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### 'Household Managers': Women's Employment in Japan

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**‘HOUSEHOLD MANAGERS’: THE ISSUE OF WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT IN  
CONTEMPORARY JAPAN**

Japan is an influential global power, having the third highest GDP after China and the U.S. This economy, however, is built on an unequal job market, where men and women are exposed to different career paths, different wages, and ultimately different lifestyles. Considering Japan and other countries are becoming more developed and modern, it is questionable whether these social expectations and standards will change and to what extent. This essay will argue that women are disadvantaged in contemporary Japan's employment system through different expectations from men in the workplace and gendered duties outside the workplace. This essay will also illustrate the effect of gender disparity in employment on Japan as a whole and describe attempts to solve this problem and persisting issues.

In Japan, non-standard employment is a prominent area of discussion within the country itself and internationally. Non-standard employment is considered any type of employment that is not full-time, such as temporary work, self-employment, and part-time work.<sup>1</sup> 27% of employment in Japan is considered non-standard, with over 56.1% of establishments employing part-time workers.<sup>2</sup> Japanese establishments hire non-standard employees for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, in the event of an economic crisis, instead of firing prominent full-time workers in the company, corporations can lay off part-time workers. This provides employment security for full-time workers, as well as minimizes losses in human capital for establishments. For example, during the Oil Shock of 1970, many part-time workers were the "first to feel the effects" of the economic problem, as they were laid off in the wake of an economic crisis.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, part-time workers provide corporations with a means of making without any

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<sup>1</sup> Heidi Gottfried, "Pathways to Economic Security: Gender and Nonstandard Employment in Contemporary Japan" *Social Indicators Research* 88, no. 1 (August 2008): 179.

<sup>2</sup> Gottfried, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Dorinne Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 275.

substantial backlash. Secondly, corporations can hire part-time workers to do the same work as full-time workers but with a lesser pay.<sup>4</sup> In Japan, “a part-time worker is considered anyone whose weekly hours fall below those of regular workers in the same establishment.”<sup>5</sup> However, regular hours vary, and as a result, over 30% of part-time workers work 35 hours or more, with 20% having the “position of a regular worker.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, despite the designation of a part-time worker, there seems to be little distinction in workload for a substantial portion of these individuals. Lastly, part-time workers are only employed for a short period of time, and therefore, few training or promotions are provided. Only a quarter of corporations actually provide training to part-time workers, with the expectation that their employment will be short lived. Also, there is little employment mobility for these workers, as only 10% of part-time workers ever get promoted to a full-time worker.<sup>7</sup> Overall, these characteristics benefit corporations greatly, leading to more hiring for these positions, while these roles remain disadvantageous to workers.

This distinction regarding part-time and full-time work is important in understanding employment disparities between men and women, as women make up much of the part-time work industry.

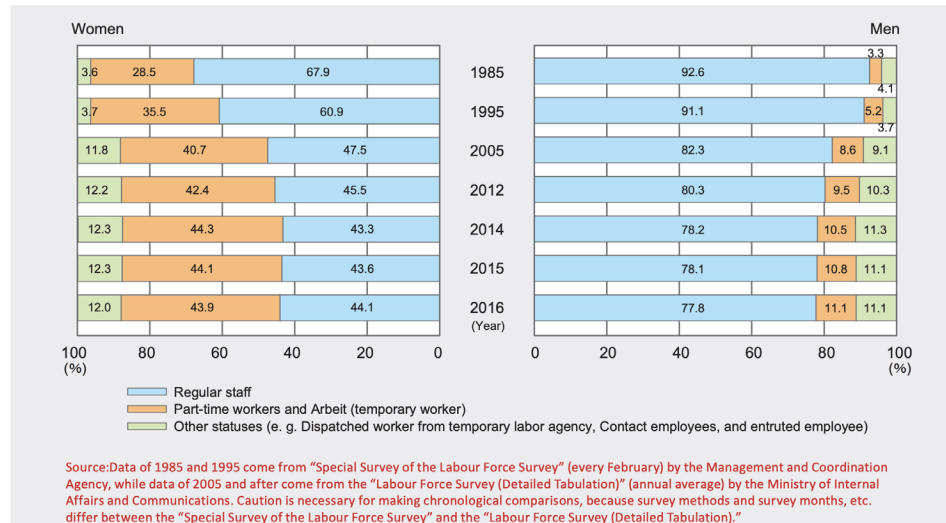
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<sup>4</sup> Kondo, 249-252.

