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Japanese Women in the Workforce: Tradition Versus Equality

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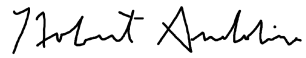

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Abstract

For decades, women in Japan have advocated for gender equality, especially for increased support in entering the work force. However, it has been difficult to increase women's rights without compromising traditional ideals. As more women needed to enter the workforce in the 1990s due to economic circumstances, gender equality has become increasingly called into question. The role of the office lady and the role of female politicians reflect the limited role women have in the workplace. This is reinforced by state legislation, which are created by a government overrepresented by men. These policies aim to promote economic development and address the national issues of low birth rate, economic stagnation, and decreased labor participation. However, this paper argues that gender inequality in Japan is perpetuated by traditional social values that influence employment practices and government policy, exemplified by women's limited role in the workplace and the political system.

Keywords: Japanese women, gendered division of labor, women's rights, Liberal Democratic Party, gender equality, office lady/ladies (OL), women in politics

Introduction

Gender inequality pervades essentially every country and Japan is no exception. Japan's government has identified the low-birth rate, the aging population, economic stagnation, and low participation in the workforce as national goals. Gender inequality is closely related to all these issues. Women in Japan particularly struggle with equality within the workplace. Despite having high levels of educated women, there are few women present in the upper managerial positions, gender pay gaps, and other issues that prevent women from excelling in their careers. Therefore, the central research question that informs this paper is, "Why have Japanese women struggled with career advancement and workplace discrimination?" Situated in East Asia, and influenced by traditional Confucian ideology, Japan offers insight into how social values have limited women's role in the workplace and politics.

This paper will first explore a cultural perspective that looks at how Confucianism influenced gender ideology, which in turn gendered divided spheres of labor. It will then explain how the end of World War II influenced Japan as a society, economically, and politically. The post-WWII economic success was halted by the real-estate bubble that popped in the '90s and women had to enter the work force to support their families and economy. To adjust to this necessary change, the government passed various legislation that aims to assist women in career advancement. To analyze the effects of these actions taken for women's advancement in the workplace, this paper will analyze the position of office ladies and women in politics. The position of the office lady highlights the vulnerability and limitations women face within the workforce. Looking at women in politics helps to illustrate the difficulty women face when attempting to enter elite and professional careers. It also shows the challenges facing Japan's male-dominated government when writing legislation aimed at promoting women. By researching and analyzing these various factors, this paper will show that societal values have a large impact in determining modern-day circumstances for women. Therefore, the main argument put forth is that gender inequality in Japan is perpetuated by traditional social values that influence employment practices and government policy, exemplified by women's limited role in the workplace and the political system.

Concept and Methodology

Before presenting the context and evidence, it is important to explain the research frameworks and methodology used to investigate and analyze this topic. This paper will take on a case study format, borrowing terminology utilized by Darian-Smith, and McCarty (2017). They define the subject of the case study as "a person, a community, an institution, an event) [that] provides evidence that is used to analyze the object of the study (e.g., inequality, policy impacts, mental disorders)" (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017). In this paper, the subject is Japanese women in the workforce, while the object is gender inequality or the systematic oppression of women. By analyzing women in opposite positions in the workforce, this paper will show that neither position enables women to thrive, which demonstrates the larger issue of gender inequality in Japan. A second subject is the Liberal Democratic Party, the dominating party of Japanese democracy, which enables the systematic oppression of women. Having a one-party dominated democracy sounds ideal because legislation is easy to pass, but diverse representation is arguably important for a successful democracy. This could explain why policies have not addressed the concerns of women, since there are few women in high-ranking positions like politics.

The main global dimensions that are relevant to this study are the intersectional dimension and the economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017). The culture of Japan and the economic circumstances have magnified gender inequality, which is a significant crux of the argument. The political dimension is also important because understanding the state's structure is important to understand the policies that they passed to address their national goals.

I also apply a feminist framework that contrasts cultural and liberal feminism. As explained by Taylor and Rupp, "…cultural feminism is based on an essentialist view of the differences between women and men" (Taylor & Rose, 1993, p.32). This means that men and women are perceived as inherently different, and they should be treated differently because of it. Cultural feminism is much more palatable for Japanese society because it is based on the notion that women and men are intrinsically different but equal. In contrast, liberal feminism posits that men and women are the same and should

be treated the same (Alcoff,1988). Liberal feminism is more closely associated with Western ideas of feminism, where they believe that, “racism and any form of political, social, or economic discrimination or oppression for reasons of gender…or philosophical temperament are evils no morally sensitive society can or will indefinitely allow” (Almeder, 1994, p.299).

