

Towards Gender Diversity: Opportunities for Change in Japan in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the global political, economic, and sociocultural landscape, leading to a mountain of uncertainties. Its sudden outbreak, and the implementation of health and safety measures, inflicted a serious blow on state economies, industries, and workers. More importantly, it has damaged efforts for gender equality around the world. Globally, 4.5 percent of “women’s employment” are at risk, compared to the 3.8 percent for men (Madgavkar et al. 2020). Women also take on “an average of 75 percent of the global total unpaid care work” (Madgavkar et al. 2020). Because of such glaring statistics, it is imperative for governments to strive to achieve gender diversity even while responding to the crisis.

“Gender diversity” refers to the equitable or nondiscriminatory representation of people of different genders. This definition includes both having an equal ratio of men and women, and the inclusion of non-binary individuals (Sytsma 2006). Gender equality and diversity have been proven to “stimulate economic growth,” especially in nations with “higher unemployment rates” and “less economic opportunity” (Domingo 2020). Diversity also “fuels innovation” because it “provides workplaces

with diverse values, ways of thinking, interests, and experience[s] (Iwata 2017). Moreover, the fact that “women represent half the global talent pool” should mean a bigger role for them in solving “complex business challenges” (Diversity Task Force 2014, 11). Countries will not experience much development until women are given equal access to all economic, political, and social opportunities.

Like the rest of the world, Japan faced the same challenges on gender diversity even before the pandemic. The country still has entrenched traditional gender roles, be it in employment, education, sciences, politics, and familial structures. In fact, it “ranked 110 out of 149 countries” in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2018 (Hayashikawa and Manns 2019). “Long working hours, compulsory overtime, evening socializing with colleagues, and transfers to offices farther from home” define Japanese work culture (West 2019), and affect women’s participation in the labor market. According to Koshi (2018), almost two-thirds of women quit their jobs “after having their first child” to stay at home to care for them accordingly (Yi 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has increasingly exacerbated these challenges in Japan. Between July and September 2020, the number of unemployed single mothers “rose significantly” (Okabayashi 2021). From April 2020 to February 2021, the “number of domestic violence consultations,” including those conducted online, surged by approximately 50 percent from to the previous year, according to the Japanese Cabinet Office (Chau 2021).

An era of transformation into “a post-Abe and post-coronavirus era should present an opportunity to adopt new policies” (Wilson 2020). With the urgency to strengthen, develop, or alter their current measures or policies on gender diversity, they should learn from their mistakes and failures, and associate it not just with economic growth but also with human rights. Policies should now be geared towards addressing women’s personal experiences of inequalities and insecurities. Japan must recognize the need to urgently create significant changes in health, economics, and other areas to usher in a gender-equal society. This essay seeks to answer two

major questions: (1) how can the present global health outbreak become an opportunity for Japan to manage its internal gender diversity? (2) what changes in health, the economy, and society can and should it accommodate?

Women and Health Changes in Japan in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Japan was said to have effectively contained the spread of the COVID-19 virus during the first few months of the pandemic, but there have been questions on how it was achieved. The answer may be found in their lifestyle and customs (Muto et al. 2020), but it can also be especially attributed to their universal healthcare system. The Japanese government was careful not to overwhelm hospital occupancy (Muto et al. 2020). To accomplish this, it adopted the following measures: “early detection of clusters and rapid response, enhancement of the early patient diagnosis and intensive care for severely affected patients, and strengthening of the universal healthcare system and public behavioral change” (Muto et al. 2020).

However, women were prevented access to “sexual and reproductive services,” resulting in a significant increase in “maternal and neonatal mortality” rates (Médecins Sans Frontières 2020). Furthermore, the government failed to consider the gendered effects of its COVID-19 measures. According to Japan Health Policy Now (n.d.), the country has yet to adopt “policies that are sufficiently cognizant aware of gender differences in areas other than labor and education, such as women's health.” Historically, medical research has shown insufficient gender sensitivity (Nagano et al. 2021).

