

Womenomics: Success or Failure?¹

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1. A Brief Overview of the Cultural History of Women's Job Seeking and Employment

The employment of women and their active inclusion in the labor market became a real necessity in numerous countries during World War II. This was mainly due to the fact that a high number of working age men capable of taking up jobs were either killed in the war or incurred permanent physical damages depriving them of their capacity to work. The social demand and need for economic recovery after the war exerted a further push effect on this ongoing process of labor restructuring. However, for a long time, in certain sectors of the economy women were significantly under-represented compared to men (i.e. women experienced horizontal segregation), as many jobs (primarily jobs in the engineering and technical sectors, and for a long time also the job of medical doctors) were considered only-for-men occupations, making these jobs an exclusive privilege of men. On top of this and in this context, we must also mention vertical segregation, which meant not only that even within the same sectors women faced disadvantages concerning job opportunities and available positions at workplaces compared to men, but that women's promotion was usually slower than that of men. In the case of certain workplaces and particular types of companies, the glass-ceiling effect was also noticeable: women were unlikely to be promoted to higher-level managerial positions, or if they were, that happened quite seldom.

All this took place in the face of events in the scope of which—parallel to these developments—the number of women enrolled in education programmes increased in all countries of the developed world, giving rise to the present-day scenario, where the

¹ This study is based on the author's direct experiences and data collection in the target country on the one hand, and grounded on numerous authoritative works of the relevant literature providing analytical and summative data, on the other. This essay has been realised in the scope of the study visit supported by Budapest Business School University of Applied Sciences Oriental Business and Innovation Center (OBIC). The paper also incorporates some aspects and elements discussed in the author's earlier studies and essays (Hidasi, 2015; 2016a; 2016b).

ratio of women enrolled in higher education and the number of women with higher education qualifications greatly supersedes the corresponding figures of men. In other words, the quite frequently quoted argument that women's lower education or qualifications and their insufficient sectorial expertise are the reasons for their lower career achievements, is simply not supported by facts.

Given that these phenomena and interdependencies exist and prevail in numerous countries of developed democracies (bearing in mind that each country is specific in terms of how phenomena and interdependencies surface and how intensively all this happens), one may argue that the situation experienced in Japan in the same fields and contexts is extremely critical. The use of the adjective 'critical' is not accidental here: in fact, due to the still pervasive influence of strong Confucian moral traditions, the Japanese society and culture have functioned along very strict principles up until the most recent times as far as socially acceptable gender roles are concerned (Goldstein – Gidoni, 2012). These traditional roles primarily advocated and saw women's role in the family as well as in the management of the family's life and affairs and in raising children. Besides, the same tradition allocated a subordinate and inferior gender role to women compared to the roles dedicated to men ('men' including fathers, husbands and even grown-up sons) and an obedient and dutiful attitude was expected of women. This in practice meant that after marrying, grown-up girls—even if they have received the best education—gave up their own careers and devoted their full attention and efforts to jobs and chores in the household and to family management. Girls did not study in higher education in order to realise their own intellectual potentials, but to gain enough knowledge to be able to support their children in their studies and school advancement. In the world of work, highly-qualified women were not considered potential or possible experts, and for this very reason women were employed in jobs requiring lower qualifications than the ones actually held by them, based on the consideration that when they were to marry, or about to deliver their first child, at the latest, they were bound to discontinue their jobs and terminate, even if temporally, their employment, thereby suspending their active involvement in the affairs and work processes of their workplaces. This model befittingly served the hurried pace of work dictated by the Japanese economy's post-World War II development: men, exerting tireless efforts, engaged themselves in their work—even at the expense of their own and their families' interests—, while women, through affirming their steady, reliable and unconditional commitment, ensured the necessary family background and environment for these efforts (Yong – Nagy, 2016).

2. Japan: The Interconnections and Interdependency between Japan's Economic Miracle and Social Crisis

Despite the heavy losses and destruction Japan had to face during World War II, Japanese economy and society recuperated at an incredibly high speed during the second half of the 20th century, and a few decades later it achieved an economic growth analysts referred to as a 'miracle'. This wonder was even more conspicuous for three reasons: on the one hand, the economic boom took place within an exceptionally short time; on the other hand, a country very poor in mineral and natural resources could achieve an economic performance that placed it among world-leading economies; and, thirdly, this economic boom was coupled with such a technical and technological development that could, all in all, be characterised by unparalleled achievements in quality. By the end of the 1980s, Japan had become a so-called "country of exception" (Morita, 1986), which was flooded by analysts and observers from all over the world who wished to learn about the secrets held by the Japanese nation (Vogel, 1979). Even in that early stage, many voiced their concerns and worries about how far and to what extent this greatly intensified pursuit of excellence in performance could continue. The price the Japanese society had to pay for this enormous success came to light and became evident only decades later (Hidasi, 2003).

In 1967, Professor Chie Nakane published her outstanding book—written in Japanese—, which soon became a milestone in social research, about the structure and operation of the social hierarchy of the contemporary Japanese society (Nakane, 1970). The strongest pillar of this society was constituted by a select layer of employees committed to the firm they were working for: they were willing to sacrifice even their private lives and were called *sarariman*, or サラリーマン in Japanese (this word is the Japanese version of the English coinage 'salary-man'). This stratum of society, which was later also called "working samurais", literally gave up their own individual interests, completely identifying themselves with the goals their companies established and sacrificing themselves for the success of their companies, not sparing their intellectual power or physical strength (Hidasi, 1998).

As a result, the Japanese economy reached its peak in 1989: the spectacular growth up to this year, nevertheless, halted after the "economic bubble" burst in the same period. Discussing the period to come, many Japanese analysts expressed their bitter feelings and resentment by calling the long and protracted period of recession beginning in the 1990s the "lost decade". In Japan, the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century witnessed increasing uncertainty, the accumulation of economic and social problems as well as the proliferation of political scandals and corruption,

all of which contributed to the deterioration of public morale and general sentiment (Hidasi, 2005b).