This paper relies heavily on secondary sources on gender inequality in Japan. Much of the extensive existing literature focuses on what women are struggling with and the evolution of feminism in Japan. Some literature looks at the state’s role in formulating policy geared towards feminism. This paper relies on journal articles, government materials, books, and news articles to answer the research question. As far as limitations in the data, the research and completion of this project needed to be started and completed within less than a year, which dissuaded the use field research or the collection of original primary sources. There are references to Japanese news outlets with coverage in English, but looking at information in Japanese could allow for a different perspective or access to new sources. However, my current capacity to read Japanese may not suffice to properly utilize those sources.

Society, Polity, and Economy in Japan

First, this paper offers a brief history on how Confucianism informed Japan’s gender ideology and how that led to the creation of gendered spheres of labor. Then it moves to explain how the end of WWII changed Japan’s government from an imperial monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. This led to women’s suffrage and an impassioned commitment to economic development. The bursting of the real-estate bubble in 1992 led to women needing to enter the workforce due to high inflation and economic stagnation. Women face discrimination and have failed to thrive within the workplace due to long-held traditional values about gender. Part of the problem is the male-dominated government run by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP); a conservative party led by men. The government has adopted various governmental legislation such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, The Basic Law to Promote a Gender Equal Society, Law for the Promotion of Women’s Advancement, and the Law for the Promotion of Women’s Parity in Politics to help women combat discrimination and

limitations within the workplace. The effectiveness of this legislation will then be analyzed in the following section.

Traditionally, Japan is a patrilineal society that has been strongly influenced by Confucianism. A patrilineal society is a society that bases ancestry and heritage off male relatives. In Japan's case, this severely limited a woman's autonomy and ability to engage in civil society as they were part of the "inside". There is a social concept in Japan that is called Uchi-Soto (内外(うちそと)). Uchi-Soto translates to "inside" and "outside" respectively. A person has an "inside group", which is themselves and their family and others are the "outside". However, there is also a desire to fit into the "inside", to "be an insider", and or uphold the status quo. This attitude is exemplified in the Japanese expression, "derukui wa utareru" (出(で)る杭(くい)は打(う)たれる). This saying means, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down". In other words, if you draw attention to yourself or stick out, you will be "hammered" back down to blend in with the rest of society. This concept of uniformity coupled with Confucian values on the importance of social hierarchy and order, led to a gendered division of spheres of influence.

These social dynamics significantly informed Japan's gender ideology. Women were responsible for the domestic sphere (uchi, 内(うち)), and being a "Good Wife and Wise Mother" (ryōsai kenbo) 良妻賢母(りょうさいけんぼ)) became strongly associated with femininity. "Good Wife and Wise Mother" was a traditional East Asian ideal that influenced femininity in Japan, China, and South Korea (Boling, 2008). On the other hand, men were responsible for the labor sphere (soto, 外(そと)) and being a breadwinner became strongly associated with masculinity.

The end of World War II signaled a turning point for Japan's social landscape. The United Stated occupied Japan from 1945-1952, and it was under this occupation that Japan wrote its new Post War Constitution in 1947. The 1947 Constitution is most famous for Article 9's renunciation of war, but Article 14 also had considerable impact on Japan's society. Article 14 reads, "All of the people are equal under the law and

there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin" (Constitution of Japan). This is significant because it reads "people" instead of "men", which means that Article 14 was the first legal government document that identified women and men as equal citizens. Article 14's author, Beate Sirota Gordon, was raised in Japan and was familiar with its culture and its impact on women. She wanted to "give rights that were very detailed and explicit so that they could not be misinterpreted"(Japanese American National Museum, 2010, para. 3). Therefore, the adoption of Article 14 exposed Japanese women to a host of new opportunities and rights, which included voting, equal education, participation in politics, and selecting their own husbands (Bullock, 2009). There was now an unprecedented amount of female autonomy that was embraced by Japanese women.

