

# Liberal or Conservative? Analysing the Legacy of Abe's Women's Advancement Policy

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## Abstract

Prime Minister Abe's bold policy proposals focused on women attracted significant attention and various responses. However, going back to the fundamentals, LDP is a conservative political party, and Abe himself identifies as a conservative. During the backlash era, he attacked gender equality and emphasised traditional family values and patriotism. This paper reexamines the implications of the women's policies implemented under his leadership from a gender perspective. It sheds light on the deeply entrenched and complex gender inequality regimes that prevail in Japanese society. It becomes evident that Abe's administration carefully avoided any explicit reference to gender equality, skilfully incorporating recommendations such as promoting three-generation households, while consistently depicting women as operating under the guidance of men, signifying that the government's underlying "traditional" values had not changed. Women's Advancement policy, in essence, implies the deep entrenchment of a Japanese-style patriarchal, vertical society made up of political parties, administration, corporations, and society at large, where women are granted opportunities to succeed through assimilation into a gendered world involving subordination to men.

**Keywords:** Abe administration, Women's Advancement, gender equality, Japanese women

**JEL codes:** Z18, K38

## Introduction

Not many administrations have prominently emphasised “women’s policies”. The policies of the conservative leader Shinzō Abe, Prime Minister of Japan (2006-2007, 2012-2020), are an exception. As a part of Abenomics, the Women’s Advancement policy of the second Abe administration attracted extensive domestic and international interest. The unexpected move of a conservative government pushing for women’s policies likely contributed to the media attention. However, careful consideration of the true meaning of “Women’s Advancement” raises doubts about the related intentions and outcomes. Being implemented in Japan, known for its significant gender gap, suspicions are raised concerning whether the policy has genuinely steered society towards greater gender equality.

Indeed, the gender gap in Japan is one of the greatest among advanced countries. According to the latest results of several international indices that measure gender equality, Japan ranks 125th out of 146 countries on the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index, 55th out of 167 countries on the UN Gender Development Index, and 24th out of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, 2023; WEF, 2023). In the political arena, the proportion of women in the House of Representatives is currently 10%, and in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), only 8% (The House of Representatives, 2023). It is not difficult to claim that the LDP government’s promotion of women’s advancement, particularly under the leadership of the conservative figure Shinzō Abe, has not genuinely prioritised women’s rights and empowerment. Various opinions about Abe’s women’s policy have emerged, including the concerns that it focuses solely on elite women, may inadvertently increase female poverty, and does not contribute to gender equality. Additionally, there are concerns about the rise of neo-liberalism and the perceived contradictions within the policy itself (Dalton, 2017; Dobson, 2017; Miura, 2015; Schieder, 2014).

It should first be noted that laws, regulations, and institutions are not gender-neutral but are informally gendered structures, albeit this may not be immediately visible. Within these structures, gendered relations favouring men are produced, upheld, and reproduced throughout organisational processes. This perspective is pursued in gender-informed institutional and organisational theories (Acker, 1990; Bjarnegård, 2013; Connell, 2005; Kenny, 2007). Acker, in particular, argues that organisations are not gender-neutral but gendered in a male-dominant form, with gender being a fundamental element of all aspects of organisational practices, ranging from cultural issues like imagery and ideology to structural aspects such as power distribution (Acker, 1990, 1992, 1998, 2006). Gender norms are highly “sticky”, and overturning the status quo is not an easy task (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). In this regard, how should we contextualise the essence of the women’s advancement policy championed by the ruling conservative party’s leader? This paper aims to reassess the fundamental objectives of women’s advancement policy, with attention to the nature of the ruling LDP as the incumbent party. It therefore sheds light on the essence of the complex and layered gender inequality regimes

prevalent in Japanese society. In this, the research contributes not only to gender studies but also to the broader field of Japanese studies on an international level, while also improving the understanding of Japanese society.

## 1. LDP's *Ie*-centrism

The LDP has been the ruling party leading Japan since the post-war period, except for a brief time interval. The starkly low representation of women in the ruling party cannot be separated from the phenomenon of Japan's significant gender gap. As a source for exploring the underlying gender perspectives within the LDP, Andō's work (2022) serves as a reference. Andō conceptualises the political orientation of the LDP as "*ie*-centred" and derives insights into how the party perceives women through a detailed analysis of the career paths of female politicians (Andō, 2022). The term "*ie*" can be translated as "family" or "household", and encompasses the concept of patriarchal authority, embodying cultural nuances specific to Japan. It refers not only to the family or kinship group, but also to various other groups that share a sense of familial identity. Nakane, a Japanese social anthropologist, theorised the group-oriented nature of Japanese society using the concept of "*tate*" (verticality; a relationship involving a hierarchical 'pecking order,' such as master-pupil, older-younger person, parent-child, etc.). According to Nakane, how group consciousness persists in Japanese society is clearly exemplified by the traditional and ubiquitous concept of "*ie*", that permeates every nook and cranny of Japanese society, including its vertical relationships. In other words, "*ie*" or familial groups signify both blood-related kinship groups with patriarchal heads and other groupings (such as corporations and organisations) that exhibit patriarchal vertical relationships (Nakane, 1967). With this concept in mind, it becomes evident how LDP, characterised by its strong ties to bloodline-based hereditary politicians (constituting about half of its members, increasing to over 60% in the core leadership during cabinet formation), the presence of individual support groups, and the formation of a vertical (*tate*) type of vote-gathering system, is a typical example of a Japanese-style patriarchal group. The LDP's connections with local electoral districts, often linked to wealthy local figures or prominent families, further reinforce its patriarchal nature. In this context, women are perceived as constituents of this patriarchal group (Andō, 2022).

