is a revised version of Takeda (2015; 2016a; 2016b). The author is grateful for a series of comments and questions given to the earlier papers, and for the anonymous reviewer for insightful suggestions.

governmental discourses advocating the promotion of women's labor. Since then, the current Abe Shinzo government has repeatedly confirmed that the promotion of women's economic participation is one of their most important national policy agendas and the core of the government's growth strategy, commonly known as "Abenomics." Concretely, in 2014, the government proposed to take action in the following three policy areas: to increase women's labor force participation rates (for ages 25-44) from 68 per cent in 2012 to 73 per cent in 2020; to increase the number of nursery places by 400,000 by 2017; and to introduce a series of initiatives to promote the "utilization" (*katsuyō*) of the female workforce including a policy goal to increase the proportion of women occupying leadership positions to 30 per cent (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014).

The Abe government's commitment to the promotion of the female workforce can also be read in the Basic Policy for Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform (the so-called "Robust Plan," *Honebuto no Hōshin*), the key policy document authorized by the Cabinet that sets a framework for policy-making and budgeting for the following year. The 2014 Robust Plan located the promotion of the female workforce as the first item in a section entitled "Key Issues to Facilitate Economic Revitalization and Mid- and Long-Term Development" (Cabinet Office 2014). Following the release of the 2014 Robust Plan, the Abe government announced a plan to introduce a new piece of legislation to effectively facilitate the process of promoting the female labor force, while pledging to

increase family-related national spending. In October 2014, "A Policy Package to Make Every Woman Shine" (*Subete no Josei ga Kagayaku Pakkēji*) was approved by the Cabinet, and two bills concerning the promotion of the female labor force were submitted to the Diet for deliberation. After having shelved due to the 2014 snap General Election, the bills were resubmitted without major revisions in the 2015 Diet Session and the Bill to Promote Women's Working Life (*Josei Katsuyaku Suishin Hō*) was passed in August 2015. In Autumn 2015, the Abe government policy initiative of "making women shine" was upgraded into a policy program of "Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens" (*Ichioku Sō Katsuyaku*), within which the expansion of women's economic participation is still located as the central policy goal.

Such policy-making moves certainly beg the question of whether or not the second Abe government is seriously pursuing a political goal of improving women's socio-economic position in Japan, and if so, what changed Abe's political stance from that of his first term as Prime Minister. The first Abe government of 2006-2007, in which *Takaichi Sanae*, a close party ally of Abe and a conviction conservative/anti-Feminist, served as the Minister in charge of fertility decline and gender equality, approached family policy reform in a "traditionalist" manner by underlining the importance of maintaining the conventional family model. Such a policy line was also declared in Abe's pre-premiership publication *Towards a Beautiful Country (Utsukushii Kuni e)* (S.

Abe 2006: 214-221). In his book, Abe's policy priority is clearly placed on the edification of young Japanese regarding the "beauty" of a "typical" family through education, and this echoes a longstanding conservative view in Japan that dismisses gender equality as a destructive force against a "beautiful" Japanese tradition and culture. So, do recent policy moves by the Abe government signify his radical transformation, and does the Japanese government now take the agenda of gender equality seriously?

Among extant studies of the Abe government's women's policy, a sociologist, Minagawa Masumi indeed suggests a shift in Abe's approach towards a more social democratic and feminist line (Minagawa 2014). Others have pointed out a series of factors operating behind the ostensible policy moves, namely the needs 1) to sustain and further stimulate economic growth; 2) to maintain popularity in the face of controversial constitutional reforms; and 3) to claim that Japan is a first-rate country by international standards (Takenobu 2014; Tsuji 2015a; 2015b; Horie 2016a; 2016b; 2017; Coleman forthcoming; Ogasawara forthcoming). In other words, these arguments posit the recent shift in the Abe government's women's policies as a political tool to achieve the government's genuine political goals, but not for the promotion of gender equality itself.

This article certainly shares the understanding of these extant studies that the primary purpose of the Abe government's recent policy initiatives is *not* gender equality

or women's empowerment, but rather the strengthening of state power through the expansion of the national economy. In addition, the article argues that in order to grasp the full picture of current policy developments, the Abe government's policy initiatives need to be clearly located in the trajectory of family and gender policy reforms since the 1990s. As will be discussed below with reference to the "productivist paradigm," the second Abe government's policies often exhibit continuity, rather than change, with those of the previous governments, in particular, in the sense that family and gender policies are positioned as a means to maintain and stimulate national economic growth. This, however, raises some questions over the efficacy of current policy initiatives, since the economic concerns at the state side appear to limit the scope of employment system reform, which is necessary to promote the female labor force in the labor market.

The rest of this article is organized in the following manner; the section immediately following this introduction examines the notion of "womenomics," the principle idea behind the women and gender policy reform of the Abe government. Then, the third section locates the Abe government's women and gender policy reform in the trajectory of the political reform process since the 1990s. On completion of these steps, the fourth section discusses the Abe government's policy-making endeavors and identifies their limitations. The concluding section briefly summarizes the main points and explores some implications for the future

developments.