It is extremely crucial that Japanese medical and scientific research not be gender-blind. Men and women have distinct health outcomes given their biological differences. For Iwasaki and Ring (2020), “sex difference is an important clue to understanding the underlying mechanisms of a disease. In this case, it provides us with a real opportunity to identify the sex-specific biological processes that contribute to a better or worse outcome.” Similarly, recognizing how “disease outbreaks” affect men and women differently is

to “understand the effects of a health emergency on different individuals,” and helps in designing “effective, equitable policies and interventions” (European Institute for Gender Equality 2020).

One clinical trial sought to take gender into account. Avigan, a product of Fujifilm Toyama Chemical Co., was “able to shorten the recovery period” of COVID-19 infected patients, but has been shown to have “side effects in pregnant women” (Akimoto 2020). Accordingly, apart from recognizing how the drug affects women, the Japanese healthcare sector must also look at how social factors impact men and women differently. Although women test positive for COVID-19 at a lower rate than men, they are also exposed to additional health risks: through their extensive involvement in “care work” and through “lockdowns that hamper access to both health care and food.” Together, these pose “challenges for pregnant women and mothers with young children who have special needs for nutritious foods” (Park and Inocencio 2020, 8).

Furthermore, Japan must also deeply examine the weaknesses of its universal healthcare system that negatively affects either men or women. To be more specific, research should look into different groups, most importantly of women, based on religion, ethnicity, or social class. This will allow the government to effectively identify and explore health policy measures that best address gender inequalities and better serve the individual health needs of citizens.

Underrepresentation in Science and Medicine

Scientific and medical research using a gendered lens is not the only measure that needs to be considered. Women are also underrepresented in the fields of health and the sciences, as well as health governance. According to Osumi (2006, 1), Japan saw a rise in the number of women pursuing careers in science, but “the ratio of female professionals still remains far below the international average.” Moreover, women are also not well-represented in governance and decision-making positions in the sector,

which thus lack the perspectives of women. To bridge this divide, a research study by Ramakrishnan, Sambuco, and Jagsi (2014, 927) recommends changing "workforce policies, environments, and cultural views of gender roles."

As such, the ongoing pandemic provides an opportunity for Japan to utilize the knowledge and skills of women in the health sector—in scientific and medical decision-making, as well as in leadership roles. Many of them work on the frontlines as nurses, doctors, and caregivers, as well as midwives, nurses, community health workers, and hospital support staff. No COVID-19 health efforts or initiatives would be effective without women's participation. This would bring in new, wider perspectives and provide opportunities to shape important healthcare decisions. This shall also increase the effectivity of health initiatives and promote health and gender equity. Furthermore, it highlights the need to safeguard the "health, psychosocial needs, and workplace environment of frontline female health workers" (Morse and Anderson 2020).

Women and Economic Changes in Japan during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Major job losses as a result of the pandemic occurred in industries that hire more women (Ishibashi and Nakafuji 2020). Over one million Japanese women lost their jobs in 2020 (Djankov, Trumbic and Zhang 2020), while men were barely affected. In Japan, many companies have embraced the new work-from-home arrangement. This allowed women to become even more involved with their children at home while, simultaneously, working and earning for their families. However, this arrangement also affected their performance as they struggled to balance their household or childcare responsibilities. According to Aoyagi (2020), a "guilt gap" exists between men and women, where the latter are frequently forced to make more "professional sacrifices" than men. Such heavy burdens strongly call for new and better changes in the labor force and company regulations that could bring about a gender-diverse business environment.

A broad range of research shows that “significant economic dividends” can result from improving gender equality (Eda 2018). The most significant determinant of economic competitiveness is now commonly held to be the skills and productivity of its workforce. In Japan, as of 2020, women account for a little more than half of the total population with 51.17 percent (Trading Economics 2020). According to Huang (2020), citing a study by Great Place to Work, “publicly traded firms with inclusive workplaces thrived before, during and after the Great Recession.” This indicates that the economy flourishes when women “actively participate in the labor force.”