Female candidates elected to LDP often have a familial or bloodline connection, commonly involving the inheritance of the political stronghold of their deceased or retiring fathers or husbands. This path is referred to as a "mourning election" due to the association with taking over the constituency of a deceased family member. Examples of female politicians who have followed this career path include Yuko Obuchi, a member of the House of Representatives and daughter of the late Keizō Obuchi, the 84th Prime Minister of Japan, as well as Yūko Nakagawa, a member of the House of Representatives and wife of the late Shōichi Nakagawa, who held positions such as Minister of Finance in the Asō Cabinet. Prior to the elections, they were all devoted supporters of their fathers or husbands and actively involved

in supporting them. Additionally, they have strong networks within the party and its support groups. They are considered part of the same group as the LDP and its affiliated entities, and a sense of subordination characterised their existence through their relationship with the patriarchal figure (father or husband).

Another career path for women in the LDP, Andō points out, involves specific professions such as medicine, education, and the media. This contrasts with the diverse career paths pursued by male politicians, which may include local government, jobs as parliamentary secretaries, in the private sector, or bureaucracy. For example, being a nurse can be advantageous in this context, due to the strong connection between the Japanese Nursing Association and LDP as a political entity. The nursing association has independently established a route for supplying female candidates that benefits their interests in national politics and can garner a certain number of votes. Concerning the media, the earlier role of Yuriko Koike – the current Governor of Tokyo, who was also the first female Defence Minister – as a news anchor provided her with visibility and ensured her popularity even before she ran for office (resulting in the expected votes). Her background in the media industry also facilitated her proximity to politics and political parties, contributing to her path to becoming a legislator. Indeed, media figures like Yuriko Koike have been directly approached by prominent LDP politicians – the catalysts for their entry into politics. This suggests that male politicians may actively select female candidates who suit their purposes. It is not coincidental that professions associated with femininity, such as nursing and TV presenter<sup>1</sup>, are prominent career paths for women in politics. Additionally, it is worth noting that women who run for office without having had a career (having solely been homemakers) are typically 100% bloodline successors (Andō, 2022).

Furthermore, after conducting interviews with officials from LDP's election campaign headquarters, Andō reported that if a female and male candidate with the same qualifications apply for a position, the choice will unequivocally favour the male candidate. The former also expressed that the ideal female candidate was someone who would not become the “mistress” of a married man. They further suggested that a woman who appeared to have “abandoned her femininity” could still be considered a viable candidate. This concept can be understood as the “sealing of femininity”, implying that being a woman entails being subservient to one's spouse within a patriarchal system. Female candidates are deemed acceptable if they conform to the role of nurturing “mothers” within the family hierarchy. However, those who deviate from this traditional gender role are expected to relinquish their “femininity”. In fact, unmarried female politicians intentionally attend social gatherings and frequently appear in the company of older male colleagues, recognising that such behaviour fosters a sense of unity and rapport (Andō, 2022). The strategy by which women integrate into male-dominated environments is often referred to as assimilation or subordination and can be considered a typi-

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<sup>1</sup> In Japan, the role of female TV presenters is typically a stereotypically female one associated with patriarchal norms (they appear alongside middle-aged men, listening to them and nodding their heads. Such presenters may also read the news, but this is basically a ‘smiling profession’).

cal example of this (Acker, 1990; Connell, 2005). However, it is important to note that assimilation does not imply achieving parity or equality with men. Instead, it involves adopting a masculine persona and becoming effectively aligned with the male-dominated LDP and the traditional Japanese patriarchal system (Kenny, 2007). Ultimately, these figures remain fundamentally categorised as “women” within the context of the party’s male-dominated structure.

Taking this perspective into account, it is debatable whether LDP has actively pursued gender policies or women’s advancement measures as a means of actively addressing gender inequality. In the following sections, two representative laws in Japan that support the promotion of gender equality will be presented, and their content and the factors contributing to their enactment will be analysed.

