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## Womenenomics: Gender Equality as a Development Approach in Japan

### Kadın Ekonomisi: Japonya'da Kalkınma Yaklaşımı Olarak Cinsiyet Eşitliği

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the success of the "Womenomics" policy, launched in Japan in 2013 in response to demographic and economic challenges and aimed at increasing women's participation in the workforce, as well as the structural barriers behind it. Among the policy's main goals were increasing women's labour force participation rate and boosting their representation in management positions. Therefore, womenenomics has failed to achieve its goals. Although women's labour force participation rate has increased since 1986 (reaching 66% in 2016), this increase has largely coincided with a rise in irregular (precarious) employment rates. Notwithstanding, womenomics, within a neoliberal framework, primarily aims for economic growth rather than genuine social equality. This top-down approach does not adequately address the various economic challenges and pressure to leave the workforce faced by women, particularly in low-skilled occupations. All in all, to create a sustainable impact for womenomics, it must go beyond mere participation metrics and target deep-rooted cultural and institutional transformations that ensure job quality and parental leave are accessible to both genders.

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#### ÖZ

Bu makale, demografik ve ekonomik zorluklara yanıt olarak 2013 yılında Japonya'da başlatılan ve kadınların işgücüne katılımını artırmayı amaçlayan "Kadın Ekonomisi" politikasının başarısını ve bunun arkasındaki yapısal engelleri analiz etmektedir. Politikanın temel hedefleri arasında kadınların işgücüne katılım oranını artırmak ve yönetim pozisyonlarında temsilini güçlendirmek yer alıyordu. Bu nedenle, kadın ekonomisi hedeflerine ulaşamadı. Kadınların işgücüne katılım oranı 1986'dan beri artmış olsa da (2016'da %66'ya ulaşmıştır), bu artış büyük ölçüde kayıt dışı istihdam oranlarındaki yükselişle aynı zamana denk gelmiştir. Bununla

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birlikte, neoliberal çerçevede kadın ekonomisi, öncelikle gerçek sosyal eşitlikten ziyade ekonomik büyümeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu yaklaşım, özellikle düşük vasıflı mesleklerde kadınların karşılaştığı çeşitli ekonomik zorlukları ve işgücünden ayrılma baskısını yeterince ele almamaktadır. Kadın ekonomisi için sürdürülebilir bir etki yaratmak için, iş kalitesinin ve ebeveyn izninin her iki cinsiyet için de erişilebilir olmasını sağlayan köklü kültürel ve kurumsal dönüşümleri hedeflemelidir.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘Womenomics’ was aimed at addressing the demographic and economic problems facing Japan by increasing female labour force participation. Some of the primary objectives of Womenomics may include enhancing the female participation rate in the economy, promoting the basis of reproduction, and advancing female placement in managerial posts. It was expected that Womanomics would expand women’s economic contributions and thus address the issue of an ageing workforce in Japan and promote economic growth. However, the success of Womenomics in these areas, particularly concerning job quality and opportunities for advancement within an organisation, requires judgment.

Was there any naive belief that Japanese women actively wanted to join the workforce? Since the introduction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986, the number of women participating in the labour force in Japan has increased stepwise. From 1986 to 2012, the percentage of women’s participation rose from 53.1% to 60.7, and by the year 2016, it climbed to 66% — all these assumptions point to a dramatic increase since the formal introduction of womenomics (Kawaguchi, 2012; Smith & Stewart, 2017). These figures reflect the increasing trend of women joining the workforce. However, this development has taken place concurrently with an increase in ‘irregular’ employment.

It has been observed that women have mostly lost out on traditional employment and are occupied in more irregular positions, since as many as 60% of all female workers now fall into that category. Women’s Work Participation Policy of Womenomics thus poses many questions relating to the quality of employment that women can access and their long-term economic security (Hara, 2018).