### “Womenomics”

A 2014 Gender Equality Bureau document that explains why and how the promotion of the female workforce contributes to the revitalization of the Japanese economy and society posits the following three expected merits:

1. The activation of female workers will enable the expansion of the labor force in the face of aging and fertility decline.
2. It is necessary to secure top-class human resources, regardless of gender, to be competitive in the global market. In pursuit of this aim, it is useful to activate the underutilized female labor force.
3. Women are the leading demand creators in the area of everyday consumption. Yet, at the supply side, there are very few women making decisions. The promotion of the female workforce should address this situation and, in so doing, create a consumer-centered market.

(Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2014a).

These points intimately resonate with the idea of “womenomics,” which urges us to pay due attention to women’s economic contribution as a vital engine to achieve economic growth. The term has been popularized through a series of strategy reports published by the Goldman Sachs Group. The first report, *Womenomics: Buy*

*the Female Economy*, was released in 1999. An updated analysis in 2005, *Womenomics: Japan’s Hidden Asset*, attracted some media attention<sup>2</sup>, and in more recent years, two more versions, *Womenomics 3.0: The Time is Now* and *Womenomics 4.0: Time to Walk the Talk*, became available in the public domain, in 2010 and 2014, respectively. Kathy Matsui, a senior strategist with Goldman Sachs in Tokyo (at that time), was listed as the leading author of all the womenomics reports.

The thrust of the womenomics argument is to stress the necessity for the Japanese state, business and society to revitalize the female workforce to address demographic and fiscal challenges and, in so doing, sustain economic growth. In the authors’ words:

*We first wrote about “womenomics” back in 1999, and our conclusion has not changed. That is, out of economic necessity or as a result of lifestyle choices, an increasing proportion of Japanese women are actively participating in the workforce and becoming a very important source of income and consumption growth. While much more progress still needs to be made at both the public and private sector levels to foster greater female labor participation, we believe Japan is finally moving in the right direction.*

(Matsui et al. 2005: 1)

Concretely, “womenomics” works in the following way; Japan’s acute demographic crisis incurred by rapid fertility decline and

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2 For example, “A Guide to Womenomics: The Future of the World Lies Increasingly in Female Hands”, *The Economist*, April 12, 2006.

aging, which is described as a “tsunami” in the 2010 report (Matsui et al. 2010: 4), will generate a severe labor shortage, while contracting the size of demand. This will lead to the national economy being trapped in a deflationary cycle, when the amount of social security spending is expanding, exacerbating the already-sizable national debt. These economic and political challenges, the authors argue, cannot be managed through implementing conventional fiscal and monetary policy, but only by boosting the underutilized female labor force.

The reasons as to why Japan’s national economy would benefit from having a more active female workforce is threefold. First, the expected labor shortage would be filled by a sizable, unused, well-educated labor force. Second, women, who tend to be the key decision-makers about household consumption and investment, would have a larger disposable income. Third, increased female participation in the labor market would create more demand in some industries, in particular, in the service sector, further stimulating the drive for economic growth. The 2014 womenomics report estimates that “the absolute level of Japan’s GDP could be lifted by as much as 12.5%,” if the level of women’s labor participation in 2013 in Japan (62.5 per cent) were to match that of men’s (80.6 per cent) (Matsui et al. 2014: 5). In addition, the 2010 report names “womenomics winners” (i.e., areas of industry in which “there is likely to be secular growth going forward,” for example, daycare, nursing care, restaurants/prepared food, internet, beauty products, apparel, real estate,

financial, travel/leisure and temporary staffing agencies) (Matsui et al. 2010: 31).

In sum, womenomics reports make a “business case” for promoting women’s labor participation in Japan in the form of the investment bank strategist’s language. In order to provide customers with the information necessary to make sound investment decisions, the womenomics reports identify the underutilization of the female labor force as the structural obstacle that impedes the Japanese economy from sustaining and stimulating economic growth and make a determined call for change. Indeed, the 2014 report contains a long list of recommendations, not only for the Japanese government and private sector, but also for “society,” by pointing out that to achieve a higher level of women’s labor participation, the “mindset” needs to be altered by “dispelling myths,” and “encouraging greater gender equality at home” (Matsui et al. 2014: 17-29). Nevertheless, a fact that the notion of womenomics regards foreign domestic helpers, again often women, as a vital resource that will enable Japanese women to be mobilized for employment (Matsui et al. 2005: 11) indicates that the idea of “gender equality” discussed in the reports appears limited, being subjugated to the primary goal of economic growth in Japan. Such economically-driven recommendations seem to have caught “the ear of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe” (Nohara 2014) and have been incorporated into the Japanese government’s economic strategic plan, i.e., Abenomics. A US Congressional Research Service report on womenomics in Japan, for example,

identifies womenomics as the ideational source of Abe's growth strategy:

*Many observers and analysts have called for reforms to close the gender gap as a way to revitalize the economy after years of slow growth. This economic argument perhaps was first advanced in 1999 by Kathy Matsui, a strategist with Goldman Sachs in Japan who coined the term "womenomics."*

(Chanlett-Avery and Nelson 2014: 2-3)

### **The Productivist Paradigm and Family and Gender Policy Reforms since the 1990s**

The reviewing of the trajectory of family policy reforms as well as gender equality politics in Japan since the 1990s, however, urges us to acknowledge that what the US CRS report calls the "economic argument" has an older root than the womenomics reports. When the legislation of the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society was in progress in the mid 1990s, policy-making elites who led the legislation process frequently pointed out the economic merits of promoting gender equality.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, the promotion of gender equality was posited as a useful economic device to, first, tackle the economic setback in the post-bubble-economy period; second, alleviate pressures of economic globalization; and third, cope with rapid demographic and lifestyle changes, thereby rationalizing and upgrading the Japanese economy, by helping it to return to the growth path. For example, Hashimoto

Ryūtarō, Prime Minister in 1996–1997, addressed the members of the Gender Equality Advisory Council, as follows:

*The realization of a gender equal society is a demand of our time and a big key to determining the future of our country. It is vital to attempt to create an abundant and energetic society by dealing with the issue of fertility decline, aging and rapid changes in the economic and social environment exemplified by maturing economic activities and internationalization.*

(quoted in Ōsawa 2002: 54-55)

As pointed out in an interview given by Ōsawa Mari, a professor of social policy at the University of Tokyo and one of the main players in the legislation process, the logical construction to emphasize the economic merits of promoting gender equality was useful to elicit consent to the legislation of the Basic Law from business leaders who were often concerned with the "cost of equality" (i.e., a series of costs that are likely to be incurred from extra human resource expenditure and more rigorous labor regulations) (Ōsawa and Ueno 2001: 64-71). By projecting economic benefits rather than the costs, discourses to promote gender equality politics in the 1990s advanced an idea that a stagnating and struggling Japanese economy would be revitalized by achieving a more gender-equal society, and in this way, the agenda of gender equality was incorporated into the national political

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3 For more detailed discussions with reference to policy documents, see Takeda (2005: 175-184; 2008b: 201-205).

process, as demonstrated by the promulgation of the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society in 1999 and the revision of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1997. These legislative efforts certainly need to be marked as the institutional achievements of gender equality politics in the 1990s, in particular, given that the Basic Law includes scope for gender-mainstreaming. Simultaneously, it is worth noting that through the emphasis placed on its economic merits, gender equality politics in the 1990s intersected with neoliberal concerns to optimize the national economic structure by rearranging the employment system, while the ideational edge that the term ‘equality’ could potentially pose was in effect compromised by excluding the very term from the legislation process. Although the political endeavors in the 1990s to promote gender equality are conventionally described as “gender equality politics” in English, the literal meaning of the original Japanese term is the “co-participation of men and women” (*danjo kyōdō sankaku*), which does not necessarily question the actual state and quality of “co-participation,” and the policy discussion was generally framed with

reference to women and men’s active participation in the economy and society, but not gender equality, justice, and fairness.<sup>4</sup>

The ideational ambiguity stemmed from the economic emphasis of gender equality politics in the 1990s was exploited to further advance neoliberal reforms in the early 2000s. Structural reform policies implemented by the Koizumi Jun’ichiro government<sup>5</sup> engaged in family policy reform and advocated the “virtue” and merits of being a double-income family. Yet, the focus of policy-making and implementation was directed towards labor deregulation and the development of life-related industries, such as childcare, elderly care, and domestic work support services (Takeda 2008a; 2011). That is to say, the policy development under the Koizumi government can be understood in line with womenomics: the active economic participation of women contributes to sustaining and, more importantly, expanding national economic growth, while filling the shortage in the labor force (and hence, in social security contributors) in a time of population decline. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the shift to the double-income family model was an integral

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4 Ōsawa Mari has confirmed in the interview cited above that the wording of the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society is designed to include the scope for monitoring and sanctioning indirect gender discrimination. In other words, the legislation was intended to make some provisions to cover a broader issue area than mere “co-participation” (Ōsawa and Ueno 2002: 30-33). On this point, it is worth noting that gender equality politics in Japan was countered by fierce backlash movements in the 2000s in which feminist scholars, policy-makers and activists were so severely attacked as to receive death threats, and local statutes directly going against the Basic Law were established by a series of subregional assemblies.

5 It was the Hashimoto government that embarked on ‘structural reform’ in Japan. Gender equality politics in the 1990s developed within the framework of structural reform of the national social security system (Takeda 2005: 201-205).

part of labor deregulation advanced by the Koizumi government, whose main objective was to increase employment flexibility, thereby destabilising the male breadwinner's employment security. In this way, the Koizumi government *had to* promote women's active labor participation as an integral part of its signature political agenda. To achieve this, it exploited the notion of the economic merits of gender equality discussed in the 1990s. Yet, the government concurrently carried out labor deregulation, which resulted in further widening gender gaps in the labor market by pushing many women into irregular modes of employment. In other words, the politics of gender equality was appropriated into the political and economic reforms strongly influenced by the neoliberal creed under the Koizumi government.

