Towards sustainable society: Womenomics and women employment in Japan

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Abstract. Japan’s gender inequality, aging population, and economic stagnancy create problems to sustain society. To counter this, under the growth-promotion policies coined as ‘Abenomics,’ the Abe government proposed a set of policies under its structural reform policy called ‘Womenomics. By analyzing policy papers, statistical data, and news articles using Ochiai’s familialist welfare concept and Osawa’s Japan corporate system, this research aims to add further contrasting evidence on how much Womenomics fare as a women-empowering policy to counter the growing gender inequality, stagnant economic growth and low fertility rates in Japan. However, instead of achieving structural reform, I argued that Womenomics only focused on economic growth ‘for the greater good’ by utilizing women to enter the labor market without addressing their real problems.

1. Introduction
In September 2015, 193 countries in UN General Assembly pledged together to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals for a sustainable future where no one will be left behind [1]. The Assembly underlined, among others, rising inequalities, natural resource depletion, and climate change as challenges to the sustainability of the planet and society. Therefore, it is important to move towards a development that prepares for the needs of future generations while still catering to the needs of the present [2]. Achieving a sustainable future requires efforts to sustain the environment and efforts and policies to ensure human rights and equal opportunities for all, including women [1].

Despite its status as an advanced economy country, Japan ranked 121st out of 153 countries in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report released by World Economic Forum [3], lowest among OECD countries. Gender inequality is still apparent in Japan, even made worse if compared with its past rankings. Women are still responsible for most household chores compared to men, dropping out of employment due to childbearing and childrearing, facing discriminatory practices at work, and being forced to choose marriage and career [4-8]. These factors contribute to the rapidly aging population in Japan, with 28.4% of its population comprised of the elderly, and only 12.1% of the population comprises 14-year-olds and younger [9]. To add it up, Japan also recorded a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) as low as 1.36 in 2019 [9].

As Shinzo Abe was elected as Japan’s Prime Minister in 2012, he proposed an economic plan widely coined as Abenomics, a set of ‘anti-deflation and growth-promoting’ policies with three prominent arrows: monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reform. Abe talked further about the third arrow, structural reform, in an op-ed article in Wall Street Journal [10] and during his speech
at the 68th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations [11]. Abe wrote about womenomics as part of its structural reform policies, mentioning the importance of boosting women's employment to 73% by 2020 to increase GDP and fertility rate.[10] Womenomics itself wasn't something Abe came up by himself. A proposal published with the same name by Kathy Matsui [12] underlining the boost of women employed as a key to Japan's declining fertility rates. Matsui also claimed womenomics could increase Japan's GDP and consumption rates. Matsui talked about women's resilient spending trends compared to men and showed evidence from various countries and regions in Japan that high female employment rates equal to high fertility rates. She listed ten recommended actions for the public and private sector to boost women's employment, such as expanding daycare and nursing care facilities, substantial childcare benefits, flexible working arrangements, etc. [12]. Following the recommendation from Matsui to increase women's employment rate, the Abe government also set a goal of decreasing the number of childcare waiting lists by 2017 and increasing the number of women in managerial positions by 30% [13-14].

The notion of women's economic empowerment policies, particularly in boosting Japan’s economy, isn't a new thing [7-8, 15]. After Japan ratified CEDAW in 1979, in 1986, the government enacted Equal Employment Opportunity Law, or EEOL, as Japan's legal framework to implement gender equality in the private sector. The law went through two major revisions. The first one was in 1997 about workplace discrimination, followed by another in 2006 about sexual harassment in the workplace. However, instead of giving a penalty for companies who don't comply, the law provides only affirmative action as a reward for companies who complied. Besides EEOL, another law under gender equality effort was also enacted in 1999, which highlighted the sharing of responsibilities and designed to be a guideline for a society where women and men participated on an equal basis. Another one in 2010 was enacted to facilitate the low number of women in decision-making positions in companies and universities. However, the implementation of all the laws wasn't efficient and couldn't create the result they intended [7]. A similar case was found in research papers related to Womenomics [8, 15-17].