Another significant consequence of the end of WWII was the transformation of Japan's political system. Following WWII, Japan transitioned to a parliamentary system, creating the bicameral legislature called the National Diet. The upper house is the House of Chancellors, and the lower house is the House of Representatives. Japan practices democracy, however, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan has controlled the government since 1955. They briefly lost power from 1993 to 1994 and from 2009 to 2012 (Li, 2024). The LDP was originally founded by the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party, both of which were conservative parties. Because of their conservative standing and their long-standing monopoly on power, it has been said that the LDP is not liberal or democratic (Dalton, 2022). The LDP has had very low numbers of female representation, with only 11% of all LDP Diet Members being women as of 2023 (Asahi Shinbun, 2023). The LDP hopes to have women make up 35% of their candidates by 2025 (Otake, 2023). It is important to look at the state of Japan's government as they are the ones passing legislation. Having one-party dominance has allowed efficient passing of legislation, but the lack of female representation presents one explanation for its ineffectiveness in targeting gender inequality.

Another important consequence of the end of WWII was Japan's rapid economic development that later stagnated in the '90s. After renouncing its right to war, Japan reoriented itself to improving its economy and it looked to the US for help. US

intervention and this new allyship helped Japan to restructure its economy and become an economic power in two decades. They did this mainly through a state-led intervention or state-led development model. This model involves the government intervening in the market to ensure that targeted industries and businesses succeeded rather than letting the market naturally determine the outcome. In Japan's case, the government championed certain businesses or sectors and controlled policies to ensure their exports were successful abroad. By doing so, Japan became one of the leading economies and exporters.

However, in 1971, President Nixon ended the Bretton Woods system, which meant the USD was no longer pegged to the gold standard. Nixon was concerned about trade deficits and inflation, so he decided they needed to devalue the USD. At this time, Japan had large current account surpluses due to the mass number of exports, and now had to acclimate to an appreciation of the yen. Later, in 1985 during the Plaza Accord, the US, Japan, Germany, the UK, and France reached a decision to depreciate the US dollar against the yen yet again. The large current account surplus, insufficient domestic consumption, and the appreciation of the yen created a property bubble or the "bubble economy" (バブル景気(けいき)), which burst in 1992. The bursting of the bubble led to extreme economic stagnation in Japan, which continues today (Wan, 2019).

With Article 14 of the Constitution and the bursting of the economic bubble, participation rates of female workers greatly increased. Even though women were granted more rights in 1947, they did not need to enter the workforce. Their husbands, who often worked as salarymen, were able to support the entire family because of the rapid economic development. So, women who did work were not trying to pursue their careers, they were doing so because they could. They would often leave work when they got married or when they had children. The breadwinner-housewife model in Japan is often referred to as the salaryman model or the Shōwa model after the period. The salaryman model was no longer feasible after 1992 when the bubble economy burst. Most families needed dual income to combat inflation. The gendered spheres of the inside and outside began to overlap.

As previously mentioned, women did enter the workforce prior to the ‘90s, but participation was very low (Council on Foreign Relations). One explanation is that women were not properly supported and considered equal in the workplace. Some of the issues that confronted women included assumed retirement at marriage, sexual harassment, and inequal pay gaps. For example, an old common practice was the shoulder tap or “kata-tataki” (肩叩き).This practice was essentially tapping an employee on the shoulder as an indirect indication that they were to leave their jobs. Women would often be tapped on the shoulder by their male supervisors to pressure them into marriage retirement. Another method would also be peer pressure to avoid becoming an unmarried middle-aged woman as being unmarried is seen as undesirable by both men and women (Takemaru, 2011). Sexual harassment was not considered a form of discrimination until the EEOL’s 1997 Amendment, as it was considered a private issue, not a public one (Huey, 1997). This is in line with the value of social conformity, and not disrupting the order of the workplace.

To remedy some of the inequality, Japan’s government passed the Equal Employment Opportunities Law (EEOL) in 1986. This law was created with the intention of eliminating workplace discrimination in hiring, pay wages, assigning tasks, and promotions but did not have a legal reinforcement mechanism. For example, there were no sanctions for companies or businesses that did not follow the law (Molony, 1995). Companies and businesses were able to circumvent the EEOL even further by creating a dual-track system. The dual-track system was comprised of a clerical and an integrated track. These tracks also became gendered and allowed companies to continue privileging their male employees. The dual track system and its consequences will be further explored in the following section on Japanese office ladies.

The government also passed the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society, which pushed companies to establish gender quotas for managerial positions. The goal was to have 30% of managerial positions filled by women within 10 years, with hopes of having 20% of positions filled by the end of 2000. (Gender Equality Bureau). This was outlined in the Basic Plan 2000. In 2000, 9.4% of managerial positions were filled by women. And, as of 2023, only 14.6% of all managerial positions in Japan are filled by women

(International Labour Organization). The 30% quota was later restated in the fifth revision of the Basic Plan that was released in 2021. There is no set deadline for this quota, other than “as early as possible during the 2020’s” (The Fifth Basic Plan, 2021).

