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Women Empowerment in Japan: policies and public's reaction

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Traditionally, Japanese women are seen as subservient, dominated by men inside and outside the household and very dedicated to their families, leaving their jobs and careers after getting married or having children. This image is attributed to Confucianism and to the Samurai-based feudalism, both of them positioning women on an inferior level within the society. In 2013, Prime Minister Abe addressed the idea of "women empowerment" and the necessity of women being more involved in economy in order to revive Japan. Although the idea is not new and many countries around the world are trying to implement many changes in this field, the Japanese are famous for their unwillingness to modify mentalities and for the traditional ways of getting things done, aspects that might slow down real actions and developments. This paper analyzes the reactions of the Japanese citizens (women and men) to the idea of women empowerment for a stronger economy and a better future for the country. The research is based on a questionnaire administered to 36 Japanese nationals (men and women) living in Japan, working in private and public sectors. The findings indicate a desire to change women's place in society and economy but also a difficulty in what it concerns changing mentalities and acceptance of women as equals at work. Changes will happen but a long time is required.

Keywords: women empowerment, traditional beliefs, change, Japan

1. Introduction

In this paper[3] we investigated the idea of *women empowerment* promoted by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe since 2013, which meant that more women participated in and advanced at their workplace, as a way to revive the Japanese economy. We wanted to know if his political speech, together with the policies that came along, influenced in any way the reality of Japanese women working and if there have lately been many changes for them regarding equality at work, advancement, etc.

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The research is based on a survey comprising 16 questions, both open-ended and multiple choice, aiming at identifying the familiarity of Japanese people with the term *women empowerment*, their opinion about it and if the implementation is possible or not. The participants in this endeavor were people with ages between 20 and 70, employed in private companies or public institutions, who consented to provide answers to the questions. For ethical reasons, the participants' names are not revealed.

Since the number of people who completed the questionnaire was not very high and it represents just one minor share of the Japanese population, we also took a look at the social networks, statistical data, publications etc. related to the topic of women empowerment in Japan and the people's reactions to and opinions about it.

We departed in our research with the idea that Japanese society has difficulties in changing traditional mentalities and in accepting new ones, such as *women empowerment*, although the desire to change women's place in society and economy exists and it is desired.

2. Policies promoted by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe related to *women empowerment*

As mentioned before, since 2013, an important aspect of 'Abenomics' has been the emphasis on gender equality and support for women in the work place as an economic growth strategy. The emphasis has been so strong that the name *womenomics* has also been used. As the Prime Minister advocated during a General Assembly Address to the UN in 2013, 'building a society in which women can shine' (in Japanese: *josei gakagayakushakai o tsukuru*) is very important. He promised to appoint more women (a third) in senior management positions and governmental agencies, to increase the number of female workforce by 530,000 within one year (Kurtenbach, 2014), to improve and increase the day care facilities (200,000 new day care spots for children by 2015 and another 200,000 by March 2018 (Otake, 2014).

The Prime Minister, in order to give an example, appointed five female ministers in the September 2014's cabinet reshuffle. However, in only a month, two of the five women had to resign due to scandals (one because of bribery, the other because of misuse of political funds) (Aoki and Yoshida, 2014).

His cabinet has introduced policies to address problems such as balance between career and motherhood, the lack of sufficient childcare and nursing services, lack of women friendly work environment (gender wage gap being 26.6 in 2013, based on OECD's data), lack of incentives for Japanese women to join the workforce, lack of childcare leave benefits.

Also, a new law called the **Female Employment Promotion Legislation** or **The act of Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace** was made, which called on companies to disclose targets and proposals on how they planned to increase the number of female managers in their organizations (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office).

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Another policy created in order to support working women is the abolishing of the spousal tax deduction system that was first introduced in 1961 (at a time when women were largely expected to stay at home after marriage, relying on husbands as the breadwinners). By the law implemented in 1961, the families where one of the members wins less than 1.03 mil yen a year have a tax advantage and the "dependent" spouses don't need to pay their own health insurance fees and pension premiums. By the new law, families will have to pay taxes based on their combined income. By this change, PM Abe tries to push women to work more in full time jobs and less in non-regular ones (which they did until now in order to earn less than the limit imposed by the law mentioned above). In 2015, The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications' statistics indicated that 56% of women work in non-regular jobs in Japan, compared to 22% of men (Cislo and Takahashi 2016). Also, this law will try to encourage women to advance in their careers compared to the time when the law was in use and women were working less on purpose so the family can receive the tax advantage.

This is mainly what has happened legislatively since 2013. The idea of *women empowerment* for the economy's benefit has been also sustained by Kathy Matsui from Goldman Sachs[4] who first wrote about *womenomics* in 1999 and who explained many times the advantages of this: she believes that closing Japan's gender employment gap would add an estimated 7.1 million employees to the workforce and lift gross domestic product by as much as 12.5% (Goldman Sachs Report 2014: 5).