Song [15] investigated womenomics by analyzing the policy initiatives and how the government and business sector interacted to implement the new rules and regulations. She listed several policies and measures under the Ministry of Economic, Trade, Industry (METI), Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), and those directly under the Cabinet's Gender Bureau. Specifically, in MHLW's Bill Regarding Promotion of Active Participation of Women in Their Working Life, Song underlined the interaction between government and business sector even before the law was officially effective. She concluded that even though Japan's government tried to centralize the policies, there's still a process of bargaining between the private sector and government.[15] Helen Macnaughtan [8] provides further insight by analyzing womenomics' strategy to implement the policies by looking at Japan's historical and social context, assessing the viability of the program. Macnaughtan argued that in his womenomics campaign, the Abe government assumed a gender bias of normative core male employment. She concluded by saying that it's essential to change the employment system so that women and men could also enjoy better employment conditions. It is important to embrace diversity and flexibility and promote sustainability, wellbeing, and equality [8]. From another perspective, Schieder [16] linked womenomics with growing neoliberalism policies. ‘Trickle-down feminism’ that Abe hoped from womenomics would only benefit a small, elite group of women in employment and pushed women in vulnerable situations further into poverty [16]. Ayako Kano [17] added into the discourse by mentioning that Japan's feminist scholars and supporters are put into a difficult position by negotiating between conservatives who wanted women to assume their role at home and business leaders who welcomed women in workplace, but wanted women to sacrifice their lives for the company. Thus, women are forced to do 'acrobatics' of being leaders without threatening men, the traditional family system, or reproductive labor at home [17].

Women are mentioned as Japan’s underutilized resource, [10] even though historical evidence saw that women are always working. Women's employment creates a feminization of the labor market, where women are often missing from discourse about Japan's employment system and corporate
culture [4]. Japan’s society is a corporate-centered society with companies in its center. Companyism, a concept of company culture, emerged after World War II in the form of company power to influence their employee to conform to company culture, either by letting employees participate in company management [4] or pushing employees to compete against each other [4]. Employees' compliance towards rules is not influenced by a written contract, but voluntarily or by peers' pressures to get promoted. The concept was based on lifetime employment, seniority system, and company union—the three divine treasures of Japanese employment. It is gradated in the relationship between labor and management as one authority, humanistic in the way company acts like family and community, and attributional in the way wage is measured not by performance, but by gender, education, age, experience, and period of work. Among all of the attributes, gender influenced the most [4].

But the concept of companyism is centered on the male employee without taking account of female employment. It was understood as a capitalistic competition and a collaborative relationship in a corporate-centered society. At the same time, it is a form of patriarchy, where the relationship between employer and employee derived from the relationship between a man over his wife, where women's labor is appropriated by men, just like the Japanese model as a system where the regular employee is guaranteed work. What makes it possible to guarantee work for the regular employee (and member of the union) is by adjusting sub-contractual relationships, laying off and reemploying non-regular staff when needed, and employing young women as regular employees. Young women are used as a buffer and ensure the male employee's satisfaction by delegating repetitive and de-humanizing tasks to women [4]. Companies established a dual career track system that divides job applicants into career-oriented, management track (sogo-shoku), and clerical track (ippan-shoku) [7]. The management track is mostly filled by men who could accept the rotational pieces of training and possible relocations and endured Japan's workplace culture of long working hours, loyalty to the firm, and continuous employment [8]. When EEOL was enacted to erase indirect discrimination in employment, it didn't completely erase the dual-career track system. Instead, the clerical track often filled by women was replaced by hiring them as irregular workers [17]. In addition to being excluded systematically by the company, women also still do most household chores in the family, even when both men and women are in the workforce [4].

The state's welfare system is also enforcing the nature of women's employment. The government set a welfare policy called “Japanese-style welfare society” in 1973, emphasizing coordinated efforts from the family and the local community. The policy was set up during Japan's high economic growth and demographic dividend, opening up opportunity for the government to spend more and expand the welfare policies [18]. However, the decision persisted. The family was put as the foundation of the policies as the core of national identity. With this, the government planned to combat increasing divorce rates, age of marriage, and declining fertility rates. It underlined the role of housewife, supported by laws on the increase of wife's legal inheritance, eligibility for pensions without paying premiums for married women with income less than 1.3 million yen per year, tax deductions for families living with elderly relatives, and spousal tax deduction if an employed person has a dependent spouse with income less than 1 million yen [18-19]. This increased part-time employment for women to be eligible for the pension system and tax deduction. And so, Japan's welfare system becomes a familialist system that puts the obligation of childcare and elderly support on the family. Due to the measures to 'protect' housewife's role, the welfare responsibility consequently falls to women [18]. This social system built by the 1980s familialist welfare system solidified women's role as housewives and persisted through economic, demographic, and policy measures. It is still prevalent even in present Japan, when the family's flexibility and adaptability are needed in the middle of a decreasing economy and fertility rate [18]. Welfare, for women, has always been 'welfare through marriage to men who work [17]. Both company and the state limit the current condition of women's role in Japan.

This research argues that looking at the structure of Japan's society and growing social problems such as an aging population and patriarchy, the policy hasn't fully delivered its promises and yet to show its contribution, particularly in achieving the sustainable development goals and on gender equality. Womenomics won't work if it's still centered only on increasing women's employment. A
real structural reform where women's life-cycle isn't dictated by marriage, childbirth, and child-rearing, the wage gap between regular and irregular workers has been bridged, and a better tax system that encourages women and men to choose should be done. Only then Abe's womenomics vision of a 'society where women can shine' can be achieved.

