

Impact Of Government Policies On Women Workforce In Japan

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Abstract

Japanese economic and technological advancements have profoundly impacted its societal structure, including its workforce culture. While there has been a significant increase in female labor force participation, deep-rooted social conventions and systemic barriers continue to hinder women's career progression. Despite a substantial workforce of over 69.5 million, Japan faces challenges in providing equitable opportunities, especially for women encountering social obstacles in employment. Traditional societal frameworks largely uphold norms where men are the primary income earners, and women are responsible for all domestic duties, including childcare and elder care. These societal values persist in affecting women in the labor market, even though Japan demonstrates economic superiority compared to many nations. Governmental initiatives, such as those implemented under Abenomics in 2014 to boost female employment rates, have not led to substantial improvements. In early 2025, the female workforce reached an unprecedented peak of approximately 45.1 million, increasing from around 44.9 million in 2024. This overall augmentation in the Japanese workforce was driven by increased female involvement, despite a slight reduction in the number of male workers. Policies promoting women employment across various sectors are helping them achieve financial independence.

Index Terms: *Japanese Society, Tokugawa, Meiji Restoration, Working Women in Japan, Labor market, Gender, Pay, Industry, Employment, Law, Equality, Tradition, Child Care, Aging, Reforms, Regular workers, Part-time Employee*

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I. Objective Of The Study

This paper evaluates the influence of governmental policies and influential societal factors in Japan on participation of women as workforce, wage parity, and the distribution between non regular and full-time employment. The study emphasizes policy interventions that have significantly improved female labor market outcomes and examines the effects of an aging population on the availability of female workers.

II. Review Of Literature

There is a limited amount of research on Japan's working culture, labor practices, and the roles of women. The reviews of the available literature covering these subjects are as follows: Research on Japan's working culture, labor practices, and the roles of women is limited. A review of the relevant literature on these subjects is provided below:

In her 1990 book, '*Women in the Japanese Workplace*,' Mary Saso examines the distinctions in working conditions and patterns between Japanese women and their counterparts in Britain and Ireland. Specifically, she contrasts the work behaviors and attitudes of Japanese women employed in large electronics manufacturing firms with those of British and Irish women working in the overseas plants of the same companies, highlighting differences in gender perceptions. Throughout the book, Saso provides updated information and offers interpretations that thoroughly address the complexities of issues surrounding women's employment. Of note is her meticulous consideration of surveys and reports published by newspapers, private research institutes, and the government since the implementation of Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) in 1986. Saso contends what many Japanese working women now apprehend: that the EEOL and subsequent labor legislation may not only prove ineffectual in ameliorating women's working conditions but potentially even detrimental. An illustrative instance is the concept of flexible working hours, an idea that, while seemingly meritorious in principle, may ultimately benefit the employer more than the employee. The 1988 Labor Standards Law proposes the gradual introduction of a 40-hour workweek in large corporations. In the chapter 'Implications for Japanese Employment for Women,' Saso, as a British economist, endeavors to articulate that Japanese companies are failing to fully utilize the potential of their female workforce, despite some advancements in employing intellectually capable women in roles traditionally considered less expert, such as receptionists who can manage visitors with discretion and aptitude. Regrettably, a prevalent perspective

in Japan has been that women are less committed to their companies than their male colleagues, leading to a perception of diminished diligence in their work.

In *'Managing Women: Disciplining Labor in Modern Japan'* (2007), Elyssa Faison examines the experiences of young Japanese women employed in urban factories between 1918 and 1937, positing that these establishments significantly influenced the construction of Japanese femininity. Through various labor-management strategies, factory managers, social reformers, and the state educated lower-class women for industrial work, inculcated gender-specific expectations, and transformed them into gendered imperial subjects. Despite their less frequent academic study, female industrial workers were integral to Japan's industrial sector. Faison details how women and girls from rural areas migrated to work in cotton-spinning and silk-reeling factories during a period when industrial labor was vital yet perceived as precarious. The central argument of the book revolves around gendered paternalism; an ideological framework utilized by industry and the state to control and shape workers and state subjects. Faison suggests that, in contrast to male workers whose identities were defined by class, the identities of many women as Japanese subjects were primarily shaped by gender. Factory owners and management frequently assumed paternal roles towards these young, unmarried women. Another prominent theme is the containment of lower-class women's sexuality by factory management. Educational initiatives targeting these factory women aimed to instill middle-class values. However, Faison observes that workers often resisted this paternalistic indoctrination by maintaining connections to their rural origins. Additionally, she emphasizes the role of ethnicity in labor organization and the development of an ethnic hierarchy among Japanese, Korean, and Okinawan workers. Each chapter of the book delves into distinct incidents or facets of labor-management practices.