The Act for the Promotion of Women’s Advancement was passed in 2016 and it stipulates that companies and governments with over 300 employees are required to track gender and employment data that includes the rate of new female employees, gender gap in tenure, working hours, and rates of women in management positions. Companies also need to produce action plans to improve gender equality with concrete goals and measures of progress. They are then required to disclose their data and findings. It was later amended to include companies with over 100 employees, instead of 300 (UN Women, 2020). The main weakness of this legislation is that there is no real enforcement to ensure companies are self-reporting. The report does not include gender gaps in compensation, which is another area where women are left vulnerable (Dalton, 2017).

The last significant legislation to consider is the Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field (2018). Article 2 section 1 asserts, “The promotion of gender equality in the political field is to be undertaken with the aim of making the numbers of male and female candidates as even as possible in the elections of the members of the House of Representatives, the House of Councillors, and the councils of local governments” (Act on Promotion of Gender Equality, 2018). As of 2022, women constituted 10% of parliament seats, which has 713 seats total (UN Women, 2023). However, there is no penalty for parties who do not meet the equal sorting of political candidates (Otake, 2023).

Although not a piece of legislation, the government did endorse a campaign in 2016 called “Ikumen”. “Ikumen” is a play on words, to combine two words, “ikuji” (育児) and “ikemen” (イケメン). Ikuji means childcare or child rearing and ikemen is used to describe an attractive guy. The idea began in the 2000’s, but the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare later officially began the Ikumen Project to help change societal attitudes surrounding the domestic sphere. The government hoped to make active fatherhood appealing to Japanese men since fathers were often absent from childcare

due to long working hours. They also sponsored classes and lectures to teach men, married or single, how to be better fathers and help alleviate the stress on women. The classes included teaching men how to be more considerate towards their wives and how to take care of their babies, such as changing diapers and bathing them (Michelson, 2020). However, in 2022 a survey conducted by the labor and welfare ministry reported that only 17% of men took childcare leave. The government wants to raise this to 50% by 2025. Current reasons men give to explain why they do not take paternity leave include a decrease in income as well as peer pressure (NHK World, 2023). There is a lack of efficacy behind the Ikumen campaign, if men continue to remain uninvolved in the raising of their children.

Arguments and Evidence

Moving forward, this paper will analyze the case for gender inequality within Japan by utilizing two examples as case studies. First, the explanation of the office lady and analysis of their position will highlight the challenges women face when entering the workforce. The office lady is often responsible for repetitive and monotonous tasks and is inherently short in tenure as its expected women will retire at marriage or around child-rearing age. They are not taken seriously and are seen as disposable in the workplace as they lack individuality and are unable to advance their careers further. After completing a brief analysis of the office lady, I move to focus on women in politics. This is to offer a juxtaposition of sorts to compare how women remain disadvantaged regardless of what career path they choose. The lack of female representation in politics highlights the challenges facing women who want to enter elite careers but are limited due to lack of party support and societal values. This in turn prevents legislation that considers the hardships women exclusively endure as sole caretakers who need to participate in the workforce.

The easiest way to understand the gender inequality in Japan is to apply a cultural feminist framework to the challenges that Japanese women face. As previously established, Japan was a patrilineal society that believed a person’s role in society informed how they should behave. This later determined Japan’s gender ideology. These long-standing ideas made it difficult for men to accept women in the workplace.

And so, in order to best exemplify the situation of women's role in the workforce, this paper will first turn to explain and examine the position of the office lady (OL).

The Office Lady (OL)

The office lady, or OL for short, is a position in nearly every office in Japan. They are similar to secretaries in the US in that they perform administrative or clerical tasks to help the efficiency of the office. The OL position began to appear following WWII but increased in popularity in following years. They are typically young girls who just graduated high school, junior college, or a four-year university. Companies hire OLs with the implicit expectation that she will retire in a few years once she is engaged or before she has children. Therefore, the OL position is characterized by short tenure and an insufficient recognition of individuality among the women they hire for these roles.

The position of an OL itself was built to keep women in menial roles and maintain as much of the traditional system as possible. For example, when the EEOL outlawed discrimination based on a person's sex, they created the dual track system. The dual track career system consists of the shōgōshoku (integrated track) and the ippanshoku (clerical track). As written in her book on OLs, Ogasawara explains, "Those in sōgōshoku were trained to become managers, and ippanshoku employees worked as their assistants. The deceptively gender-neutral terms cloaked the fact that integrated-track employees were almost all male and clerical workers were without exception female" (Ogasawara, 1998, p. 28). The creation of the dual-track system was how companies were able to include women in the workforce in a limited capacity while maintaining the traditional system. If the LDP had been more aggressive in their legislative attempts, it would have been harder for companies to implement and promote policies that circumvented the rules.