In fact, this recession finally proved to be longer and deeper than initially estimated and caused numerous serious consequences: the real estate bubble burst in the 1990s leaving behind a crashed real estate market as its aftermath, while many bank loans became non-performing. A financial crisis broke out and structural problems emerged that ultimately and inevitably led to changes in the philosophy and practice of employment. In addition, unemployment appeared, insufficiencies of the social security system came to light, and the necessity for privatisation became apparent despite repeated attempts aimed at bank consolidation (Fukuyama, 2000).

The generation of “working samurais” experienced the economic recession as a profound disappointment: many of them felt that the self-sacrificing lifestyle and all the toils of these long-long decades, whose fruits eventually were to have been financial, leading to material progress and advancement, as well as prospective well-being already in formation at that time, finally turned out to be useless. The faltering existential security experienced by this generation left the social layer of employees in a state of uncertainty and in search for alternatives.

By the threshold of the 21st century, the changes and crisis perceptible in Japanese society became quite palpable and noticeable. Several root causes account for the conspicuous nature of these changes and crisis, as described in the following points.

- One of the root causes is the tension provoked by Japan’s economic advancement induced changes in lifestyle. As a matter of fact, social consciousness in Japan could not keep pace with material development. Compared to earlier times, Japanese people lived in much more favourable circumstances, both as far as material wealth and financial circumstances were concerned, but—concurrently—human relationships changed. Families lived in more convenient homes but, in exchange for comfort, they forfeited the solidarity and security offered and guaranteed by former local or residential communities. These days, dwellers of enormous high-rises hardly know one another, and the resulting alienation and the emptiness of such human relationships make families and individuals feel quite lonely.
- A great number of traditional values—mostly cultural and ethical values rooted in Confucianism including collectivism, self-sacrifice, self-discipline, loyalty, etc.—are changing. Several of the stereotypes associated with Japanese culture seem to be challenged (Matsumoto, 2002). New generations do associate themselves with

values traditionally and specifically held by Japanese society and culture, which values have accounted for the coherence of this society so far. Individualism is increasingly gaining ground at the expense of collectivist values.

- Similarly, to many European countries, Japan is also struggling with the problem of its ageing society: even though life expectancy at birth is steadily increasing thanks to more favourable living conditions, the population size, in turn, is firmly decreasing because fewer and fewer children are born (Ota, 2016). Analyses by Japan's Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy predict that Japan's current population of 126 million might sink under 100 million within a few decades. According to some forecasts, the number of old people increases by 650 thousand annually: by 2025 the average life expectancy is estimated to reach 89 in the case of women and 82 in the case of men. This means that the Japanese society is not only drastically decreasing as far as the size of the population is concerned, but it is also an ageing society. This is perfectly illustrated by the following unique situation first experienced in 2012: the sales volume of incontinence diapers for old people in Japan was higher than the sales volume of babies' nappies!

The decrease of the size of the population also means a concurrent decrease in the number of working-age population. While formerly fresh graduates were afraid of experiencing unemployment, by 2017 the problem of the lack of labor force became so critical—not only in the productive (mainly in the automotive) sector, but also in the transportation and postal services sectors—that statistically speaking, there is 1.49 vacancies for one job-seeker, i.e. Japan is facing a demand-driven labor market. This referent value was as high as this 43 years ago, in February 1974 (TJN², 2017, July 1/3). Notably enough, at that time, the lack of labor force was attributable to the high-powered economic boom, while the present situation is caused by a decrease in the number people of working age. Concerning this issue, other causes, which fall beyond the scope of this study—and remain unknown to or are not made public to the world outside Japan—are also at play (these causes, for example, include several million people in total who refuse, or fail to be involved in, social participation) (Hidasi, 2012), but the fact still remains a fact that Japan is facing an acute loss of labor force. One way to combat this problem is to increase women's participation in the labor market, the other solution could be to invite migrant workers to the country (Yong – Nagy, 2016), which latter solution the Japanese government is unwilling to resort to for several reasons.

2 TJN: The Japan News. English-language daily digest of Yomiuri Shimbun

- The institution of marriage is currently also showing signs of crisis. This is apparent partly in the increased number of divorces, and also in the fact that young people's—mostly girls'—willingness to marry is lower than ever. The economic and existential security that formerly only marriage could guarantee to women is now also available for them outside marriage. In addition, marriage, which was earlier seen as a safe haven in terms of economic security, has lost some of its appeal due to the fact that the chances to find lifelong employment have been on the decrease because of changes in employment structure and as a result of globalisation-related challenges. In brief, the institution of marriage has by now lost its most powerful and stable uniting force, that of existential security. It is also true to say that many young women refuse to undertake the risk of marriage: they prefer to stay at home with their parents, live their lives as they wish and spend the majority of their earnings on themselves. These women are called "parasitic singles" or パラサイトシングル (*parasaito shinguru*) in Japanese: they are the ones who are not ashamed or reluctant to live with their parents as long as their fathers and mothers can afford to support them. The number of these women is constantly increasing: almost 45 percent of young women exhibit this lifestyle in bigger cities in Japan. Whereas earlier social thinking and attitudes sanctioned single women, today's attitudes tend to be increasingly liberal. In other words, the social pressure on women that formerly stigmatised them (for remaining single) and also their families, is now dwindling away.
- Celibacy syndrome: it is not only the number of those wishing marry that is decreasing, but also fewer and fewer young persons seek to live in a relationship (Ota, 2016). Primarily due to considerations of convenience, a surprisingly high number of persons in the young generation decide to refrain from love and social relationships and opt for committing themselves to living in the virtual world for, and by, themselves (Hidasi – Varga, 2014). A 2011 survey by the Japanese National Institute of Population and Social Security Research claimed that 61 percent of single men and 49 percent of single women aged between 18 and 34 had never had any love relationships in their lives. A research by the Japan Family Planning Association (JFPA) has shown that 45 percent of women between 16 and 24 years of age "are not interested" in establishing bodily or physical contact, and that they literally disdain any sexual relationship.
- Changes affecting Japan also impacted the assessment of women on the labor market (Hidasi, 2005a). Even if the employment of female labor force became acceptable, fewer women hold managerial or leading positions than men and women also earn lower salaries compared to men (Shibata, 2007). In spite of this, an increasing number of women seek career building opportunities instead of

