

Original Paper

Gender Roles and the Impact of Welfare Policies on the Gender Gap in Japan

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Abstract

This essay investigates how, even though economic progress is being made, welfare policies deepen traditional gender roles in Japan. The paper gives specific examples of such policies to show how such measures either work to promote gender equality or, on the contrary, strengthen stereotypes. Conclusion Overall, most of the policies outlined have good intentions, but they are groomed with little efficacy attributed to cultural norms and inadequate stakeholder implementation participation. This essay encourages future policy recommendations that increase childcare capacity, enforce equal pay, and encourage male involvement in caregiving. Research should address overcoming cultural barriers in attaining a more gender-equitable society in Japan.

Keywords

gender inequality, welfare policies, gender roles, employment, cultural norms

1. Introduction

Gender inequality remains a significant problem in an advanced country like Japan, where traditional gender roles are still predominant despite significant economic advancement (Fasbinder, 2015). This essay investigates how welfare policies influence gender roles and the gender gap in Japan. The research question in this paper is: “In what ways do welfare policies influence gender roles and the gender gap in Japan?” This research critically evaluates existing welfare policies about employment, income, and family roles. Furthermore, the research aims to avail these understandings of the gender dynamics that affect these policies.

Japan has had a history of defined gender roles: men playing the role of breadwinners and women playing the role of caretakers and homemakers (Tada, 1999). This division is very deep-rooted in cultural and social norms. Indeed, this thinking already led to the completion of “Ryosai kenbo”—a

good wife and, a wise mother (RACEL, 2017). Even though modernization entered full force, these roles have been carried forward to dominate almost all aspects of society, from employment opportunities down to family dynamics. In Japan, there exists a wide gender gap. This inequality extends to employment, underrepresentation of women in more senior positions, and overrepresentation in part-time jobs. According to Gender Equality Bureau (2022), when asked about how they feel about gender equality throughout society, 74.1% of participants felt that men are being given privileged treatment. Further, there is a disproportionate family burden borne by them. According to the Gender Equality Bureau, in 2020, women spent more than fivefold time in unpaid household and caregiving work compared to men. These are but a few of the telling statistics exposing deep-seated gender inequality in Japanese society.

Nemoto (2013) deals with the persistence of masculine organizational culture within Japanese companies, which curtails the woman's chance of furthering her upward mobility in her career. In its findings, there is substantial cultural resistance to policies targeting engendering equality. In her other publication, Nemoto (2016) rehashes that a very low percentage of women ever rise to management and attributes this to deeply positioned cultural and structural barriers. Other studies, including Matsuda in 2018 and Ishii-Kuntz in 2019, go on to concur with the above findings by Nemoto, therefore proving correct that current policies do little to bridge the gap between males and females.

2. Analysis of Welfare Policies

2.1 Overview of Japanese Welfare Policies

Japanese welfare policies include employment, family support, and income redistribution. Employment Insurance Law is where the unemployment benefits regime and job-seeking support are arranged (Yamakawa, 1992). Then there is the Childcare and Family Leave Law made purposely for parental and family care leaves (Lambert, 2007). Public Assistance Law ensures that at least the minimum standard of life will be lived with self-support becomes automatically promoted (Hayashi, 2010). In addition, long-term care insurance supports care for the elderly, and the child allowance law gives economic benefits to families raising children. These policies are said to be aimed at balancing work and family life but are debatable about being compelling enough to change gender roles and bridge the gender gap.

2.2 Specific Policies Influencing Gender Roles

Japan's parental leave policies are very generous. It provides up to a maximum of 12 months for leaves to either parent or an extension into 14 months if both parents take the leave (Yamaguchi, 2017). With the inclusion of men in childcare, the policy targets ensuring gender equality. However, men's participation still stays very low. According to Japanese government in 2022, 17.13% of fathers took paternity leave in 2022, compared to 80.2% of women (Kimoto, n.d.). This kind of disparity further reinforces the traditional gender roles that make women bear all childcare responsibilities. Therefore,

despite this policy being set up to achieve a balance in family duties, it is strongly affected by cultural norms and workplace expectations, which continue perpetuating the gap between genders both at home and in the workplace.

