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Root Causes of Gender Inequality in Japan: the Government and the Society

A few years ago, Yoshiro Mori, a former prime minister of Japan, commented that "women talked too much" during an Olympic Committee meeting, stirring an outcry among the feminists in the form of replacing Mori with a younger female (Oi). It's when feminists speak up for themselves that people realize sexism cannot be ignored anymore. In Japan, gender inequality is a pressing issue that requires attention as it becomes more explicitly biased against women from the households, where the majority of housework is pushed onto women, and to the workplace, where women's chances of succeeding are obstructed. Many women, as a form of protest against such inequality, are opting out of childbearing, leading Japan into an aging society. They devote themselves to their work entirely and choose not to be a part of the households, where inequality is most present, resulting in Japan's birth rate in 2023 being the lowest since 1899, and if this continues, Japan's population is expected to fall by 30%, "with four out of ten people 65 years of age or older," which infers shrinking workforce and economic growth (Yamaguchi). Such significant inequality in Japan that leads them into an aging-society makes me wonder what are the roles of government policies and cultural beliefs in understanding the dynamics of gender inequality in Japan?

Gender inequality is present almost everywhere in Japanese society, evidenced by people's collective acceptance of gender-based division of labor. In "Gender Inequality in Japan," scholar Aki Iida presents an opinion poll conducted by the government regarding

women's participation in society, where many people expressed that women should stay home. Among the participants, "40.6% agreed with the statement that 'Husbands must work outside, and wives must stay home,'" revealing that many believe each gender belongs only to a single occupation, not both. Moreover, those who disagreed with the statement above believe that "it is possible [for women] to continue working while combining housework, childcare, and nursing care for the elderly." It's astonishing that society uses women as free labor who must do all no-reward work and contribute monetarily to the family. Furthermore, employed women in Japan often lose their job because of their family as over a quarter of the people surveyed believed that women should "leave [their] job when [they] become pregnant" to prioritize their family over themselves. Despite societal expectations, once women become pregnant, "there is no hope of continuing to work" because of the responsibilities coming from both work and family. Losing a job in a society where it's difficult for women to get a job means that they would probably not get a job again and lose their chance of living their own lives. Certainly, gender inequality is present in society as it expects women to focus on their family and neglect their own needs.

Inside the large society, gender inequality is also present in various places, especially the households. In "Why Japan Can't Shake Sexism" by The British Broadcasting Corporation journalist Mariko Oi, gender inequality in households is shown through a national survey conducted in 2020. Data shows that "mothers still do 3.6 times more housework than fathers." The difference between time spent around the house proves that women in Japan take on most of the responsibilities at home. Research on Japanese households published by the National Institutes of Health furthers this statement by saying that even in households where both parents are employed full-time, women "spent 21 [hours] a week on housework," while men "spent 5 [hours] a week on such work." Whether employed or not, women take on almost all housework

responsibilities even though they are just as busy with work as their husbands. Indeed, the unequal distribution of housework indicates the presence of gender-based inequality in Japanese households.

Furthermore, gender inequality is also present in the workplace, as evidenced by the lack of female employees in Japan. According to Iida, women occupy very little part of private companies in Japan as "the proportion of women in regular employment in private companies is 24.9%." In "Systemic Changes Necessary to Achieve Gender Equality in Japan," Professor Honda from University of Tokyo offers a rationale that "the majority of women are employed in nonregular positions in order to balance family and work." Many women cannot work regularly because of the responsibilities coming from two opposing sides. Moreover, Iida points out that it's harder for women to obtain managerial positions than men since "female full-time employees take 26-30 years to obtain the same managerial positions that men achieve within 5 years," resulting in a female managerial employment rate of only 6.2% in Japan. It's difficult enough for women to have regular jobs, but their way to promotion is also obstructed. Such an apparent difference between women and men in Japan seems more like an accumulation of inequality rather than a spontaneous issue.

In order to understand the persistent presence of gender inequality in Japanese society, we need to look back to the root causes of it. The government played a major role in originating and embedding inequality in its policies. As Professor Honda illustrates, modern gender imbalance all began with "a period of rapid economic growth" during the 1960s, which the government responded by dividing the population into three categories to maximize growth in "education, work and family." Naturally, children would focus on education, while men on work and women on family. This division of labor was "incorporated as an essential mechanism" in promoting

overall growth in Japan but also “reinforced gender stereotypes.” The policies then contributed to “[putting] forth the idea of a Japanese-style welfare society.” From then on, women, who are in charge of the “family” division, had to take on the role of “primary caretakers of children and the elderly in the family.” Over and over, the division promoted gender stereotypes in Japan where “men are to be breadwinners,” and women the homemakers. Even to this day, the imbalance in society is “remembered as success stories of Japan’s period of economic growth” rather than gender inequality. The government policies that divide labor based on gender indeed lays the foundation for gender inequality.