<sup>5</sup> Gottfried, 184.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, 9.



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As evidenced by 2016 data compiled by the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office of Japan, there are just about as many women in part-time work and temporary work as there are in full-time work. In 2016, 43.9% of women in the labor force were part-time workers, while only 11.1% of men in the labor force were part-time workers, establishing a clear disparity.<sup>9</sup>

Evidently, women dominate the part-time industry in Japan. The disparity in part-time work participation further highlights other major problems in the Japanese employment system that specifically affect women in the workforce – primarily the wage gap and the lifetime and two track employment system. As detailed previously, the wage gap between full-time and part-time work is large, especially considering both types of workers do about the same work. As women make up 70% of non-regular workers, there is a resultingly wide wage gap.<sup>10</sup> The wage gap between full-time and part-time workers for women was 69.5% in 2015, as compared to 54.8% for men. Not only that, but the income of full-time workers was four times higher than

<sup>8</sup> Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, "Women and Men in Japan 2018."

[http://www.gender.go.jp/english\\_contents/pr\\_act/pub/pamphlet/women-and-men18/index.html](http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/pr_act/pub/pamphlet/women-and-men18/index.html) (accessed March 27, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, 10.

that for part-time workers.<sup>11</sup> The Japanese employment system also negatively impacts women and is evident in the prevalence of part-time work. The Japanese employment system creates a standard for life in which people are expected to pursue a career straight out of college.

Therefore, corporations tend to hire young people who have recently completed their education over those who begin their career at age 30 or 40.<sup>12</sup> The Japanese work system also functions based on seniority. That is to say, the longer a person works at the company, the more promotions and benefits they receive; this system is commonly referred to the lifetime employment system. Although beneficial to men who tend to get a job right after college and stick with it until retirement, this system disadvantages women who usually have to forfeit their career shortly after higher education for domestic pursuits. By the time women are ready to continue pursuing a career, typically in their 30s or 40s, they must start back at square one in accordance with the lifetime employment system. Therefore, they are paid much less than their male counterparts despite being the same age and doing the same level of work.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the Japanese employment system of seniority and the wage gap both disadvantage women both in part-time and full-time work.

Outside the workplace, women face further pressures that make employment difficult. Japan's culture focuses on women as wives and mothers over businesswomen or managers. This cultural idea continues to persist into modern society, where women are expected to devote much of their life and focus on childrearing and housework. The following section will illustrate how

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Sanae Tashiro, "'Is Being Single Better? An Analysis of Employment Structure and Wages of Japanese Female Workers.'" *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* 18, no. 3 (2015): 251.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Brinton, *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*. (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 44.

these expectations for women affect their means of and access to employment in contemporary Japan.

Women are often pressured to get married between the ages of 23 and 27 in Japan. This pressure is exhibited by family, coworkers, managers, and even society as a whole. Women are ultimately expected to marry within this short time span and begin their domestic life. However, there are many downsides to this. With this pressure, women are faced with a difficult decision: to marry or to focus on their career. By choosing to marry, women are expected to sacrifice their careers and are “written off by employers, who consider them poor risks for investment in human capital.”<sup>14</sup> This is one of the many reasons women make up such a small portion of full-time workers; by marrying, they effectively terminate their chances of achieving a long-term career.