Kumiko Nemoto's 2016 book, *'Too Few Women at the Top: The Persistence of Inequality in Japan,'* explores why women in Japanese companies rarely hold leadership roles, despite advancements in education and gender equality laws. Through interviews with employees from financial and cosmetics firms in Tokyo, Nemoto reveals that vertical sex segregation is often used as a cost-cutting strategy. Practices such as seniority-based pay, specific hiring tracks, long working hours, and the absence of female leaders hinder women's career progress. Nemoto calls for significant changes in Japanese business management to enhance gender equality and draws comparisons to the glass ceiling faced by women in U.S. workplaces. The book examines the Japanese institutional framework, including seniority-based systems and vertical sex segregation, which affect women's career advancement. It proposes that modifying management practices is essential to attain gender equality.

Barbara Sato's 2003 publication, *The New Japanese Woman Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*, examines the social and cultural position of women in modern Japan. The book analyzes the rise of the modern woman in Japan during the interwar period. This transformation was significantly influenced by urban growth, the expanding middle class, and increasing consumerism in the 1920s. Sato investigates figures such as the 'modern girl,' the housewife, and the working woman, illustrating how the media redefined these roles and questioned conventional stereotypes. She highlights the significance of women's magazines by detailing their categories, narratives, audiences, and styles. Although these new identities did not represent a revolution, they generated concern among men and impacted gender dynamics after World War II.

Christopher Gerteis's 2009 publication, *Gender Struggles: Wage-Earning Women and Male-Dominated Unions in Postwar Japan*, provides an extensive examination of women's involvement in labor activism during the early postwar era. Gerteis investigates a range of unions, from private-sector entities such as the less prominent filmmakers' union at Toho studio to significant public-sector organizations like the Japan Rail workers' union and *Nikkyoso* (the teachers' union). Within these organizations, Gerteis underscores the endeavors of female union activists to secure access to quality employment and equitable wages, ensure stability of family income, and advance public policy agendas supported by ambitious union federations such as Sohyo, which collaborated with the Japan Socialist Party on matters of foreign policy and other issues. Gerteis's analysis centers on the period spanning the late 1940s to approximately 1960, a transformative epoch characterized by considerable economic and political shifts when labor unions exhibited high levels of activity. By the late 1950s, corporate leadership had largely succeeded in curtailing union activism while simultaneously ensuring stable family wages for male primary earners. Consequently, women desiring continued employment after marriage or childbirth frequently found themselves relegated to part-time or temporary positions. Tax and benefit systems further disincentivized married women from pursuing higher wages in secure employment. Unions, prioritizing the safeguarding of male breadwinners' jobs and remuneration, were more inclined to mobilize women as homemakers supporting male workers rather than as wage earners equally deserving of union advocacy. Through an examination of union publications, transcripts of union leader discussions regarding the mobilization of women, and oral histories of union women, Gerteis demonstrates that the male breadwinner-female homemaker paradigm was not the sole perspective held by women workers in the immediate postwar years. Wives of union men, particularly coal miners' wives, organized for improved family incomes, thereby aligning with the protection of male breadwinners' wages, often at the expense of women's

wages and job security. Nevertheless, many women workers championed the principle of equal pay for equal work, and when their demands were disregarded, they occasionally levied sharp criticisms against male union leadership. Gerteis effectively documents the divergent attitudes of male leaders toward women, while acknowledging their utility in popularizing unions' political stances.

Ross Mouer and Hirosuke Kawanishi's 2005 publication, *A Sociology of Work in Japan*, provides substantial contributions to the discourse on postwar Japanese labor by analyzing the influence of employment structures on individual decisions. This notable addition to Japanese labor scholarship commences by addressing prevalent inquiries regarding Japanese work, encompassing management methodologies and the prevailing work ethic. It distinctively introduces four theoretical paradigms (conflict, institutional, behavioral, and cultural) and prominent Japanese academics. A chapter dedicated to working hours and labor-force participation offers a comprehensive examination of the temporal commitments of full-time employees within medium to large enterprises, while also incorporating data concerning women's part-time and unremunerated domestic labor.