OL's were labeled as a "full-time permanent" but, they are inherently short in tenure. Due to the expectation that women will quit their jobs in a few years, the woman who fulfills the OL position is therefore treated as disposable. Unlike US secretaries, one salaryman is not assigned a personal OL, a group of six or so men are often assigned a pair of OLs. The men trust the OLs to complete the smaller tasks, like typing

of memos or making copies, and ensuring office efficiency. However, the one responsibility that seems to be the subject of many OL's annoyance is serving tea. OLs have some autonomy in prioritizing the tasks they are given, but when they are asked to serve tea to the office's guests, that autonomy disappears. They must stop everything they are doing to serve tea. As Ogasawara writes, "OLs detested serving tea because it emphasized their subordinate position" (Ogasawara, 1998, p.42). Serving tea is also reminiscent of pre-modern responsibilities for Japanese women (Wallis, 2008). The act of serving tea, while seemingly superficial, perpetuates the gendered divisions of labor by replicating the same inside-outside, or women-men structure respectively, in the workforce. Serving tea physically reduces an OL's autonomy by interrupting her current task. It also simultaneously reduces her theoretical autonomy by relegating her to the subordinated position, which is then emphasized through the act itself.

This replication of the inside-outside system within the workplace also speaks to the objectification of OLs. There is a fantasy surrounding OLs due to the fact that they are characteristically young and bright women who take on a role in the workplace that resembles that of the salarymen's wives at home. Within this fantasy, a young OL joins a company, meets her husband, and has a marriage retirement to fulfill her filial and domestic responsibilities. It was not exclusive to men, as women still prioritized family over employment (Woźny, 2022). This romanticized fantasy reveals a lot about how people perceive society and gender expectations. Following this logic, women can work but only in short-term positions like an OL, as they are expected to find a partner, quit their jobs, and take care of their children soon after starting employment while their husbands continue work regardless. This fantasy exemplifies the ongoing nation-wide nostalgia for the Shōwa Era (1926-1989) and traditional gender roles while acknowledging the practical needs of the economy. It also reveals another nuanced dynamic between salarymen and OLs. Even though the woman herself holds little value to the men due to the generalization of the OL position and the position's limit on career advancement, they are still the object of desire within this fantasy framework, which reinforces their secondary status in the workplace.

To a Western reader, these conditions may seem undesirable, and it would be logical to assume that the OLs would mobilize and protest their circumstances.

However, this is not the case. Women are generalized during their tenure as OLs. Their individuality is stripped from their position. This is exemplified by the use of “girls” (女(おんな)の子(こ)) to refer to the OLs in the office when speaking to an outsider, meaning anyone who did not directly work with the OL. Ogasawara recalls an experience at the bank she used to work at, “Thus a man speaking to another man on the phone often said, “I’ll have one of the girls go get it,” or “Our girl made a mistake”” (Ogasawara, 1998, p.31). Ogasawara continues and highlights the sentiment felt by OLs, “Being treated as “one of the girls” made many OLs feel that they were mere replaceable cogs in the gigantic machine” (Ogasawara, 1998, p.31)”

This generalization of OLs is further enforced by the nature of the Japanese workplace hierarchy. Historically, the workplace was characterized by seniority over qualification. For an OL, this means that whenever a company hires a new batch of young women, they are labeled as equals based on their company entrance year rather than their credentials because the nature of an OLs work does not require any skill specializations. For example, a high school graduate who has four years of experience at a company would be the senior to a woman with a four-year college degree even if they are the same age. These complex and nuanced power dynamics coupled with the short tenure of the OL position have prevented women from mobilizing and questioning their circumstances (Ogasawara, 1998). Another component to consider is the previously stated cultural value of conformity. It is quite likely that women would be less likely to cause a stir and mobilize even if they had more if they had more invested in their careers. This is further reinforced through the example of men in the workforce who complain about working long hours or excessive overtime but persevere regardless. There is a hesitation to publicize their personal grievances and disrupt the working order.