A common cultural conception, not only in Japan but in many other countries, is that women should have children and be the primary caretaker. Japan’s culture places a large emphasis on women as mothers. This ideal first took hold with Japan’s adoption of Confucianism, where women were encouraged to be “good wives” and “wise mothers” over anything else. This was further established during the Meiji Era, where women were expected to “faithfully execute their duties as household managers and especially as educators who [instill] proper Japanese values in their children.”<sup>15</sup> Even today this cultural ideal exists. It is believed that there is “high salience” in the role of raising a child, and women are considered “self-indulging” or “selfish” to disregard this role.<sup>16</sup> For example, in 2003, former Prime Minister of Japan Yoshirō Mori declared that women without children should not be required to have a

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<sup>14</sup> Brinton, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Kondo, 267.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Holloway, Sawako Suzuki, Yoko Yamamoto, and Jessica Dalesandro Mindnich. “Relation of Maternal Role Concepts to Parenting, Employment Choices, and Life Satisfaction Among Japanese Women.” *Sex Roles* 54, no. 3/4 (February 2006): 236.

retirement pension on the account that they had “renounced their civic responsibility to raise children.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, men typically remain at work without taking time off for child rearing. As of 2008, only 1.23 percent of male workers took parental leave, leaving the task of childcare almost completely to women.<sup>18</sup> The implementation of the Child Care Leave Law of 2002, which provided more flexible leave for parents was meant to alleviate this disparity in childcare between men and women. However, only .33 percent of men took parental leave after the law was enacted, while 64 percent of women workers continued to take parental leave.<sup>19</sup>

Another time-consuming task often left to women is housework. According to the Office of the Prime Minister in 1982, “over 90 percent of wives indicate that they are the ones responsible for carrying out [cleaning tasks]” at home.<sup>20</sup> There were also similar responses regarding washing, cooking, and shopping. Women are also responsible for duties typically considered “men’s work” in the U.S., such as household repairs and finances.<sup>21</sup> Overall, women are expected to take the responsibilities of childcare and housework alone. The chart below from the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office of Japan helps to illustrate this issue:

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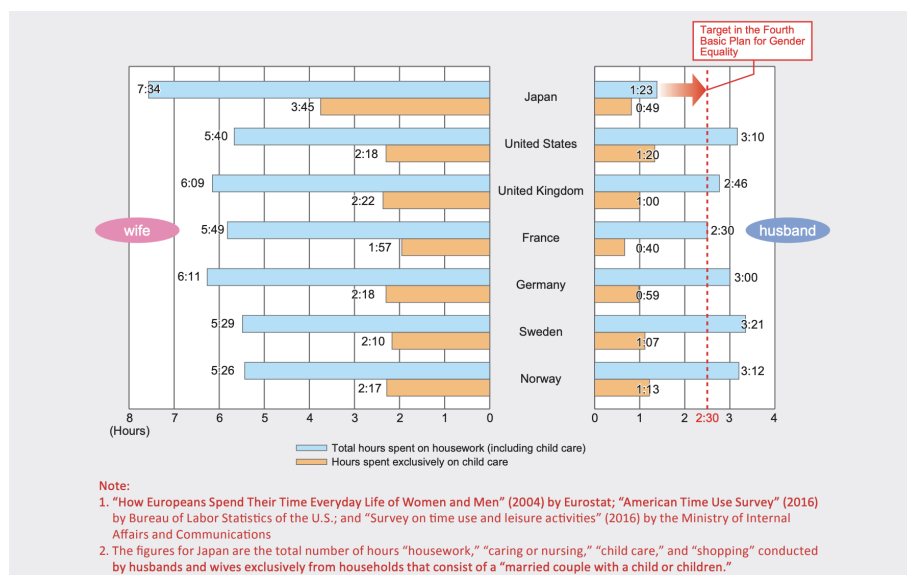
<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Adams, “Japan: The Sacrificial Society.” *Journal of Psychohistory* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 91.

<sup>19</sup> Yuki Huen, “Policy Response to Declining Birth Rate in Japan: Formation of a ‘Gender-Equal’ Society.” *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 368.

<sup>20</sup> Brinton, 93.

<sup>21</sup> Kondo, 281.