The three subsequent LDP governments that followed the Koizumi government, each of which only lasted about a year, made light of family and gender policy reforms, despite the fact that anxieties over everyday family life exacerbated due to the spread of precarious employment and economic setbacks triggered by the global financial crisis. The reasons as to why family policy reforms remained undeveloped during the three post-Koizumi governments were manifold. To start with, none of them could stay in office long enough to implement meaningful policies. In addition, the negative impacts of structural reform policy on everyday life, exemplified by an increase in

the numbers of people who economically struggle, became more visible by the time Koizumi left, and all the post-Koizumi governments had to handle strong antipathies towards the reforms carried out by their predecessor (Ōta 2010; Shimizu 2009; Nagato 2012). The first Abe and Asō governments, the latter was directly hit by the global financial crisis in 2007-2008, exhibited not only a withdrawal from the policy line of the Koizumi government's structural reforms, but also a clear preference for maintaining conservative cultural and historical values (Uesugi 2007; Yomiuri Shinbun Seiji-bu 2009). As Nakakita Kōji points out, their support bases within the LDP were firmly rooted in the right-wing factions (Nakakita 2014: 227-237). The Fukuda government acknowledged the importance of developing policies to provide Japanese people with "security" and "safety" (*anshin, anzen*) in everyday life, and proposed policies to expand employment opportunities for women, youths and the elderly (Ōta 2010: 200-202), but was so caught up in intra- and inter-party politics that Fukuda stepped down before fully developing its policy agendas (Yomiuri Shinbun Seiji-bu 2008).<sup>6</sup>

While the post-Koizumi LDP governments left aside family policy reforms, the DPJ as an opposition party actively took them up, locating them at the center of the party's political agenda, as demonstrated by the party platform installed in 1998, and a series of election manifestos from 2005 onwards. The 2009 election, in which the

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6 It is worth noting that Fukuda served as Minister of State for Gender Equality under the Koizumi government.



DPJ campaigned on slogans such as “Japanese people’s everyday life, first” and “from concrete to human beings,” finally realized a full change in government from the LDP, providing the DPJ with its first opportunity to run the state and implement policies that it had long advocated.

The DPJ’s family and gender policies were multi-faceted but suffice it to say that they contained some innovative elements. For example, one of the most highlighted pieces of policy in the 2009 election manifesto, the cash child allowance, was proposed to signal to the populace that the healthy and sound development of children, i.e., human resources that shoulder the nation’s future, is a public concern which should be shared across society and hence, should be allocated government funding (Ōsawa 2013: 404; Yamaguchi and Nakakita 2014: 8-9). In other words, the implementation of the cash child allowance was intended to introduce the principle of universalism into Japan’s social security system. Together with the abolition of tuition fees for students studying at publicly-run high schools (subsidies for students attending private high schools), and the re-installment of additional funds given to children living in single mother households receiving the Livelihood Security Benefits,

the DPJ’s policy was designed to support the upbringing of children residing in Japan universally. Accordingly, it did not set conditions such as an income cap for receiving the Allowance. This idea was, nevertheless, not sufficiently communicated to the Japanese populace, inviting fierce criticism from not only the LDP and other political parties but also Japanese people as a symbol of irresponsible pork-barrel politics (Hagiwara 2013). Indeed, a series of voting behavior analyses of the 2009 general election have pointed out that voters’ decisions were made based on discontent with the past LDP governments’ performance rather than on differences in terms of policy-making, and the cash child allowance did not attract a high rate of support (Hino 2009; Maeda 2011).<sup>7</sup> The cash child allowance was increasingly made a political battleground in which non-DPJ actors tried to prove the DPJ’s incompetency and ineffectiveness as the governing party, and the policy was eventually compromised by introducing an income cap, in other words, withdrawing universalism and changing its title back to *Jidō Teate*, a title used under the LDP government (which also means “child allowance”).<sup>8</sup>

The DPJ also produced several policies

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7 Analyzing public survey results conducted in the mid and late 2000s, Abe Aya reports that general expectations over the quality of life of children living in the economically-struggling households appear lower in Japan than in other industrially advanced countries. For example, only 33.7 per cent of the respondents agree with the statement that all children should have at least a set of newly-bought (i.e., not passed down from others) clothes (A. Abe 2008: 184-188). Such survey results suggest that the universalism did not have a popular support base among voters when the DPJ tried to introduce it.