getting married. Single life has also become quite fashionable, which reflects these persons' hope for a "more exciting" life and their desire both to attain self-realisation and to achieve their individual goals.

- These days, the Japanese nation's self-image is also undergoing profound changes: social practices among young Japanese people have been transformed, and they more increasingly try to imitate Western, and primarily, American behavioural patterns. These new-wave Japanese people do not strive to hide their feelings as much as this was earlier necessitated by social etiquette. A young Japanese company employee is no longer as committed to the firm as members of the previous generations were. In a programme aired by TV channel Asahi (June 18, 2017), middle and top-ranking company managers voiced their dissatisfaction when they complained that an increasingly higher number of male employees "dared to refuse their bosses" when invited to join them for evening drinks (Hidasi, 2012). This never actually happened before, and such an attitude is still considered a "selfish" act. On the other hand, these companies fail to provide the safety net that formerly guaranteed their labor force uninterrupted and secure employment with the given company until they retired.
- Changes in value judgements almost completely reflect division lines between the different generations (Brinton, 2010). Changes started not in the entire society but only in a certain layer of the society, more precisely among the young, which gave rise to the existence of fundamentally different, and actually opposing, ways of behaviour even within the family. Let us mention, as an example of this, the hard-working father who sacrifices his own interests and those of his family for the success of the company he works for as opposed to his son, who is unwilling to work or to study; an equally fitting example is a home-making mother taking care of her entire family vis-à-vis her daughter, who spends all her money on herself and leads an uncaring and joy-seeking life (Kingston, 2004).

In essence, it must also be understood that Japan has come to understand that she needs to give up the utopia that its economic growth is continuous and unbroken, that human performances can still be increased and that the human capacity can be further expanded practically without limits. Japan has also realised that any further exploitation of the human productive capacity is only possible through sacrifices impacting social and interpersonal relationships, which after all may not prove a cost-effective strategy—as supporting evidence, suffice it to mention the behavioural anomalies observable among younger generations in Japan (Hidasi, 2011; Hidasi, 2015).

3. Need for New Solutions

Former Prime Minister and party president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Shinzo Abe was elected Prime Minister of Japan in December 2012 again.³ His success, apart from the slightly nationalistic trend in the foreign policy he promised to lead, was due primarily to his economic programme targeting the stimulation of the economy. Suited to his name, his economic programme has come to be called “Abenomics”. This programme is based on three arrows, i.e. policies or pillars: fiscal reform, which was started in 2013; changes in monetary policy, which have since been in progress; and thirdly, structural economic reforms—most of which is in progress.

An important element of the last pillar is the policy of womenomics (which term perfectly rhymes with Abenomics), which targets the integration of the female labor force, i.e. the potential afforded by women, in the processes aimed at economic stimulation. This programme—in the context of Japanese traditions—was met with considerable uproar and opposition both by the Japanese society and by the world of Japanese employers despite the fact that the programme cannot be declared unprecedented if measured against developments on the level of world economy.

Some scholars regard the 21st century the age of “3W”, that is the age of Weather—the Web—Women. They claim that the role of these three factors, i.e. climate, the internet and women, will have a definitive role to play in the events to unfold on the global level in this century. Analysts have already pointed out that the employment of women constitutes an even more important factor of growth in the modern world economy than technological revolutions or the rise of China (Zimbardo, 2015). In fact, it can be observed that recently girls have been outperforming boys at school and that a higher ratio of girls continue their studies in higher education than boys. Given this situation, it is no wonder that women are catching up with men in the labor market and they even assume leading roles. They perform well not only as employees but there is an increasing number of successful women entrepreneurs. A high number of analysts agree that women, more precisely, women employees, continue to remain one of the sources of economic growth in the 21st century (Shipman – Kay, 2009). With reference to women’s active role in the economy, it was leading investment banks, including Goldman Sachs that started to use the term “womenomics” referring to

³ On 20 September 2018 he was re-elected as head of his ruling Liberal Democratic Party, paving the way for up to three more years as the nation’s leader. With a third term as party leader, Abe is poised to become Japan’s longest-serving leader in August 2021.

the potential source of economic growth women represent. Strategic analyst Kathy Matsui, who knows the Japanese situation probably the most thoroughly, has been engaged in analysing the situation of female labor force in Japan since 1999 and she sees the bridging of the gender employment gap as a potential source and means of leaving behind economic stagnation. According to her forecasts, if the same employment ratio could be achieved in the case of both women and men, this could result in as high a GDP increase as 13 percent in the Japanese economy. In addition, a rise in the number of women in leading positions is also likely to improve corporate performances. This assumption is in line with IMF President Christine Lagarde's statement, which reads as follows: "When women do better, the country does better." "I know this is economic jargon, but essentially, if you bring more women to the job market, you create value, it makes economic sense, and growth is improved. There are countries where it's almost a no-brainer: Korea, Japan, soon to be China, certainly Germany, Italy. Why? Because they have an aging population."