On one hand, women wanted better working conditions that did not require them to feel second to men. However, they also prioritized having children and starting their own families. This directly speaks to the cultural feminist framework because Japanese women still value their roles as wives, and mothers, which is associated with femininity. They do not want to engage in the same work that men do necessarily. The first point is

the impracticality of the integrated track. Some companies require their employees to put in 80 hours of overtime each month (Saiidi, 2018). Men are more readily able to do so, while women are not because of their domestic responsibilities.

Another point for consideration is that women see the career-track as masculine, and because of the dynamics of Japan's society, women do not want to appear masculine. The idea of being a "carnivore woman" (nikushokujyōshi 肉食女子) is not appealing to men or women, as they too are strongly influenced by cultural feminism. Since gender ideology is so entrenched within Japan's society, traditional femininity is seen as desirable. Men want women who are passive and do not exhibit masculine features and women want to fit into this standard (Woźny, 2022). This is why the government launched the Ikumen campaign in 2010, to help change society's understanding of gender ideology. However, it has not been effective because the government has not been strict enough in their legislation. They emphasize that they want 30% of women in managerial positions, but do not have effective mechanisms in place to ensure companies follow their rules. In fact, it is hard for companies and society to implement these changes when the government itself lacks female representation. Office ladies exemplify the marginalized or disenfranchised experiences of women in the clerical track.

On the other side of the spectrum, it could be helpful to look at women at the top. This paper will now shift to analyzing women in politics to show how and why it is difficult to increase female representation in government positions.

Women in Politics

The rewriting of the Constitution in 1947 gave women an unprecedented amount of freedom and autonomy. Perhaps one of the most significant changes was giving women the right to vote and participate in government. Despite the constitution being adopted in 1947, the government held elections on April 10th, 1946, for the House of Representatives. Of the 2,7770 candidates total, and out of 79 female candidates, 39 women won seats in the House of Representatives (Ōgai, 1996). This is a considerable number of women who entered the House of Representatives as they were excited to

take advantage of these new privileges. It may seem surprising that so many women were quickly elected to office, but this is because of Japan's previous voting system.

From 1947 to 1993, Japan utilized a multi-vote plurality system with some large districts. This is important for women because it allowed more political diversity. The large districts represented more members of smaller parties. Larger parties had the financial means and connections to effectively campaign in the majority of districts. At this time, the LDP had not yet been formed. However, women were unlikely to join large political parties, in general, because many of them were conservative and did not think women belonged in politics. In fact, the 1947 election for the House of Representatives saw 29 of these 39 women who ran for reelection, lose their seats. After the 1946 election, the conservative faction within the government wanted to have a new election for all members of the Diet. They believed that the large constituency gave women and socialists an unfair advantage. And so, the government redrew districts to make them smaller to a medium sized district. The government decided to dissolve the Diet and change the electoral system to a multi-member single-vote system. This was disadvantageous to female politicians who lacked the resources to campaign themselves for re-election (Ōgai, 1996).

The LDP was created in 1955 when the Liberal Party and Democratic Party merged to create a strong force for stability. Due to its merge, the LDP easily won most seats within the Diet, and quickly became the dominating political party (Gaunder, 2011). This was disadvantageous to women because women were most likely to run as independents. Typically, candidates run in elections at the local level to build themselves up for national elections. However, women were markedly absent from local and prefectural politics. This is because they often do not have the economic means or resources to successfully run as independents. However, they are unable to receive backing from major political parties because many of them are conservative. In 1995, nearly four decades after women gained suffrage, female representation in office was at 2.8% at the prefecture level, 8.2% of city offices, and 2.9% of town and village offices (Usui et al., 2003). Currently, 16% of members of local deliberative bodies are women (UN Women, 2023). This is the paradox that confronts Japan, the government endorses

more female representation in the workforce and politics yet does not provide women with the circumstances to truly thrive.

The LDP is the largest political party, but there are factions within the party as well. Within the LDP, the factions fight for control over the party by becoming the party president. The party president, during the LDP streak between 1955 to 1993, determined the prime minister. Because of this, it was common for individual factions to endorse certain candidates and fund their campaigns if the candidate promised loyalty to their faction leader in the party presidential election (Gaunder, 2011). They would not have chosen a woman in this situation due to her lack of connections and influence. Since women had only been recently granted suffrage in the 50's it would have been unlikely for the LDP to endorse a woman as a candidate due to her lack of connections and influence. In fact, it took outside influence to push for women's rights. The first instance of women's political rights being advocated for by outside forces was when General MacArthur had, "put "the emancipation of women through enfranchisement" at the top of his list of "Five Great Reforms"" (Ōgai, 1996, p.85). It was through Beate Sirota Gordon that women received suffrage in 1946.

