

# Issues for working women as debated in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly

The representation of women in parliament in Japan is perhaps the most significant barrier still standing in the way of gender equality in Japan. While recent incidents—such as former prime minister Mori’s resignation as the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic committee president after making sexist remarks and movements against sexual harassment in the entertainment industry—suggest that the tide of gender discrimination may be turning, change is especially slow in the political arena.

The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2022 ranks Japan relatively high in ‘educational attainment’ (1<sup>st</sup> of 146 countries with a full score of 1; the score ranges from 0 to 1) and ‘health and survival’ (63<sup>rd</sup> with 0.973) but relatively low in ‘economic participation and opportunity’ (121<sup>st</sup> with 0.564) and ‘political empowerment’ (139<sup>th</sup> with 0.061).

Although the first national election after women were granted voting rights in 1946 was promising, gains made were quickly reversed: After women gained 8.4 percent of lower house seats, this dropped to 3.2 percent the following year due to a change in the electoral system. Currently, women represent just 9.9 percent in the lower house and 22.9 percent in the upper house (14.4 percent when both houses are combined; more women are elected to the upper house due to the electoral system and higher status of the lower house). Last year, political scientist Donna Weeks discussed the gap between women’s limited political leadership and women’s active grassroots activities in Japan. Meanwhile, neighbouring South Korea and Taiwan have increased women’s representation in the parliament to 19 percent and 42 percent respectively using legislated quotas.

The only major legislative body in Japan where women represent more than 30 percent is the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly (TMA), which represents the largest metropolis in the world with a population of approximately 14 million. In 2021, the citizens of Tokyo elected 41 female members for the 127-member assembly, making women 32.3 percent of representatives.

We have been investigating issues raised by female members at the TMA to see if female representatives of different political parties pursue different types of women's issues. We analysed statements made at plenary and committee meetings by female politicians from three political parties that had relatively high numbers of women at the TMA between 2017 and 2021. The 2017 TMA election resulted in 36 female members being elected to the assembly (28.3 percent of the total).

Our analysis of the statements found that most were concerned with women's work-related issues such as work hours and carer's leave, but that women from different political parties focussed on issues ranging from pregnancy, health, and violence against women. Whereas women of the Tokyoites First Party (*Tomin Fāsuto no Kai*), who secured 18 TMA seats after the 2017 election, had a tendency to support career-oriented women through their pregnancy and child-rearing, women of the Japanese Communist Party, who gained 13 seats at the 2017 election, tended to support vulnerable women by addressing issues of violence against women. These two different groups of women (career-oriented women and women in vulnerable circumstances) often coincide with higher and lower socio-economic status respectively.

This article introduces and explains some of women's work-related issues discussed at the TMA and governments' responses (both national and local) with a belief that many of such issues are shared by many women across the world.

## Gender gap at work

Regardless of political party affiliation, many TMA female assembly members raised gender inequality issues related to work and called for measures to address them. For example:

*[The international organisation] defines all acts that are not directly discriminatory in form but actually create gender disparities as indirect discrimination and prohibit such acts as illegal. However, ... if we look at the way women are hired, there is discrimination based on differences in employment management categories such as career track and clerical track. ... The gender ratio of career-track positions is 22 percent for women and 78 percent for men. For clerical-track positions, 82 percent are women and 18 percent are men.*

(Yonekura Haruna [Japanese Communist Party] on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2019)

*The employment rate of women has been increasing, and the so-called 'M-shaped' curve has improved as a result of gradual progress towards an environment in which women can continue to work during childbirth and child rearing. However, the average annual income of women is only about 70 percent of that of men and many women are employed part-time or as temporary workers. Small and medium-sized companies, which account for 90 percent of all companies in Tokyo, have maternity and childcare leave systems, but are not making much use of them. There is still a long way to go to improve the employment environment for women. I believe that the priority area of policy is shifting from securing quantity to improving quality.*

(Kinoshita Fumiko [Tokyoites First Party] on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020)