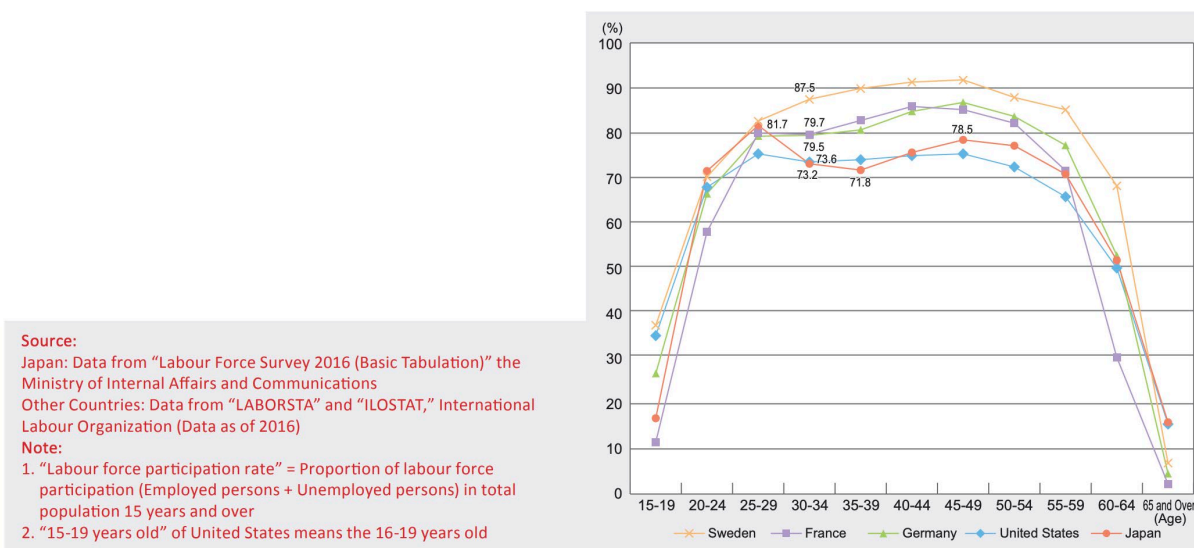


According to the Gender Equality Bureau, Japanese men spend the least amount of time, globally, on housework and childcare. While women in Japan spend up to 7.34 hours a day on domestic work, men spend only about 1.23 hours, with only 49 minutes of that being childcare. In comparison, women in the US spend 5.40 hours on housework, while men spend 3.10 hours on housework.<sup>22</sup> While there is a disparity between men and women in both countries, the proportion of time spent by men in the US on domestic duties far outweighs the amount of time men in Japan spend on domestic duties.

Without the help of their partner, women are expected to take on a lot of work at home, leaving little time for full-time employment. This is part of the reason why women are expected to leave full-time employment and rarely have regular jobs; there is simply no time to fit that sort of commitment into their already packed schedules. This also explains why women are more prominent in part-time employment. One prevalent representation of this phenomena is the M-curve. Women usually work shortly before college, up until the age of 24 to 27, where they are pressured to take off from work. After taking care of their child for a critical number of years,

<sup>22</sup> Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office.

women usually re-enter the workforce (usually as part-time workers). These sudden shifts in employment and unemployment are well-represented in the M-Curve.



As seen in the graph, for Japan, there is an M-shape in relation to labor force participation rate (the y-axis) and women's age (the x-axis).<sup>23</sup> This shape shows the rise and drop in employment during certain age points. Although over time this graph has shifted to the right and flattened, with women waiting until later to marry and have children, the M-shape still persists despite other countries maintaining stable employment participation for women.<sup>24</sup>