## **2. Pressure from the international environment: The Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society**

In the international community, the movement for gender equality began with the inclusion of the principle of gender equality in the United Nations Charter. It continued with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 1967. Article 14 of the post-war Japanese Constitution guarantees equality between men and women as a fundamental human right and stipulates equal labour and educational rights for both genders (Iida, 2018). Despite these provisions, there have been different legal regulations for men and women, such as restrictions on women’s overtime work under the Labor Standards Act, leading to a situation where substantive gender equality in labour is unattainable. The catalyst for the transformation was the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women by the United Nations. In 1985, upon ratifying this Convention, Japan enacted the Act on Securing Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment (Equal Employment Opportunity Act), which came into effect the following year (Hasunuma, 2015). However, this resulted in a career-path-based employment system, where managerial candidates were hired as *sogo-shoku* (mainly men), while *ippan-shoku* (predominantly women) were assigned supportive roles.<sup>2</sup>

Following subsequent legal revisions, hiring only women for *ippan-shoku* positions was prohibited. However, the trend of hiring men as *sogo-shoku* and women as *ippan-shoku* has remained unchanged to this day (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan [MHLW], 2021a, 2021b). When the Equal Employment Opportunity Act was enacted, the ruling party was LDP (under the Nakasone Cabi-

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<sup>2</sup> *Sogo-shoku* positions are designed for individuals who aim for careers in management and leadership that involve dynamic roles with significant responsibilities and opportunities for advancement: namely, career-track positions. *Ippan-shoku* positions, on the other hand, focus on specialised, stable roles with an emphasis on supporting the core functions of the company, offering a more predictable career path: i.e., non-career track positions.

net), needless to say. From the perspective of Japanese patriarchal society, it is evident that although there was a need to align practices with those of the international community, the intention behind the law's establishment was not to suddenly consider women (who had previously worked in supporting roles with the assumption of retirement after marriage) as equal to men. The companies and organisations that implement this law can be seen as adhering to the Japanese patriarchal framework, explained by the concepts of assimilation and subordination mentioned earlier. Most women who have advanced to managerial positions, i.e., *sogo-shoku*, are still unmarried or have no children (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2014). In other words, there is limited opportunity for women to pursue a career path similar to that of men (apart from relinquishing their femininity). Thus, women who conform to the roles of wife, mother, or daughter, and remain subservient to men, end up working as *ippan-shoku*. They may temporarily leave the workforce due to marriage and childbirth, and later return through part-time work or similar arrangements, pursuing a route that does not threaten men.

One additional point to note is that the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in official Japanese use is termed *Danjo-koyō-kikai-kintō-hō*. The term “*kintō*” in Japanese, translated as “equality” in English, has a slightly different nuance. While “equality” represents the concept of fairness or equal numbers, “*kintō*” in Japanese has broader implications. It may be symbolised by the “=” symbol, indicating a degree of approximation or equivalence. When referring to fundamental human rights inherent to everyone, the word “*kintō*” cannot be used. In Japan, there is a tendency to prefer “*kintō*” over “equality” in specific contexts. This is crucial when analysing the topic from a gender perspective (Andō, 2022).

Next is the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society (1999) (*Danjo-kyōdō-sankakushakai-kihon-hō* in Japanese), which originated from the “Fourth World Conference on Women” held in Beijing in September 1995. During this conference, the “Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action” was adopted, urging each country's government to formulate its national action plans by the end of 1996. From Japan, Nosaka Kōken, the Chief Cabinet Secretary and Minister in charge of Women's Issues, attended the conference as the acting Prime Minister. He cited Mao Zedong's words, “Women hold up half the sky”, and expressed Japan's commitment to creating a society with greater women's participation (Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, 1995). However, it is worth noting that Japan's stance was reflected in it sending a male representative to a gathering where women constituted the majority, and even appointing a male minister to be in charge of Women's Issues. As Nosaka stated during the conference, Japan was triggered by the United Nations' efforts and subsequently promoted domestic women's policies. In late 1996, Japan formulated the “Action Plan for Gender Equality 2000”, which led to the establishment and enforcement of the “Basic Act for Gender Equal Society” in 1999. The aim was to promote the formation of a gender-equal society. National and local governments were required to formulate and implement policies aimed at helping to create a gender-equal society (i.e., were cognisant of gender equality). As a result, the Cabinet Office established a Gender Equality Conference to ad-



dress gender equality in its various aspects (Digital Agency of Japan, 1999). However, this remains an obligation that lacks punitive provisions. Moreover, the term “Danjo-kyōdō-sankaku-shakai” (“Gender Equal Society” in English) has a different nuance in Japanese. “Gender Equal Society” translated directly into Japanese should be rendered as “Danjo-byōdō-shakai”. “Danjo-kyōdō-sankaku” implies a broader range of meanings, such as “Men and Women’s Joint Participation/Cooperation”, suggesting that men and women participate together in various aspects of society, not gender equality.

The two laws mentioned above are representative gender-related policies; however, due to the strong influence of a desire to align with international trends during the legislative process, there is little legal continuity, including the subsequent explanation of the Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace. Furthermore, after the enactment of the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society in 1999, as described below, the conservative-led gender backlash strengthened.

### 3. Gender backlash

The phenomenon of a gender backlash is not unique to Japan but acts as a counterforce to feminism, which advocates for women’s liberation and challenges male-dominant societal norms. According to Susan Faludi, the expression “backlash” was coined in the 1980s by the New Right to describe a social phenomenon that targeted feminism. This was identified during the Reagan administration (Faludi, 2009).