Using a labour-force model economically based on the M-curve, people can see that female labour-force participation in Japan tends to be low while women are having young children, but is high again in their early 20s and their late 30s. More recently, however, such an outline curve has been changing as a significant proportion of women have remained in paid work in their early 30s, owing to more flexible maternity leave policies among other measures (Inoue et al., 2016). Even so, a crippling lack of childcare facilities, particularly in densely populated metropolitan areas including To-

kyo, remains a major bottleneck. The figures reported above are not particularly surprising given a government guarantee to make available 320,000 childcare places by 2020. However, independent estimates show that there are nearly twice as many people looking for such provisions. The continuing lack of support systems indicates that although Womenomics has encouraged women to be part of the workforce, these reintegration measures have yet to be advanced (Schad-Seifert, 2019; Hashimoto & Naito, 2024).

Womenomics aims to promote the advancement of women into leadership positions; however, progress has been limited. Between 2012 and 2016, the percentage of women in managerial roles increased only slightly, from 11.1% to 13%. Japan’s overall representation of women in senior roles remains low, as demonstrated by a decline in its Global Gender Gap Index ranking over three years, placing Japan 114th out of 144 countries in 2024 (Statista, 2025; Teranishi, 2025). This under-representation implies that although Womenomics has improved workforce participation to some extent, it has not adequately addressed the barriers to female leadership, which limits its ability to have an impact on decision-making and wider economic fairness. Socioeconomic considerations also make womenomics less effective. A male-breadwinner paradigm is reinforced and dual-income families are discouraged by Japan’s tax and social security systems, which tend to support single-income households (Chopel et al., 2025). This is particularly significant since Japan is the only OECD nation where dual-income households have a higher likelihood of being impoverished than single-income households (Lebedeva, 2022). Increases in karōshi (death from overwork), stagnation in real pay growth, and a growing divide between regular and irregular income further exacerbate these issues. These conditions limit the economic options available to women, which ultimately defeats the purpose of womenomics.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Barriers from institutions and cultures further exacerbate the issue. High-pressure work situations and strongly embedded gender norms prohibit men from taking parental leave, while women continue to face significant barriers in the workplace, such as sexual harassment and

pregnancy-related discrimination (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). Working mothers are disproportionately affected by these problems, which impedes the wider adoption of family-friendly laws. Thus, many women are left with limited choices, feeling pressured to resign from their jobs or struggling to manage their work and family responsibilities (Torres et al., 2024). Without a shift in culture towards shared home duties, Womenomics' potential to boost women's economic mobility remains constrained. Womenomics has increased the number of people joining the workforce, but not everyone has profited equally (Williams, 2001; Kabakçı Günay & Ince Yenilmez, 2023). The "Tuna Girls," a group of Saitama working women, brought attention to the unfulfilled needs of ordinary working women by launching their own company to address the dearth of resources for working mothers (Shinoda, 2023; Tang, 2024). Programs that could drive them into the workforce without adequate assistance continue to make many people wary. This disparity indicates that Womenomics, which has primarily been formulated and applied at the top levels of society, is inadequate in tackling the various economic realities that Japanese women, especially those without well-known professions, encounter. These difficulties show how important it is to thoroughly reassess Womenomics. Significant gaps in employment quality, compensation, and career advancement persist despite an increase in workforce participation (Dalton, 2017; Hasunuma, 2017; Crawford, 2021; Guo et al., 2024). For Womenomics to truly promote gender equity and contribute to Japan's economic growth, it must extend beyond mere participation metrics and tackle qualitative aspects of employment, including improving job quality and ensuring parental leave is accessible to all genders.

Womenomics addresses the issues of how the inclusion of women in the workforce can help revive the economy and society of Japan, lists three expected advantages (Buchholz, 2019; Genna, 2021, Statista, 2024): 1. The employment of women will contribute to the increase of the labour supply that is necessary due to population ageing and decreasing birth rates, which have been on the rise for quite some time now. 2. This country has to pursue and attract top-qualified personnel without regard to sex to compete in a global marketplace. In terms of this goal, it is constructive to mobilise the potential women workforce. 3. Women represent the primary drivers of demand in the field of daily consumption. However, looking at the supply side, there are not enough women in decision-making positions. This background demands the involvement of more women in the workforce, which will, in turn, create a market looking towards its consumers. These ideas are closely related to the idea of "womenomics", which is about the need to recognise and incorporate women's efforts in the economy as one of the factors beneficial to the overall growth of the economy.

