

Womenomics and Acrobatics: Why Japanese Feminists Remain Skeptical about Feminist State Policy

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism and conservative ideology have come together in Japan as ‘womenomics’, a state policy to boost women’s labour productivity as well as the nation’s birth rate. Feminists have responded with scepticism to this policy, proposed by the strongly conservative and nationalist Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. The content of ‘womenomics’ includes a new law to promote the advancement of women to leadership positions, and reflects the government’s concern for Japan’s international standing. The demographic crisis of a rapidly aging society with a declining birth rate is another background to the policy. Policies to boost the birth rate have been hard to reconcile with policies to promote women in leadership positions in corporate life. The gendered division of labour and the structure of the labour market exacerbate problems as neoliberal reforms are introduced belatedly to Japan. The resistance to neoliberalism has come from conservatives, and thus feminists in Japan have had to perform complicated acrobatics. The long-term prospects depend on finding ways to promote equality in a potentially shrinking nation while continuing to resist the seductions of neoliberal state policies that purport to advance the interests of women.

Keywords: feminism, policy, Japan, neoliberalism, womenomics, equal employment

INTRODUCTION

Japan has been living through a reactionary era and feminists have responded in complicated ways. Since the 1990s, the nation has been struggling through an economic and demographic downturn. Since 2012, the government has been led by a strongly nationalist Prime Minister, Abe Shinzō, who has been notorious for his attacks on feminist activism. Yet in recent years, he has also been selectively promoting women’s activities to boost the GDP and the birth rate, as well as to lift Japan’s international standing.

Of course it is not easy to define what the term ‘feminist’ might mean in Japan today: the category of ‘woman’, which can be assumed to undergird feminism, is crisscrossed by differences of class, sexuality, race, nation, religion and ideology. What is nonetheless undeniable is that there are individuals who identify themselves as ‘feminists’ and when they do so, they generally aim to promote women’s interests, from the perspective that women’s interests are not best served by the status quo. There are differences in tone and tactics, as well as of visions for alternatives to the status quo. These differences also include attitudes towards policies that seem to advance women’s interests. Feminist ideas and practices have managed to survive in the current age by strategically appropriating official discourse to gain wider support. And in turn, policy makers have appropriated the discourse of feminism in order to achieve national goals of economic and demographic growth.

This dynamic is nothing new and has been analysed and critiqued by scholars such as Nancy Fraser and Hester Eisenstein as a dangerous liaison or an uncomfortable marriage between feminism and neoliberalism (Fraser, 2009; 2013; Eisenstein, 2005, 2016)¹. Neoliberalism’s emphasis on individual entrepreneurial freedom has been powerfully seductive to certain kinds of feminism, and thus the description is apt. Yet these descriptions are based primarily on feminist movements in the United States, Australia, and Western Europe. What is different in Japan’s case? Could it be that feminism in Japan has yet to tie the knot with neoliberalism? And if so, is it now belatedly

¹ For a critique of Fraser, see Funk 2013, for a critique of Eisenstein, see Beneria 2011.

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facing that prospect, after having successfully pushed off advances from neoliberalism for several decades? Is feminism in Japan likely to continue to resist or to cave in to the pressure? Can the relationship be characterised as a complicated dance, even an acrobatics, or juggling act?

I will begin this paper by examining the Japanese government policy of Womenomics and the feminist responses to it. I will then place these contemporary phenomena in the context of the longer history of ambivalence among feminists about policies that purport to empower women and to achieve gender equality. After examining the current outcome of Womenomics policy, I will consider the possibilities for going forward, including hints for a better future that do not rely on the unhappy marriage of feminism and neoliberal state policy.

WOMENOMICS AND PROMOTING WOMEN TO SHINE

The history of feminist activism in Japan reaches back to the late nineteenth century, and a lively stream of feminist expression and contention has swirled since then.² In the early years, women spoke up against prostitution and concubinage and sought political rights as well as protection for mothers. After World War II, feminists have focused on equality in the workplace as well as on securing state support for childcare and eldercare. These efforts have resulted in the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (1986), the Childcare Leave Law (1992), the Nursing Care Insurance Law (1997), as well as the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society (1999).

Many of these feminist victories were won in a conservative political climate, dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), hegemonic in Japanese politics for much of the period after World War II. Its policies have been far from monolithic, but observers agree that in recent years the LDP's leadership headed by Abe Shinzō has brought a new level of resurgence to conservative ideology. Previous administrations had conjured a Japanese-style welfare system that relies on the unpaid labour of women within the family and had also pushed for neoliberal reforms (Ōsawa Mari, 2002; Miura, 2016b), but under Abe, feminism and state policy have reached a new and more complicated configuration.

After Abe returned to power for a second term as Japanese Prime Minister in 2012, he started to deliver speeches with seemingly feminist themes. This was surprising because in his previous term a few years earlier (2006–7), he had spearheaded a reactionary backlash against feminism, attacking state-sponsored and grassroots initiatives for gender equality and sex education. This was part of a larger conservative backlash involving rightwing media, religious groups, and conservative politicians.³ And yet, after returning for a second term, Abe chose to strategically sell an agenda with feminist overtones. This policy called 'Womenomics' was based on the claim that promoting women's greater participation in the economy would boost the Japanese Gross Domestic Product by 12.5 percentage point (Matsui et al., 2014: 5). Women were desperately needed in the workforce to reenergise the flagging economy. But they were also needed to give birth to more children in order to deal with the demographic crisis of a rapidly aging society. Dressed up in the language of 'making women *shine*', Womenomics seemed to be a policy to make women work harder than ever before, both inside and outside the home.

