

Evolution of Womenomics: Comparing and Contrasting Abe and Kishida's Policies

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Introduction

Japan has consistently been ranked low in the Global Gender Gap Index rankings—in 2020 Japan was placed at 121st, out of 153 countries. Compared to other developed nations, for instance countries in the G7, Japan is the last in terms of gender equality. This phenomenon naturally brings up questions regarding the state of women in Japan, and how the 121st placing came to be. Historically, Japan has upheld a typical patriarchal family model, with women serving primarily in the domestic realm. However, during the interwar period and post-WWII, Japanese women gradually began to hold spots in academic and professional realms. Despite these new opportunities, clearly inequality is still persistent, and undoubtedly the gender issue in Japan is complex involving economic, political, and social factors. This paper will aim to analyze the government policies that have contributed to the gender inequality in Japan, specifically focusing on the heavily debated “Womenomics” policies proposed by Abe Shinzo.

Within the past twenty years, Japan has experienced ten changes in the Prime Minister position. Subsequently, with the leadership changes comes inevitable changes in the administering of gender equality and women empowerment policies. Fumio Kishida was elected to office on October 4, 2021, serving as the 100th Prime Minister of Japan. In comparing the policies surrounding gender equality under Abe Shinzo and Fumio Kishida, fruitful observations can be made regarding the magnitude of the shift away from the patriarchal Japanese society that has

been achieved in the last couple of decades. This paper will focus on the Womenomics plan that was proposed under Abe Shinzo's time as Prime Minister, and the continuation and changes as it extended into Fumio Kishida's term.

Background on Womenomics and Kishida

Abe Shinzo is the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japan's history, known for his aggressive economic revival plan coined "Abenomics". The program featured three pillars, known as the three arrows, which involved fiscal consolidation, aggressive monetary easing, and structural reforms in boosting economic growth. An interesting part of the plan is embedded in the third arrow of economic growth, highlighting greater female participation in the economy as a critical point for achieving said economic growth.¹ Furthermore, in 2015, Abe introduced the new slogan "Society in which all 100 Million People Can be Active", which focuses on addressing the issue of Japan's declining population as part of "Abenomics 2.0". Abenomics 2.0 focused more heavily on the declining and aging population issue, which meant the government hoped to convince more Japanese people, specifically women, about the benefits of childrearing.² With all these moving parts combined, Shinzo Abe's "Womenomics" came into view, which can be described in general as Abe's plan of increasing women's involvement in the workforce while simultaneously motivating them to give birth to and raise children.

Both Abe and Kishida have acknowledged the necessity of economically empowering women as a component of Japan's overall growth and development. Abe has expressed on multiple occasions that unleashing the full potential of Womenomics is integral to the overall growth of Japan.³ Similarly, in Kishida's message on International Women's Day in 2022, he declared that economic empowerment is vital in

1 Yoshino, N., and F Taghizadeh-Hesary. 2014. Three Arrows of "Abenomics" and the Structural Reform of Japan: Inflation Targeting Policy of the Central Bank, Fiscal Consolidation, and Growth Strategy. ADBI Working Paper 492. Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute. <http://www.adbi.org/workingpaper/2014/08/01/6370.three.arrows.abenomics.reform.japan/>

2 Kiyoshi Takenaka, "New Japan Cabinet Minister Seeks to Stem Shrinking Population," *Reuters*, October 8, 2015, sec. APAC, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-politics-population-idUSKCN0S214E20151008>.

3 Abe, Shinzo. "Shinzo Abe: Unleashing the Power of 'Womenomics'; our Goal in Japan is to Boost Women in the Workforce significantly by 2020 and Reduce Pay Disparity." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Sep 25, 2013. <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/shinzo-abe-unleashing-power-womenomics-our-goal/docview/1436265566/se-2?accountid=14707>.

responding to Japanese women's challenges and structural issues.⁴ Kishida's website outlines his platform of four key policies. Under the "New Form of Capitalism" policy, the initiative coined "Realization of a Society Where Everyone Can Feel a Sense of Purpose" listed gender equality and women's success as primary points.⁵

Similarities between Abe and Kishida's Plan On Daycare Centers

With the woman out of the house, who will be taking care of the children and doing the housework? This seems to be a primary question in both Abe and Kishida's women's empowerment policies, as both Prime Ministers addressed the domestic sphere with great attention. Namely, Abe and Kishida took similar approaches involving the opening of more childcare centers and encouraging paternity leave.