The focus of womenomics is to call the Japanese government, businesses and society to harness the potential

of the women population to tackle the issues of population and fiscal, hence ensuring continued economic expansion. This is, as a matter of economic need or sufficed by lifestyle changes, a growing case of Japanese women now becoming gainfully employed and thereby an important source of income and Consumption (Chanlett-Avery & Nelson, 2014; Macnaughtan, 2015; Coleman, 2017). Although much more is still required at both public and private sector levels to further enhance female labour markets, we believe Japan is finally on the right path (Elysia et al., 2023). Specifically, 'do womenomics' is implemented like this; Japan's fertility is declining rapidly and the ageing population has reportedly reached a dramatic stage which a 2010 report characterized as a 'tsunami' (Nakatani, 2019; 2023), will create a huge excessive demand for labour, while reducing the size of the market, this will effectively result in a vicious cycle of deflation within the economy. In turn, Japan's continued rapid growth may lead to aggressive social security spending, further compounding the already substantial public debt (Abe, 2017; Fukunaga et al., 2024). These economic and political challenges policies, addressed solely through traditional fiscal and monetary policies; instead, they require an increase in the underutilised female labour force. There are three main reasons why Japan's national economy would benefit from a more active female workforce (Fukunaga et al., 2024; Furukawa et al., 2024). First, a significant, untapped, and well-educated labour pool could help fill the anticipated labour shortage. Second, women, who often play a crucial role in household consumption and investment decisions, would have greater disposable income. Third, a rise in female participation in the labour market would boost demand in various industries, particularly in the service sector, thereby further driving economic growth (Hogen et al., 2024). Therefore, "the absolute level of Japan's GDP could be lifted by as much as 12.5%," if the female labour participation rate in 2013 (62.5 percent) were to reach the level of men's (80.6 percent) (Bank of Japan, 2024a; 2024b).

Womenomics winners are sectors expected to grow, such as daycare, nursing care, restaurants, online services, beauty products, clothing, real estate, finance, travel, and temporary staffing. Overall, womenomics reports create a "business case" for enhancing women's participation in the Japanese workforce, using terminology typical of investment bank strategists. To equip clients with the right information for informed investment choices, the reports pinpoint the underuse of female workers as a key issue hindering Japan's economic growth, urging significant reform (Goodhart & Pradhan, 2020; Furukawa et al., 2023). As a result, the Japanese government and businesses try to boost women's labour participation; it is essential to shift the "mindset" by "dispelling myths" and promoting "greater gender equality at home" (Takeda, 2018; Salguero-Huaman, 2024). However, the view of womenomics includes the reliance on foreign domestic workers, often women, as a crucial resource that would al-

low Japanese women to join the workforce. This suggests that the concept of “gender equality” discussed in the documents may be somewhat constrained, mainly serving the goal of economic advancement in Japan (Stotsky et al., 2016; Ono & Yamada, 2020; Ince Yenilmez & Darıcı, 2025).

Economically motivated suggestions such as these took root early on, with certain policy plans being dubbed “Abenomics” – in direct reference to the popularly well-known current Japanese Premier. Essentially, womenomics serves as Abe’s signature growth strategy. US Congressional Research Service publication on Japanese women shows, for example, that the source of the Prime Minister’s growth strategies could be found in the basic precepts of womenomics: Governments have put in place several measures to address this part of the wage gap and promote family-friendly policies, but overall, the incentives for changing how the workplace operates have not been as effective (Abe, 2013; 2017; Groysberg, 2015; Shambaugh, 2022). The gender gap in employment rates has barely moved in the last decade, indicating slow progress on that issue.

### 3. WOMENOMICS AS A NEOLIBERAL POLICY

Womenomics, though framed as a policy for enhancing gender equality, is widely criticized as a neoliberal economic approach prioritising national economic gains over genuine social reform. Womenomics under Abe’s administration aimed primarily to reinvigorate the economy rather than fundamentally improve conditions for women (Kano & Mackie, 2013; Yamaguchi, 2018). Critics argue that this approach reflects broader neoliberal priorities, where a “business-friendly climate” outweighs broader societal welfare. Within this context, Womenomics becomes a tool for economic growth rather than an instrument for comprehensive social change, creating tension among advocates for women’s rights in Japan, who question whether Womenomics truly represents a step toward gender equality (Kano, 2018; Fisker-Nielsen, 2022).