Swee-Lin Ho's 2020 publication, *Women Managers in Neoliberal Japan: Gender, Precarious Labour and Everyday Lives*, delivers a comprehensive and insightful examination of the diverse professional experiences of Japanese women. This demographic constitutes a critical segment of Japanese society, yet their lived realities frequently remain insufficiently studied and comprehended both domestically and internationally. The book investigates the intricate challenges associated with the proliferation of flexible work arrangements. While frequently presented to enhance work-life balance, Ho's analysis likely reveals the potential drawbacks and heightened pressures that such arrangements can impose upon women managers, particularly within a cultural context that often expects unwavering professional dedication. Furthermore, the study likely underscores the pervasive nature of precarious work conditions even within managerial roles occupied by women. This may encompass issues such as job insecurity, limited benefits, and a paucity of opportunities for career progression, thereby emphasizing the gendered dimensions of labor market vulnerability. A significant component of work by Ho, likely concentrates on the Japanese state's role in addressing the challenges confronted by women managers. The analysis likely critiques the state's apparent inaction in modernizing antiquated labor laws that may perpetuate gender-based workplace inequalities. It may also address the state's perceived failure to effectively counteract abusive corporate practices that disproportionately affect women in managerial positions. These issues could range from subtle forms of discrimination to more overt instances of harassment and inequitable treatment. By analyzing media portrayals of women managers, the book likely uncovers prevailing stereotypes, expectations, and societal biases that contribute to the pressures faced by these women in their daily lives. Through the examination of these multifaceted issues, Ho's work offers a crucial contribution to our understanding of gender dynamics in the Japanese workplace and the broader societal implications of neoliberalism on the lives and careers of professional women.

III. Introduction

The historical trajectory of Japanese working women is a multifaceted narrative shaped by evolving socio-economic experiences, cultural norms, and governmental policies. Early periods witnessed women primarily engaged in agriculture, textile production, and domestic crafts, often within family-based units. During the protracted reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate, a period characterized by relative peace and isolation in Japan, the legal framework effectively rendered women as non-entities. They were denied fundamental legal personhood, lacking the capacity to own property or exercise any independent legal agency. The Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century brought about rapid industrialization, leading to a surge in women working in factories, particularly in the burgeoning textile industry. These early industrial workers often faced arduous working conditions, extended hours, and meager wages (Anderson, 2010).

The 20th century experienced significant transformations influenced by two World Wars and subsequent economic expansion. During periods of conflict, women assumed essential roles in manufacturing and other sectors as men were conscripted. Post-war reconstruction and rapid economic development generated increased opportunities for women in professional occupations, though often concentrated in administrative and secretarial capacities. Nevertheless, traditional gender roles persisted, frequently impeding women's professional advancement and perpetuating the expectation that familial obligations would take precedence (S. Uno, Ed., 1993).

The latter half of the 20th century and the early 21st century have been characterized by persistent discussions and incremental transformations concerning gender equality within professional environments. Despite an increase in female participation in specialized fields and higher educational attainment, significant challenges persist in contemporary Japan, including the gender pay gap, insufficient female representation in leadership roles, and the complexities of reconciling professional responsibilities with familial obligations. A comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution of Japanese working women offers vital insight for the

analysis of current challenges and the determination of future pathways towards achieving gender parity in the Japanese labor force.

As Abegglen discusses, that the multifaceted evolution of Japan's female workforce not only reflects changing societal values and a growing awareness of the economic benefits of gender equality, also constitutes a rich and dynamic field of inquiry for those interested in comprehending modern labor trends, the complexities of gender dynamics in professional settings, and the strategic imperatives of economic development in the 21st century (Abegglen, 2006). Extensive exploration remains, ranging from understanding the crucial role of continued cultural transformation in dismantling persistent gender stereotypes to analyzing the influence of international comparisons and best practices on domestic policymaking in Japan.

Japanese advancement in integrating women into its workforce presents a compelling case study of societal transformation, characterized by notable progress amidst enduring cultural, economic, and structural impediments. This intricate narrative illustrates a nation contending with demographic shifts and economic imperatives while navigating deeply entrenched traditions and evolving perspectives on gender roles within the professional sphere. Recent years have witnessed a significant increase in female employment in Japan. Statistical evidence unequivocally demonstrates rising labor force participation rates; for instance, approximately 45.11% of women were actively engaged in the labor market in 2024 (Trading Economics, July 2025). This constitutes a substantial enhancement from prior decades, indicative of a growing acknowledgment of women's vital contribution to Japan's economic dynamism.