Perhaps, prompted by analysts' forecasts, but—in my interpretation—more probably, due to the realisation that Japanese society will exhibit a more favourable attitude to the employment of Japanese women than to an influx of migrant workers to compensate for the currently experienced loss of work force, Prime Minister Abe announced his economic programme (cf. his talk on September 26, 2013 at the 68th General Meeting of the UN⁴ and his talk in January 2014 at the World Forum in Davos⁵)—which was sceptically received by many—and committed himself to ruthlessly realising this programme. The situation in Japan is quite serious and can be traced back to several causes: there is a steep decline in birth rate (the birth rate fell to 1.44 from 2.1 per couple, which latter figure signals sustainability with respect to population reproduction),⁶ and the effects of stringent immigration rules and restrictions, coupled with the aging Japanese population, jeopardise not simply, and not so much, economic stimulation but the mere sustainability of the Japanese economy. It is not accidental, either, that the Abe Government has decided to set up a new government agency called Ministry of Human Resources Development, which, according to Prime Minister Abe, aims at "effecting revolutionary changes in the field of human resources development by way of doing away with [...] conventional

⁴ Japanese Prime Minister's Speech: The 68th session of the UN General Assembly (2013): [online] Available form: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8E1Wlzs100>

⁵ Davos 2014 - The Reshaping of the World Vision from Japan (2014): [online] Available form: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApRaK516PZU>

⁶ 2016 was the first year in the history of post-war Japan when the number of births did not reach 1 million, which figure in a country with a population of nearly 127 million clearly shows the overturning of the age pyramid.

stereotypes so that we [i.e. Japan] can become a country that is capable of offering everyone an endless array of possibilities (of self-realisation)”⁷ (TJN, 2017, June 21/5).

4. The Action Plan of the Japanese Womenomics

The action plan of womenomics, announced by Prime Minister Abe, consists of numerous points. The programme aims at encouraging an increasing number of women:

- to take up jobs in general;
- not to give up working after childbirth and to return to the world of work as soon as possible; and
- to be willing to accept higher level positions if promoted.

Giving up their prejudices and disregarding factors of insecurity and unforeseeability typically associated with female workers (how many children female employees wish to give birth to and when they are planning to do that; whether or not they would like to return to their workplaces while they are raising their children, and if so, when; women might have to take days off work due to unexpected events including their children’s illness, compulsory medical check-ups, etc.). Employers, companies and the private sector are expected to be prepared to:

- employ an increasing number of women; and
- to achieve a higher ratio of female employees also in higher-level positions.

Since the announcement of the concrete plans in 2013, several changes and restructuring have taken place, which are briefly summarised below.

4.1. The Employment of Women

The target figure set at the start of the programme, i.e. the goal that the ratio of female workers should closely approximate the ratio of male workers by 2020, seems to have been achieved. In 2016, 66.7 percent of working-age women participated in

⁷ “We will carry out a revolution in human resources development by excluding conventional stereotyped ideas, so that Japan will become a country in which there are plenty of opportunities for everyone” (TJN, 2017, June 21/5).

the labor market in some form of employment (as opposed to the 92 percent ratio of working-age men), which is a surprisingly high number (in the USA the same ratio is 64 percent). Regarding this figure, it might be concluded that the problem is caused not by quantity but by quality. 57 percent of women in employment do part-time jobs, which figure may also include women with an employment of minimal working hours such as a few hours every week. With reference to jobs, the Statistics Bureau of Japan differentiates between the following types of employment in the statistical data it provides:

- A) regular employment;
- B) non-regular employment;
 1. part-time employment;
 2. temporary "part-time employment";
 3. temporarily dispatched workers delegated by employment agencies (dispatched workers from temporary agencies);
 4. contract employees or entrusted employees.

The situation of persons in non-regular employment is quite insecure: this condition affects mostly women and young employees, who are willing to work for low wages (with no fringe benefits attached and without any institutional interest representation). As for female employees, in the case of childbirth, women most commonly (70 percent) give up their jobs and typically engage themselves in child-rearing for long-long years to come or even for several decades. As opposed to male colleagues, this means a great disadvantage, which women cannot compensate for when it comes to their career advancement.

4.2. Appointing More Female Workers to Leading Positions

In the Japanese business sector, the ratio of women in high managerial positions is as low as 5 percent (Yong – Nagy, 2016, p. 251), as opposed to the global average of 21 percent. Actually and initially, womenomics was planning to raise the ratio of women in managerial positions (including jobs in the economic and governmental sectors) up to 30 percent by 2020, but this target figure was lowered to a much more realistic 7-15 percent (the referent percentage value depends on the type of companies and institutions concerned), with a concurrent modification of the deadline from 2020 to 2021. In the meantime, as of April 1, 2016⁸, a new law entitled 'Female Employment Promotion

⁸ The Japanese financial year runs from April 1 to March 31.

Legislation' came into effect. This piece of legislation in support of female employment expects all companies and institutions with 300 or more employees in both the private and public sectors to submit annual reports concerning 1) the actual ratios of male and female employees working for the given company or institution and 2) the action plans devised to regulate or, if necessary, adjust this ratio. Even if this law does not stipulate any sanctions, many analysts believed that the law does constitute a very significant step thanks to its concrete target date, increased transparency and expected competitor-induced pressure. These analysts were more than right: out of the companies and institutions concerned, 98 percent met their obligation to provide data by as early as 2017. Ultimately, both the discipline so characteristic of Japanese institutions' performance of administrative duties and their innate urge and drive to completely fulfil their tasks were again observable, this time concerning data provision.

All in all, the corporate sector, apart from its duty to provide data, is expected on the one hand, to generally increase the number of female employees in managerial jobs (the question, however, still remains: who can be considered a "manager") and on the other hand, each company must have at least one woman in a high-level managerial position, which latter step also signals one of the tangible target figures specified by this initiative. As for realisation, the problem that lies in the nature of this expectation and in the desire to fulfil this expectation is that very often companies and institutions act only for the sake of PR: it does not really matter if one of the vice-presidential jobs is held by a woman if no real power or space of decision-making are associated with this job and if, consequently, the whole position is relegated to a job of nothing else but "showcasing".