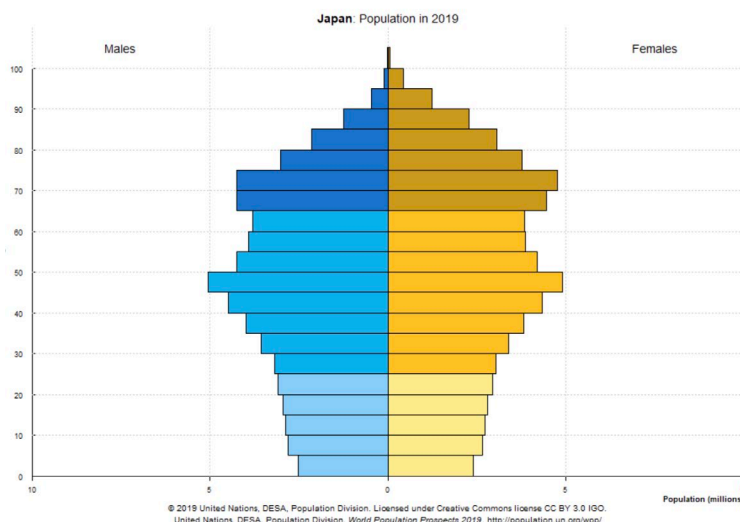
The previous section focused on women's perceived cultural role; this section will focus on how these roles have affected Japanese society as a whole. These effects include a drop in fertility rate and the overworking of males. These issues are what drew attention to women's employment both from the Japanese government and internationally in the first place.

As women are waiting to have children in favor of their career, the fertility rate and number of live births in Japan are decreasing. The drop in fertility rate in Japan, and the resulting

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Huen, "Policy Response to Declining Birth Rate in Japan: Formation of a 'Gender-Equal' Society," 367.

decline in population, is an increasingly prominent problem in Japan, especially since efforts in the last twenty years have done little to solve it. In 2016, there were 976,978 live births; this is the first time since 1899 that the number of live births was under a million.<sup>25</sup> The United Nations published a visual population pyramid depicting Japan's declining population:

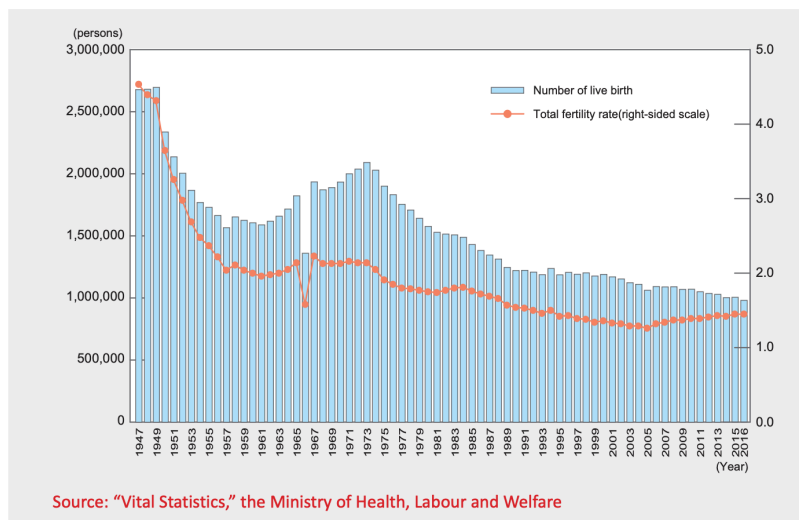


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The population pyramid shows the proportion of the population at each age interval. An aging or decreasing population is evident when a country's population is higher in the elder years than it is in younger years. This phenomenon is clear in Japan's population pyramid above. This suggests that Japan's birthrate is declining and, as a result, Japan's population is decreasing. Another graph from the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office further illustrates this problem:

<sup>25</sup> Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "Population Dynamics: World Population Prospects 2019." <https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/DemographicProfiles/Pyramid/392> (accessed March 29, 2020)



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Evidently, there is a very clear declining birth rate, juxtaposing the growing number of citizens aged 60 and above. According to Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, the total fertility rate is continuously decreasing. This is the source of another problem, as there could be a potential labor shortage, as well as the challenge of financing social security for the ever-growing number of elderly.<sup>28</sup>

Another resulting problem is that men in Japan are being overworked to the point of severe exhaustion and, in extreme cases, even death, with number of deaths from overwork totaling around 10,000 to 50,000 per year.<sup>29</sup> Again, this is another cultural aspect that stems from Confucianism and has persisted in modern society. Men are encouraged to exhibit a “slavish devotion” to their work, with many males putting in 60 hours of work or more per week; even when given “voluntary” overtime, most men would put in the extra hours of work to demonstrate their loyalty to their work.<sup>30</sup> This persisting cultural ideal – the man working relentlessly in the workplace, the woman working relentlessly at home – reflects the continuous cultural practices

<sup>27</sup> Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office.