8 It has by now been well documented that the idea of cash child allowance being a medium to introduce universalism into Japan’s social security system was not shared even among DPJ MPs.

towards the end of its office to activate and promote the female labor force. One of these policies was the "Action Plan for Economic Revitalization through Women's Active Labor Participation," the so-called "Operation Working *Nadeshiko*"<sup>9</sup>, announced in June 2012, which proposed concrete plans to increase the number of female employees at private firms, and promote their positions within the corporate hierarchy. Following this, a report entitled "The Visualization of Women's Labor Participation" was compiled by a government committee to which Kathy Matusi, the leading author of the womenomics reports, was appointed as a committee member. It was the National Strategy Council (*Kokka Senryaku Kaigi*) situated within the Cabinet Secretariat that hosted the meetings to compile the Operation Working *Nadeshiko* and the policy was explicitly positioned as a vital component of the Japan Revitalization Plan (*Nippon Saisei Senryaku*), an economic growth policy approved by the Noda government which aimed at revitalizing the national economy by stimulating innovation, and in so doing, achieving recovery from the economic setback after the 2007-2008 crisis and the triple disaster in March 2011. The link between Japan's economic recovery and the activation of the female labor force was

stated in a straightforward manner in the very beginning of the Operation Working *Nadeshiko*. It reads:

*The most important potential for revitalizing the national economy and society is "women." Women's active economic and social participation will compensate the declining productive-age population. Furthermore, it will be a drive to introduce new thinking and, in so doing, stimulate innovation and energize different sectors of the national economy.*

(Cabinet Secretariat 2012)

On this understanding, the Operation Working *Nadeshiko* proposed the implementation of policies in three areas, namely, consciousness-raising among men, the implementation of drastic positive action and the introduction of active initiatives in the public sector.

Summarizing the above, the trajectory of family policy reforms as well as gender equality politics since the 1990s demonstrates that the policy-making process has always been closely linked with the framework of the "economic argument," except for the first Abe and Asō governments. Throughout this process, the activation and promotion of the female labor force has continuously been posited as a channel to

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As a result, when the policy was criticized, the DPJ was unable to unanimously provide a counter-argument. Furthermore, the level of the allowance (26,000 yen per month) was set at the decision of the then party leader, Ozawa Ichirō, by raising the initial figure of 16,000 yen per month. Some senior party members openly contested Ozawa's decision in the process of finalizing the 2009 manifesto due to fiscal concerns (Yamaguchi and Nakakita 2014: 21-36).

9 *Nadeshiko* refers to a kind of flower which conventionally signifies an ideal type of Japanese woman. The policy was compiled after Japan's female national football team called *Nadeshiko* Japan won the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup.

revitalize and stimulate national economic growth. That is to say, the basic approach to policy-making falls into a category of “productivist,” discussed by Ian Holliday (2000) as the characteristics of welfare capitalism in East Asia. According to Holliday, the productivist paradigm is defined by “two central aspects,” namely, “a growth-oriented state and the subordination of all aspects of state policy, including social policy, to economic/industrial objectives.” As the discussion of gender equality was appropriated to advance neoliberal labor deregulation through structural reform in the early 2000s and, in the process, reduced semantically to co-participation in the labor market (whose gender bias was strengthened via neoliberal labor reforms), the political goal of achieving gender equality became obscured.<sup>10</sup> Abenomics-womenomics needs to be understood in the context of such policy developments.

Indeed, just a quick comparison of Abenomics-womenomics with previous policies can establish a substantial degree of continuity. For example, the much-advocated numerical target of 30 per cent of women occupying leadership positions was initially introduced by the Gender Equality Promotion Headquarters (*Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Suishin Honbu*)<sup>11</sup> within the Cabinet, under the Koizumi government in June 2003. This target was incorporated into the third Gender Equality Basic Plan (*Danjo*

*Kyōdō Sankaku Kihon Keikaku*) compiled under the DPJ government in 2010, which presented concrete plans for policy-making and implementation to the end of 2015 (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2010). In other words, the Abe government was institutionally obligated to engage with this agenda upon taking office. The other major policy items, such as the introduction of financial incentives for private firms via taxation, subsidies and public purchases, career-building support for non-working mothers, raising the awareness of men, alongside the long-term issue of nursery shortages in the Abenomics-womenomics policy package, were proposed in Operation Working *Nadeshiko*. As such, despite its title carrying the Prime Minister’s family name, Abenomics-womenomics policy is by no means unique to the second Abe government.

The continuity observed in the Abenomics-womenomics policy package might have been something to be welcomed if had offered policy stability and effectiveness; ultimately, the objective is to achieve the policy goal of promoting the female labor force. Yet, the analysis of discrepancies between the realities of working women in Japan and the Abe government’s policy-making rhetoric discussed below indicates that the government has been acting without an informed understanding of the actual state of women’s labor in Japan.

10 On this point, see, for example, Ōsawa’s criticism towards the Koizumi government’s labor and social security reforms (2002: 167-198).

11 The headquarters was set up in 1994 to advance policies to facilitate creation of a gender equal society. It is composed of all ministerial members and the Prime Minister serves as the Chair.