2. Method

This research aims to further contribute to the discourse on womenomics by analyzing how womenomics fare in the middle of Japan's corporate system and welfare policy that constructed women's rigid role as a housewife. The primary data used in this study are taken from the government's policy paper and statistical documents and shreds of evidence from various research papers and news articles related to womenomics. The data is analyzed by looking at Japan's corporate system described by Osawa Mari and the familialist welfare concept explained by Ochiai Emiko.

3. Results and discussion

In June 2013, the Abe government released its first list of economic growth strategies under the Japan Revitalization Strategy [13]. Before the release, the government organized the Forum for Promoting Active Participation by the Young and Women. Held eight times since February 2013, the forum provided recommendations and insights on women's current situation in society from more than 40 academic experts, students, activists, and local government who participated in the dialogue. It highlighted long working hours and lack of support from both company's employment system and family members on childcare and/or elderly care work as reasons behind women leaving their jobs. Women workers are forced to leave their career paths to care for their families. It was also why there aren't many women in a management position, with too many quit before they reach the position or lacking in knowledge and experience [20].

The situation isn't unique to Japan or something that could be called a "tradition." In the 1880s, Japan already had a relatively high labor participation rates from women, staying at 70% range for women in the age of 20s to 40s [5]. This is because of the stem family system, where labor division is made between two generations of the couple who live together. And then, the female labor force participation rate in Japan started to decrease before World War II and became an M-shaped pattern, a transparent form of "housewifization," [5] where women's role is positioned at home. The economic crisis and recession in the 1990s then created a situation where it is harder to find and secure the job for both men and women. In European countries and North America, the recession helped weaken the gender division of labor and created a "de-housewifization" where women returned to the workforce. The family lost the luxury of choosing who gets to work [5]. This, however, didn't happen in Japan. Because of the Japanese corporate system and welfare policies in the 1980s, women's role in Japan has solidified as a housewife [18]. It continues until the present, influencing the employment and policies in return.

Responding to the prior situation and to realize womenomics' target for women employment, the government released Japan Revitalization Strategy [13], with policy packages containing incentives for companies promoting and supporting women's employment and work-life balance; efforts to promote more women into managerial positions; subsidy programs for workers on and/or returning from childcare leave; re-learning opportunities for women to return to work after childcare and expanded daycare facilities to reach zero childcare waiting list. These are then followed by policies that acted under the local government as well as various government bodies.[21] Several policies and the campaign has been released since then, such as The Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace in 2016; certifications such as Diverse Management 100, Nadeshiko Brand, and Eruboshi; and a portal site which showcases the company's gender-related information. However, enacted policies and campaigns only provide subsidies and rewards for companies who comply without penalizing companies who don't. As Song [15] explained, the government also relies on business groups such as Keidanren to enforce the policy. The push-and-pull
between the government and business sectors ended up with companies, not including a numerical target for their own companies' policies.

Furthermore, the policies don't address the dual-career track that is still prevalent in the Japanese employment system. Even when hired as a regular employee, women are often hired under the clerical, non-career track (ippan-shoku) or even as irregular workers, instead of the career track (sogo-shoku) [7]. This is because employers have a conception that women would eventually assume their role as a housewife when they get married and have children [18]. With Japan's career system that rewards seniority over performance, employers find recruiting women who will eventually stop working to care for their children to be a 'waste' because of companies invested in their newly recruited employees with training. The company also set up a seniority-based wage and career track in return for their loyalty and dedication to the company, which is hard as women are also required to perform work at home and unable to dedicate themselves to work fully. Even though the second revision of EEOL stated no indirect discrimination in the employment system, because it was enacted with changes in Japanese labor market policies, the discrimination towards women only changes its form, from clerical track to irregular work [17].

However, if we look at womenomics goal of increasing women's employment, regardless of the employment type, to 73%, more women are in employment now. Compared with the US and Eurozone, Japan's female labor participation rate recorded a rise to 70.7%.[22] an increase of 2.9 million working women aged 15 and over from 2013 to 2019.[9] However, we see in Figure 1 that more than 50% of working women are working as non-regular staff members, such as part-time workers and agency-dispatch workers [23].

![Figure 1. Japan’s labor force is divided by gender and types of employment [23].](image)

Although part-time work allows them to adjust their time flexibly between work and housework, it hinders women's employment advancement. Part-time jobs have a very 'unstable' nature regarding wages and benefits. Part-time jobs get paid less, sometimes with longer working hours than full-time jobs, without benefits given to full-time jobs such as paid leave [4]. Furthermore, part-time jobs don't have a clear career path and no promotion opportunity, which further impedes the government's target of achieving 30% of women in managerial positions. The women manager ratio is still at 13.2%, while women's ratio as board members stood lower at 5.3% [22].