3. General reactions

As for the reactions of other Japanese citizens to *women empowerment* in Japan, a quick look in the press indicated that women that are now in high positions, as Miho Otani, Japan's first female captain of a destroyer-class vessel, consider that the male attitudes need to change in order to have more policies supporting working women. Also, from her personal experience, the biggest challenges at work were related to the implementation of gender-balanced policies in the working culture (Demetriou, 2016).

And she might be right, as Japan ranks 111 out of 144 countries in gender equality in the Global Gender Gap Index 2016 (World Economic Forum).

Other challenges that women are facing at work are related to childcare shortage and extended parental leave. Regarding these topics, Kathy Matsui said in

[4] The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc. is a leading global investment banking, securities and investment management firm that provides a wide range of financial services to a substantial and diversified client base that includes corporations, financial institutions, governments and individuals. Founded in 1869, the firm is headquartered in New York and maintains offices in all major financial centers around the world.

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an interview for Japan Today that 'Improving the capacity of daycare and elder care is obviously critical, but it is also important to educate society about the benefits of greater diversity. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is the mindset. There are many 'myths' about *womenomics* that need to be overturned if we are going to make more progress from here' (Landry, 2016). She also suggested that, although the image of Japanese women indicates a lack of ambition or interest to return to work after having children, the issue is actually the lack of support mechanism to help them re-enter the workplace. A change in what is called the dual track employment model of career (*sogo-shoku*) and non-career (*ippan-shoku*), where career means higher salaries, training, possibility of advancement (usually chosen by men) and non career means lower salaries, limited training (usually chosen by women), would have a significant impact on the number of female managers in Japan (Goldman Sachs Report: 23).

Another challenge for women is the inequitable division of responsibilities in the household. In the Japanese society, women are in charge of child rearing, household chores, family's elders' care, etc., while men are seen as outsiders or the household breadwinners. Moreover, the problem is also the fact that inside the Japanese companies, the seniority is better valued than the performance, so men prefer to 'maximize their time at work and minimize their time at home' (Landry, 2016), keeping the traditional gender roles unchanged. In order for these to change, companies have to reconsider their promotion systems, employee evaluation systems, etc.

However, the place where the gender roles are defined is inside the house and within the families so the change must come first from here. As Kathy Matsui said, 'If we want to shape role models that reflect today's realities and encourage for women to pursue careers traditionally filled by men, we have to tackle unconscious biases within society"(Landry, 2016). She also points out the importance of male leaders that support diversity and help create a shift in the broader population's mindset. Through programs such as 'Male champions of change[5]', men could make real progress on gender equality by stepping up beside women.

A big help in this direction would also be if companies such as Toyota and Nissan push diversity and promote gender equality in the work place, because if they start it the rest of the corporate Japan may follow them. However, for the time being, at Toyota only 3% of the managers are women and at Nissan 8%. Unfortunately, not even the government has more space for women, having only 3.5% in the senior position jobs (Oi, 2016).

Moreover, although the political speech of the Prime Minister Abe is very supportive of women's advancement in the national leadership and he desires to have 30% of supervisory positions in all fields by 2020, he seems to be very far from his goal when in his own cabinet there are only three female members out of 20 (Reynolds, 2016) and he does not support women such as Yuriko Koike to be elected in senior position jobs, in this case the first female governor of Tokyo.

[5] Male champions of change website: http://malechampionsofchange.com/

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4. Questionnaire results

The questions were created to cover following aspects: the respondent's opinion about working women, even after marriage, her / his opinion on the place of women and men in the Japanese society, the environment in which she / he works (how many women, how many men) and the personal opinion about the main topic, if the person has heard about women empowerment and what is their opinion about it, if the person has felt any changes in the last years related to woman's place in a company / institution and the personal opinion about the ability of Japanese people to change their traditional ways in order to save the economy.

The respondents were 52% men and 47% women, with the highest number in the 20's age group, continued by the 30's and so on. 88% are working in private companies and 12% in public institutions. Although the majority of the respondents were in their 20s and 30s, they included themselves in the traditional category (62%) rather than in the modern category (38%).

For the question referring to woman's place in society, the answers were as follows: women are powerful inside the household due to their motherhood and birth capabilities, one respondent declaring that women are followers of men. Generally, the respondents presented a woman's place as being low in the work hierarchy (confirmed by 17 respondents). The same people mentioned that lately an increasing number of Japanese companies have women playing an active role, while in reality women are still seen as lower than men in the work environment. 8 respondents have promoted the idea of equality between men and women and the fact that they feel no difference between the two at work. Only 2 respondents said that it depends on the work environment. And only one of the public employees declared that, because she works in a university she doesn't feel any particular gender differences.

Also, a few respondents indicated that the society is changing and it is adapting to the new ways, but that it takes time.