In Japan, the passage of the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society in 1999 catalysed a movement in local assemblies that involved attacking the concept of “gender-free”. This term was a Japanese-English hybrid phrase that initially meant the ability to fulfil one’s capabilities freely, without being confined to social gender roles. However, due to its Japanese origin, the interpretation of the term varied, and it became a prime target for conservative forces, since it was perceived to encompass radical ideas that denied all biological and cultural differences between genders. Moreover, sex education in schools was criticised and rejected for potentially disrupting traditional family values (Sok, 2016). As a result, in March 2005, the LDP formed the “Project Team for Investigating Radical Sex Education and Gender-Free Education (PT)”. Shinzō Abe, then Deputy Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party, chaired this PT. The associated interim report expressed concerns about the mainstreaming of gender. It emphasised that a gender-equal society should foster family bonds, community solidarity, and a sense of national devotion, aligning with the later patriotic education promoted by the Abe administration. Additionally, while acknowledging individual freedom in personal life, the report strongly opposed individualism that challenges social norms and established practices perceived to be derived from societal order and history. Many statements in the report criticise such individualism. It should be noted that this paper does not delve into detail, but it is essential to recognise that the conservative members of this PT strongly opposed communism. The report also crit-

icises the mandatory inclusion of gender theory in university curricula, likening it to teaching Marxist economics and explicitly targeting figures like Engels (Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, 2005). In line with the arguments associated with the conservative backlash, in January 2006, the Cabinet Office issued a notice to local governments, stating that the term “gender-free” should not be used, as it could lead to confusion. Subsequently, various forms of action were taken, including the suspension of projects related to gender in public parks and social education, and the removal of gender-related books from libraries (Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, 2006). These activities were influenced by pressure exerted by the conservative backlash faction.

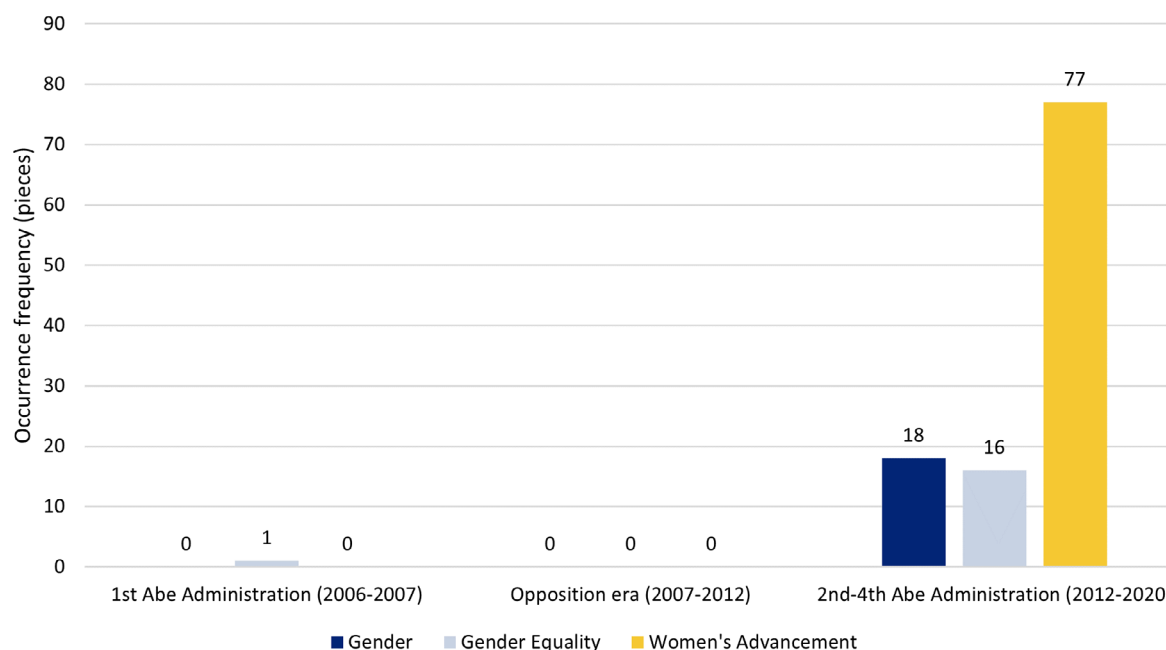
In this context, Abe played a central role in the backlash against gender mainstreaming. In his book *Utsukushii Kuni E* (Toward a Beautiful Country), published in the same year, he criticised the concept of *gender-free*. He emphasised that education’s mission is to provide children with a strong family model (Abe, 2006). During the first Abe administration, the focus was not on women’s policies, but on a comprehensive revision of the Basic Act on Education, enacted in 1947, and on constitutional amendments. The revised Basic Act on Education incorporated a statement in Article 2 promoting a patriotic attitude and love for the country and hometown, reflecting a strong nationalist orientation (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan, 2006). Abe looked to the example of Margaret Thatcher in the UK for education reform and mentioned this in the book mentioned above. He viewed the pre-reform Basic Act on Education as a symbol of the post-war regime, and called for correcting self-deprecating and biased education and raising educational standards. To achieve this, he advocated the need for government auditors to assess and monitor school management, methods of guidance, and other aspects of education. The views of Abe are not unrelated to the backlash. Abe expressed concerns about the denial of “masculinity and femininity”, the lack of representation of the “typical family model” in home economics textbooks, and the portrayal of cohabitation, divorced families, single mothers, and same-sex couples as families in educational materials. He repeatedly wrote about these concerns (Abe, 2006). In essence, “educational reform” entails rectifying a formerly erroneous education (as perceived) and creating nothing less than a “beautiful country”.