Japan has been plagued with infamously long waiting lists for daycares. Stories exist with women having to travel and visit more than 40 centers to find vacant spots for their children.⁶ The issue of being unable to find a vacant childcare center has become such a prevalent issue that a term has been coined: *hokatsu*, which translates to kindergarten hunting. Abe had pledged under his "Womenomics" plan to increase the percentage of women who return to the workforce after their first child to 55% by 2020. A core part of this plan was decreasing the number of children on the childcare waiting lists down to zero; it had reached a shocking number of 23,167 children in 2015. Aside from the waiting lists, another issue surrounding the childcare center is the disparate differences between private and public sector centers. The heavily subsidized public-sector nurseries have trouble hiring workers due to long working hours and low wages, and the privately-owned nurseries have costs as high as \$20,000 a year, an amount which is unaffordable for many Japanese families. Regarding this issue, Abe and Kishida have taken a similar approach to increasing the wages for childcare workers. In November

4 Kishida, Fumio. 2022. "Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's Message on International Women's Day 2022." May 8, 2022 https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/pr_act/pub/status_challenges/pdf/202205.pdf

5 "未来を切り拓く「新しい資本主義」," 首相官邸ホームページ, accessed July 4, 2022, https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/headline/seisaku_kishida/newcapitalism.html.

6 Anna Fifield, "You Thought the U.S. Had a Day-Care Shortage? In Japan, the Government Is Looking for Baby-Sitters.," *Washington Post*, August 1, 2014, sec. Asia & Pacific, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/japanese-leader-abe-wants-more-women-to-work-so-hes-got-big-plans-for-day-care/2014/08/01/8dcd84f5-c4b2-4e39-a1e0-125eaa57309b_story.html.

of 2021, Kishida declared childcare worker wages as his top priority and was looking to raise the monthly wage by \$44 to \$88, equivalent of 5000 yen to 10,000 yen, by February 2022.⁷ Furthermore, during Abe's term, Abe pledged to increase daycare teachers' salaries by \$70 a month.⁸ Very recently, on June 15, 2022, the Diet enacted a bill to set up an agency for children and families. Declared as a "signature policy" of Kishida's term, the agency aims to eliminate bureaucratic walls and assemble sections across multiple agencies to carry out children-related initiatives—childcare centers will undoubtedly be the main focus.⁹

On Childcare and Family Leave

Another similarity between Abe and Kishida's approach to women's empowerment is the encouragement of men to become more involved in their roles as fathers. During Abe's term, his cabinet pushed the idea of "work-life balance" and made initiatives such as "Society in Which Work-Life Balance Has Been Achieved". Under this plan, the goals for the government involved increasing the hours spent by men with children under six years old for childrearing and household tasks from one hour to two and a half hours per day. Additionally, the "work-life balance" plan also sought to encourage more men to take paternity leave, increasing the percentage of men taking childcare leave from 2.63% to 13% by 2020.¹⁰ In June of 2014, under Abe, male leaders across multiple industries in Japan came together to create the "Declaration on Action by A Group of Male Leaders Who Will Create a Society in which Women Shine" which involved three pillars of "Taking actions and sending messages ourselves," "Disrupting the status quo," and "Developing networking". Relating to paternity leave, under this Declaration, companies such as Nippon Life Insurance Company, Sompo Japan Nipponkoa Insurance Inc, Stride Inc, and Cross Company Inc worked together to introduce policies that made

7 "Japanese Gov't Plans to Raise Monthly Wages for Nursing, Child Care Workers by up to \$88," *Mainichi Daily News*, November 10, 2021, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20211110/p2a/00m/0na/009000c>.

8 Anna Fifield, "You Thought the U.S. Had a Day-Care Shortage? In Japan, the Government Is Looking for Baby-Sitters.," *Washington Post*, August 1, 2014, sec. Asia & Pacific, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/japanese-leader-abe-wants-more-women-to-work-so-hes-got-big-plans-for-day-care/2014/08/01/8dcd84f5-c4b2-4e39-a1e0-125ea57309b_story.html.