As for a man's place in the society, the answers have been more different from one respondent to another. However, 5 participants declared that there is no difference between men and women in society, 3 considered men as household protectors and supporters for the family by their work (4 members). The rest of the respondents declared that men have more advantages than women have (at work), they are on a higher level than women at work, they are seen as leaders, the center of the business, 'the core of the society', 'the owner', more active than women and as a 'shield for vertical connection'. Only one respondent has declared that men are the 5th wheel and another one stated that men are strong in society but weak at home.

Regarding the respondents' opinion about working women, 97% declared that they agree and the rest of 3% stated that they didn't care about it. Also, for the question referring to whether women should work after marriage and after having children, 76.5% said yes, while 23.5% said no.

As for the respondents' opinion about what type of jobs are suitable for women, the majority indicated jobs that do not require hard physical work, such as service industry, nursing, clerical, education (nursery) (23 respondents), with the

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observation that women need jobs that are 'female specific' and irregular after giving birth. From all respondents, 9 of them considered that women can have the same jobs as men, without differences and only one respondent considered women being capable of being managers / coordinators.

In what concerns the differences between the employment percentages between women and men in companies and institutions, 25 out of 34 of the respondents work in companies where the number of employed women is significantly smaller by comparison to the men employed, 6 respondents work in companies where the number of women is higher than that of men and 2 in companies with an equal number.

Regarding the reasons why a woman should work after marriage and after having children, they were as follows: lack of workforce, increase in income, financial independence, connection with society (3 responses), share the house expenses, low birthrate and aging society. However, between the supporters of stay-at-home mothers, the reasons mentioned are: mother should be close to the child, which is important for children (mentioned by 2 respondents that had housewife mothers and hence understood their importance).

The next set of questions was related to *Womenomics*. 58.8% of the respondents did not hear about the Prime Minister's idea of Women empowerment. Among the ones that heard about it, the majority (7 respondents agree with it (partially or completely)), commented that women should get more involved in the work field, especially in education, the prime minister's idea is good but there are many problems and if men don't change, there will be no real change for working women.

To the question referring to the significance of women empowerment the majority (22 respondents) see it as a good thing, some respondents saying that it should be introduced more and more in each company, although it is difficult; it represents diversity and it is recommended for giving chances to more women to work in different fields in order to show their potential.

To the question related to the recent number of women in leadership positions, 20 people answered that the numbers are higher, while 12 said they are not, the rest saying they didn't know or didn't really notice any changes. As for the question if people feel any changes recently concerning women's place at work, 13 respondents said *yes*, mentioning that there are many differences by comparison to the situation 20 years before; 14 people said there were no real changes, men were still conservative and the changes were happening slowly. The rest of the respondents said that maybe there were some changes, but they were not visible. One respondent said that the implementation of this idea was very visible in the political speech, but not in reality.

In what concerns the willingness to change of the Japanese people in their traditional ways, 73.5% responded *no*, and 26.5% responded *yes*.

The ones who answered *yes*, motivated the answer by saying that things had changed significantly since the WW2, and that the changes would continue to happen. One respondent sustained that changing the tradition is not actually important, but how to create a better society with strong economy is. 'The tradition

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is made every 100 years, by being reinterpreted or re-brought from past. It is not a matter of removing tradition but keeping it as a guide point and improving it for being a good change in the country's situation.'

In the case of the ones who answered *no*, the reasons were the traditional and old fashion ways of doing things in Japan, especially in the countryside and when working with older people. Similarly, another respondent indicated that it would be important that not only the people in power, but other people too should change their awareness and behavior, the intention and the action being important in changing the situation of women. Other reasons were related to men's resistance to do housework, the difficulty to change habits, the fact that men are in charge to fix women problems, but also women should change their work styles and systems. That is why, the larger the company, the harder the change in mentality because 'most Japanese people mind what others think and not what is necessary". Another reason might be the lack of good parental care.

5. Conclusions

As we saw in the statistics, in the press and in the survey analysis, women seem to enjoy more support (at least political) to work and to pursue a career on the elite track even after getting married and having children, much more than they did before.

However, the problem arises inside the companies, where there still exists the traditional male oriented world, there is a lack of female role models, many companies have inflexible work hours and there is a lack of day care places where women could leave their children while working. Even if it weren't mentioned in the comments, we personally believe that the drinking culture (*nominication*), the *matahara* (harassment for leaving job after getting married), the 'old men's clubs', etc also negatively influence Japanese women's work life.

Although the government's regulations will most probably gradually clear the structural obstacles, the constraints that are harder to deal with are the cultural ones. The request for a gender equal society means a huge change in the male oriented Japanese society, which still has sex-segregated education and jobs, and requires different sex characteristics for females and males.

As Kathy Matsui also said, Japan's single-most valuable resource is its people and 'with its demographic clock rapidly ticking, more aggressive steps must be taken to promote gender diversity so that everyone has the chance to maximize their full potential. Diversity is no longer an option, but an economic imperative and the benefits of greater diversity will be enjoyed by all' (Matsui, 2016).

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