In line with Abe’s larger political position on gender, the Womenomics method, which is based on a neoliberal framework, clearly places economic efficiency above justice. Abe’s cabinet voiced fears that the advancement of gender equality could upset Japan’s traditional family values during his first term as prime minister (2006–2007). This led many to question his sincerity in supporting feminist causes (Zhou, 2021; Iida, 2024).

Japan’s consistently low performance on global gender equality rankings was the focus of Womenomics. However, detractors point to Abe’s past acts that seemed to threaten efforts at gender equality as well as the government’s patchy record on women’s rights. Persistent disparities are highlighted, for instance, his cabinet treated female MPs who were heckled about issues like population decrease and female ministers, many of whom felt pressured to quit (Yoshino & Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2014; Kiyoshi, 2015; Weathers,

2018). In addition to being a problem in Japanese politics, institutional sexism is also present in pop culture and corporate settings, which continue to uphold traditional gender stereotypes and hinder women’s ability to pursue leadership positions. One of the primary areas of disagreement in womenomics is how childcare leave is handled. Despite its seeming preference for working women, the law might actually serve to uphold long-standing caring conventions. Although extending women’s one-year childcare leave to three years may seem like a good idea, experts claim that it really encourages women to take on caregiving duties rather than working (Omori & Ota, 2023; Matsuda et al., 2024). This action strengthens the social perception of women as primary carers and makes it more challenging for men to request paternity leave by conveying the message that childcare is predominantly a woman’s responsibility. The seniority-based pay plans and the male-breadwinner paradigm that is common in Japanese companies make this problem worse by discouraging men from taking time off and making it harder for women to support themselves financially.

This dynamic perpetuates systemic inequities and gender wage disparities in Japan’s corporate climate. While women who leave and re-enter the workforce face salary stagnation and limited opportunities for upward mobility, men benefit from uninterrupted tenure under the seniority-based compensation paradigm (Chiang & Ohtake, 2014; Merry & Levitt, 2017). Although wage equality is supposedly required by the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO), the seniority system restricts women’s earning potential. In many cases, Womenomics’ methods of maternity leave and job reintegration do not yield equitable outcomes because they trap women in a loop of delayed professional progress that eventually hinders their long-term economic involvement (Shigenoi, 2022; Takahashi, 2022).

After the Second World War, Japan embarked on a rapid industrialisation journey, which in turn brought about the establishment of a unique corporate system whose employment policy thrived on strict adherence to lifetime employment, seniority, and employees’ attachment to the companies (Dalton, 2022; Nemoto, 2023). Lifelong job security, seniority-based pay, and high expectations of organising corporate life near the place of work are among the attributes of this system. Consequently, a more rigid labour division became the result since employees were committed mainly to steady employment, learning, and exhausting hours. In this framework, men were obliged to work long hours and to change jobs frequently, while women exclusively took up being housewives (Takemaru, 2011; Woźny, 2022; Shao & Lee, 2023). That is, both the husband and wife are the ones who should make efforts to fulfil the family’s needs equally. This scheme was institutionalised as the ‘male-breadwinner’ formula where males were represented as the principal wage earners and females as housewives and child-care providers (Yagi et al., 2022; Ueno, 2024)

Under this system, women's involvement in the workforce remained extremely restricted. As a result of social expectations, getting married often signalled the end of a woman's career. This was reinforced not only by culture but by policies that required women to retire sooner than men—often to align with the major life events of marriage and childbirth. Regulations like this, which were separate for men and women, were the norm and led to an environment where it was expected that married women would put family first and their careers second (Pereira et al., 2023).

Thus, married women found themselves at a disadvantage and were often constrained to the workplace in a lesser capacity, which often limited their number of working hours and further limited their chances of progress (Schäper et al., 2023). The economic consequences of the male breadwinner model are seen as largely negative since gender divides into job responsibilities and training expenditures were institutionalised.

While men were afforded roles and routes that maximised value creation, women were confined to support roles with minimum investments oriented towards their advancement (Damman et al., 2015; Michelson, 2020; Li, 2024).