9 "Japan Enacts Bill to Create Agency for Children, Families," *nippon.com*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjji2022061500135/>.

10 Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, "Society in Which a Work-Life Balance Has Been Achieved" (Government of Japan, 2016), https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/mge/wlb/society.html.

it easier for new fathers to take off from work. For example, Sampo Japan sent emails and leaflets to male employees whose spouses recently gave birth with a congratulatory message and an encouragement to take childcare leave. STRIDE decided to "lead by example" and issued a policy where the company executives periodically took time off to tend to childrearing and household chores.¹¹

Kishida, on multiple occasions, has also expressed the importance of men becoming more involved in the household. In the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality, the government aims to increase the male childcare leave-taking rate to 30% by 2025. More specifically, the government under Kishida is calling for more action towards making it mandatory for companies to inform their employees about the opportunity to take paternity leave. The Fifth Basic Plan also calls for the percentage of male workers taking childcare leave in companies to be publicly revealed.¹² In June 2021, the government under Kishida passed legislation amending the Child and Family Care Act which went into effect in April 2022. Several notable amendments make childcare more feasible and appealing for men and women. Firstly, beginning in December of 2022, employees taking paternity or maternity leave will be compensated with paid leave of up to four weeks on top of the childcare leave they were initially entitled to. Furthermore, fixed-term employees can now take childcare and family leaves more flexibly.¹³ In contrast, before the amendment, the employees were permitted to take leave only after working for a year—this aids women greatly, as a vast portion of the fixed-term population are women.

Differences in Abe and Kishida's Policies

A subtle but essential difference between Abe's and Kishida's policies surrounding women's empowerment is the *rhetoric* employed when discussing women's societal roles. Under Abe Shinzo's various initiatives and policies, a woman seems to hold the most significant value when employed and actively working. While this notion isn't

11 Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, "Male Leaders Efforts to Promote Women's Active Role in Japan" (Tokyo: Government of Japan, August 2015), https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/mge/declaration/pdf/women_active_role.pdf.

12 "The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality 'Toward a Reiwa Society Where All Women and Girls Can Thrive and Achieve Their Full Potential,'" *Japan Labor Issues* 5, no. 33 (August 2021): 6–12.

13 Lockton Global Compliance, "Japan to Increase Child Care Leave," *Lockton Global Benefits* (blog), December 30, 2021, <https://globalnews.lockton.com/japan-to-increase-child-care-leave/>.

explicitly stated, the way in which house chores and childrearing are often considered as "leisure" or time away from work implies the lower status Abe's government assigned household tasks. For instance, in the initiative "Society in which a Work-life Balance has been Achieved", the description of the plan is "a society in which an individual citizen can work with motivation and a sense of fulfillment and discharge his/her responsibilities at work".¹⁴ The rhetoric in this government document indicates that participation in the household realm, through activities such as childrearing and chores, is dispelling someone from their "responsibilities". It seems to imply that childrearing and household tasks are a break or period of rest away from the obligations at work. While the sentiment of this initiative is to encourage men and women to become more involved in the community outside of their job, it can be argued Abe's government does not consider household chores and childrearing to exert the same level of stress or difficulty as a company job does.

During Abe's term, the end goal was to encourage more female participation in the workforce; however his goal disregarded the many nuances that accompany increased female workers. For instance, while the percentage of women's participation rose to 66% in 2016, 55.9% of those women that year were relegated to non-regular workers status.¹⁵ Up until now, most of the women in the workforce hold non-regular worker roles. Still, Abe's administration did not seem to cater to this nuanced issue that applies to women in the workforce. Under Abe's terms, the courts have consistently ruled that public sector, non-regular workers have no right to job protection.¹⁶ Additionally, the government and policymakers approached the "obstacles" of childcare in a *profit-focused* manner. They attempted to inexpensively increase childcare by deregulating the childcare industry and encouraging private operators to establish more childcare facilities. On paper, while more childcare facilities did indeed appear, the quality of childcare depreciated drastically. Privately owned centers did not want to hire childcare veterans since they were more expensive, and the rapid expansion of profit-focused corporations for childcare

14 Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, "Society in Which a Work-Life Balance Has Been Achieved" (Government of Japan, 2016), https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/mge/wlb/society.html.