#### **4. How “Women’s Advancement” is used**

The first Abe administration resigned in 2007, but when it regained power in 2012, it did not suddenly awaken to liberalism; its fundamental stance remained unchanged. Abe began mentioning women’s participation in the workforce in the spring of 2013, but consistently avoided using terms such as “gender” and “gender equality”. This avoidance persisted even before and after the enactment of the Women’s Active Participation Law. The following graph illustrates the occurrences of the words “gender”, “gender equality”, and “women’s participation” in Abe’s parliamentary records.



Figure 1: Occurrences of gender-related words used by Abe in the Diet (2006-2020)



Source: Edited by the author based on data from the National Diet Library of Japan (n.d)

Before and after the return to power in 2012, the word “women” did not occur even once, and at the time of the return, women were not the focal point, whether in gender-related or economic matters. Around the spring of 2013, the term “women’s active participation” started to appear, but there was still no mention of “gender”. The few occurrences of the word “gender” were either about Japan’s poor score on the Global Gender Gap Index or in repetitions of terms used by the questioner, such as “gender budget”. In essence, it can be observed that Abe actively avoided using the term “gender”. In his growth strategy speech in April 2013, Abe himself stated the following:

“Women’s advancement<sup>3</sup> is often discussed in the context of social policy. However, I disagree: I don’t use it that way. I believe it is at the core of the growth strategy” (Cabinet Office, 2013, para. 32).

In essence, Abe has consistently rejected framing women’s advancement as part of social policies such as welfare. Although the “Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace” was established in 2015 and implemented in 2016, the slogan of this policy, “a society where all women shine”, remains ambiguous and abstract. Despite Abe’s repeated emphasis on economic policies, this ambiguity may lead to the misconception that he has shifted toward a pro-gender-equality stance. In fact, few people would currently oppose the idea of women’s active participation publicly. Like Abe, using terms such as “gender” and “gender equality” may provoke a backlash from conservative factions, but the

<sup>3</sup> The Japanese word Abe used in the speech Katsuyaku may be translated as ‘Empowerment’ (although the Japanese word Empawamento also exists), but in legal matters, the expression ‘Advancement’ is often used instead.

phrase “women’s advancement” remains abstract and broadly accepted. The LDP’s support base includes diverse groups, ranging from corporate entities represented by Keidanren (the Japan Business Federation) to agricultural cooperatives and the Japan Medical Association etc. Pursuing the regulatory relaxation favoured by corporate entities may invite resistance from groups who advocate for protection, such as agricultural cooperatives, making policy navigation difficult. However, the discourse surrounding women’s advancement is more flexible. Additionally, from an external perspective like that of the UN, which has been pressuring Japan to close the gender gap and address sexual violence against women, etc. for a long time, it may appear favourable that a conservative-led government is advocating for women’s advancement (such as reported in “UN Gender Focus” (2016)). It is precisely because of this that careful observation of the true intentions behind “women’s advancement” rhetoric is essential.

## **5. Traditional family stereotypes and Women’s Advancement**

Abe’s fundamental stance has not changed since the backlash era, and it is apparent that the LDP itself is characterised by a strong adherence to Japanese-style patriarchy, as stated above. Keeping in mind Abe’s strong emphasis on the “typical family”, the perspective of women’s advancement from an economic policy standpoint reveals the following. Japan has been experiencing economic stagnation for over 30 years, since the bursting of the bubble economy, and it is grappling with a labour shortage due to the challenges posed by an ageing population and declining birth rates. The idea of supplementing the workforce through immigration is not a viable option, and even if the problem of a declining birth rate was to be resolved, it would still take time for these children to enter the workforce (Iida, 2023). Therefore, turning attention to the untapped human capital of women is a pragmatic choice. An IMF Working Paper (2012) pointed out that the key to overcoming Japan’s economic stagnation is involving more women in the workplace. GDP would be higher by 4% if women’s participation in the labour force were at the same level as in the G7 (excluding Italy) and by 8% if it was the same as in Northern Europe (Steinberg & Nakane, 2012). The “Key Strategies for Accelerating Women’s Participation” policy announced annually since 2015 highlights that in the context of an ageing population, achieving sustainable national growth and maintaining social vitality is essential, and this can be achieved by harnessing the immense potential of “women’s power” (Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 2015b). From this, it can be inferred that “women’s advancement” is synonymous with utilising women in the workforce.