The childcare support policies in Japan have mainly been the three primary measures: subsidized daycare centers, financial assistance for childcare, and extended daycare services. These three indices are taken as the attempt to help or support women to return to work after maternity leave (Zhao, 2024). Currently, however, these three measures of childcare services—the subsidized daycare centers, financial assistance for childcare, and extended daycare services—seem to be not enough, as indicated by the taiki jidō (waiting children) lists, with large numbers of children on the waiting list of parents demanding such services. Many women have been withdrawn from the labor market or working part-time jobs because of this shortage of daycare services. And that affects their career development and widens the gender pay gap.

Japan is graying, increasing the need for elderly care, typically a role fulfilled by women. However, the Long-Term Care Insurance Law will establish support for family caregivers and professional caregiving services (Ikegami et al., 2003). It often falls on women; hence, their likelihood of getting employed declines, and at the same time, traditional gender roles are reinforced. Work reduction or leaving work to provide care is typical among women. This places them at an increased risk of income inequality and reduced chances of advancement in their careers.

2.3 Impact of Welfare Policies on Gender Gaps

The gender gap in employment is still vivid in Japan. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the participation rate for women is 54.8%, and for men, it is 71.4% (Statista, 2024). Several of these disparities are addressable by various welfare policies; however, their effectiveness is mixed. Though the Childcare and Family Care Leave Law is intended to motivate both parents to take a leave, it was mentioned above that male departments take advantage of this opportunity at meager rates (Sano & Yasumoto, 2014). This policy is supposed to advocate the work-life approach, but usually, the result is that the wife takes a leave since, without her, the child cannot be cared for. Thus, it affects her career upward movement. The Employment Insurance Law provides unemployment benefits and retraining programs, which could be helpful for women to be back in the workforce after a long break for family care. Cultural expectations and workplace practices, however, persist in creating obstacles to long-term career development for women.

Income inequality has long been a problem in Japan. Women are paid much less than their male equivalents, and Soni and Amah state the average gender wage gap to be around 30%. This is also because a much higher percentage of women work part-time and non-permanent jobs, the payment for which is less along with the benefits. Moreover, the greater concentration of females in traditionally lower-paid industries and underrepresentation in senior and managerial occupations also account for a

large part of the difference in incomes.

Welfare policies in Japan are also designed to mitigate some sources of income inequality but are relatively ineffective. Increasing the gender-specific policies about women, which enable them to balance family life with work, in principle allows them to stay in employment with a continuous career track record. However, the low take-up of parental leave by men and a shortage of affordable childcare act to undermine the effectiveness of these policies. Consequently, cases of family care very often still bring along with them interruptions in women's careers and a decrease in income. Some income redistribution policy measures alleviate those costs by providing tax benefits and allowances for families with children but are not designed to deal effectively with the sources of the gender wage gap. These measures can reduce the financial burden on families, but they do little to ensure pay equity or to encourage women's promotion into better jobs.

Income-related welfare policies have a partial effect on closing the gender gap. On the other hand, approaches like parental leave and childcare support, for instance, are steps in the right direction with all potential but meager low implementation and utilization. For example, the endeavors of the government to increase the capacity of daycare are significant, but still insufficient—not all women can return to more full-time work. Welfare policies should rather take steps to make equal opportunities in the workplace, for example, enforcing equal pay laws, leading the course for businesses to have transparency in pay, and motivating businesses to make women climb on top. On the other hand, a cultural shift regarding traditional gender roles and asking for more equity in distributing family responsibilities is imperative.

3. Conclusion

Japan's welfare policies significantly influence gender roles, gender gap in employment, gender gap in income, and family responsibilities. To level the playing field for all concerned, Japan will have to make its policy measures more effective, enforce equal pay, raise the availability of childcare facilities, and motivate the males to share the responsibility of caregiving. Further research should look at breaking barriers imposed by cultural societies, which will further help evaluate new initiatives to develop a more gender-equivalent environment.

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