15 Weathers, Charles. "The Contradictions of the Womenomics Campaign: Abe Shinzō's Employment Reforms and Japan's Public Service Workers." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 53 (2018): 47-71. doi:10.1353/jwj.2018.0002

16 Ibid.

continuously forced down the quality of care and wages for childcare workers.¹⁷ Abe's encouragement for women to join the workforce, while not addressing the issues of unequal pay and lack of job security for the female-dominated field of non-regular workers, and the rushed efforts of opening-up inadequate childcare facilities, display what was truly important for Abe's plan—economic growth, and not necessarily women's empowerment.

On the other hand, Kishida seems to be shifting away from the underlying profit-driven spirit of Abe's Womenomics and is willing to sacrifice economic efficiency for equality. First of all, in the White Paper on Gender Equality from 2020, the Gender Equality Bureau clearly stated that "it is necessary to consider not just overwork from "work," but also the effects of overwork from "housework/childcare/caregiving".¹⁸ This statement highlights a key difference from Womenomics, which is that childcare and housework are essential responsibilities and are not necessarily an escape from workplace obligations. This change in rhetoric while discussing care work and house chores highlights a possible shift away from the lower status to which workers in such fields were prescribed and recognizes the value that women also hold in the home. Kishida has also publicly recognized the importance of improving the treatment of workers in the medical and welfare sectors, which is a female-dominated field.¹⁹ While the Prime Minister and his cabinet have admitted that there is no precedent for what Kishida is attempting to do, they have repeatedly reiterated Kishida's goals of supporting families with young children and providing social security for non-regular workers.²⁰ The overview of the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality, published in March 2021, not only does it explicitly acknowledge the mistreatment that non-regular workers face but also makes it a key initiative to take measures necessary to convert non-regular workers into regular workers.²¹

17 Ibid.

18 Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office. *White Paper of Gender Equality 2020*. Tokyo: Government of Japan, July 2020.

19 "Japanese Gov't Plans to Raise Monthly Wages for Nursing, Child Care Workers by up to \$88," *Mainichi Daily News*, November 10, 2021, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20211110/p2a/00m/0na/009000c>.

20 "Kishida's Lofty Economic Plans Lacking One Thing: Details | The Asahi Shimbun: Breaking News, Japan News and Analysis," *The Asahi Shimbun*, accessed July 4, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14454514>.

21 Cabinet Office, "The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality" (Government of Japan, March 2021), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100236491.pdf>.

As mentioned previously, the amendments to the Child and Family Care Act which introduced more flexibility in allowing non-regular workers, a female-dominated population, to take childcare leave is demonstrative of the more detailed attention placed on women in the workforce. Compared to Abe's profit-focused, growth-driven Womenomics plan that prioritized getting women into the workforce no matter the cost, Kishida's plans seem to better recognize the tradeoff and nuances of women's involvement in the workplace. While Kishida's plan might come with increased taxes for additional funds, it does paint a positive picture of more recognition and awareness of a woman's responsibilities and importance in society.

Conclusion

Under both Abe Shinzo and Fumio Kishida's policies, an effort to involve women in the professional sphere can be observed. Both Prime Ministers have taken ambitious steps towards encouraging women to leave the domestic space, primarily through efforts such as providing more childcare support and allocating more of the housework and childrearing responsibilities to men as well. The subtle but prominent difference between Abe and Kishida is, however, that Abe was arguably more focused on economic expansion rather than gender equality. Encouraging higher female participation in the workforce was an instrument of economic development for Abe.

Even though Kishida is shifting away from Abe's economic-driven motives, the gender issue in Japan still seems to be largely social in nature. In spite of the encouragement for increased paternity leave, Japanese men are still reluctant to abide and help their wives at home. Yet, this issue stems from the workplace and corporate structure in Japan, which values longevity and consistency at work. Therefore, in order to address the gender inequality issue in Japan, it is necessary to address the broader social and economic factors which contribute to the current state of Japanese women—a process which will certainly require time and large-scale social mobilization.

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