Compared with men, much fewer women are working in managerial positions and many more women are non-regular workers, resulting in lower wages for women. In Japan, people are often employed in the managerial career track (*sōgō shoku*) or the clerical track (*ippan shoku*) and most of those in the clerical track are women. This two-track system emerged around the time when Japan signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and legislated the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1985. Instead of eliminating discrimination against women, a separate career track was created in an attempt to avoid accusations from the international community related to gender discrimination in Japan. What supports this practice is a gender norm that men should work long hours at their paid work while women take care of family at home, unpaid. Emma Dalton explains this gender norm was strengthened through policies of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments as the backbone of Japan's economic growth until the 1980s. As a result, many women start working on the clerical track, leave work after marriage or when they have children, and often start working again as non-regular workers once their children are old enough. Accordingly, graphs of women's employment rate by age group used to show an 'M-shaped' curve with a drop in employment when women were in their late 20s. The drop is much more shallow than in the past and has shifted to the early 30s age-group since women are getting married at an older age.

## **Juggling work and family**

A government survey in 2019 showed that younger people tend to express their opposition to the idea 'husbands should work outside the home and wives should protect the home', but this deeply entrenched gender norm still negatively affects

married women who work outside the home. One Assembly member summarises the problem:

*While the number of working women has increased and dual-income households have become the mainstream, it is overwhelmingly women who struggle to balance work with raising children, caring for family members, and other household responsibilities. Even if men want to contribute to the household, they are forced to prioritise work because of their long work hours or to financially support their family. The employment rate of women aged 25 to 44 in Tokyo is over 70 percent, but only about 50 percent of families with children under the age of three are dual-earners. Although there is a trend towards improvement, the M-shaped curve is far from being eliminated, indicating that it is difficult to balance work and child rearing.*(Akanegakubo Kayoko [Tokyoites First Party] on 8th December 2017)

Married women themselves, as well as people around them, often expect wives to take care of family even when they work full time. In addition to raising children, Japanese women are often expected to take on the work of caring for parents and/or parents-in-law. At the TMA, it was also pointed out that women who have left work to raise children tend to start considering working outside the home again when the youngest child starts primary school. However, they tend to face a mismatch between their skills and needs on one hand and available jobs on the other. There are not many jobs where they can utilise their skills and experience (now many women leave work in their 30s) but have working hours that mean it's possible to continue their caring work as well. Assembly members called for measures such as supporting companies that re-hire women who have left work earlier and promoting job-sharing.

## **Impact of COVID-19**

As has been noted worldwide, the economic impact caused by pandemic-related lockdowns have been often felt more harshly by women than men. One assembly member reported the impact of COVID on women around her:

*During the pandemic, women are being forced into a more difficult situation. I have heard from female temporary workers in the clothing, bookkeeping, and other industries, that their employment has been terminated, and from female part-time workers that they have been laid off. There were also many women who had no choice but to quit their jobs to take care of their children or other family members.*

*According to the July Labour Force Survey by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the number of non-regular employees, excluding executives, decreased by 1.31 million from the previous year, the largest drop since January 2004, when comparable figures became available. Among them, the number of women was 810,000, which means that women, who tend to work as non-regular employees, were disproportionately affected.*

(Azegami Miwako [Japanese Communist Party] on 19th November 2020)

Another Assembly member pointed out that more than 70 percent of the care workers that were working on the front line against the virus were women and that heightened stress was increasing the danger of domestic violence. Referring to a policy brief released by the UN in April 2020, another member called for increasing women's representation in COVID-19 response planning and decision-making.