Beyond the goal of boosting the productive and reproductive labour power of women, what were the concrete proposals of Womenomics? An early slogan was '30 by 20', placing women in 30% of leadership positions in the economy and government by 2020, the year of the Tokyo Olympics. As I discuss later, this was a goal held over from the previous administration and was later downgraded when it became obvious that it would not be met in time. Another manifestation of Womenomics can be found in a law passed in 2015 and implemented in April of 2016 for the Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace (hereafter the Promotion of Women Law or PWL).⁴ The main component of the PWL was the assessment of employers according to their efforts to 'empower women'.⁵ This could be described as a very mild form of 'carrot and stick' approach – corporations and local municipalities would receive official approval if they ranked highly, would be eligible for

² For an overview, see Mackie 2003. For the decades up to 1945, see Sievers 1983. On the 'women's lib' decades of the 1970s and 1970s see Shigematsu 2012. For a recent anthology focusing on the diversity of feminisms in Japan see Bullock et al. 2018.

³ For detailed discussion of the backlash, see Kano 2011, 2016; Yamaguchi et al. 2012; Yamaguchi 2006, 2014.

⁴ The text of the law can be found from the website of the Gender Equality Bureau in the Cabinet Office: http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/lbp/index.html. The full (Japanese) version can be downloaded from: http://www.gender.go.jp/policy/suishin_law/

⁵ Companies were asked to set numerical targets in at least one of four areas: increasing the ratio of women among those hired; lowering the difference in duration of employment of men and women; keeping the number of working hours reasonable for better work-life balance; increasing the ratio of women in management positions.

modest grants for pushing the initiative, and would presumably be somewhat embarrassed if they did not.⁶ And yet, no clear penalties were indicated, and much was left to the voluntary initiative of the employers.⁷

Some male legislators responded to the PWL in a predictable fashion.⁸ For example, Inoue Yoshiyuki, a conservative politician and former secretary of Abe, made an oft-heard comment against quotas as unfair, since they place gender above individual ability. Eguchi Katsuhiko, another politician known for his nationalist affiliations, asked whether gender equality in the workplace requires women and men sharing the same bathrooms and locker rooms, echoing a familiar spectre of gender confusion raised by the anti-feminist backlash arguments in the early 2000s (Kano, 2011). He also made various uninformed remarks suggesting that having a woman as a boss might create difficulties in the workplace, such as sexual harassment claims against friendly hugs – hugs are not common in Japanese adult interactions – and awkwardness around late-night entertaining of clients.⁹

How widely held are these kinds of conservative opinions? The most recent national survey from 2016 shows that 44% of men and 37% of women still agree that a wife should be primarily responsible for home and family, with the husband as the main breadwinner. While still rather high, it is certainly a much lower figure than in the 1970s, when 75% of men and 70% of women agreed with this gendered division of labour.¹⁰ Surveys, however, do not fully capture the texture of public sentiment.

Anonymous online comments are by no means a scientific sample, but can offer glimpses into the id of a society, sometimes revealing attitudes and sentiments that cannot be expressed openly. They can show, for example, a continued lack of social consensus about having women in leadership positions in Japanese society. Particular individuals might welcome greater promotion of women, but this might actually arise from a feeling of resentment that women are currently shirking hard work, rather from a feeling that it is unfair to hold women back. Or, individuals might argue for the importance of women's roles in the home, but this might come from a sense of nationalistic fear about Japan's future, rather than from an appreciation of women's contributions per se. This can be seen in anonymous online comments to an article by Matsuura Tamie, one of the experts consulted on the PWL.¹¹ They include sentiments such as:

First, they should ask each woman “Do you want to work? Or not work?” If they are honest, eight or nine out of ten would say “I don't want to work” (...) Women are quick to evade responsibility, and have no social conscience, so men are stuck in positions of leadership (lured with just a bit of prestige) which objectively makes them unhappy. Only a few masculinized women make a fuss about this, but most women are happy with the status quo in which men are sacrificed. This is the true state of gender inequality in Japan (...) This kind of inequality cannot be tolerated. Even if women don't want to, they need to be pulled into key leadership positions. Japanese men want to enjoy life more. I can't tolerate a society in which only women are so happy.

How to interpret such a tirade? Instead of dismissing it as risible, can we glean from it a sense of resentment, even fury, from men about what they perceive as gender inequality: too much work and responsibility for them while women relax at home?¹²

Another anonymous commenter argues, from a different viewpoint entirely, that being a good mother and raising the next generation is crucial for society:

If outstanding women are pulled out of the home into corporate life, things will look dire in thirty, fifty years (...) The problems are clearly visible in Euro-American countries where women's social advance has been promoted (...) It's wonderful that some women want to shine in society, but unless there are a certain number of excellent women who want to shine at home rather in society, in the long term society and economy will decline.

⁶ For a description of ‘carrots’, see the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's webpage on the law: <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/0000091025.html>

⁷ In one limited aspect the PWL came closest to what is known in the U.S. as ‘affirmative action’ and in Japan as ‘positive action’: It explicitly allowed favouring women over men in promotion, but only if less than 40% of management positions were held by women. This measure also was left at the initiative and discretion of employers. This was justified by the argument that it would be counterproductive to force corporations to hire and promote women. Tamie Matsuura, quoted in Aoki, 2015.

