



Exacerbating Risk *or* Building Resilience?

**Exposing the Intersectional Vulnerabilities of
Women in Japan during the COVID-19 Pandemic**



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Executive Summary

Japan implemented some of the strictest protections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not everyone was protected equally.



Executive Summary

As of 2022, Japan boasts the lowest COVID-19 population mortality rate—a mere 0.02%—of all the G7 countries. This is an entire order of magnitude lower than the G7 average of 0.21%,¹ an extraordinary feat of patience and understanding on the part of the Japanese people.

But this extraordinary feat came at an extraordinary cost—one the women of Japan are paying.

Due to pre-existing faults in Japan's public and corporate policies around gender equity, the pandemic and subsequent control measures resulted in women—especially vulnerable women—being thrown into the economic meat grinder of COVID-19. Below is a summary of the disparate effects across five key areas.

Job and Income Loss

- 73% of the total jobs lost were among women.²
- Single mothers faced job losses and furlough rates of 8.7% due to their job types and the inability to find adequate child care.³

Impact of Public School & Childcare Service Closures

- Women with child rearing responsibilities faced a 22.7% reduction in work hours, twice as large as that of men.⁴
- 16.6% of single mothers had to stop working due to school closures.⁵

Access to Basic Services & Support Networks

- As many as 17,000 long-term residents of Japan would become stuck outside the country.⁶
- At least 900 disability service providers suspended caregiver dispatch services. Those caregiving responsibilities, in most cases, fell on women relatives.⁷

Domestic Violence

- The total number of domestic violence cases consulted increased 140% from 2019.⁸
- 80% of DV survivors that reached out to the Domestic Violence Consultation Plus service were unable to reach support.

Migrant women are especially vulnerable. Interviews reviewed significant difficulty accessing social support due to a 'dependent' visa status. Of course, if these women divorce their husbands they will be deported.

Suicide and Mental Health

- Suicides increased by 83% for women, compared to 22% for men year-over-year.⁹
- Roughly 70% of the people reaching out to nonprofit Lifelink for suicide prevention assistance in September were women.¹⁰
- The percentage of mothers showing signs of postpartum depression rose to 24%.¹¹

These effects actively harmed not only women, but society. Women with "full-time, permanent work contribute 42.7% of their household income, and even women with contract work contribute 23.8% of their household income."¹² In houses where women's income decreased, the rate of unpaid bills is between double to quadruple. When women lose, the men, children, and economy of Japan loses.

The threat to economic well-being doesn't end there. The majority of job losses in Japan were experienced by women. If corporations and governments cannot rebuild the trust needed to convince both women and other minorities to come back to work, the already dire talent shortage will increase.

Moreover, Japan, which already has the lowest rate of employee engagement in the G7, risks further alienating and demoralising the male, native-

born workforce. According to the 2018 World Happiness Report, the better the life evaluation of a country's immigrants, the better the life evaluation of its entire resident population.¹³ In other words, countries that successfully care and protect its least privileged populations experience higher rates of life satisfaction at all levels of society.

Japan's conservative approach to immigration is well known, and it has repeatedly scored the lowest of the G7 countries in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report (No. 120 of 156; the remaining countries average 27.8).¹⁴ This is no secret: Japanese citizens are well aware their government and economic elites are undeserving women and minorities. The increase in domestic violence alone created a wave of Japanese news coverage. To reiterate: by failing to address these systematic inequalities, Japan's safest, most protected citizens are being kept from happier lives.

To mitigate the ongoing economic fallout of COVID-19 and successfully build a bulwark against future disasters, Japan needs to increase the participation of women and other marginalised groups in both government and corporate settings. In doing so, governments and corporations alike take the first step towards undoing the systems failing to protect women and patching the ruinous gap that allowed COVID-19 to harm so many families.

It's time to strike while the memory is fresh.

Policy Recommendations

As Japan emerges into the post-COVID world, economic and political leaders have the chance to implement changes that could save corporations trillions in yen annually and raise the happiness and efficiency of their workplaces across the board.