Pham (2017, 52) also presents the importance of gender diversity in the workforce. It stipulated that Japan’s policies in this regard seem unsuccessful because they do not address the “roots of the problem [that] lie in the... history and culture of Japan,” including male domination. Accordingly, “policies can also play a major role in determining the treatment of employees. Obvious examples are the minimum wage and statutory limits on working hours” (Wakana 2021).

The World Economic Forum recommends “gender budgeting” in companies, which entails planning or evaluating a budget from a “gender perspective.” This ensures the fair distribution of resources, and “aims to account for the disadvantages and discrimination that individuals may face...” (Huang 2020). It is an inclusive approach that allows companies to become more sensitive to the needs, skills, and capabilities of every employee, including women. This process will take an enormous amount of time, but in the end, it will eventually produce a more “equal, diverse, and success business” (Huang 2020).

Alon et al. (2020, citing Goldin 2010) write that one of the largest causes of the “gender pay gap” and gender inequality in the workplace is the “lack of flexible work arrangements.” As such, it is imperative for companies to alter the work schedule and workload of women so that it suits their needs, capabilities, and circumstances. However, this should not affect their income or their voices as employees. Notably, throughout the years, companies in Japan have focused on extending childcare leave for

women, but also realized that this impedes “women’s career development and promotion” (Iwata 2017). It is, therefore, not enough to simply adjust work schedules, leaves, and responsibilities. Gender diversity also involves empowering all workers, giving equal opportunities to grow and thrive, listening to the different perspectives of employees of different backgrounds and genders, and providing workers what they deserve, whether in wages or career development. Following Huang (2020), the Japanese can promote gender equality at work “by looking at every aspect of the company, from compensation and recruiting strategy to performance reviews....” and others. New work arrangements as a result of the pandemic have allowed companies and the Japanese government to look at the bigger picture of gender diversity. There had been some legislative progress in narrowing the “pay-and-benefits gap” (Wakana 2021), but differences in job security remain a major issue.

The Japanese government should also include women in implementing COVID-19 response and in socioeconomic decision-making. This means listening to their voices in all sectors, identifying and addressing their core economic needs, and giving women seats at the table, as it were. The United Nations recommends that policymakers develop female-centered “economic and social policies” such as cash handouts and “extending basic protections to informal workers” (Morse and Anderson 2020). Similarly, Japan could provide health insurance for women and mandate the provision of paid leaves for those who cannot physically or digitally work because of household responsibilities. Policies to encourage enhanced work-life balance are also crucial during and after the pandemic.

Women and Social Changes in Japan in the COVID-19 Pandemic

For several years now, the Japanese government has been trying to address deep-rooted social prejudice and discrimination against women. This can be illustrated by the stereotyped perception of gender roles mostly seen in a traditional family set-up. In most Japanese households, the husband usually works or is the breadwinner, having little to no time for his children. The wife, on the other hand, stays home, with almost full responsibility for “raising the children...., running the household, and managing the family budget (Dolan and Worden 1994). Therefore, the household should also be a place where change must happen to achieve gender diversity.

During the pandemic, these unequal household gender roles have intensified (Rich 2020) and have made it more difficult for Japanese women to balance childcare and work responsibilities (French Academic Network on Asian Studies 2021). Unpaid work at home, such as “household chores and caring for children and frail parents,” now takes up far “more time and energy” of Japanese women (French Academic Network on Asian Studies 2021). Globally, this “unpaid labor burden leaves women less time for paid work, education, and career advancement, which fuels current economic and social disparities” (Morse and Anderson 2020).