⁸ The meeting minutes are available from <http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/sangiin/189/0058/18908060058019a.html> (Accessed August 27, 2017)

⁹ On masculinist workplace culture and entertainment in hostess bars see Allison 1994.

¹⁰ *Danjo kyōdo sankaku bakusho* 2016: 75.

¹¹ Matsuura had urged a long-term view, cautioning that in the short term, promoting women equally might not result in visible financial gain (Matsuura 2015).

¹² On debates concerning the ‘housewife’ and ‘labour,’ see Kano, 2016, Chapter 4. See also Ueno 1994/2009.

Here home (*katei*) vs society (*shakai*) are understood as mutually exclusive, women are seen as crucial to the maintenance of home, yet the ultimate value is placed in society, and home is valued insofar as it strengthens society.¹³ Moreover, the fear of socio-economic decline and comparisons with Euro-American countries betrays a fear of where Japan might be headed if feminist policies are carried out.

These statements reveal the lack of social consensus in Japan about women in leadership positions. There is a general consensus that women and men deserve equal respect, but many continue to believe in some notion of gendered suitability or division of labour. Thus they will say that *some* women might be ready for leadership, but it would be unnatural to slot a certain percentage into such positions. Many also insist that women are needed as homemakers and mothers, more than in the workplace competing with men. Thus we can locate a division between those who are pushing for women's leadership – either out of genuine belief in equality or because of how this affects Japan's international standing – and those who argue against such promotion of women – either to preserve Japan's 'traditional' way of life, or based on the claim that women wish to stay home. And while such divergence of opinions is found in the general populace, scepticism about what might be termed 'feminist' state policy are also surprisingly common among those who would define themselves as 'feminists'.

FEMINIST AMBIVALENCE: INTERNATIONAL, DOMESTIC AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

What drove someone like Abe to propose Womenomics at this moment in time? Answering this question also allows us to understand why many feminists in Japan have been largely sceptical so far.¹⁴ The background includes the international context of scrutiny over Japan's sexual past, the domestic context of an escalating demographic crisis, and an even longer history of state-feminist interaction.

Let us first consider the international context. In recent years, the Japanese government has faced international criticism over its response to revelations about the so-called military comfort women during the Asia-Pacific War.¹⁵ The government had also received censure over human rights violations such as trafficking women in the contemporary sexual industry. Against this backdrop, in 2010, the government was chided by the United Nations' CEDAW Committee for lagging in gender equality, especially the lack of women in leadership positions. At the time, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was in power and promised to undertake 'positive action' with a goal of increasing female leaders in all sectors of society. Although the DPJ fell from power shortly thereafter, Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government continued in this line of linking international norms to domestic promotion of women.

It makes sense for policymakers under both the DPJ and the LDP to target the percentage of women in leadership positions, because this figure directly affects Japan's standing in global rankings. Historically, Japan has ranked high in the Human Development Index, measuring health, longevity, and level of education for women and men. But the Global Gender Gap Index ranks Japan closer to the bottom. Abe thus carefully chose highly visible international arenas to announce his Womenomics policies, such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, which publishes the Global Gender Gap Index. He also appointed five female members to his cabinet. Though their terms were short-lived, and the women were mostly known for sharing his conservative and nationalist views, Abe pointed out that this single act raised Japan's global ranking from 29th to 11th as measured by the percentage of women in cabinet positions (Schieder, 2014).

Transnational feminists have long been sceptical of Abe's performance in international arenas. Feminists in Japan had expressed solidarity with Korean feminists in bringing the issue of comfort women to public attention (Yamashita, 2008; Seo, 2018), collaborating to hold a powerfully symbolic Women's War Crimes Tribunal in Tokyo in 2000. Abe had pressured the national broadcasting network NHK to alter coverage of this event, leading to a series of reactionary attacks on media outlets by politicians, pundits and vocal denizens of the internet. There was

¹³ There is the possibility that one person is commenting in the guise of different people, but they are each fairly long-winded and detailed, and they argue with each other.

¹⁴ Very few individuals who self-identify as feminist have expressed enthusiasm for Womenomics. On the other hand, a larger number of feminists have been involved in formulating the policies for gender equality in the workplace (EEOI), and policies for 'gender equal society.' The most prominent of the latter is Ōsawa Mari (Ōsawa, 2002, 2011). For a critique of such 'mainstream' feminist positions, see Yamaguchi et al., 2012, Yamaguchi, 2014, 2018.

¹⁵ The terminology is part of the controversy. There is contention over the degree of military involvement, coercion, and compensation, as well as over the proper modes of apology, redress, and commemoration. 'Comfort women' is the English translation of the Japanese term *ianfu* and some object to it as euphemising sexual exploitation. While *Nibongun ianfu* (Japanese military comfort women) may be said to have become standard terminology among specialists, the term 'sexual slavery' is also used among Anglophone feminists. See Soh, 2009; Yamashita, 2008; Ueno, 1998/2004.

little wonder, then, that feminists in Japan were sceptical of Abe's seemingly pro-feminist performances in 2013 (Kano and Mackie, 2013).