## **Steps towards and beyond gender equality**

Even if not as slow as women's political empowerment, the pace of women's economic empowerment has been far from ideal in Japan. Recent governments have introduced workplace reforms related to reduced work hours and equal pay for equal work and have revamped its parental leave policy (only 14 percent of men are taking parental leave). While governments have accelerated efforts towards gender equality after the Council for Gender Equality (*Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shingikai*) was established in 1994, these efforts have not always been motivated by genuine concern for women's welfare. Osawa Mari, who was a member of the Council when it submitted a report called 'A Vision of Gender Equality: Creation of New Values for the Twenty-first Century' to the government in 1996, identified two approaches to gender equality coexisting within the report: 'gender equality as an objective' and 'gender equality as a means to an end'. The former approach addressed 'the deeply ingrained prejudice against women' that had hindered the effect of existing measures such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and is often promoted by feminists and the progressive side of politics. The latter approach regarded women's participation in the labour force as necessary to tackle urgent issues such as an aging population, which resonated with discourse within business and the conservative side of politics.

Governor Koike Yuriko, the first female governor of Tokyo and founder of the Tokyoite First Party, is a conservative and tends to mention women's advancement in the context of growth and development. She has focussed on addressing the

problem of childcare shortages since she became the governor of Tokyo in August 2016 and had some success: the number of children on childcare waiting lists in Tokyo has dropped from 8,586 in 2017 to 300 in 2022. Still, there are concerns about the quality of childcare, with staff shortages and limited facilities such as playgrounds. Discussions in the TMA also suggest that having a female governor made it easier to raise women's issues such as economically vulnerable women who have difficulty purchasing menstrual products.

Tokyo has often outpaced the national government in the pursuit of gender equality. The title of Tokyo's basic ordinance on gender equality uses the term '*danjo byōdō sankaku* (equal participation of men and women)'. This contrasts with the term used for the national basic law on gender equality: '*danjo kyōdō sankaku* (joint participation of men and women)', which is suggestive of a half-hearted approach to gender equality at the national level. Following female Assembly members' calls to address deeply entrenched gender norms, Tokyo's revised plan for the promotion of women's advancement (2022) includes a chapter that promotes changing people's mindset towards gender equality. The Tokyo government has also introduced a 40 percent quota for women for its councils and achieved that goal last year. Other measures for women's advancement include a support centre for women who are considering returning to work, financial incentives for small and medium-sized companies that contribute to women's advancement and a website through which women can consult with mentors experienced in combining work, raising children, caring for family members.

While recent statements by female TMA members reveal many serious issues for working women in Japan, Tokyo is one of the prefectures that are leading the country in relation to promoting women's advancement. An example of this is that the Tokyo government's executive positions are held by a higher proportion of women compared with other prefectures. At the same time, an emerging buzzword suggests that women's advancement is creating another type of gap in society: similar to 'power couple' in English, '*pawā kappuru*' means a married couple with each earning high income. In the book that is said to be the origin of the buzzword, economists Tachibanaki Toshiaki and Sakoda Sayaka highlight the disparity between higher and lower income households is growing as women with higher levels of education and high-income husbands are increasingly entering the workforce in Japan. At the same time, many unmarried men over 40 years old say they are not financially stable. While gender equality and women's advancement have a long way to go and surely remain an important political agenda for some time to come, this

new development invites us to acknowledge that women's advancement could lead to economic inequalities between high-income couples on one hand and low-income singles and couples on the other hand.

With a critical mass of women on the Assembly, a female governor and a climate where women Assembly members feel comfortable raising women-related policy issues, the TMA has the potential to be a relatively progressive workplace for women, including its elected representatives, and the potential to create women-friendly policies for the citizens of Tokyo. Improvement in working conditions for women in politics and elsewhere nonetheless requires 'critical actors' to make effective changes—numbers alone are not enough. Furthermore, cross-party alliances between women are not common, and women from different parties do not necessarily have the same policy goals. Koike Yuriko's TFP pursues 'gender equality' of the neoliberal variety, characterised by the idea that women become economic replicas of men, while the Komeito is often more concerned with women's health and maternal policies, and the JCP tends to use a human rights framework to seek better conditions for women. Work-related issues prevail when women TMA members talk about gender-equality issues, regardless of affiliation. This is likely to do with the fact that Tokyo has a very large population of young professionals and so gender equality claims to emerge from the TMA converge around the idea of making Tokyo a better place for working women.

*Authors: Dr Hiroko Levy and Dr Emma Dalton*

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