Moreover, if we take a closer look at employment distribution by age, we found a gap in a particular age group. Figure 2 shows the female labor force participation rate distributed by age group. We could see it reached its peak in the 25-29 age group and started to dip in the 30-34 age group. The table compares female labor force participation from the year 1998 with current data. Even though it shows improvement, compared with the male labor force participation graph, they showed a straight line from the peak 25-29 age group until the 60-64 age group, the age where people started to retire.
Japan still has a very distinct division of labor, where females are expected to stay at home and take care of children while men go out and work. This ‘ideal’ type of family continues to be the ideological base in a family [18]. As long as this continues, the female labor force participation rate couldn't increase as much as it intended to be. Despite having “work,” women still spend their time “working” on household chores at home far more than men did. Because the responsibility of household chores on women is what sustains men's career [4], in this way, women's work is appropriated by men in a patriarchal relationship so that they could fully dedicate themselves to their career. Even when the number of dual-income households nearly doubled since 1999 [23] and 54.4% of men start to think women need to work even after childbirth [24], men continue to neglect their housework share and instead, still put the burden on women. Women still show contrasting long hours of doing house chores, with 207 minutes for women in dual-income households and 283 minutes in full-time housewife households [25].

Moreover, even when men and women both have children, women as housewives are the one responsible for taking care of them. Women would take maternity leave to take care of their pregnancy and the child afterward. And in Japan's career system, which still favored seniority and experience, it's hard for women to return to work after taking such an extended leave. This is also why few men take their allotted paternity leave, fearing demotion and struggle in their career path. A 2019 case of a Japanese father who sued his employer after taking one-year paternity leave proves this. The father said that even though no official demotion or pay cut was received, he was given 'meaningless' and physical jobs after returning [26]. Even when a high-ranking government official, Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi, announced he would take two weeks of paternity leave, he was met with mixed reactions. Some criticized his decision as irresponsible. A similar comment was also directed to celebrity news report Maasa Takahashi when she said she hoped to continue working a month after giving birth. Many criticized her as neglecting her responsibility as a new mother and that she should take longer leave [27].

Care work, especially childcare, is still perceived as women's responsibility in the family. The image of ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’ (ryosai kenbo) was promoted together with the Japanese-style welfare system [18] when Japan enjoyed rapid economic growth to protect the male labor force and ensure the reproduction of a quality labor force in the future. This model proves to be unsustainable as the economy continues to be stagnant since the 1990s. If we look at other Asian countries like Singapore and Taiwan, the market sector plays a crucial role in the welfare system while still oriented towards the family. Care work is delegated to the state, but the state also provides opportunities for them to hire care services from the market sector, where most of the employees are migrant workers [18]. With the increasing number of elderly in Japan, the government started to adopt this system.
under the Long Term Care Insurance program in 2000 in institutionalized domestic work [28]. It was hoped to lessen the burden of care work for women in the family. However, in reality, it was still women who mostly work as care workers. "Importing" migrant worker for care work also creates the problem of deskilling. This was the case with Indonesian nurses who were sent to Japan under IJEPA. In Indonesia, they studied and trained as medical nurses, but they were stationed as care workers for the elderly when they arrived in Japan. Upon returning, many show evidences of deskilling [28].

But hiring external help or paying care facilities requires money. Facilities subsidized by the government are limited, and private-owned facilities are expensive for families who are struggling even to survive. With no help from extended family, women still need to decide whether to work with limited choices or stay at home to care for them. The limitation around women's choices impacted the sustainability of society. Consumption rates would remain low because there's no money to spend, and fertility rates would keep declining as more families see having children as too costly.

4. Conclusion
At first, womenomics shows excellent promise on advancing women's employment. However, shreds of evidence from various studies and women's ongoing situation proved that womenomics didn't have the commitment needed to create structural reform and reach the desired result truly. The policies are focused on economic growth and effort to build the nation 'for the greater good' while ignoring women's real problems that needed to be solved. With only positive action and no real sanction, womenomics couldn't force business sectors to form an action plan with an implementation effort that would create a sustainable working environment and employment system for both women and men. Serious implementation from the government and company could create a change in the social system. Business needs women's economic participation in the public sphere to balance the declining labor force. Still, the welfare system also needed women for reproductive work in the domestic sphere to provide labor. With Shinzo Abe's resignation in August 2020, the government could use this opportunity to rethink and reinforce better policies to ensure an equal division of labor in the public and domestic sphere for a sustainable society.

Acknowledgments
This research is funded by Universitas Indonesia Research Grant through PITMA-B scheme.

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