Having thus seen the international background for the government's gender policy, let us turn to the domestic context for it. Although its policies might appear feminist on the surface, the administration is not moved by a genuine concern for women's human rights or gender equality as a principle of social justice, but by what helps the nation and its economy. Scholars have noted that Abe avoids using 'gender' or 'equality' or 'feminism' in his speeches, choosing instead *katsuyō* (utilisation) or *katsuyaku* (lively contribution), tapping women as assets for meeting national goals (Schieder, 2014; Miura, 2016a). At the same time, words like *katsuyaku* and *kagayaku* (to shine, to sparkle) are vague enough not to threaten anyone. This semantic strategy is not unique to the Abe administration: a similar calculus explains what has been rendered in English as 'gender equal society', a pillar of the government's gender policy since 1999. In Japanese, the term is *danjo kyōdō sankaku*, 'male-female co-participation and planning', carefully avoiding the contentious terms 'gender' (*jendā*) and 'equality' (*byōdō*), and thus avoiding overt feminism.

Rather than concern for gender equality, what is driving the policy-making is Japan's demographic crisis. Japan is facing a future with a declining population and a shortfall of working-age people. The labour shortage motivates the Womenomics' emphasis on pulling women into the labour force. Meanwhile, feminists in Japan are sceptical because they see 'working like men' to be a recipe for potential disaster. There is thus a grain of truth in the anonymous online commenter cited above, who saw the Promotion of Women Law as a measure to pull women out of their comfort zones and to place them in stressful positions of leadership – with its costs as well as its rewards. But when the cost is as high as death or suicide from overwork (*karōshi*) – as it has been reported in cases involving young women recently – most women have refused to welcome it. As we will see later, there is a longer history behind the feminist scepticism on policies mobilising women to work.

Finally, the Womenomics policy aligns only circuitously with birth promotion policies rolled out simultaneously. This combination only makes sense because addressing the demographic crisis requires boosting the birth rate as well as labour productivity. Abe's belligerently named "Task Force to Bust Through the Crisis of Low Birthrate" kicked around the idea of instilling the awareness of a 'proper childbearing age' into all women by distributing 'women's notebooks,' presumably designed to allow women to keep track of menstrual cycles and other such fertility-related data points.¹⁶ This has been criticised as intrusive and paternalistic, and the idea was eventually dropped, although threats to women's individual control over their reproduction persist.¹⁷

Abe also proposed extending women's childcare leave to three years (from the current one to one-and-half years) to encourage women to withdraw from the workforce and be full-time caregivers of their infants and toddlers. This was also criticised as unrealistic and likely to lead to further workplace discrimination. This policy would directly contradict some of the goals of Womenomics, but it would save the government money it would otherwise have to spend on day care facilities. It can thus be described as a 'neoliberal' 'maternalist' policy, to borrow Miura's characterisation (Miura, 2016a). It emphasises the role of women as mothers, but also seeks to minimise the expenditures of the state, leaving individual women to shoulder the responsibility of reproduction. That this is proposed at the same time as Womenomics shows the potential incoherence of elements in Abe's gender policy, or the fact that they can be made to cohere only by women working harder: bearing and nurturing many more children by using the extended childcare leave, while somehow leaping over the barriers against women aspiring to leadership positions.

Another controversial plan, albeit receiving less public attention, relaxes regulations against importing domestic help from abroad. So far this has been approved only in Special Economic Zones. This plan, like the more established one of importing nurses for elder care, has both good, bad, and uncomfortable consequences from a feminist perspective. The outsourcing of care work and housework has been a crucial accelerator of women achieving leadership positions in many countries. Nannies, maids, and nurses for the elderly have freed many elite women to pursue education and career success – and yet this has led to the care drain and exploitation of third-world and non-elite women. Many feminists in Japan have thus been reluctant to embrace such a solution, and there is continued ambivalence about the outsourcing of housework and care work in general.¹⁸

The scepticism of feminists about Womenomics also needs to be understood in a longer historical context. The current response echoes earlier scepticism about the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of the 1980s as well as

¹⁶ On the discourse around 'canonical pregnancy,' see Seaman, 2017.

¹⁷ The history of state control of reproduction casts a long shadow here. See Kano, 2016, Chapter 2. Critics also pointed out that the Task Force was misguided in blaming women and their lack of awareness for the declining birthrate, rather than larger economic, legal, and institutional impediments.

¹⁸ Feminist economist Adachi Mariko, for example, articulates the consequences of the global outsourcing of care (Adachi, 2007). See also Kaizuma, 2016 on the consequences of globalization on care networks.

the ‘Gender Equal Society’ policy since the 1990s.¹⁹ Womenomics and the Promotion of Women Law remind many feminists of the war-time mobilisation of women, just as did the EEOL and GES policies. For example, the promise of ‘employment equality’ in the 1980s came coupled with withdrawal of measures that were seen as protective of women (such as banning overwork at night). The EEOL could thus be understood as mobilising female workers for economic growth. The promotion of ‘gender equal society’ in the 1990s was also seen as a way to recruit women for national goals, though it contained progressive potential in its early formulation. Feminist Hotta Midori points out that the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society resulted from a compromise among three interest groups: conservative politicians, business leaders, and feminists. Conservative politicians were happy with the status quo, business leaders wanted to hire more women if it was profitable, and feminists sought to challenge the sexual division of labour. Caught between the first two groups, feminists were required to perform a kind of ‘acrobatics’: in order to fight conservatives who believed women’s place was in the home, feminists had to collaborate with business leaders who welcomed women into the workplace. And yet at the same time, feminists had to fight business leaders who assumed that women, just like men, should sacrifice their personal lives for the sake of the company. Feminists thus had to insist that women, as well as men, should balance work and family life, without thereby giving in to conservative politicians who would be happy to see women tied to home and family (Hotta, 2002). No wonder feminists felt discombobulated. And no wonder Womenomics elicited similar ambivalence.