Japanese employers began using temporary employment in the 1960s during economic downturns as a way to lower labour costs. It was this twist that made married women work in the labour market as contract or part-time workers. But those were insecure positions, and when times got tough, they were among the first to go. As a result, female non-regular workers, especially housewives, became flexible labour to support job stability for male employees. It was used to justify requiring male employees to work longer hours and financial rewards for employers, as they agreed on family allowances that served a reinforcement role in propping up the model of a male breadwinner with a financially supported stay-at-home spouse (Inoue et al., 2016; Chung & van der Lippe, 2020).

This was followed in the 1980s with expanded fiscal and social policies that extended male-breadwinner norms even more. Tax-deductible was then limited to the household head (usually the husband) if his spouse's wage had simply stayed below the specific cutoff point (Sear, 2021; Nakayama, 2024). This model contained a large incentive for married women to under-earn and led to the concentration of female nonregular employees at an income limit. Other measures, such as the pension exemption for dependent spouses and social benefits targeted at part-time workers, serve to reproduce women's roles as secondary earners or primary caregivers, hence, perpetuating a gendered economic structure (Selin, 2014; Christl et al., 2022).

In the 1990s, this eventually led to a decline in the male-breadwinner model as the Japanese lost confidence and hope for their economic future after Japan's asset bubble burst, followed by decades-long stagnation. As time passed, the sharp increase in the proportion of elderly Japanese and

the decrease in several newborn children compelled businesses to seek highly efficient part-time workers. Nevertheless, even with changes to the labour market and government policies (such as the Koizumi administration), there was no overarching dissolution of this solidified system formed by males (Kushida, 2024). While liberalising economic initiatives were intended to make the economy resemble a more market-oriented system, they did little for social welfare and failed to curb decreasing birthrates, spelling the possible necessity of gender equality interests and policies that will ensure sustainable labour practices in Japan's new work environment (Debroux, 2016; Ochiai, 2019).

#### 4. FLOATING RHETORIC AND NEGLECTED PROBLEMS

The percentage of women in leadership positions was only 8.7%, even though a target had been adopted aiming for it to reach as high as 30% by year-end 2003, well after the equivalent rates had settled, hovering around the low hundreds of Women are positioned at a disadvantage over men then remained highly marginalized in Japan's labour market. While women filled just 11.2% of managerial positions in 2013, most countries showed marginal improvement over a decade (Sims et al., 2021; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). The nature of employment creates additional hurdles, as 55.8% (men) compared to women get stuck in precarious low-wage jobs — an observation that speaks volumes for the vast difference in job security and pay between both genders. It was more than a decade later that the Abe administration placed notable emphasis on this target (Abe, 2007), raising real questions of feasibility amidst continued structural inequities.

To fix these problems, Abe's team asked business heads to help women grow and set up a group of men to support women's rights. Yet, this plan worried some people as it made men seem key to women's success. Also, this way of doing things was like other plans from Abe's group: starting new offices under the Prime Minister with little input from real experts, resulting in plans that felt out of touch. This top-down talk often focused on change but missed real tools for real change (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2024).

The Abe government's gender plans built on old ideas but added new groups, like the "Headquarters to Make a Place Where Every Woman Shines," run by the Prime Minister. However, this change created gaps in implementing policies. The Headquarters showed little grasp of things like the "glass ceiling." This mismatch between high goals and the real lives of Japanese women revealed that the aim of achieving 30% leadership was ambitious, if not impossible, due to deep-rooted societal issues. Their work progress has been hampered by time off for babies and a lack of training opportunities, particularly for women working part-time. Several studies have found that highly educated women are the least likely to return to work after giving birth (Akagawa, 2019; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Second, the number of hours men work—especially at plodding jobs (see article) - means that they cannot help much around the house; hence, married women are less likely to find a concrete incentive—or reluctantly offered support—to get back into their careers. Collectively, these entrenched dynamics imply that it is unlikely to be a straightforward policy fix for such deep labour market inequalities (Dotti Sani, 2014; Kamp Dush et al., 2018). The government proposed a more wide-ranging package of reforms, which included long working hours experienced by men as well as poor conditions suffered by irregular workers. The Basic Guidelines were designed first to address the challenge of dual earnings stability and second, to support child-rearing among men (HRW, 2025). But passing legislation to support these policies, such as the "equal pay for equal work" principle, is a different matter, with Abe already facing an uphill battle due to expected resistance from employers, and it runs counter to his pro-business economic agenda that focuses on cutting corporate costs (Hoshi et al., 2021).