From the '50s onwards, women continued to struggle to maintain a position in politics. Until the late '80s, women constituted less than 4% of the entire National Diet (Sheel, 2003). In 1975, women held 1.5% of Lower House seats, 4.8% in 1999, and 7.3% in 2000 (Usui et al., 2003). Japan has recorded historically low numbers of female participation in government positions despite claiming desired increased participation. Female participation has not significantly improved as women only make up 10% of the entire National Diet as of 2023 (World Bank). Japan did adopt a quota in 2003, where they hoped to have 30% of government positions filled by women (Kyodo, 2020). However, Japan has continued to rank low on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report with their score being 125th out of 146 countries (Nemoto, 2023).

Based on the National Diet's lack of increased female representation, it follows that the legislation may have been ineffective at dramatically increasing numbers since the government is predominantly run by men. However, it will remain difficult to remedy this problem while Japan continues to operate within the traditional cultural feminist framework. In other words, the assumption that women are solely meant for the

domestic sphere because they are women has hindered the efficacy of the legislation by preventing women from entering the work sphere. As Usui, Rose, and Kageyama adeptly explain, “employment and family policies strengthened family responsibilities as women's primary roles. They emphasized complementary roles of men in the labor market and women in the family, rather than the treatment of men and women as equal individuals.” (Usui, et al., 2003, p. 88). This is seen with the example of the first version of the EEOL, where companies simply created a dual track system to circumvent gender discrimination and keep women away from career advancement that could hinder child rearing. There is a disconnect between the legislation and the real-life problems of women, which include discrimination, harassment, and impractical working conditions. As Molony explains, “Most employers opposed legislating equality of employment opportunities, however weakly that might be defined. Many stated that women were both physically and emotionally different from men and therefore should be treated differently in the workplace” (Molony, 1995, p.274). It is the underlying social values that influence the treatment of women in the workplace. Yet Japanese women are stuck in a paradox because they are unable to improve their situation despite government endorsement because they do not have access to positions where they can make a stronger difference.

This is not to say that there are no official departments or outlets to advocate for or make change. In 1947, Japan established the Women’s and Minors’ Bureau, but there was some resistance due to the fact women and children were under the same department. This sent the message that women and children were perceived as the same and that they needed to depend on men. It was also filed under the Home Ministry, which was later dissolved. The bureau was not well-received, and it was held with less regard in comparison to other ministries. This is evident in its old nickname, the “Island of Amazons” (女護が島). Later, female members of Japan’s Social Democratic Party advocated for a separate bureau for women. At this time, gender equality was a low priority for male politicians. And so, women and children remained together under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, specifically under the Equal Employment, Children, and Families Bureau (Ogawa, 1997). Part of the

Equal Employment, Children, and Families Bureau's mission is to promote, "a society where both men and women can jointly participate in activities at their places of work and at home as well as in their community. These include measures designed to secure equal employment opportunities for men and women and their fair treatment, to support having a family life and a career, and to promote part-time work, family work and teleworking" (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare). Women's rights or gender equality falls under the Gender Equality Bureau, which is a Cabinet office. This is the office that is responsible for the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society, and the subsequent Basic Plans. These are the existing avenues within Japan's government that are available to help women.

Overall, the issue of female representation in politics needs to be improved, if Japan wants to see real change when it comes to gender equality. Since the creation of Japan's parliament, there has never been a female prime minister out of the 64 prime ministers. They have all been men. In fact, women are often excluded from positions that are typically known as gateways to the prime minister position, such as the main trade or finance departments. For example, current Prime Minister Kishida has five women in his cabinet. This is the highest number of female ministers within the Cabinet. Despite this, they are kept in positions such as the Minister of Reconstruction, Minister of State for Policies Related to Children, Minister of Economic Security, and so forth (Reynolds, 2023). This shows that despite women making it to the Prime Minister's cabinet, they are again limited in their opportunities for advancement. It also shows how men are unwilling to allow women to infiltrate top positions, despite supporting the promotion of women.