The even longer history of the difficult relationship between Japanese feminism and the state also needs to be remembered. Before 1945, women had no right to vote and so little formal political power that they needed to collaborate closely with male politicians, as has been explained by historian Sheldon Garon (Garon, 1997). Because of this dynamic, and because certain women’s interests aligned with state interests, many feminist groups collaborated with the state’s imperialist and colonial policies and the disastrous war. Due to this history, independent women’s groups have been much more cautious about collaborating with the state after the war. In short, groups that define themselves as explicitly feminist in recent decades in Japan have almost by definition been sceptical of government policy, though ‘mainstream’ women’s groups have cooperated with the state in significant ways (Kobayashi, 2004; Murase, 2006; Kano, 2016).²⁰

The acrobatics of feminist positioning have continued in more recent decades. Memories of the backlash against feminism led by Abe around 2005–2006 make activists especially weary. Reactionary times in Japan could refer to this period, or to the longer arc of the resurgence of conservatives starting in the 1990s. In so far as this resurgence is a ‘reaction’ against the progressive gains of the post-war decades, Japan has much in common with the United States where a similar backlash and turn to the Right happened in the 1980s. Yet the 1990s had also been a decade of important gains for women in Japan, including the Childcare Leave Law and the Nursing Care Insurance Law. And when we trace the history of the government’s Basic Plans for Gender Equal Society, we can see how feminist discourse has been imbricated with gender policy in Japan, leading to a ‘two steps forward, one step back’ dance. When the First Basic Plan of 2000 laid the framework, it had surprisingly progressive elements, targeting the gendered household division of labour. This was attacked by conservatives as threatening the fundamental distinction between women and men. The Second Basic Plan of 2005 bore the brunt of the backlash and thus included language rejecting some of the more progressive elements of the previous plan. The Third Basic Plan of 2010 was presented during the Democratic Party of Japan’s regime, and took another step forward after the backlash, especially pushing the greater participation of men in housework and childcare. This plan also announced the numerical goal of 30% for women in various leadership positions. Finally, the most recent Fourth Basic Plan of 2015 under Abe and LDP had to step back and downgrade numerical goals, as discussed below.²¹

WHERE WE ARE NOW: NO MORE 30 BY 20

What have been the results of Womenomics? Women’s labour force participation has indeed risen, but this is a complicated figure. Kathy Matsui, Chief Japan strategist at Goldman Sachs whose ideas inspired the policy, reports that the percentage of women who are in the labour force rose from 57% to 66%, surpassing the level of the United States at 64%. But she also notes that an increasing percentage of all workers are in the so-called ‘irregular’ positions, lacking job security and benefits.

As Miura Mari has described, the Japanese labour market is a ‘gendered dual system’, in which mostly male core members of the labour force have access to stable employment and full benefits in ‘regular’ (*seiki*) positions,

¹⁹ On feminist debates about these policies, see Kano, 2016.

²⁰ For example, the International Women’s Year Liaison Group founded in 1975 operated as an umbrella organisation for official women’s groups and became a regular channel of communication between the government and its large membership base (Murase, 2006: 109).

²¹ On the various Basic Plans and the background see Kano, 2016, Chapter 5.

while those who are on the margins – including women, the elderly, and increasingly young men also – are in so-called ‘irregular’ (*hi-seiki*) positions. Those in irregular employment include part-time but also full-time and contract workers, who often perform the same job tasks as regular workers. They are paid much less, however, and they can also be fired much more easily than those in the regular tracks.²² The Japanese labour market maintains a strict division between regular and irregular work – few of those hired for the latter ever move into the former ranks. Most women take advantage of partially paid childcare leave, but when they return to work they often only find irregular positions.

One of the structural changes resulting from the neoliberal reforms in recent decades is that women in the regular but clerical (*ippanshokun*) track were eventually replaced by irregular workers. There is grave inequality of pay: for every 100 yen a male regular worker is paid, a female regular worker is paid 74.8, a male irregular worker 55.7, and female irregular worker only 50.4.²³ Between 1984 and 2011, the percentage of men in regular employment dropped from more than 90% to 75%, while those in irregular employment rose from less than 10% to 25% (Miura, 2016a). Thus one in four men are in irregular employment. Meanwhile, for women, the percentage of regular employment also dropped from 75% to less than 50%, while those in irregular employment surged from 25% to more than 50%. This means that even as more women enter the workforce, they are doing so increasingly as irregular rather than regular workers.