### **Floating Rhetoric and Neglected Problems**

As aforementioned, it was in 2003 when the target of 30 per cent of all leadership positions to be held by women was first introduced, and the Abe government's policy to promote women's labor highlighted this target more than 10 years after the initial goal-setting. A quick glance at statistical data, nevertheless, informs us that there had been little progress made in meeting the 2003 target, and women had remained largely marginalized in Japan's labor market before the Abenomics-womenomics policy was initiated. According to the 2014 Gender Equality White Paper released by the Cabinet Office, the proportion of female managerial workers (namely, those who occupy positions of section chief or above) was recorded at 11.2 per cent in 2013 (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2014b: 62). Compared to 2003, certainly more women were in managerial positions, but the extent of the increment over 10 years appears very modest: from 3.1 per cent to 5.1 per cent for departmental manager positions, from 4.6 per cent to 8.5 per cent for section chief positions and 9.4 per cent to 15.4 per cent for assistant manager positions (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2004: 67; Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2014b: 63). More importantly, the problem of women's peripheral positioning stemmed not only from the corporate hierarchy but also the structural distortion of the labor market. In 2013, 55.8 per cent of the total number of female workers were in some types of irregular employment (part-time, temps and fringe workers), and if we look at figures for

different age groups, the proportion exceeds 50 per cent for all age groups except for age 25–34 (41.4 per cent) (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2014b: 56-59). The number of irregular workers has generally been on an upward trend for the last twenty years among both men and women (Mitsuyama 2011; Imai 2011; Suzuki 2015; Watanabe 2015) but there are also substantial gaps between the percentages of women and men. For example, in the age group 25–34, the proportion of irregular workers amounted to 16.4 per cent for men vis-à-vis 41.4 per cent for women in 2013 (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2014b: 60). The differences in terms of job status between men and women have direct pay implications. The overall gender pay gap was 71.3 in 2013, having reduced slightly from 67.6 in 2003 (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2004: 68-69; Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2014b: 62-64). Yet, if we compare female part-time workers' average pay with that of male regular workers, female part-time workers generally earn about half of their male counterparts (50.7 versus 100 in 2013) (*ibid.*). These figures demonstrate that the labor market in Japan remains an unattractive place for women, just as in 2003.

The numerical target of 30 per cent was therefore highly ambitious in the sense that it required the Abe government to not only attain a policy goal that was initially set 11 years ago in just 6 years, but also reverse a long-term trend in Japan's labor market that is rooted in structural factors. Acknowledging this problem, the Abe government urged business leaders to offer

firm commitments to achieve this target, and with the Prime Minister's leadership, "A Group of Male Leaders Who Will Create a Society in Which Women Shine" (the title is an official translation from the Japanese: *Kagayaku Josei no Katsuyaku o Kasokusuru Dansei Rīdā no Kai*) was formed, and a "declaration of action" was released in June 2014.<sup>12</sup> According to the declaration, the aim of the group is to implement initiatives "to increase the motivation of a wide variety of women and make it possible for them to utilize their abilities maximally" (cited from the provisional translation) by engaging in 1) "taking actions" and "sending messages," 2) "disrupting the status quo" and 3) "developing networking".

The group's title certainly raises questions about agency as it can be read as implying that it is male leaders who can create a society in which women can "shine" and, in so doing, motivate them. More fundamentally, the political initiatives exercised through the Abe government's "Male Leaders' Group" epitomize the ways in which the Abe government conducts policy-making, as discussed by Yanagisawa Kyōji with reference to defense policy-making (Yanagisawa 2014). In particular, the following three points are noteworthy; first, the Prime Minister's leadership tends to be

emphasized by setting up new machineries directly subject to the Prime Minister and consisting of his close allies; second, such policy-making does not necessarily guarantee that the policy concerned is sufficiently informed by expert knowledge; accordingly, as the third point, what is said in policy documents frequently appears incongruous with or even removed from the realities of everyday life of the Japanese people. This certainly raises questions about the efficacy of the concerned policy, while underlining the rhetorical nature of the Abe government's policy-making, which tends to result in disconnecting policy tools from policy goals.

In the area of the family and gender policies, it is not only the "Male Leaders' Group" that exhibits the above three characteristics. Since the initiation of gender equality politics in the 1990s, the Gender Equality Council and its sub-groups, in which academic experts and activists collaborated with national bureaucrats, politicians and business leaders, were set up to play a driving role in the policy-making process.<sup>13</sup> Upon this extant institutional framework, the Abe government has introduced a series of new organizations, most notably, the Headquarters to Create a Society in Which Every Woman Shines

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12 The declaration can be accessed via the Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau website ([http://www.gender.go.jp/policy/sokushin/male\\_leaders.html](http://www.gender.go.jp/policy/sokushin/male_leaders.html), accessed on November 21, 2014). To compile the declaration, two meetings were held in May and June 2014 which were attended by 9 male business leaders heading large corporations such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Takeda Pharmacy and Marui.