However, Alon et al. (2020) find that these household and labor market gender barriers can be reduced through “flexible work arrangements.” With both men and women mostly working from home during the pandemic, fathers and/or husbands can and do indeed take a larger role in the household. According to Rich (2020), this has enabled them to observe firsthand how many chores need to be accomplished. Accordingly, women who do basic house chores now seek the support of their spouses, who become the primary caregivers for their children. This way, men could better appreciate the work and effort of their wives and other women, potentially obliterating gender roles, stereotypes, and discrimination. In a situation where “fathers, including managers and CEOs” are forced “to come to terms with the needs of their own families,” change in social norms is an expected likelihood

(Alon et al. 2020). However, such shifts in social norms and care practices are not possible without government and institutional interventions. In this respect, the government needs to “give bolder direction to promote a more comprehensive teleworking system” (Rich 2020).

Opportunities are also ripe in placing women in high political positions. In its two-chamber parliament, women account for less than 10 percent of legislators, “40 percent of local assemblies have no female members,” and only two ministers of the 20-member Cabinet of Prime Minister Suga are female (Yamaguchi 2020). Consequently, many gender issues are not acknowledged or addressed by political and sociocultural decisions that predominantly male leaders make. Changing the structural issues of gender equality, therefore, begins in government leadership. The state can also implement “legal obligations for political parties to promote gender equality,” introduce a “gender quota system” for political candidates (Akimoto 2021), and help fund women’s organizations. However, as stated by Smith (2014), social and government interventions must also consider that there is no such thing as a “homogenous idea of woman,” since race, class, and sexuality,” among others, shape identity. It is, therefore, not enough to include only one to two female government leaders in any administration. Diversity also involves including capable, skillful, and competent female leaders.

Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide stated that “we will form a policy which reflects women’s voices and aim for a society without gender bias for people in leadership positions.” Such remarks indicate hope for change (Siripala 2020). Indeed, now is the right time for Japan to encourage and empower women to take on leadership roles in the government, in companies, and in organizations.

Conclusion

Gender inequality has been a persistent problem in Japan even prior to the pandemic. Almost all of its industries are overwhelmingly male, and this has been a crucial factor for the extreme gender imbalance in the country. While the government has focused on its COVID-19 response during the first few months of 2020, it has left out and failed to consider the gendered effects of such measures. This has resulted in a deeper gender divide within the labor sector, for women mostly have unstable jobs and are more vulnerable to unemployment. Household gender roles have intensified, and women struggle to balance childcare and employment.

No magic bullet exists for Japan to automatically achieve gender diversity. Progress requires a consistent and determined whole-of-society approach. The country's COVID-19 health responses could be further improved by enhancing scientific and medical research sensitive to the social vulnerabilities of men and women to the health measures that were imposed. The government also needs to ensure that significant technical expertise on emergency decision-making frameworks consider gender issues. This could be done by collecting and analyzing sex-disaggregated data to guarantee that the best available evidence informs both a speedy response and recovery.

The Japanese government should also incorporate women in socioeconomic decision-making and COVID-19 response planning. The country should promulgate laws that support women's economic independence and empowerment in all sectors, change those that limit them, and create incentives or policies to increase economic parity. Empowering women entails advancing women's careers without childcare responsibilities being a hindrance. Companies should foster inclusive workplace environments, and establish flexible and family-friendly policies for all employees.

In the household, there is an opportunity to break gender roles, alter common narratives, and demonstrate that "leadership, decision-making, household tasks, and caring for" and educating children can

and should be responsibilities shared by both genders (United Nations Global Compact n.d.). The pandemic has allowed fathers and/or husbands to step in and help with household and childcare duties because of the work-from-home arrangements. However, to set an example, addressing the systemic challenges of gender equality must begin with government leaders themselves. The introduction of a gender quota system for political candidates and mandating political parties to promote gender equality are two ways to accomplish this. Reforms in government leadership structure will allow policymakers to pay more attention to the current household set-up, and promote equal distribution of care burden between women and men.

We live in a time where the actions of all leaders and individuals are integral, and where inclusiveness and diversity are vital in the development of a country. Japan has an opportunity not only to move forward but also to bring about a substantial shift towards true gender diversity.

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