Because the Japanese welfare system is predicated on protecting employment for the (usually male) head of the household as breadwinner – what Miura calls the ‘welfare through work’ model – when regular employment declines and irregular employment rises, it becomes a major social issue.²⁴ The welfare safety net is not strong enough for this new reality. The ‘welfare through work’ model is also a ‘male breadwinner’ model. The on-going breakdown of this model seems to leave us with only a few options for the future: to try harder to shore it up, which is a reactionary move, or try to shift to a ‘universal breadwinner’ model, in which couples earn dual income and outsource much of the reproductive labour if they can afford to do so, or juggle and struggle if they cannot, as in the neoliberal USA (Fraser, 2013). The Abe administration seems to be torn between these two directions, with the forces of the conservative backlash pointing in the first direction and Womenomics pointing in the second direction. The end result is that women are being asked to do an impossible acrobatics act, to become breadwinners and leaders without being too threatening to men, to the traditional family system, or to their reproductive labour at home. As I will argue below, there are other alternatives, and it is important to keep those possibilities in mind lest we get caught between the false alternatives of a patriarchal past and a neoliberal future.

Meanwhile, another phenomenon accentuates the precariousness of women’s economic situation. One of the most dramatic demographic changes in the last few years is that the percentage of women who marry is quickly decreasing. In the 1980s, the percentage of those who never married was less than 5% for both women and men. In 2015, those who had never married increased to 14% in women, and 23% in men. For women, the system has always been ‘welfare through marriage to men who work’: in other words, the Japanese welfare system has assumed that all women will eventually marry and be financially supported by their husbands. The tax system, the pension system, and the health insurance system, are all designed to support the married housewife who does not earn too much money. Now this model of ‘welfare through marriage’ is crumbling as well.

This means that it has become harder for young women in Japan to either obtain economic independence through work – because as irregular workers they earn barely enough to make ends meet, and their salary does not rise commensurate with experience – and also harder for them to attain economic security through marriage. And because it is becoming harder, it is also perhaps becoming more aspirational. In a survey of 3000 young women in their teens to thirties conducted in 2013, one-third of unmarried women expressed the wish to become full-time housewives.²⁵ This high figure needs to be understood as a dream of economic security, one that is increasingly out of reach for many. For more and more women, the future holds struggling with low-paying and insecure jobs, as well as unpredictable family relationships, often with partners who themselves are in low-paying and insecure jobs.

²² Miura (2016b) points out that the terminologies and categories for irregular work are often divided by gender and age: *pato* (part-time) is used for middle-age and older women; *arubaito* (from the German Arbeit) for younger men and women especially side-jobs for students. The term *baken* (dispatch workers) used to apply mostly to women in specialist positions such as computer programming and translating, but a series of revisions of the Dispatch Labour Law in the 1990s expanded the category to include manufacturing. This led to the great increase in irregular labour, especially among men. The workplace hierarchy that used to be defined along gender lines is now less gendered, but only in the sense that many more men are also in irregular and insecure forms of labour. It does not mean that men in regular positions have been replaced by women.

²³ Quoted by Konno Hisako in <http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/sangiin/189/0058/18908060058019a.html> (accessed August 27, 2017)

²⁴ See Miura (2016). Miura contrasts the Japanese model with others, such as ‘welfare without work’ (Western Europe), ‘welfare with work’ (Scandinavia) ‘work instead of welfare’ (Anglo-American).

²⁵ Cited in Ogawa (2017).

What about role-models for women who want to move up to leadership positions? What has happened to the generation of women who entered the workforce as ‘equal to men’ in career tracks (*sōgōshokū*) under the EEOL? The picture is discouraging. A survey revealed that 80% of the more than 1000 women who had joined career tracks in 1986 had quit work by 2015.²⁶ The career tracks tend to require long work days and relocation at the will of the employer. Thus many women decide it is not possible to combine that kind of employment with having children.²⁷ The difficulty of juggling career and family has led to women racing to exit from both, rather than staying in order to have a voice in changing both, to borrow Leonard Schoppa’s formulation (Schoppa, 2006). This results in the low number of women in leadership positions thirty years later, as well as the low marriage and birth rate for society.

Consequently, ‘30 by 20’ – 30% of leadership positions held by women by 2020 – seems ever distant as a goal. Reflecting this reality, the government downgraded the numbers in the Fourth Basic Plan of Gender Equal Society announced in 2015: Now the target is women in 7% of leadership positions in government, and 5% in the private sector. This is not a very ambitious figure. The number of women in the cabinet has also declined. After the August 2017 cabinet reshuffle, there were only two women.

What about the idea of involving more men in childcare, which had been another major focus of the Third Basic Plan? Not surprisingly, under the Abe administration this has received much less attention, even as ‘work-life balance’ has become a buzzword. Promoting awareness on the need for such balance is fine, but has little real effect without concrete measures to make it possible. Attempts to curtail long work hours – traditionally expected of male employees – have so far not been successful.

It is thus also not surprising that boosting the birth rate seems to have receded somewhat as well, compared to the initial few years of the Abe regime. Japan may have moved beyond the tipping point for reversing the population decline. There are few concrete and optimistic plans to push the birth rate back past the point where the population will hold steady. Increasing immigration is frequently mentioned as a solution, but not seriously discussed as a policy.²⁸

Many constraints remain around the ‘ideal’ family shape. Thus infertility treatment is in the news often – one in six couples seek treatment according to recent reports – but this is restricted to married heterosexual partners. Single women are not encouraged to give birth; adoption and foster parenting is also very marginal.²⁹ The ideal family continues to be having biological children (preferably two or three) born to married heterosexual couples where the man is in a stable occupation as breadwinner and the mother is primarily responsible for childcare for the first several years. Established in the post-World War II decades as the foundation for Japanese economic growth, this continues to be the outdated ideal image of the family in the minds of many lawmakers. So far, neither the birth rate nor the female leadership goal is being served by clinging to this image.