Implications and Recommendations

Traditional values have a significant role to play in how women are treated in Japan's society. Women are still not seen as compatible with the work sphere and are still seen as mothers and caretakers first. This is not unique to Japan as China and South Korea also struggle with similar challenges when it comes to gender equality. All three countries are strongly influenced by Confucian ideology. In the 1980's the Chinese

government promoted mass education of all citizens, which led to an influx of highly educated women. Despite this, there is a phenomenon of “leftover women” (剩女, sheng nu) to define women past the age of 27 or so who are unmarried. Here too there is a pressure to get married early and have children to promote society and maintain order (Kozinets & Liu, 2021). In South Korea, there is an ongoing movement calling for resistance against men called the 4B movement. “4B” is short for the four commitments women are making. As explained by Sussman, “4B is shorthand for four Korean words that all start with bi-, or “no”: The first no, bihon, is the refusal of heterosexual marriage. Bichulsan is the refusal of childbirth, biyeonae is saying no to dating, and bisekseu is the rejection of heterosexual sexual relationships” (Sussman, 2023, para.5). Sussman goes onto explain that the 4B movement is how South Korean women are taking back their autonomy against the rampant violence and harassment committed by men. Women who participate in the 4B movement believe that South Korean men are unable to be redeemed, and therefore are giving up men altogether (Sussman, 2023).

Looking at China and South Korea, it is apparent that gender inequality rooted in traditional conservative values is not uniquely Japanese, but rather a potential regional issue. Another limitation in this project was the lack of time and resources to investigate East Asia as a region and the impacts of Confucianism on modern day society. However, looking at neighboring countries may offer some perspective for Japanese women, as they could also adopt a radical approach to gender inequality like South Korean women. Investigating a regional pattern could yield more evidence that reinforces the argument that conservative values have limited women’s opportunities and advancement.

Moving forward, Japan needs to have more female representation in government office. As stated before, Japan has not reached its 20% or 30% goals of women in managerial and or government positions. Women have not been properly supported to attain success in their careers or a positive work-life balance. As seen through the former legislation and Ikumen campaign, the government needs to implement harsher mechanisms for companies who do not follow the rules or who circumvent the law. By increasing female representation in politics, it will help to increase diversity among the

LDP. It will offer a new perspective on policymaking that comes directly from women themselves.

Another suggestion is the utilization of other marginalized communities to achieve national goals. For example, to combat the low-birth rate and low labor force participation, Japan could look to the LGBTQ+ community or to immigrants. They could also benefit from improving the welfare of other non-nuclear families such as single parents. However, seeing as how Japan is struggling to improve gender equality, it may be difficult to propose more progressive reform for these marginalized communities. They fall too far out of the government's conservative scope. However, if the national goals are that troubling to the government, it would be beneficial to operate outside of their social norms.

Conclusions

This paper sought to investigate Japanese women's equality in the workplace, by applying a global case study framework. This paper aimed to show the broader issue of gender inequality through the specific case of Japanese women in the workforce. Japan has labeled the low birth-rate, the aging population, low workforce participation, and economic stagnation as national goals. The national government has identified women's empowerment as a solution for these issues. As such, they have tried to promote gender equality, but there is still considerable work to be done. Beginning with the traditional influence of Confucianism, this paper explained how gendered spheres of labor informed gender ideology, which has lasting effects today. Women have been struggling with the same issue for years, which is feeling second to men within the workplace. First, women are seen as disposable and lack individuality within the workplace because of the expectation they will quit to have families. The government has tried to pass legislation such as the EEOL, or the Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field. However, companies and the government put mechanisms, such as the dual track system, to superficially promote women while maintaining the status quo.

A pattern emerges that shows women choosing the clerical track over the integrated career track because of its association with masculinity and the impracticality of the expected work hours. To investigate women who do pursue their careers, this paper looked at women in politics. The percentage of female members in the National Diet remains low because there is a lack of support for female candidates by larger political parties like the LDP. They tend to support more well-connected and wealthier candidates in exchange for factional support. Women get lost in this grab for power as male politicians are competing amongst each other. By increasing female representation in politics, the legislation will naturally shift to support women and apply to women more accurately. Having more women in politics show other women that they can successfully coexist in both the domestic and work sphere. Having more female politicians can also offer a female perspective when drafting legislation that pertain to women. They have the experience and societal expectations that men do not, which seems to be part of the explanation as to why women have been so limited when it comes to career advancement and their roles in the workplace.

Looking forward, this paper lacked research beyond secondary sources, so it would be helpful to conduct more recent interviews on Japanese women and their opinions on Japan's current climate when it comes to gender equality. Another avenue would be to investigate more on-the-ground groups that advocate for women's rights. Researching marginalized groups and how they could help to solve the national goals is another avenue that could be explored. This paper is far from comprehensive, but the idea is to isolate and identify the traditional values that have entrenched themselves into Japan's polity, economy, and society.

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