4.3. Nadeshiko Brand Recognition for Large Enterprises

In the 2012 fiscal year, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) announced the *Nadeshiko Meigara*⁹ (Nadeshiko Brand) programme, and in its initiative it was joined by the Tokyo Stock Exchange (TSE). The brand serves as a kind of recognition to be awarded to those registered companies in a given year that contributed the most successfully to female employees' success at their workplaces. This is nothing else but the great-scale PR-purpose recognition of outstanding diversity management: in the year 2017, as many as 100 corporations received this recognition,

⁹ In Japanese culture, the second part of the original expression '*Yamato nadeshiko*' (やまとなでしこ or 大和撫子) in the traditional sense means "real Japanese female patriot", but the expression is slightly obsolete and thus sounds archaic.

mostly internationally famous and acknowledged companies including Daiwa House, Kao Corporation, Toshiba, etc. The marketing value of the gala event hosting the award ceremony produces exceptionally high returns as far as the CSR budget of the referent companies are concerned.

4.4. Reduction of the Differences between Men's and Women's Income

All countries of the world are characterised by differences between men's income and women's income and their pensions: men earn higher salaries and receive higher pensions than women. The extent of the difference varies from country to country and the root causes behind this phenomenon are also diverse. The situation is exactly the same in Japan, but Japan exhibits even more significant differences between the incomes of men and women than other developed countries. In the case of women, the annual average income was USD 22,727 in 2013 as opposed to the sum of USD 40,000 for men in the same year. This huge difference is partly explained by the fact that women are more likely to be employed in less prestigious jobs, which offer lower salaries. This might well be the situation, but it must also be observed that, in the case of men and women holding the same positions, men will earn much higher salaries than women. In 2016, the average income of women in full employment was USD 2,157 monthly (NAR¹⁰, February 23, 2017), which constituted a mere 73 percent of earnings by males. This already signals an energetic catch-up as compared to the corresponding rate of 60 percent in 1990, but there is a long way ahead as far as a real closing-up in the salaries received by the two sexes is concerned. As a result of the acute shortage in labor force characterising the most recent years, employers are now forced to offer more favourable salaries to women, even if sectoral differences may still be quite huge. Slowly but steadily, women tend to occupy more and more managerial and leading positions, which also contributes to more balanced incomes. Even so, with respect to income differences, Japan still seems to be lagging behind most OECD countries in income differences.

4.5. Increasing the Capacity of Nurseries and Kindergartens

As long as a mother—in line with the traditional Japanese family model—was a home-maker from the birth of her child until the time her son or daughter started university, and as long as a mother's main—and mostly one single expected—activity

¹⁰ NAR: Nikkei Asian Review – English-language weekly.

was child-rearing coupled with the concurrent management of the household, the role assumed by nurseries and kindergartens was almost negligible. Nonetheless, recent changes in mothers' roles and the fact that they took up jobs, necessitated the opening of new nurseries and kindergartens or, as an alternative solution, capacity-building in already-existing nurseries and kindergartens. At the start, the target set by the womenomics programme was to increase the capacity of nurseries and kindergartens by 400 thousand places by the year 2017, and to eradicate waiting lists as extensively as possible. For that purpose, incentives and measures for lifting legal restrictions were instigated in order to facilitate an increase of places available in kindergartens: new kindergarten teachers were employed, state-owned lands, estates and buildings were allocated for the operation of kindergartens in each area, and special workplace-based nurseries and kindergartens were also established. By 2014, as many as 219 thousand new places were set up, thanks to considerable efforts undertaken by locals and their municipal governments. Yet in the meantime, it was realised that the demand for new places is much higher than the one initially identified: the target figure was increased to 500 thousand with a concurrent extension of the deadline up until 2019. In addition to all this, new capacity-building plans and the setting of revised target figures are underway but the waiting lists may be eradicated only as late as by 2022, given the best-case scenario (TJN, 2017, June 3/4).

The greatest problem, however, is not really the establishment of new places but the education of properly trained staff including professional nursery and kindergarten teachers. If there is no appropriately trained staff, the given institution is not licensed to operate, according to Japanese laws. At the same time, depending on the region concerned, this sector is facing quite serious understaffing: there simply is not enough educated and well-trained nursery teachers (TJN, 2017, June 17/5). To combat this problem, several training programmes were hastily launched, and the fresh graduates from these programmes will hopefully be able to compensate for the missing labor force. At the same time, just like many other countries, Japan also witnessed the emergence of the initiative of establishing family-run and private home-based kindergartens coupled with other possible solutions as potential answers in response to the shortage of places in kindergartens.

Quite peculiarly, the Japanese society does not cultivate the model of family helpers (i.e. the grandparents or other relatives helping the mother and her family)—unlike the well-established practice e.g. in Hungary. The analysis of the social and psychological causes of this Japanese phenomenon (Hidasi, 2007) exceeds the scope of this paper, but in general it can be stated that Japanese families very seldom resort to the practice of involving family helpers, and the very few who follow this model have

adopted it based on their positive experience gained abroad. Japanese families who are distrustful of strangers, often do not employ the services of babysitters either, which leaves the mother or some form of institutional care-provision to remain the only solution to this problem.