A closer look at the employment landscape reveals a more complex situation. As per record in March 2025, around 54% of working women hold part-time positions (Global Legal Group, 2025). While offering flexibility, these roles often come with job insecurity, limited benefits, and fewer opportunities for career advancement and leadership. Despite a record a good number of employed women, they remain underrepresented in leadership, holding only about 11% of managerial roles (Japan Data, Sept 2025). This significant gap highlights the qualitative differences in employment experiences between men and women in Japan.

The Japanese government has actively shaped the evolving professional landscape through various initiatives aimed at integrating women into the workforce. Acknowledging the crucial need to utilize its female talent, the government has implemented policies to support working mothers and foster a more inclusive work environment. These include enhanced parental leave provisions for both mothers and fathers, facilitating the balance of work and family responsibilities, and promoting flexible working arrangements for greater schedule adaptability. Furthermore, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's 'new form of capitalism' in May of 2022, introduced specific goals to address gender disparities in senior corporate leadership. A significant example is the ambitious target of achieving over 30% female representation on the boards of major corporations by 2030. These stated aspirations underscore the government's growing commitment not only to increasing women's participation in the workforce but also to actively advancing them into influential decision-making positions (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, May 2022).

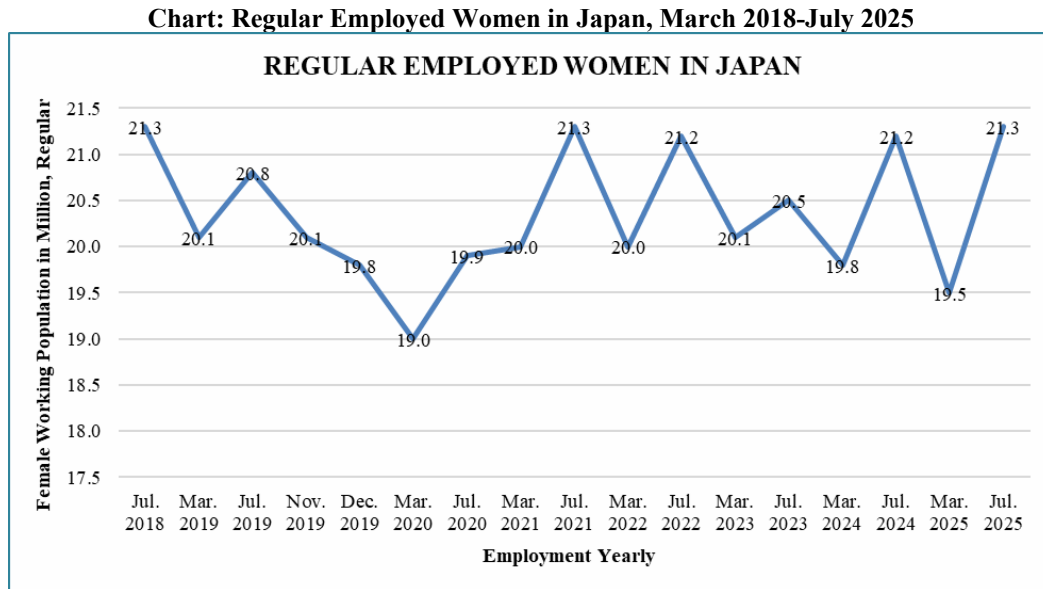
Despite certain advancement at policy level and in women approach towards work ethics, Japan faces pressing demographic challenges, including a rapidly aging population and a shrinking workforce, which underscore the urgent need to fully integrate women into all economic sectors. Notwithstanding their increasing contributions to the nation's economic output and health, deeply entrenched traditional gender roles and systemic barriers continue to hinder the full utilization of women's skills, talents, and ambitions, comprehensive reforms are crucial to address these issues.

Such reforms encompass initiatives for improving work-life, i.e. accessible childcare and greater societal acceptance of shared parental responsibilities. Fundamental corporate reforms are also necessary to tackle biases in employment, promotion, and compensation. The evolving nature of work, particularly the accelerated shift towards remote and flexible arrangements post-pandemic, further highlights that achieving true gender equality in the workplace goes beyond mere participation numbers. It demands a fundamental re-evaluation and redefinition of traditional workplace norms, expectations, and cultures to foster truly inclusive and equitable environments where women can thrive and realize their full potential.