The meaningful changes to Japan's workforce required are even bigger than improving women's employment rates and simply equalising pay, both of which would be challenging enough on their own. Finally, a productivist paradigm – which favours economic growth over social equity – continues to define policy responses, also partly depicted in accommodations such as the Ministry of Health equal pay guidelines that still permit employer-related wage hierarchies (Pejović, 2016; Yearby, 2019). Japan will not achieve meaningful and sustainable gender balance in the workplace until it tackles these fundamental problems with its industrial and economic policies, too.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

The research approach used in the study was desktop analysis. Desk research is secondary data, or data that can be gathered without going out into the field. Since desk research primarily consists of gathering data from already-existing resources, it is sometimes regarded as a less expensive method than field research because the primary expenses are related to executive time, phone bills, and directories. Thus, the study was based on research, reports, and statistics that had already been published. Online journals and library signs made it simple to obtain this secondary data for both industries.

### 5.1. Findings

#### 5.1.1. Long-standing disparities in gender representation in leadership and employment

Although Japan raised an early flag in 2003 to aim at a 30% representation of women in management by 2020, figures show that progress is persistently disappointing. Figure 1 indicates how women represented just 11.2% of those in senior management positions in 2013, and that by 2024, there would be a modest increase to only a little higher, at 15.2%, indicating that over a decade, systemic

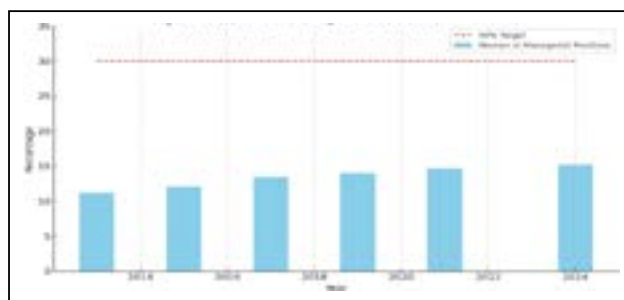


Figure 1. Women in managerial positions (2013-2024).

structural barriers-residual contemporary male-dominated corporate hierarchies and rigid career tracks-continued as impediments to gender equality in leadership. This gap between legitimate figures and the national target also calls into question both the policy design and the implementation process.

The other main concern, along with the first one, is insecure employment, affecting women more than men. Figure 2 shows a slight drop in the proportion of women in non-regular employment, from 55.8% in 2013 to 52.1% in 2024. This situation indicates that structural issues such as the seniority-based career barriers and the male breadwinner model, which were discussed earlier, persist. Nevertheless, the percentage remains significantly lower than that of males, whose equivalent number is more than half, at 32.4% in 2024. Non-regular employment typically implies low wages, limited job security, and scarce opportunities for promotion, all factors that contribute to the broader gender income gap. The very fact that this gap persists suggests conditions that require deeper, structural reforms in employment to achieve equitable labour conditions.

#### 5.1.2. Ways forward: Policy efforts that structural barriers undermine

Most importantly, however, the Abe government floated the "Womenomics" initiative, which focused on improving female participation in the labour force as a key part of an economic strategy. The establishment of the "Headquarters for Creating a Society Where All Women Shine" was one such initiative in 2014. The initiative, however, came under fire for being devoid of bottom-up approaches and discon-

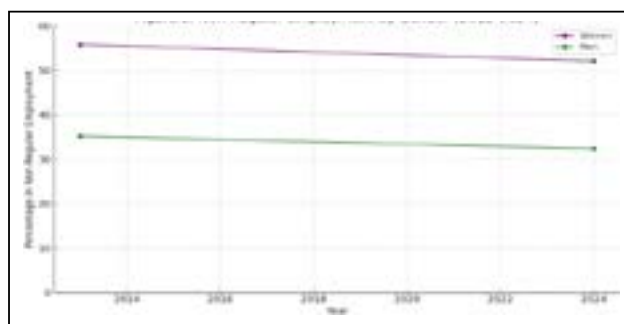


Figure 2. Non-regular employment by gender (2013-2024).



nected from workplace realities. Major obstacles included Japan's inherited culture of overwork, which made participation by men in domestic responsibilities. Childbirth, and--more importantly--involved occupations skittish towards retention after childbirth, notoriously led to this human capital drain.