4.6. Family Support Benefits

In 2012, one of the explanations behind the planned multi-stage increase of the consumption tax from 5 percent to 10 percent¹¹ was the intention to spend the tax revenue thus generated on financing forms of child-rearing support. Nonetheless, the majority of this annually generated tax revenue was spent on related quantitative developments and infrastructural investments. In response to this spending policy, a group of young parliamentary representatives is currently working on drawing up a bill, to be passed by the Japanese Parliament, that would require all employees to pay a minimal contribution (0.1 percent of the monthly income) to this end, which could generate a considerable sum in tax revenues to be spent on costs associated with childcare and children's education. On top of this, some members of parliament advocate totally free education including no-fee tertiary education thereby supporting families in their endeavour to have children. Put differently, there is an intention to act and help, but realisation and implementation do not happen from one day to the other, oftentimes because of the carping criticism opposition parties.

As of April 2014, the Japanese Government raised the amount of childcare benefits from 50 percent to 67 percent of the previously earned income in the first six months of child-rearing, with an amount of 50 percent in the period of the second six months. Additionally, fathers are encouraged to take out childcare allowance and it is considered preferable that the corresponding ratio of fathers doing so increase from 2.6 percent registered in 2011 to 13 percent in 2020. At present, a change in this walk of life is also taking place: in 2016 as high as 55.9 percent of men seized the opportunity to take out childcare leaves within a period of two months following the birth of their child. Even if these childcare leaves were brief—with 23.0 percent taking out 4–6 days, 21.8 percent taking out 6–10 days and 20.2 percent taking out 3–4 days—, it is a fact that these men did “dare” to take this opportunity afforded by the law, which signals a change both in mentality and in the way of thinking concerning attitudes to gender roles.

¹¹ In 2017, the rate of consumption tax is still 8 percent, while an increase to 10 percent is envisaged to take place in October 2019.

In fact, related to child-rearing, one of the terms coined in the previous decade is *ikumen* or イクメン, which compound originates from the clipped form of the Japanese word *ikuji* or 育児 (meaning child-rearing) and the English word *man*. This new coinage denotes fathers who assume an active part in child-rearing. The media treats pictures of fathers taking care of their children sitting on swings, changing their children's nappies or helping their children with their homework as sensational images; still, these images all signal a tremendous change and communicate that it is also a possibility for fathers to actively contribute to child-rearing.

4.7. Restructuring of the Tax System

The Japanese tax system allowed dual-earner families to take advantage of the annual tax benefit deductible from the man's income (in accordance with the number of supported persons), if the woman's annual income does not exceed JPY 1.01 million. This very low income threshold demotivated women in taking up higher-earning jobs. As a response to the problem, this income threshold was raised to JPY 1.5 million as of 2016. Yet, this increase still hinders women from taking full-time jobs and thus makes such forms of employment practically unattainable for them.

As a matter of fact, the current social security system insures women only in case they are really "dependant". This means that the tax and contribution systems work against the realisation of the dual-earner family model. In other words, as long as the systems of taxation and family allowances continue to fail to be altered in a way that they no longer penalise females taking up jobs, no major breakthrough can be expected in connection with women's employment. Several suggestions to combat this problem are being considered and discussed at present, but the introduction of possible solutions is far ahead in the future.

4.8. Relaxing Restrictions Concerning Migration and Immigration Policies

According to plans, the restrictions concerning immigration policies will be relaxed. These former restrictions prevented Japanese families from employing migrant caregivers, babysitters or nannies; actually, this regulation is currently being changed and prepared Japan would be willing to receive migrant workers from the South Asian region (from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, etc.) so that migrants can take jobs such as nursing, care-giving and domestic work. So far, this was impossible, which put an immense amount of unbearable pressure and burden on mothers:

apart from child-rearing, they had to care for the elderly members of their families, which chores occupied all their time, leaving them no opportunities to even think about taking up jobs. To be sure, the increasingly aging Japanese society is unable to provide enough hosting places for those elderly who are already incapable of supporting themselves: there are long waiting lists of several years in public institutions, while prices in private institutions are prohibitively expensive for many. Put differently, both the development of childcare institutions and an increase in the number of institutions providing care for the elderly—including necessary staffing—constitute the precondition of mothers' taking up jobs or resuming their former employments.

In my understanding, it is the attempts to have these nursing and caregiving jobs done and the urgent need to find suitable workforce to compensate for the loss of Japanese workers that prompted a need for innovation in the scope of which Japan took a step in the direction of developing robotics and artificial intelligence. At present, in the global leader's position, Japan has been engaged in rapid developments in this field and within a few years, innovations, causing paradigm shifts, are likely to appear in the service and transportation sectors including the development of robots capable of warming up food or serving customers. Yet, concerning these innovations, another very pressing question is what effect the cooperation between humans and robots (i.e. the use of the human–robot interface), an interaction envisaged to replace inter-human communication, will have on the already quite lonesome, solitary and alienated Japanese society...

5. Global Gender Gap Index in Japan

As evidenced by the facts described above, control-purpose measures and actions undertaken by the Japanese government around (METI, 2017): concerning each plan and target figure, very ambitious deadlines have been set (Cabinet Office, 2016). All researchers, observers, analysts and experts agree that there have been positive developments with respect to the implementation of womenomics (Matsui, 2014), and for that very reason it came as a great surprise that Japan actually slipped back 10 places in the 2016 Gender Gap Index ranking, and 3 more down in the 2017 GGI ranking¹² and hence remains at the bottom of the Group of Seven advanced nations.

¹² Since 2006, OECD countries have been annually ranked on the basis of their gender-gap-index, i.e. the differences between the unequal opportunities and possibilities (health, education, economy/employment, participation in public life/politics) experienced by the two genders, and this is expressed in the Gender Gap Index ranking.

Countries are ranked based on 14 indicators in four categories: economic participation and opportunity; political empowerment; educational attainment; and health and survival.