THE LARGER VIEW: POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR FEMINISM IN JAPAN

As we have seen, Womenomics has a complex history, and the results are ambiguous. Where would feminists in Japan go from here? If all women could have three children and hold jobs that make them shine, that would seem to be a success by Abe’s standards. But how do feminists in Japan feel about this picture? Of course the definition of feminism has been problematic, and it has become impossible to blithely espouse any notion of sisterhood, or women’s common experience or interests. Can we at least articulate what the commonalities of interests might be for women in Japan? Or is that category also disintegrating?

For example, Ueno Chizuko has been one of the most prominent feminist scholars in Japan since the 1980s and her stance can be interpreted as a kind of snapshot of the current paradox of feminism in a reactionary age. Many feminist scholars have come to take for granted the divisions within the category of women, and would point out the serious differences, as well as potential conflicts in the relationship between first- and third-world women, or between majority and minority women (Grewal and Kaplan, 2006; Shigematsu, 2018).³⁰ Ueno, however, insists that the experience of womanhood has a universal component. Moreover, she insists on such universality that arises from the experience of weakness and vulnerability (Ueno, 2006). Her stance sets her potentially at odds with

²⁶ Josei sōgōshoku ikki sei hachiwari taishoku: Kintōhō shikō sanjū nen [80% of First Generation of Women on Career Track Retired: 30 Years after EEOL]. *Tokyo Shinbun*, January 24, 2016. <http://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/economics/list/201601/CK2016012402000111.html?ref=rank>

²⁷ See Strober and Chan (1999) for a comparison tracking female graduates of elite institutions in Japan and the U.S.A.

²⁸ Meanwhile, so-called ‘trainees’ (*kenshūsei*) is an ambiguous category that allows a large number of foreign workers to be employed temporarily in Japan, often with minimal benefits and sometimes in exploitative conditions.

²⁹ Same-sex marriage is not recognised; domestic partnership is partly recognised in two municipalities (Shibuya and Setagaya Wards in Tokyo) but with few legal rights. Support for reproductive and childrearing costs are low by OECD standards.

³⁰ See also Eisenstein 2016: x-xi who disagrees with the postmodern transnational feminism.

two dominant trends in feminism: with the kind of neoliberal feminism exemplified by Womenomics (let strong women become stronger and ‘shine’) and the kind of postmodern feminism that renounces the idea of common interest for all women (Ueno and Miyaji, 2011). If one rejects the ‘trickle-down feminism’ that is Womenomics as well as the ‘always already divided’ postmodern take on feminism, what remains logically is a position of universal vulnerability.³¹

Recently, Ueno has come under fire for her comments about the present and future of Japan (Ueno, 2017). In an interview she reflected with striking pessimism about Japan’s future, stating bluntly that it is impossible to reverse the population decline by boosting the birth rate, but also rejecting the possibility of population and economic growth through increased immigration. She claimed that because of xenophobia and ethnocentrism, Japan would never accept immigrants – especially in an era of global anti-immigrant sentiment – and that the only remaining option for Japan is to accept a shrinking and declining nation. This rejection of immigration was greeted with a great deal of consternation as an expression parallel to ‘America First’ and ‘Brexit.’ Ueno has acknowledged that her view of immigration as an all-or-nothing proposition was too simplistic.³² But just as important was her urging that a shrinking Japan should stress equality – “we should equally and slowly grow poorer together”. This call for accepting decline was not received favourably, but it can be understood as a call akin to the notion of degrowth. It seems diametrically opposed to the type of neoliberal feminism that Hester Eisenstein critiques as complicit with globalising capitalism, and that is being pushed by the Japanese government under the name of Womenomics and women’s promotion.

What will a marriage of neoliberalism and feminism look like in Japan? The neoliberal game produces winners and losers, it is said: the strong entrepreneurial independent person who can plan and work for and invest in the future on the one hand, versus the weak disposable fatalistic underclass who is unable to live in the mode of hoping for the future, on the other hand (Shibuya, 2003; Berlant, 2011). They are often depicted as different groups of people, different classes.³³ There is a definite possibility of increasing disparity among women in Japan that makes the feminism of a previous generation – which was premised on the idea that all women share a common experience of discrimination in a masculinist world – seem old-fashioned, even impossible. Not all women are sisters, they are rivals, or even live in separate worlds, it is said.³⁴

Will Japan have an elite group of women for whom neoliberal feminism makes sense, and a non-elite group who are actually disadvantaged by it, rather than being equally helped by it? (Eisenstein, 2009/2016; Fraser, 2009). It is hard to claim that this has already happened in Japan. There are few signs of a group of elite women reaching the top. Misogyny and sexism at all levels of government and the private sector remain pervasive and entrenched. So for now, feminism as a thought and practice that speaks to women as a categorically disadvantaged group, unfortunately still has some meaning. Of course this is not unique to Japan, as gendered inequality persists in most nations in the world. And of course it is also the case that inequalities among women have always existed in Japan, and that multiple overlapping structures of discrimination are confronted by ethnic minority women, lesbian, bisexual, and trans women, women living with various disabilities, and so forth.