### 5.1.3. Legislative reforms with corporate obstruction

To combat these, reforms in the law, including the promotion of "equal pay for equal work" and regulation of working conditions, were put in place in 2015. However, the enforcement became difficult mainly due to strong resistance from corporate actors who preferred the current employment model based on cost-effectiveness. Besides such policy proclamations, pay inequalities persisted, as many firms maintained internal hierarchies regarding payments, thereby favouring male employees. This implicitly undermined the intended effect of the guidelines given by the Ministry of Health and contributed to the perpetuation of long-standing gender-based wage disparities, requiring stricter enforcement with more transparent mechanisms of accountability within the corporate structure (Byttebier, 2022).

Figure 3 shows the trend of the gender wage gap in Japan between 2013 and 2024, and the impact of the "Equal Pay for Equal Work" reform, which came into effect in 2015. As can be seen from the graph, a slight but steady downward trend in the wage gap has been observed in the years following the reform. The difference, which was approximately 26.5% in 2013, decreased to 23.6% by 2024. However, this decline does not offer the expected level of great improvement. This situation can be attributed to the reforms remaining on paper and institutional resistance continuing. While the 2015 reform aimed to strengthen the principle of equality in the legal sphere, it had a limited impact in practice due to companies' cost-focused employment policies and hierarchical wage structures. Wage policies that particularly favour male employees have hindered the horizontal wage balance that the reform aimed for. This table clearly shows that legal regulations cannot have a lasting impact without being supported by a transformation of corporate culture.

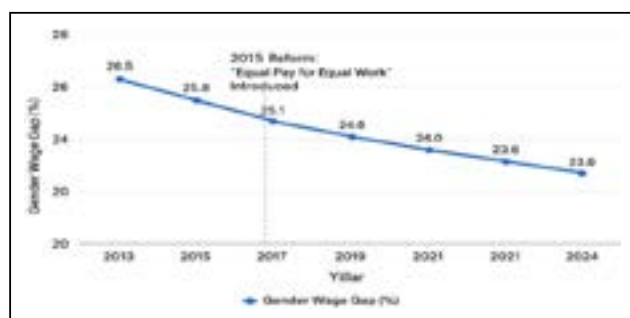


Figure 3. Gender wage gap in Japan (2013-2024).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Japan announced Womenomics to attract more women into the economy by drawing under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2013. Yet, these historical differences in leadership and work continue to show signs of a broken system. While women in managerial positions are just insufficiently represented in leadership roles, there will be about 15 percent of leadership positions in 2024, extremely short of the target of 30 percent set by two decades, within a deeply segmented labour market. More than half of working women is clustered in low-wage, non-regular work, lacking benefits or mobility in their careers. And the divide remains even with an India that has been dwindling in its workforce and with its population ageing because it not only shows but also indicates structural barriers-the inflexible work culture coupled with poor childcare and the resistance of the companies as a whole-that reinforce women's marginalisation even more through their economic participation growing in importance.

The Abe government tried introducing policies on equal pay for equal work (2015), as well as extending childcare leave, but implementation was weak owing to resistance from the employers. Many companies exploit loopholes to clarify job positions, with the result that gender wage gaps are maintained (with women earning 77.9 percent of men's wages) based on non-transparent bonus systems (Kresal, 2021). Also, the long-hours culture in corporate Japan pushes women as the main caretaking workforce to quit after childbirth; only 38 percent of college-educated women return to full-time jobs. The government's top-down, dramatic action approach often misses grassroots necessities, such as affordable eldercare or penalties for discrimination, by just having a symbolic measure like appointing women to seats on a board. Until or unless tougher enforcement conditions exist, these reforms are still rhetorical and not really a reality (Bailey et al., 2024).