Japan did slightly improve in 2017 in the economic participation and opportunity category, rising to 114th place from 2016 year's 118th ranking among 144 countries. But it still fell behind in some of the five indicators used for the economic grade. Japan ranked 116th in terms of high-ranking officials in the public and private sectors and was 100th in terms of income equality. Although more Japanese women are enrolled in higher education, and the income gap with men is narrowing, the nation ranks 123rd out of 144 in political empowerment for women.

Many analysts attribute this slip-back in the ranking mostly to changes in the applied methodology, i.e. the methods used for calculating the different indicators for the purpose of preparing the ranking.¹³ At the same time, it must not be overlooked that many of the countries featured in the list have, in the meantime, taken several steps forward in promoting the elimination of gender inequalities, and the resulting list of countries has consequently undergone quite a lot of changes reflecting the advancement of these countries. On an international scale, several methodologies (Hidasi, 2016) and ranking systems¹⁴ exist for the analysis and comparison of gender inequalities, but with respect to Japan it is the OECD methodology that provides relevant data. As regards the issue of gender inequalities, it must also be noted that Japan finds it increasingly difficult to avoid the impacts of globalisation. Concerning the above issues, Japan showed stagnation for quite a long time, while concurrently other, much smaller countries (Singapore, Finland, etc.), which had the capability and opportunity to take steps and adapt more quickly and more dynamically, made their way forward rapidly. In the light of all this, Japan will have to implement changes in its own interest, given that it wishes to remain one of the leading countries of the international community (Fujimura – Fanselow, 2011).

Currently, the weakest point in the realisation of the womenomics action plan is to put into effect the necessary modifications in tax laws, which requires several years of interest reconciliation and negotiation due to the applicable legislative protocols.

¹³ Rankings used by the World Economic Forum. [online] Available form: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/economies/#economy>

¹⁴ EU: Gender Equality Index (GEI); Taiwan: Gender Inequality Index (GII) (Hidasi, 2016).

6. Obstacles in the Way of Implementation

Needless to say that there are numerous factors and arguments against the womenomics programme, and these include the following:

- Social expectations and social thinking promoting traditional gender roles do not support this process of change. The principle of *DanSonJoHi* (男尊女卑), i.e. men's rule over women, which is rooted in the main principles of Confucianism, is an attitude that still defines and determines the mentality of a high number of men (first and foremost, the mentality of middle-aged and older generations who are in fact in decision-making positions currently!). Up until the most recent times, girls were raised in a spirit of aspiring to become ideal *RyōSai KenBo* (良妻賢母), i.e. good wives and wise mothers.
- Employees very rigidly stick to traditions and for that reason they are not very keen to give up male-dominance and authoritarianism (Yong – Nagy, 2016).
- Many women are hesitant about taking up jobs and are alarmed by the latent persecution, irking and harassment still characterising some workplaces: these actions are aimed at making women's lives a hell at the workplace, and consequently, women may eventually decide to leave the world of work after all. Such irking and harassment include *matahara* (mother's harassment), the act of irking or making comments on mothers or expectant mothers; *sekuhara*, i.e. sexual harassment; and *pawahara* (power harassment), the misuse of power. All these acts may, in practice, target not exclusively women: in general, such activities are always aimed at the weaker members of the society. Amélie Nothomb's 1999 French Academy literary award (Grand Prix du roman) winning novel entitled 'Stupeur et tremblements' (and its film adaptation in 2003) deals with this very problem.
- The most important counterargument against womenomics is that women's more active participation in the world of work might further exacerbate the situation of the already problematically low number of childbirths. To refute this argument, social researchers quote the example of those developed countries (Denmark, France, Sweden, USA, etc.) where fertility rates are higher despite women's higher employment rates and juxtapose these findings to other countries where fewer women are employed (South Korean, Italy, etc.) and, in spite of this, the number of births is lower. In a nutshell, the correlation between childbirths and women's employment is not in line with what could reasonably be expected.

- Talking to average Japanese people in the street and interviewing them about the proposed changes, we have found that many exhibit scepticism about the potential success of the policy of womenomics. They believe that government offices and the public sector in general will, in all likelihood, be able to fulfil the expectations stipulated by womenomics and meet the set target figures in the scope of the planned changes. However, in the private sector, including small- and medium-size enterprises, this reform-purpose action package is improbable to be fully realised: employers will purposefully refuse to cooperate and will create administrative burdens to hinder the realisation of the plan. This is likely to happen: even if studies showing the potential positive results of this initiative have been compiled by several researchers and analysts, these studies have still failed to contribute to employers' acceptance of the programme, who doubt that women's increased employment rates would also generate higher profits. In fact, reality shows a different picture: a recent survey conducted by Harvard University (TJN, 2017, June 5/7) also confirmed that the operation of mixed teams of men and women increases performance at work and consequently boosts corporate performance.
- A change and transformation in women's mental and psychological attitudes would also be necessary for the success of womenomics. This task would require increased participation on the part of schools and the media. The lack of self-confidence, constant underestimation of one's skills and capacities as well as a fear of potential vilification prevent many women from undertaking the struggle to fight for those rights and opportunities that they should ideally have access to on the basis of their skills, knowledge and qualifications. In the context of this identity crisis, one of the most popular and befitting words of the 2000s was *karizuma shufu* (charisma housewives) or *カリズマ 主婦* (super housewives) (Goldstein – Gidoni, 2012), which described women who could boast of some highly successful or acknowledged entrepreneurial venture (be it style-designing ice-creams, or new technology of baking bread, interior design, etc.) in fields most commonly associated with typical women's activities.
- As the last of these obstacles, we must also mention the need to terminate the use of those utterances and communications that disqualify women or are discriminatory against women. Comments such as "it's high time for you to marry" or "instead, you should consider having babies" targeted at women members of parliament addressing an interpellation are not only inadequate but are also unjustifiable in a society that calls itself democratic. A change in these practices must also be achieved as attitudes of this kind very strongly and very negatively influence public opinion and the general demeanour to women.