What then, are the plausible alternatives for Japanese feminism in this reactionary era, both theoretically and practically speaking?

A purist would insist on opposing capitalism and would argue for a revolution. Of course, one must also question the premise that feminism in Japan should, by definition, seek the improvement of the lives of women *in Japan*. A purist position would ask women in Japan to work in the best interest, not of themselves, but of ‘all women’ in the world. This will likely mean renouncing the various privileges of living in a highly developed and industrialised society and working for the good of women in less developed parts of the globe.³⁵ On the other hand, the postmodern position would start with the premise that such a universal ‘women’s interest’ is impossible to articulate. This is a point on which thoughtful and committed feminists can disagree.

Another path would be to create separate spheres in which alternatives to capitalism can be carried out. These can include anything from sustainable food production, alternative local currency, workers’ cooperatives, and

³¹ I thank Chelsea Szendi Schieder for pointing me to the term ‘trickle-down feminism.’ See Schieder (2014).

³² See the website of Women’s Action Network (<https://wan.or.jp>) for a record of critiques of Ueno’s initial position by members of the Solidarity Network with Migrants in Japan, and by feminist scholars Okano Yayo, Shimizu Akiko, and others.

³³ Critic Minashita Kiryū describes both kinds of women as ‘going rogue’ (*buraiika*) against the gendered norm of women relying on men and becoming good wives and mothers. ‘Burai’ combines the characters of ‘no’ and ‘dependence,’ but the word’s connotation is more negative than ‘independent.’ See also her tongue-in-cheek critique of current corporate structures as a ‘shitty game’ with too many bugs for female players to make progress (Minashita 2009).

³⁴ For further detail on the increasing disparity among women, see Tachibanaki (2008/2010). For an example of disagreement between those who advocate and oppose neoliberal feminism, see Katsuma and Kayama (2010). For an unusually clear statement in favor of a kind of neoliberal feminism, see Hayashi (2013).

³⁵ For an analysis of postwar Japanese social movements and the dream of revolution, see Oguma (2013, 2017), Ōsawa Masachi (2016). On the question of capitalism and feminism, see Cudd (2011).

various co-living arrangements.³⁶ A further variant of this model would call for decommodification at various levels in society, such as public housing, public healthcare, public childcare and eldercare, and public education. This is not unrealistic, and perhaps close to what Hester Eisenstein advocates under the name of socialist feminism. Nancy Fraser calls for a Universal Caregiving regime, which would be another variant. Strengthening the welfare state (often called the Scandinavian model of welfare) is preferred by many feminists.

Another option is presented by Ueno in her call to ‘grow poor together.’ This degrowth strategy is consonant with her advocacy of ‘feminism for the weak’. While it is based on the premise of universal vulnerability and care ethics, it is in diametrical opposition to the current government’s policies.³⁷

At the other extreme, feminism could dictate going along with Womenomics, and moving towards the Anglo-American neoliberal model of minimising welfare. This would be a ‘feminism for the strong.’ It would accept that some women would become elite leaders, a few even on a par with men, while others would likely struggle with a weakened social safety net. One could imagine that safety nets could be improved for the majority of women, with some feminist strategising, to alleviate the problems of poverty. One could also imagine that having women in 30% of leadership positions, if that were to happen, might change something fundamental about the structures of organisations and of society. But this seems rather unlikely to happen soon.

The current Japanese policies are torn between shoring up the traditional male breadwinner model and moving to a universal breadwinner model. It is thus a strange amalgamation of conservative and neoliberal ideologies. Conservatives want to see children raised at home by mothers rather than in day care. Marketisation is thus moving unevenly, with tight regulation on day care and limited outsourcing of housework. The conservative norms about strict gender roles are still so robust that certain aspects of neoliberalism seem to be encountering continued resistance.³⁸

But if the neoliberal aspect of Womenomics were to succeed, and if the gap between the elite and non-elite women were to grow, is that a step forward or backward? Rather than *all* women being treated as second-class citizens because of their gender, if *some* women would be treated as first class, along with some men, and the majority of women and men were to be treated as second class – would this be a step forward or back?

When neoliberal reforms arrived in Japan, they interacted with the existing labour structures, and the result has been an exacerbation of existing inequalities between regular and irregular workers. And because the resistance to neoliberalism has come from those holding conservative gender ideology, feminists have been put in a tricky triangulating position. So far, most feminists in Japan have refused to jump into a liaison with neoliberalism – especially as it has been promoted by the Abe administration. Precisely because the coalition of conservatism and neoliberalism is tenuous, and feminists are not quite ready to jump into bed with neoliberalism, we are at a moment of possible alternative futures for feminism in Japan

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³⁶ See Ueno (2011) for some examples of such collectives.

³⁷ For Ueno’s response to neoliberalism, see Ueno (2013). On feminism and care ethics, see also Kanai (2011), Okano (2012).

³⁸ There is a larger question here about why this amalgamation is not often recognized as a contradiction, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. One may note that this amalgamation is also found elsewhere in advanced industrialised countries. In the United States, for example, conservative rhetoric about the importance of women upholding ‘family values’ coexists with neoliberal valorisation of women as workers and entrepreneurs. Often hidden in media representations of ‘superwomen’ who manage to fulfil conservative ideals of motherhood as well as neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurship, are the nannies and domestic workers who make the juggling act possible.

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