However, labour economics and social security are not entirely separable. Japan has a familistic welfare regime, often referred to as the Japanese-style welfare regime (Ochiai, 2014). This regime implies that welfare services, such as caregiving and childcare, are primarily provided by families (mainly women) (Iida, 2023). This familistic regime is closely tied to patriarchal values and is sometimes called

the Confucian welfare state in East Asia (Sung & Pascall, 2014). As mentioned earlier, Abe strongly criticises the notion of gender-free and emphasises “family”, “localism”, and ultimately “patriotism”. In this context, it is understandable that he does not actively promote initiatives that may disrupt this “traditional” family structure, and thus emphasises that women’s advancement should not be seen in the context of social policy. Nevertheless, if all women were to enter the labour market, issues related to childcare would inevitably arise. As of 2015, the rate of the uptake of childcare leave for men (fathers) was only 2.65%, with more than half taking leave of less than five days, indicating their capacity to be caregivers (MHLW 2016). Regarding the childcare issue, the Cabinet Office stated in the document “Urgent Measures for Achieving a Society where All 100 Million People Can Be Active” in 2015 that, as part of creating an environment for promoting women’s active participation, it is essential to establish an environment that facilitates childcare through mutual support within families. To achieve this, the government recommended promoting multi-generational living arrangements and proximity between family members to encourage the expansion of family support systems (Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 2015a). Three-generation cohabitation has dramatically declined with the expansion of nuclear families. However, the government’s emphasis on the former suggests the intention to entrust child-rearing to the grandparents’ generation and provide caregiving for grandparents within the household. This proposal aims to help control social security expenses while alleviating anxiety related to childbirth and child-rearing, thereby facilitating the supply of the female labour force to the market but maintaining the traditional family image envisioned by the administration.

In addition, one of the systems that supports Japan’s family-based welfare regime is the “Spouse Special Deduction”. This system allows for a deduction in income tax if the total annual income of the spouse remains below a specified amount. Introduced in 1987, this system meant that if the spouse’s (often the wife’s) income was below 1.03 million yen, no income tax was imposed. As a result, many working women adjusted their employment to keep their income below 1.03 million yen, a situation commonly referred to as the “1.03-million-yen wall”. Introduced around the same time as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, the Spouse Special Deduction has long been criticised for hindering women’s employment and economic independence (Abe & Ōtake, 1995; Kantani, 1997; Ōishi, 1995).

The government is considering the deduction, which has contributed to the “wall”, from the perspective of promoting workforce participation to achieve a “Society with 100 Million Active People”, despite its somewhat hesitant stance. In the National Diet records, it can be observed that Abe himself did not frequently use the term “spousal deduction”, and the discussions about the revision are also characterised by a cautious approach, with statements suggesting that it may not significantly alter the structure of families. Nevertheless, there seems to be a growing acknowledgement of the necessity of expanding female workforce participation as part of the prevailing discourse. In 2017, as part of the tax reform, the treatment of spousal deductions and special spousal deductions underwent changes, which

came into effect in 2018. One significant change introduced in the 2018 amendment was a gradual reduction of the deduction based on the husband's (or wife's) annual income exceeding 11.2 million yen. Until 2017, regardless of the husband's (or wife's) income, if the wife's (or husband's) annual income was 1.03 million yen (annual income of 380,000 yen after all deductions) or less, they could receive the full spousal deduction of 380,000 yen. However, starting in 2018, if the (usually) husband's annual income exceeds 11.2 million yen, the size of the deduction will gradually be reduced. At the same time, the 2018 amendment significantly raised the upper limit to 2.01 million yen (annual income of 1.23 million yen after any reduction), allowing households with (usually) wives earning between 1.41 million to 2.01 million yen, who were previously ineligible for the deduction, to now qualify (Ministry of Finance of Japan, 2017). The recent revision for households whose primary breadwinner earns over 11.2 million yen annually results in an increase in taxes. However, according to the National Tax Agency's Fiscal Year 2015 Survey on Wage Structure in Private Enterprises, fewer than 5% of wage earners earn an annual income of 10 million yen or more (National Tax Agency of Japan, 2016). This system thus has the potential to reduce taxes for most households, so long as the spouse's annual income is less than 2.01 million yen. However, the "1.03-million-yen wall" has not been completely removed. This is because, in many cases, if the main breadwinner's (usually the husband's) company provides a "spouse allowance" or "family allowance", it is usually conditioned on the spouse's annual income being below 1.03 million yen. Indeed, there are various combinations of conditions, such as special measures for social insurance and childcare support for minors of various ages, which lead to different final deductions depending on the family structure and the rules of the main breadwinner's company. The revision of the tax measure, although it could potentially undermine the "typical family image" envisioned by Abe himself and was met with strong resistance from conservative supporters, has been achieved to some extent, probably because women's empowerment policy is undeniably an economic policy.