7. Conclusions and Future Perspectives

The goal is now set and given, the only question that remains is by what time and to what extent the planned activities and tasks will and can be executed. All this is exacerbated by the fact that the time bomb is in fact ticking fast: the situation of the acute shortage of labor force necessitates a quick solution.

The peculiarity of the Japanese policy of womenomics lies in its top-down strategy. Phrased differently, in Japan the ratio of female employment does not and will not rise due to a civilian or grass-root initiative, like it happened a while ago in developed Western European democracies, but as a result of a top-down approach, which economic players and the society are beginning to realise, somewhat unwillingly, in line with directives from higher levels and on the basis of government expectations expressed by target figures. The method of implementation could not be any different in Japan, as the only possibility for the government to combat all the problems above is to issue orders and directives requesting employers to carry out the related tasks and the specific jobs.

The other unique feature of the initiative is that womenomics is not considered a human rights issue in Japan, and it is not in any way seen as a programme facilitating women's mental and intellectual development and self-realisation: the programme is no other but a very stringent economic action plan.

Japan is rightfully proud of the technological and economic successes it was able to achieve during an unprecedentedly short period in history. At the same time, Japan currently faces several challenges that will inevitably influence its success and prosperity in the future. One of these challenges is concerned with finding an effective response to the country's social crisis: new ways and forms of social behaviour and changes in the Japanese value system demanded by younger generations induce numerous shifts in social norms so far considered traditional and exclusive (Ueno, 2010).

In fact, sooner than later Japan will be forced to give up its conviction that everything depends solely on one's will and invested efforts. The Japanese average person is convinced that he will continue experiencing uninterrupted periods of prosperity and that it is only his imagination that limits his material well-being. In addition, he also believes nothing can stop the series of new developments. However, in this day and age, it no longer suffices to be convinced that "one must want to do things, act accordingly and success will follow". Today the world is much more complex than before: now it is not enough to have only one's will and stamina to compensate for

one's lacking knowledge, talents, innovation or creativity (Hidasi, 2016a). Naturally, in numerous areas, primarily as far as the development of one's own skills and competences is concerned, strong will continues to remain one of the keys to success, but the playfield has, in the meantime, been expanded: the areas of assessment no longer comprise only internal and country-specific developments but comprise a much larger scope. In response to novel—mostly international—demands, what is necessary is advancement and progress in education and scientific development.

In Japan, the state of affairs above is coupled with very pressing social problems the management of which is really urgent: the longer the country waits to address these issues the more difficult the tackling of these problems becomes both financially and structurally. These problems include the ever-growing shortage of labor force and the issue of the restructuring of Japan's employment policy; the very rapid ageing of the Japanese society and the accompanying healthcare and social security reforms; the declining number of children, which fact fundamentally impacts not only employment policy but also social security; and last but not least, education-related concerns. These issues are decisive from the point of view of the general mood in society and social consciousness and should not, in any way, be underestimated in importance, as these factors provide the stamina and the vigour of each society. All in all, addressing each of these issues constitutes an almost unmanageable and highly complex task. Nevertheless, due to the interconnectedness of these problems and their interrelated impacts, the cause and effect relationships behind these issues, together with the strengthening and weakening effects associated with them, have by now become more obviously apparent than they had been in the past. The Japanese society has recognized the existence of these problems and the social perception of these issues already surfaces on the level of the Japanese social consciousness.

It is easy to realise and acknowledge that in Japan:

- the elimination of female underemployment, i.e. the more effective and successful utilisation of the female potential, can generate an immense amount of social energy. As a result of the mobilisation of women's and girls' so far hidden skills, capacities and knowledge, the future is certain to abound in really great achievements;
- girls constitute a more highly educated layer of Japanese youth. There are several reasons behind this phenomenon: the number of female university students is higher than that of males. Also, 80 percent of young persons struggling with psychic and other behavioural disorders are boys, which means that a relatively high portion of boys (annually approximately 100-200 thousand boys) will not continue

their studies in higher education. In our present knowledge-based society, several institutions and corporations will recruit highly-qualified labor force and the need for such workers will further increase in the future: in this scenario, it will be easier to find girls for these positions due to the higher level of education they can boast of;

- compared to boys, a higher number of girls take part in partial studies abroad and more girls than boys continue their graduate studies abroad. This can be explained by the current Japanese employment policy: those who are not contracted by their future employers in the year of their graduation (which is the usual scenario in the Japanese tradition of finding employment) may quite easily experience employment problems. This situation is, however, likely to change in the future due to the already pressing lack of labor force. As a result of having pursued studies abroad, girls' English knowledge excels that of boys. In Japan, a country which cannot boast high levels of English proficiency, this competence constitutes a great added value and, in the future, good English knowledge might easily function as an important selection criterion in the case of institutions more extensively engaged in internationalisation;
- women's communication skills are better than those of men, and they are capable of establishing more developed and more complex webs of human relationships than men. In addition, the knowledge and flow of information reaching women through these channels can be used by institutions and companies for their own benefit, thereby generating added value, be the purpose of these relationships marketing, services or innovation.

In conclusion, it can be claimed that in the past two decades Japan has faced as many challenges and has undergone as many changes fundamentally questioning and impacting social consciousness as other countries experienced over a period of a hundred years. The economic recession, which negatively impacted the Japanese nation's identity and social self-confidence, the restructuring of social values, the emergence of trust deficit in government as well as declining trust in science and technology, presented the entire Japanese nation with a huge ordeal and several obstacles to overcome. Japan's rebirth depends on how quickly the nation will be able to process and successfully manage these challenges. The programme called *womenomics* plays a vital role in this process. Womenomics is far from being a completed and fully-realised programme: a great number of its elements and components are currently being formed and transformed.

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