To do this, both corporate and economic leaders will

need to adopt an intersectional approach hinged on emotional leadership, themes echoed in the G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council 2021 Report.¹⁵ We recommend the following broad strategies:

- Creating systems of disaggregated, intersectional data
- Ensuring diversified, participatory representation in decision-making processes
- Relently pursuing results-based gender equality policy design and policy enforcement

The details of these strategies and their implementation can be found in the Policy Analysis and Implications section of this report.

With its long history and uniquely sustainable cultural and corporate knowledge, Japan is poised to strike a daring reentry into the post-COVID world—but only if all genders work toward that future together.

Executive Summary Endnotes

¹ Calculated on April 10, 2020 using data from [Data Commons](#), [Johns Hopkins University](#), and [Our World in Data](#).

² Pesek, W. (2020, June 17). Coronavirus fallout highlights failure of Japan's womenomics. *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Coronavirus-fallout-highlights-failure-of-Japan-s-womenomics>

³ Zhou, Y. (2021, March). コロナショックと女性の雇用危機 [Koronashokku to josei no koyō kiki]. The Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ しんぐるまざあず・ふぉーらむ [Shin guru ma zāzu fuo-ra mu]. (2020, April 21). 新型コロナでの影響：シングルマザー世帯への支援策に関するアンケート結果（2020/04/13暫定版） [Shingata korona de no eikyō: Shingurumazā setai e no shien-saku ni kansuru ankēto kekka]. <https://www.single-mama.com/topics/covid19-support/>

⁶ Dooley, B. (2021, May 18). Coronavirus Leads Japan to Lock Borders, Shutting Out Foreign Workers. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/business/japan-entry-ban-coronavirus.html>

⁷ Bookman, M. (2020). The Coronavirus Crisis: Disability Politics and Activism in Contemporary Japan. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18(18), 1–11. <https://apjif.org/-Mark-Bookman/5465/article.pdf>

⁸ Calculated with figures from アジア女性資料センター [Ajia josei shiryō sentā]. (2021 February 17). 【COVID-19とジェンダー】 コロナ禍でDV相談件数が過去最多 [[COVID - 19 to jendā] korona wazawai de DV sōdan kensū ga kako saita]. <https://jp.ajwrc.org/4361> and *The Japan Times* (2020 March) Domestic violence cases in Japan reached new high in 2019.

⁹ Zhou (2021).

¹⁰ Asahi Shimbun. (2021, January 23). Isolation due to COVID-19 a key factor in suicide surge in 2020. *The Asahi Shimbun | Asia & Japan Watch*. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14130555>

¹¹ 藤田日.向子. (2021, September 27). 「産後うつ」倍増か～1人で苦しまないで [‘Sango utsu’ baizō ka ~ 1-ri de kurushimanaide]. *NHKニュース*. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20201016/k10012665491000.html>

¹² Zhou (2021).

¹³ United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. (2018). 2018 World Happiness Report. Page 29. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2018/CH2-WHR-lr.pdf>.

¹⁴ World Economic Forum. (2021). 2021 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

¹⁵ G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council. (2021) Report on the G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1028387/Report_of_the_G7_Gender_Equality_Advisory_Council_2021-Building_Back_Better_for_Women_and_Girls.pdf

Introduction

THE CRISIS AT HAND AND CALL TO ACTION



Introduction

As seen in the impact of other natural or politically-made disasters, global studies have revealed the devastating blow of the COVID-19 pandemic upon sustainable gender equality. Women, girls, and other at-risk groups with decreased representation in decision-making have experienced disproportionately negative effects in terms of economic security, physical and mental health, and increased precarity related to complex caregiving loads. Women as a group were largely left out of COVID-19 decision-making structures, consultation processes, and policy decisions—decreasing the responsiveness of the crisis response and threatening the overall recovery and resiliency of our economies and the integrity of our democracies. If we fail to invest in the soft infrastructure (human capital) of our communities during peace times, and when we fail to design and implement structural equality through data-driven policy solutions¹, our national economic recovery and collective resilience as a vibrant liberal-democratic society experiences devastating effects both during the disaster itself and throughout the decade to follow.