Moreover, these policies contribute to the formation of gender roles that are visible in education. Early on, women “are taught to be modest” and “obedient” while being strong is discouraged (Oi). As one can imagine, living under such pre-existing gender norms hinders women's ability to be their true selves. This scenario is proved right by Professor Honda as more women choose college majors that are believed to match female gender roles. Data shows, 72.8% of students studying nursing and 64.3% studying humanities are women, but only 27.9% studying science are women. It’s unusual that only few women pursue scientific fields in higher education despite the fact that “science and mathematics literacy among Japanese girls is among the highest,” meaning that women have a high chance of succeeding in the scientific field. It “reflects societal assumptions about which academic fields are appropriate for what gender” as well as how women follow these assumptions so closely and go on paths that are chosen for them by society. Indeed, gender roles have a significant impact on Japanese women in telling them what to do, perpetuating inequality.

Despite the difference between women and men, as a society, both genders in Japan follow its societal norms strictly, especially the unspoken etiquette that silently contributes to

inequality. According to Oi, “in general, people don’t get into arguments, particularly with their elders.” Japanese people always prioritize harmony in society, even if it in turn restrains voices from being heard. A young feminist even says, “‘Japan is a country where people find it difficult to speak out regardless of your age or gender’” since “‘you could be seen as selfish.’” Japanese people would rather stay silent in the face of adversity than speak up and be blamed for being selfish. That’s why “many choose not to confront the issue, so that the situation doesn’t become awkward.” By avoiding awkwardness, inequality accumulates and becomes more impactful in the future since the public allows those who make sexist comments, like Mori, “to perceive their remarks as acceptable.” Both women and men silently follow the societal norm of swallowing their own feelings to protect the overall harmony, allowing inequality to persist.

Interestingly, when viewing gender inequality from a Japanese perspective, another contributor is that not all women want to alter imbalance since they can still benefit from it. In “Gender Inequality and Family Formation in Japan,” Robert Marshall points out that Japanese women who stay at home gain more than they lose. Compared to homemakers in the U.S., “full-time [homemakers continue] to earn more cultural respect in Japan.” Society praises those who follow gender roles, so women are regarded as well-behaving if they become homemakers. Moreover, in Japan, staying at home offers women financial security. Japanese wives usually have “exclusive management of family finances” where “husbands turn over their salaries” to wives and only receive a monthly allowance. Gender inequality in households prevents women from having their own life, but in turn creates personal autonomy that can be difficult for women to achieve in a sexist society. If women can just stay at home and get free money, then why even work? Japanese wives let go of combating inequality when they have respect and money, the two things that one possibly needs to succeed in life. Clearly, society has perpetuated gender

inequality by making embodying gender roles an accomplishment.

Indeed, all these factors contribute to the persistent cycle of gender inequality, where inequality contributes to affirmation then to more inequality. Women's voices are not heard. According to Oi, "women make up just 9.9% of lawmakers in parliament's more powerful lower house," so naturally, making policies with regard to women's desires is very unlikely. Professor Honda seconds this statement by saying, in Japan, "the average age of parliament members is the highest among developed nations," meaning that "the voices of women and young people go largely unheard" because older men, who tend not to understand either women or young people, create the laws. Women being muted in society affirms their satisfaction with their current situation and prevents different opinions from breaking "this asymmetrical situation, resulting in its replication and perpetuation." This cycle is difficult to be ameliorated with a single policy as it "requires the complete realignment of each of these social systems" of the Japanese-style society. Indeed, gender inequality created by government policies and exacerbated by cultural norms is silently affirmed by the lack of women's voices, contributing to the cycle of inequality, which requires overhaul of the social system to ameliorate.

Most importantly, gender inequality is difficult to alter because although the government is trying to ameliorate the issue, the results are frustrating. Rather than overhauling the entire system, the government encourages women to join the workforce with a series of small steps, as illustrated in "Womenomics is Pushing Abenomics Forward." Starting with "speeding up the appointment of women to positions as high-ranking national public officials," the government sends the message that women can be powerful too. The government would then build 400,000 preschools, giving women more time to focus on personal enrichment. However, the effect of these strategies is disappointing. Although the government "aims to increase…the percentage of

women in leadership positions to 30%" by 2020, as Iida points out, "The proportion of women in managerial positions was only 4.4% in 2017." The real employment rate is much smaller than the proposed one, so clearly, the government needs to think of more efficient ways to help women return to the workforce if they want to boost the economy. Although the small steps are raising women's employment rate, Japan still has a long way to go until gender balance is achieved.

In conclusion, the prominent gender inequality issue in Japan is created by government policies, exacerbated by cultural beliefs, then replicated through the cycle of inequality, making it impossible for women to achieve equality in a short period of time. Everyone looks at the truth differently, and in Japan, people believe that gender imbalance is the truth that benefits society as a whole. This explains the difficulties that one may face when trying to alter inequality because of how it not only is built into the legal and social system but also gets reproduced in people's minds. Overhauling the entire system would rock the foundation, but people must take small steps such as amplifying women's voices to ameliorate inequality and prevent Japan from becoming an aging-society. However, seeing how inequality has permeated Japanese society, will the people speak up?

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