Recent Development of Women Workforce in Japan: Statistical Analysis

Japan, despite its many benefits like safety, efficient public services, and diverse entertainment, still holds onto traditional social structures. These long-standing norms often portray men as the main financial providers, while women are expected to handle all household duties, including childcare and elderly care. The established division of labor significantly impacts women's workforce participation and advancement. Despite high educational attainment, many Japanese women leave or pause their careers after their first child due to demanding childcare needs and societal expectations of mothers. Those who return often secure part-time or lower-ranking roles, encountering substantial barriers to senior management or high political office. The

employment rate of women in Japan is much slow, though regular women employee progress experienced since March 2025 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics, 2018-2025).



Source: Statistics of Japan, Labor Force Survey, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics.

In 2014, the Japanese government introduced policies under Abenomics to boost women's employment, recognizing the need for change (We are tomodachi, 2014). However, significant progress has been slow. The 2022 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report ranked Japan is not satisfactory as it ranks 116th out of 146 countries, which need improvement. In a renewed effort to address gender disparity, Japan set an ambitious goal in 2023 to assist employability over 30% female executives in the Tokyo Stock Exchange's largest companies by 2030 (Japan Data, 2022). Despite these initiatives, progress remains inadequate. In July 2022, only 2.2% of companies had reached the 30% target, and a substantial 18.7% still had no women on their executive boards. Though, in 2022, the number of working women in Japan reached 30.35 million, up 1.22 million from 2017 (HRM Asia, 2023).

While leadership roles for women in Japan still face challenges, the overall participation of women in the workforce shows a positive trend. In 2024, the female labor force reached a record high of approximately 31.6 million, an increase from 31.2 million the previous year. This growth has boosted Japan's total labor force (see table), even as the number of men in the workforce slightly decreased compared to previous years.

Table: Labor Force Statistics in 2024

| Japanese Labor Force in 2024 | | | |
|---|-------|------|--------|
| Age 15 years and above Population | All | Male | Female |
| | 10995 | 5313 | 5682 |
| Types of Employment | | | |
| Labor force | 6957 | 3800 | 3157 |
| Employed person | 6781 | 3699 | 3082 |
| Executive of Company or Corporation | 344 | 257 | 87 |
| Regular employee | 3654 | 2355 | 1299 |
| Non-regular Employee | 2126 | 682 | 1444 |
| Executive of company or corporation | 540 | 286 | 254 |
| Government Executive of company or corporation | 6 | 5 | 2 |
| Employee, exclusive executive of company or corporation | 55 | 31 | 25 |
| Labor force participation rate (%) | 63.3 | 71.5 | 55.6 |
| Employment rate (%) | 61.7 | 69.6 | 54.2 |
| Unemployment rate (%) | 2.5 | 2.7 | 2.4 |

Source: Statistics of Japan, Labor Force Survey, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics, 2024.

This complex situation reveals both women's growing desire and engagement in the Japanese economy, alongside persistent systemic obstacles to their complete and equal advancement. Many of these women work in insecure, low-paying jobs with limited prospects, leading to lower lifetime earnings and fewer women in leadership positions.

Societal Approach and Gender Policies: Working Women in Japan

In Japan, the perception of working women is shaped by a complex interplay of deep-seated cultural norms, historical context, and evolving economic pressures. Despite advancements in recent decades, considerable challenges persist, influencing the experiences and opportunities for women in the Japanese workforce. Traditionally, Japanese society adhered to a model of gender roles where men were the primary earners, and women were primarily responsible for domestic duties and childcare. The salaryman culture, characterized by demanding work hours and a strong emphasis on corporate loyalty, often created an environment that was difficult for women to navigate, especially after marriage and childbirth (Henshall, 1999). This societal expectation for women to prioritize family responsibilities frequently resulted in their early departure from the workforce or limited their opportunities for career advancement.

Women participation in Japanese workforce is crucial amid a record-high elderly population. Japan is currently grappling with a profound demographic shift, characterized by a rapidly aging population. Projections indicate that by late 2025, a significant proportion over 30% of its total population will be aged 65 or older (Watanabe, 2025). This unprecedented demographic trend presents a multifaceted challenge that permeates various sectors of Japanese society, from its economic productivity to its social welfare systems. The implications of such a demographic structure are far-reaching. A shrinking working age population relative to the number of retirees places immense pressure on the national pension system and healthcare infrastructure. It also raises concerns about labor shortages, reduced innovation, and a potential slowdown in economic growth. Furthermore, the increasing demand for specialized elderly care services necessitates a significant expansion and professionalization of the caregiving workforce.