The deficiencies of "womenomics" are symptomatic of deeper problems: an economic model that is productivist and builds womb-to-tomb populations for the income growth of gross national product at the cost of social equity and traditional adherence to roles within the culture. Besides, even progressive firms, sectors developing "karoshi" (death from overwork) expectations disadvantage women, marking them with stigma for seeking work-life balance (Shirayev & Levy, 2016). Regional diversities compound the problem- there is a gap as wide as 68%-58% entry into the labour force by urban women vs. rural women due to differences in access to childcare and transport. Meanwhile, the intersections, such as single mothers and older women, get little policy attention. Comparative studies reveal that, even sharing similar cultural underpinnings, South Korea and Taiwan outpaced Japan in female leadership by instituting demands on quotas and flexible work policies- things Japan has not checked. Genuine progress necessitates the following three changes (Kim, 2022):

- **Enforcement Mechanisms-** Force wage transparency, penalise discrimination, and tie corporate subsidies to diversity metrics.
- **Cultural Change-** Involve men in caregiving through paternity leave incentives and public campaigns against the "salaryman" ideals.
- **Infrastructure Investment-** Universal childcare, rural job hubs, and mid-career reentry programs to retain talent.

Utilising its entire workforce is essential to Japan's competitiveness in the future. Womenomics will remain an unfulfilled promise unless institutional and cultural impediments are removed, which will weaken Japan's economy and society.

## 7. RECOMMENDATION

Theoretical probing is necessary into the consistent underrepresentation of women in corporate leadership roles in Japan. Social role theory explains that the expectations and stereotypes about gender influence the roles that a person chooses, which often deprives women of the hierarchy in the workplace where they should take care of nurturing and being supportive. Gender stratification theory further explains the roles through which the social structures and power relationships should maintain and create inequalities between the two genders presence of barriers to progressing from holding traditionally male positions in corporate hierarchies to achieving entry into them by women. It can be theorised that such an often angst-ridden phenomenon in the cultural context is further "contributed to" by entrenched cultural norms outside the organisation and established practices internal to the organisation that breed systemic gender biases in leadership selection and promotion processes.

While leadership is but one part of this equation, gender inequality in Japan's labour market extends to many other occupations and industries. Intersection theory helps understand some of these complexities, as it recognises that gender does not stand alone but interacts with other categories-such as age, marital status, and socioeconomic background produce women's rich and varied experiences of employment segregation and wage gaps. Research must also delve into these intersections, detailing the exact concerns facing different segments of women in the world of work in Japan. This is also an important foundation for developing interventions that deal with the root causes of exclusion, promoting true inclusivity in all sectors.

Solid policy intervention becomes the only sure way to leap from theoretical understandings into practical inequalities. Targeted mentoring schemes to support women's advancement in particular leadership development for addressing gender-specific barriers, and the inclusion of diversity quotas for senior management would, in practice, significantly increase women's presence at decision-making

levels. They will also undoubtedly require openness in salaries, the principle of equal work equal pay, and efforts to combat occupational segregation using targeted recruiting practices, comprehensive anti-discrimination training, and flexible working arrangements for fulfilling caregiving responsibilities.

Since work-life balance policies and caregiving support measures greatly impact women's participation in the labour market and career paths in Japan, it is safe to say that their importance cannot be overstated. In doing so, research should be guided by the principles of social exchange theory (which states that environments promoting employee well-being and productivity) and family systems theory (which emphasises the interconnected nature of work and family life) to explore how supportive work environments can empower women. Family-friendly policies, including but not limited to subsidised and accessible childcare, inclusive parental leave policies that encourage fathers' involvement in caregiving, and increased telecommuting options, must be endorsed here to ensure an equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities and enhance the convenience of work-life balance for both genders, to enhance gender-equal footing at the workplace and at home. Furthermore, pushing for policy reforms that require gender quotas for corporate boards, strengthen anti-discrimination legislation, and incentivise family-friendly practices will strengthen Japan's resolve to ensure that Gender Equality is regarded as a fundamental pillar in its approach to development.

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