The attitude of not taking on reforms unless they serve the purpose of economic growth is evident in the discussions about the revision of the marriage law. The practice of Japanese wives adopting their husband's surname began after the Meiji era, from 1875 onwards, but prior to that, it was customary for married couples to have different surnames. However, following Western influence and driven by the ideology of building a prosperous and strong nation, an amendment to the law in 1898 made it mandatory for married couples to share the same surname. As a result, Japan remains the only country in the world with a compulsory spousal same-surname system (Akiba & Ishikawa, 1995; Ministry of Justice of Japan, n.d.). Even after the post-war reform that allowed either spouse to retain their premarital surname (previously, it was compulsory for wives to take their husband's surname), approximately 95% of women still adopted their husband's surname. This is a striking example of the modern Japanese patriarchal system, where women are seen as subordinate to their husbands. Even though approximately one-quarter of single women in their 20s and 30s cite "dislike of the change of surname" as a

reason for remaining unmarried, this stance has led to little progress for decades, partly due to the backlash. As the central figure in the backlash movement, Abe is unlikely to implement any revision. In the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality (2020), the discussion on optional separate surnames is stated as needing “further consideration”, which essentially means maintaining the current status quo (Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, 2021a, 2021b). Furthermore, the Abe administration has consistently permitted being able to write one’s pre-marriage surname alongside the post-marriage surname in various media, including in the “Policy Package for Enabling All Women to Shine”. However, the former is associated with no legal significance nor official recognition: for example, credit cards, bank accounts, stocks, etc., can only be used with the post-marriage name, so those who change their last name through marriage must recreate (rewrite) all their documents (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2014). Allowing the (unofficial) use of one’s pre-marriage surname alongside the post-marriage surname is a significant concession for the Abe government and may suggest – if successful – that there is no need for legal reform. Therefore, this would preserve the status quo. However, despite approximately 60% of people supporting the option to be able to retain separate surnames, the lack of progress in terms of legal reforms can be attributed to the government and ruling party’s adherence to traditional Japanese patriarchal ideology, where women are granted specific rights only within the scope approved by men, and are expected to be subservient to the male head of the household (Japanese Trade Union Confederation, 2022).

## 6. Women’s Advancement under Male Leaders

On March 28, 2014, the “Conference to Support Empowering Women” was held at the Prime Minister’s Official Residence, and in June of the same year, the “Male Leaders Coalition for Empowerment of Women (Male Leaders Coalition)” was established within the Cabinet Office. The purpose of this organisation is to create a collaboration of male leaders who can support and accelerate women’s promotion. When it was established, there were nine participants, including corporate executives. Since then (as of 2021), the number of participants has increased to approximately 310, including corporate executives, governors, and mayors. The reason for targeting “male leaders” is the perception that strong commitment from top leadership is crucial for promoting women’s advancement within organisations. In Japan, the majority of top leadership positions are currently held by men, who are seen as the individuals who can best advance women’s participation (Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, 2014). However, establishing such a group may inadvertently create an impression that women can only “thrive” under the protection and guidance of men, which is concerning. Indeed, members of this group regularly exchange views in meetings, but all participants are male except for some female special guests and ministers. It is thus male participants who discuss women’s advancement, make decisions about it, and take the outcomes back to their respective companies or organisations. This raises the question of who the real



protagonists of “women’s advancement” are. Since a male minister was sent to the “Fourth World Conference on Women” held in Beijing, little has changed. However, considering Japanese organisations are patriarchal and male-dominated, as discussed above, creating such groups may be seen as a natural response. As long as they do not threaten male leaders, women’s participation and advancement may be allowed within certain limits, and there may be an expectation that women take a proactive role in this for the benefit of the organisations.

Abe mentioned that he had made requests to the three major economic organisations regarding women’s advancement and their active participation in the workforce in his speech on economic growth (Cabinet Office, 2013). The “economic three organisations” are profit-oriented groups, including Keidanren. From the perspective that companies are rational profit-seeking organisations and that Japanese companies operate according to patriarchal vertical relationships, promoting women’s advancement as a means of securing the labour force without disrupting the patriarchal structure could be seen as a welcomed policy. The following section examines Keidanren’s stance as an example of women’s advancement policies.

## **7. Keidanren and Women’s Advancement**

Established in 1946, Keidanren is the most influential and powerful interest group in Japan’s economic sector. It comprises 1,512, typically large and thus the most important, companies in Japan, 107 nationwide organisations from significant industries such as manufacturing and services, and 47 regional economic organisations (as of April 1, 2023) (Keidanren, 2023). In the past, Keidanren was often referred to as the “Prime Minister of the Business World” due to its overwhelming influence. Since the economic bubble burst, Keidanren has not possessed the same level of influence. However, it still maintains close relationships with politicians through informal meetings and exchanges of opinion. By engaging in direct negotiations with government ministries and cooperating with political parties, Keidanren continues to play a crucial role as a significant political pressure group. Several scholars have already addressed its political influence. Yanaga emphasised the significance of big businesses’ influence on Japanese policy decisions, pointing out that the business community is the most influential organisation in the country’s policy-making process (Yanaga, 1968). On the other hand, Curtis analysed how personal connections between large corporations, ruling parties, and bureaucrats play a politically influential role in domestic policy decisions, surpassing those in other advanced countries. In contrast to the United States’ top economic organisations like the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which struggle to coordinate their members’ interests effectively and are often overshadowed by issue-specific coalitions during policy formation, Japan’s business community takes a broader stance that transcends individual companies and industries. Indeed, conflicts between industries are not uncommon in Japan’s business community; however, they are considered to have less influence than in the