Nonetheless, increased female participation in education and a growing need for a diverse workforce, traditional attitudes continue to influence the Japanese workplace. Women frequently encounter both subtle and overt discrimination in hiring, promotions, and job assignments. The distinction between career and non-career recorded positions, while not explicitly gender-based, often funnels women into roles with limited advancement opportunities. The persistent gender payment gap remains a significant concern, as it was noticed in a survey of 2023 that the gap is 70 to 80% in compared to men. On average, women in Japan earn considerably less than their male counterparts for comparable work (Kyodo News, 2024). This disparity stems from several factors, including fewer opportunities for leadership roles, a higher prevalence of women in part-time or contract positions, and the lasting impact of past career interruptions due to family responsibilities.

Working mothers in Japan face significant hurdles due to the lack of adequate and affordable childcare, forcing many to choose between career and family. Despite government efforts to expand childcare options, accessibility and quality remain critical concerns. Societal expectations further compound these challenges, as women disproportionately bear the burden of household chores and elder care (Tsutsui, 2020). This reduces the amount of time and energy available for professional development. While there is a growing awareness of the need for gender equality in domestic responsibilities, a substantial shift in societal norms is continuing.

In recent years, the Japanese government and various organizations have implemented policies and initiatives aimed at promoting female workforce participation and gender equality. These efforts include encouraging companies to set targets for female representation in management, offering more flexible work arrangements, and improving access to childcare. The Act on 'Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace' of 2015, directly addresses the underrepresentation of women in the professional sphere, particularly in leadership roles. It encourages companies to examine and reform their internal operational mechanisms, including evaluating and revising recruitment methodologies to ensure inclusivity, establishing transparent and equitable promotion pathways free from gender bias, and implementing tailored career development programs for female talent (Japan Law Translation, 2015). The long-term impact of Act stimulated a widespread re-evaluation of traditional workplace cultures and performance metrics, prompting a move towards more inclusive and diverse conscious practices of Japanese society.

The effectiveness of recent measures in May 2025, however, depends on a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and a genuine commitment from employers and individuals to embrace gender equality (Anderson Mori and Tomotsune, 2025). Japan is committed to fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for women in the workforce, demonstrated through legislative reforms, government policies, enhanced corporate accountability, and robust capacity-building initiatives.

This foundational law was enacted to eliminate gender-based discrimination, establishing the core principle of equal opportunities for all genders across society, particularly in employment. By making gender equality a key element of state policy, the Basic act lays the legal groundwork for subsequent, more specific legislation and initiatives aimed at putting this principle into practice in the workplace for Japanese women.

This requires a societal transformation towards acknowledging and valuing the equal contributions of all individuals, regardless of gender in Japan.

Beyond these core measures, Japan has introduced additional significant policies and initiatives to enhance female labor force participation and promote workplace gender equality, emphasizing work-life balance and childcare support. Key legislation includes: the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), 1986, which prohibits gender discrimination, Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 2006 for both the gender (Japan Compliance, 2025) for proactively working to increase overall female workforce participation and boost the number of women in leadership and managerial roles across industries. These laws challenge outdated norms and promote shared responsibilities at home and work, fostering a more inclusive society. With a shrinking working-age population, Japan needs more people in the labor market. Encouraging women to work full-time and pursue careers helps offset demographic decline

IV. Conclusion

Despite increased female workforce participation in Japan, the societal view of working women remains complex due to deep-rooted cultural norms, historical precedents, and structural barriers that continue to affect women's career paths and experiences. A substantial gender wage gap also persists, with women, on average, earning less than their male counterparts for work of equal value. Addressing the root causes of this disparity, including occupational segregation and potential biases in compensation structures, is a critical priority. Furthermore, deep-settled cultural norms and traditional gender role expectations might still exert considerable influence, sometimes dissuading women from pursuing certain career paths. Japan is actively pursuing a comprehensive strategy to cultivate a more equitable and supportive environment for women in the workforce. Achieving genuine workplace gender equality demands comprehensive and sustained efforts from government policies, corporate initiatives, and, crucially, a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and expectations regarding women's roles. Engaging more Japanese women in the workforce is crucial for counteracting the shrinking working age population. Increasing the proportion of women in full time employment and career track roles might address demographic challenges associated with Japanese labor market.

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