13 Women's movements have long played a vital role in the policy-making process of gender-related legislation, providing input based on their expertise and grassroots experiences in the concerned areas (Gelb 2003).

(*Subete no Josei ga Kagayaku Shakai-dukuri Honbu*) led by the Prime Minister himself and consisting of ministerial members. The new Headquarters has been involved in drafting bills, including the Fourth Gender Equality Basic Plan.

The institutional change through the introduction of new organizations seems to have created some knowledge lapses. One obvious example is a detailed footnote attached to the term “glass ceiling” in the “Policy Package for Every Woman to Shine” released by the Headquarters in October 2014<sup>14</sup>. More fundamentally, a close examination of the statistical data detailing women's labor market participation informs us that the target of 30 per cent of leadership positions for women appears not just a difficult policy goal, but rather an unattainable one, even at the beginning of the Abenomics-womenomics policy. To start with, in some industries such as construction and manufacturing, the proportion of female employees itself recorded below the target of 30 per cent, 15.4 per cent for construction and 28.9 per cent for manufacturing in 2013 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2013: 93). On top of this, as the figures mentioned earlier indicate, more than half of female workers today were irregular workers.

Naturally, very few women have been selected as candidates for managerial positions to receive relevant skills training. Furthermore, labor participation rates for women, broken down by the levels of educational attainment and age group, demonstrate that women with university degrees are less likely to go back to the labor market in their 30s and 40s compared to those with high school diplomas-- in other words, better educated women appear more reluctant to return to the labor market (Higuchi 2009: 124-126). Meanwhile, according to the panel survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, only 38.0 per cent of female workers remained in employment after giving birth to their first child, with the figure following the birth of the second child reducing to 23.1 per cent (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2012: 45-46). All in all, the policy goal set by the Abe government in 2014 appears detached from the statistical data of working women in Japan.

Academic experts specializing in women's labor have long discussed these issues (Takeishi 2009; Estevez-Abe 2013; Nishimura 2014; Ōsawa 2015). Under the current setting of Japan's labor market, career breaks created through marriage and

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14 Literally translating, the footnote reads as follows:

*It is a metaphor to describe a situation in which employees who deserve promotion are unable to advance because of their gender or other reasons at private firms and alike as an invisible ceiling blocking career progression.*

This is the only footnote in the entire Policy Package and there is no explanation why this oft-mentioned term that can be easily spotted in discourses circulated through the mass media required such a detailed explanation.

childbirth, combined with age, significantly narrow opportunities for women in their 30s and 40s to regain a regular worker's position, and as mentioned earlier, the pay and job conditions offered to irregular workers are not thrilling. On top of this, Japanese men, in particular those who work for large corporations and tend to be married to women with university degrees, are known internationally for working long hours, leaving the task of childcare with their wives. Thus, the law of Arisawa-Douglas, which posits the negative relationship between the level of women's labor participation and the level of their husband's income is valid in this case, because there are few worthwhile job opportunities for married women with university degrees (Yokoyama 2005; Wakisaka and Okui 2005; Tachibanaki 2008). That being said, the core problem to be tackled to encourage the non-working female population to return to work is, first, the institutional and structural disparities between regular and irregular workers and, second, the long working hours that Japanese men tend to endure.

This was certainly acknowledged by previous policies, with both the Third Gender Equality Basic Plan and the Operation Working *Nadeshiko*, including scope for dealing with issues of unequal treatment stemmed from employment status and men's long working hours. In contrast, the proposal of the bill concerning the promotion of female labor resubmitted in the 2015 Diet Session placed a focus on women's career-building in the face of "rapid fertility decline" and "socio-economic changes." The bill was

modified through deliberations in the Diet by adding amendments requested by the opposition parties. The revised text acknowledges that the promotion of women's working life is a human rights issue and requires the government to tackle problems resulting from employment status, as well as men's long working hours. On this understanding, the Basic Guidelines to Promote Women's Working Life (*Josei no Shokugyō Seikatsu ni okeru Katsuyaku no Suishin ni kansuru Kihon Hōshin ni tsuite*) was compiled and approved by the Cabinet after the legislation of the bill in September 2015, which requested the allocation of a budget to administratively support an increase in the number of regular workers and to raise men's awareness about child-rearing.

The Abe government further amended its policy package in response to the criticism leveled at previous policy proposals when it was updated to the "Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens" in November 2015. While the numerical target of 30 per cent was sidelined, the new policy package acknowledged that the government needed to engage in the issue of the unfavorable employment conditions of irregular workers, the long working hours of male workers and widespread poverty among lone mother households. Indeed, the Abe government now highlights the need for reform of the employment system and practices, including the introduction of the principle of equal pay for equal work and more strict regulations on overtime, and Diet deliberations over these issues are ongoing. While the legislation on these issues is long

awaited, and if realized, being equipped with effective policy tools, it should contribute to the improvement of working conditions for all irregular workers, not just women. This suggests, on the one hand, that critique mounted by the opposition parties and academic experts is vital to ensure that the Abe government's policy-making works, by pointing out neglected and overlooked problems due to the lapse of policy expertise.