<sup>28</sup> Huen, 369.

<sup>29</sup> Adams, 92.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

that translate into modern problems. For example, when suggested the prospect of a five-day work week, the 2007 Financial Minister expressed disagreement, stating Japan would become a “country of grasshoppers” – lazy and idle.<sup>31</sup>

Overall, both of these problems can be fixed by looking past traditional barriers, but that’s easier said than done. The next section will look chronologically at the different means of solving this persistent issue and how these means have yet to adequately affect society.

One of the first notable actions taken to combat this persisting issue was the conceptualization of a “Gender-Equal Society,” defined in July of 1996 by the Council of Gender Equality. The goal of this concept was to pursue “new values” for the sake of “[establishing] human rights,” a more mature democracy, and a “greater and deeper awareness of gender-sensitive perspective.”<sup>32</sup> This defined ideal was then followed by a succession of plans and laws. Firstly, there was the Plan for Gender Equality established in December 1996, which sought to “promote gender equality” in all spheres of life, including the workplace, at home, and in communities across Japan. This was followed then by the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society established in June of 1999, which called for “equal opportunities” in “all fields of society.” These two laws were further defined through Basic Plan for Gender Equality in December 2000 and Second Basic Plan for Gender Equality; both laws provided extended definitions and means of clarification.<sup>33</sup> Although seemingly progressive in mindset, these laws inspired little declarative action or enforcement, leading to few, if any, changes.

In 2002, there were further attempts to aid the issue. For example, there was an Osaka District Court case “condemning the two-track system,” in which men are driven into a track of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>32</sup> Huen, “Policy Response to Declining Birth Rate in Japan: Formation of a ‘Gender-Equal’ Society,” 370.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 370-371.

life-long employment while women are placed into a track of short-term employment. However, businesses continued to use the two-track system regardless. There was also the implementation of the Child Care Leave Law, encouraging men to take paternity leave. This law also resulted in minimal success, as detailed in prior sections.<sup>34</sup>

The most modern attempt to encourage a more gender-equal society is Abenomics. Abenomics is an ambitious plan by the former prime minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, to reform Japan's current economic state. A major component of Abenomics is a directive known as "Womenomics," which sought to provide more equitable employment opportunities and outcomes for women. Through this, the prime minister set a target of "having women occupy 30% of all 'leadership' positions, including members of the Diet, heads of local government and corporate executives, by 2020."<sup>35</sup> According to the government of Japan, the goals of Womenomics includes "Equal Pay for Equal Work," in which the wage gap between non-regular and regular workers will be eliminated, "greater assistance to single parents" will be provided, easier access to "recurrent education for women" will be put in place, executive leadership training programs for women will be established, and paternity leave will be promoted.<sup>36</sup>

These actions have resulted in an increase between 2012 and 2019 in "the number of women joining the workforce" by 3.3 million as well as the percentage of "women in management positions in the private sector" nearing 10%.<sup>37</sup> Abe has also increased the salary of those taking childcare leave to 67% of their "preleave salary," advocated for "reductions in [overtime work]," and is working to disincentivize women from staying at home as opposed to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 368.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, 10.

<sup>36</sup> The Government of Japan.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

finding work.<sup>38</sup> Although the results are not particularly significant, these actions indicate a step in the right direction for seeking gender equality in Japanese employment.

In conclusion, women continue to face disadvantages in the workplace due to cultural expectations and roles. This issue has led to a decrease in fertility rate and the overworking of men. However, reforms and laws enacted over time, although seemingly small in effect, play a major part in the future of women in Japan, by “sending a message to the younger generation that women’s future careers will be different from those of their mothers.”<sup>39</sup> Japan continues to address this problem, for the sake of a more positive future for women and Japan as a whole.

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<sup>38</sup> Ito, Takatoshi, Kazumasa Iwata, Colin McKenzie, and Shujiro Urata. “Did Abenomics Succeed?: Editors’ Overview.” *Asian Economic Policy Review* 13, no. 1 (January 2018): 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ito, 11.

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