United States (Curtis, 1975). The success of Keidanren in influencing government policies has been attributed to its ability to provide supporting data and engage in business lobbying, as well as in obtaining the cooperation of politicians within the ruling party (Yoshimatsu, 1998). Throughout its history, Keidanren's chairpersons have included prominent figures, such as the chairmen of Toyota Motor Corporation, Panasonic Corporation (formerly Matsushita Electric Industrial Co.), Toray Industries, and Hitachi, among others. These connections extend beyond individual companies, and the organisation is often likened to a "prime minister of the business world", solidifying Keidanren's significant role in shaping Japan's corporate landscape.

Regarding the relationship between Keidanren and the Abe administration, there was a time when it was rumoured to have cooled down. However, in September 2014, Keidanren published its "View on Strengthening Cooperation with Politics" and revived its call for political donations to member companies, which had been dormant for five years. Major member companies resumed making donations to the LDP in 2015. Since then, Keidanren's policy proposals have frequently included the phrase "promoting Abenomics", indicating their support for the ruling party's positions (Keidanren, 2014b).

It is reasonable that the business world, which directly experiences the impact of labour shortages, should welcome policies that utilise women as part of the workforce. However, it can be inferred from the following statements (Action Plan, 2014) that this is primarily for the benefit of the companies themselves and is not necessarily focused on improving the well-being or rights of women.

"The promotion of women's participation is not a measure solely for the benefit of women. It should not be pursued simply because [its necessity has been] pointed out by the international community or merely considered a trend" (Keidanren, 2014a, p. 22).

This sentence appears in the final section of the "Action Plan 2014", which spans 30 pages. In the opening, it references the Abe administration's "Japan's Revitalization Strategy - JAPAN is BACK" and highlights that Japan's progress in improving the status of women lags behind that of other countries. It further emphasises that promoting women's participation is not aimed at supporting the advancement of women's welfare or rights, but rather a growth strategy aimed at enhancing corporate value through improving corporate competitiveness and ultimately achieving sustainable economic and social growth in Japan. This understanding is something that each company must recognise (Keidanren, 2014a).

Businesses are profit-seeking organisations, so they naturally utilise both women and men to increase their revenue. As Hochschild points out, companies ultimately implement family-friendly policies for reasons of profit. However, the more such policies are improved, the less their utilisation rate increases, as predicted. Instead, the reverse phenomenon occurs whereby workplaces become more comfortable places to work, leading to a commitment to long working hours (Hochschild, 1997). Nevertheless, if the goal is to ensure that women are content at work, there is no need to repeatedly emphasise that such policies are "not for women's sake" or

“not aimed at promoting human rights and welfare”. However, the latter makes sense when viewed from the following perspective: Japanese organisations are characteristically patriarchal and hierarchical, with women treated as subordinate members. In this context, companies themselves or their members (the majority of which are men) “reluctantly” utilise and promote women’s participation for the sake of “corporate interests”. This premise or justification (“not for reasons of promoting women’s human rights or welfare”) is necessary, or the concept of “women’s advancement” cannot be accepted. Unlike Abe and the ruling party, it is possible that Keidanren and the corporate sector may not have a strong ideological attachment to preserving the “typical family image”. However, there is no denying that their shared direction, organisational values, and adherence to traditional Japanese patriarchal norms are evident in initiatives like the “Male Leaders Coalition”, whose aim is to accelerate women’s participation.

## Conclusion

As is described, the Abe administration’s “Women’s Advancement” policy can be understood as an economic policy, which means utilising women’s potential as economic actors without necessarily emphasising women’s rights. If “a society where all women shine” is interpreted as using women’s abilities for economic purposes, it becomes clear that this policy does not contradict Abe’s conservative political views. Furthermore, it can be argued that the Abe administration deliberately uses ambiguous expressions in its external communication to conceal the pressure of international demands for gender equality. In reality, the values of the traditional Japanese patriarchy permeate various aspects of society, including welfare, institutions, political parties, other organisations, and the broader community, creating complex and multi-layered gender inequality regimes. It would be unimaginably difficult to completely eliminate the values of the ruling government and party that have shaped Japan as a nation from the post-war period to the present day. Whether framed as economic or social policy, the fact that “Women’s Advancement” has been prominently emphasised beyond 2010 to the present day paradoxically reflects the low status of women in Japan, and serves as evidence of the severity of the issue. It is important to be aware when analysing gender inequality and related policies in Japan, that omitting these perspectives could lead to potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Society is fluid, and individual actors are components of institutions and organisations. How the “Women’s Advancement” policy, promoted as part of economic policy, will be translated within companies and subsequently in society is still not fully understood. There is no certainty that it will not contribute to gender equality, independent of policymakers’ intentions. One area of research for the future would be carefully observing whether the gender regimes within individual companies and organisations contribute to the effectiveness of Abe’s “Women’s Advancement” policy.

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