On the other hand, both the introduction of the principle of equal pay for equal work and more strict regulations on overtime could possibly incur substantial costs for employers. This certainly raises some questions about the feasibility of the proposed policies, as these measures are inconsistent with the Abe government's economic and industrial policies which have been in pursuit of further reduction of economic burdens placed upon global corporations. More fundamentally, Mitsuyama Masako, a labor sociologist who has investigated the impact of the deregulation of the supermarket industry on the rank and file employees, mainly comprised of female part-time workers, has pointed out that many female workers find it difficult to remain the position of regular workers due to the extended opening hours of supermarkets resulting from deregulation, since family commitments often prevent them from working flexibly (Mitsuyama 2016). That is to say, issues related to structural disparities between regular and irregular workers, and long working hours cannot be tackled without challenging neoliberalized industrial policies. In other words, what is required here seems to be a

critical review of the productivist paradigm that prioritizes economic growth over other political needs. Yet, as suggested by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) guidelines of the equal pay for equal work issued in December 2016, which recognizes the prospect of transfer or secondment as a legitimate reason for pay differentials, the introduction of this principle has already been compromised in favor of employers; in this way, the productivist paradigm still drives the policy-making process in Japan.

## **Conclusion**

A detailed exploration of the Abe government's policy moves to promote women's participation in the labor market illuminates their innate limitations. The Abe government's policy-making shares much common ground with that of the previous governments, in the sense that it is rooted in the productivist paradigm, while displaying clear signs of a lack of policy expertise. The policy packages proposed so far have been amended in response to the criticism proffered by the opposition parties and academic experts. However, to overcome the problems that exist within Japan's employment system, it is essential that policy-making depart from the productivist paradigm. Yet, there is little sign that this will happen in the near future.

In the meantime, policies concerning women's reproductive roles are concurrently developing. Indeed, during the same Diet session hosting the deliberations about the bill to promote the female labor force, a draft



bill outlining comprehensive support for women's health was also submitted. This has been followed by government policy proposals including the Guideline for Tackling Birth Rate Declining Society (*Shōshika Shakai Taisaku Taikō*), which sets a numerical target for bumping up total fertility rates, while the aforementioned "Policy Package for Every Woman to Shine" lists issues concerning marriage, childbirth and family-forming as the top items, taking up greater space in the document than the discussion of employment issues. All these policy proposals point to the Abe government's strong concern over demographic issues, which are now described officially as in "a state of crisis that may erode the bedrock of society and the economy." Given that only women can reproduce in the current scientific environment, the introduction of a numerical target explicitly indicating a particular level of total fertility rate evokes a wartime slogan, "give birth, multiply," which was widely spread within Japanese society to promote then pronatalist policies. Furthermore, the

government now actively promotes tax incentives for three-generation cohabitation in which care work (for both children and the elderly) would be conducted as a family matter, just as in "Japanese Type of Welfare Society," an LDP vision of the welfare reform in the 1980s that regarded women's care work as the "hidden asset" of the Japanese economy. In this sense, the overall process of family and gender policy reforms under the Abe government can be read as an intensified version of the old, familiar political message for women: be a good reproductive agent while engaging in paid employment to an extent determined by market standards and allowed by family commitments (Takeda 2005; 2008a; Gottfried 2015). The processes of family policy reforms and gender equality politics since the 1990s were initiated by acknowledging that this message no longer worked for many women due to the socio-economic changes. Twenty years later, it seems that the reform process has retrogressed as women are urged to "shine" while the idea of gender equality has been marginalized in the framework of policy discussions.

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## 要旨

# ウーマノミクスから日本における女性・ジェンダー政策を考える： 生産と再生産の間

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本論文の目的は、安倍晋三政権による「女性の活(用)躍」の政治過程を1990年以来の家族／ジェンダー政策の展開に位置づけることによって理解することにある。このため、本稿ではまず「女性の活(用)躍」政策が基づくアイデアであるウーマノミクス(Womenomics)を検討し、それが女性の積極的な労働市場への参加を日本経済の成長の手段として位置づけていることを確認する。経済成長の実現が最終的な政策目標として設定されるのは、イアン・ホリディ(Ian Holliday)が「生産主義パラダイム」(productivist paradigm)と呼んだ東アジアの社会政策に観察される特徴であるが、安倍政権の「女性の活(用)躍」政策にもこうした傾向が認められ、この点において1990年代以来の女性／ジェンダー政策と一定の連続性が存在している。経済成長優先という安倍政権による「女性の活(用)躍」政策の特徴は、労働市場における女性の状況を改善するためには不可欠な雇用形態間の格差の是正などの働き方改革の進展を制約する可能性もあり、今後の政治過程により一層の注意を払うことが必要である。

## キーワード

ウーマノミクス、女性とジェンダー政策、日本の政策、ジェンダー平等、生産主義パラダイム

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