In Japan, where we continue to face a historically low ranking on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index Report—120th place in 2021²—gender equality has suffered significant setbacks during the pandemic. The gender-blind policies enacted by the Japanese government to mitigate the fallout of COVID-19, such as lockdowns and states of emergency, sudden school closures, one-time stimulus payments to households, and strict border closures did not take into account the intersecting and compounding precarities faced by women and other at-risk groups. Gender-blind policies are in fact structurally discriminatory because

they mask the differential and disproportionately negative impacts of policies upon some groups more than others, and in this case, upon women. Japan's gender-blind policies exacerbated the already precarious position of women and other marginalised groups due to the biased impacts of existing laws and institutional structures. Moreover, these policies reflect the pervasive patriarchal conservatism of the ruling political elite whose organisational culture systemically denies women positions of leadership and democratic decision-making across the public sectors.^{3 4}

Meanwhile, within the private sector, the post-WWII strategy driving families into the model of “breadwinning salaryman supported by dependent housewife/homemaker” has restricted women's access to lifetime employment and career track positions. Instead, women continue to be culturally treated as a reserved labour force best suited for part-time, low-wage, and precarious contract positions that lack healthcare, pension and other critical benefits of corporate membership that bestow opportunities for training and upward mobility. These factors combine to exacerbate the economic dependence and precarity of women amidst disproportionately steep responsibilities for caregiving, household management, and under-paid full time contracts due to the declining ability of most Japanese men's salaries to be “sole breadwinners” in practice. The public safety net in Japan is rife with holes, and it is women and their children of all genders who continue to fall through the cracks.⁵

What we present now is a summarised version of an original 65-page comprehensive study on this topic

1 Steele and Kimber

2 WEF Report.

3 Emma Dalton. 2015. *Women and Politics in Contemporary Japan*, Routledge.

4 Jackie F. Steele and Eriko Miyake. 2021. “Patriarchal Leadership and Women's Exclusion from Democratic Institutions”, Springer.

5 Kristin Wilson. 2020. “Japan Needs a New Path for Womenomics and Gender Equality”, Tokyo Review. <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2020/10/japan-needs-a-new-path-for-womenomics-and-gender-equality-in-post-abe-era/>

produced for UNESCO Beijing as a contribution to their Gender in Asia Research Network. Our goal is to issue a call to action and convey the urgency of a rational, evidence-based approach to integrating intersectional diversity into both Japanese public policy and corporate ecosystems. This new approach is a response to the pressing man-made crisis that is impacting national population decline, national economic decline of Japan in Asia, and the inability of companies to attract and retain global talent to drive innovation solutions for the now and future of Reiwa Japan.

Creating a diversity-positive national culture and economy must become a top political and corporate priority. It requires the development of a holistic public-private partnership and targeted strategy investing in innovation. To drive innovation into the DNA of a country and national economy, we need rational investments in public and private sector cultures that support and nurture a vibrant competition of ideas, diversity of thought and lived experiences across all spheres and at all tiers of decision-making, and the conscious leveraging of diverse forms of excellence and individual creativity in the service of inclusive innovation for people, profits, and the planet.

Regrettably, Japan has fallen behind other Asian countries during the pandemic. It must now work harder than ever to not only attract but support diverse talent within the workplace and society at large. A recent report by McKinsey urges companies to do “the deep cultural work necessary to create a workplace where all women, and all employees, feel like they belong.”⁶ Gender equality is not only the right thing for democracies, it is also vital to the economy. Existing “command and control” hierarchical leadership styles and the culture of long working hours have run their course, resulting in burnout, toxic corporate group-think, and a lack of

talent sustainability. According to Gallup, this poor corporate hygiene and lack of emotional leadership costs companies as much as 34% of each burned-out employee’s salary, wasting trillions of yen each year.⁷ Might does not equal right, nor does it result in the kind of emotionally intelligent leadership that can influence up, down and across an organisational structure with integrity and agility.

Indeed, UN Women announced the theme for March 8th, 2022 International Women’s Day (IWD) as follows: “Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow.” The theme celebrates the tremendous efforts by women around the world towards a thriving and sustainable future. We need to support and invest in the impact of women in leadership and how we inspire and empower others to live up to their full potential and leave a mark on their households, organisations, companies, society and the world over. In the Reiwa Era, this means consistent investments in non-hierarchical gender-equal relationships of mutual respect; societal and corporate cultures valuing thought diversity; and conscious efforts to design and measure the performance of political and corporate leaders in supporting people’s happiness and diverse models of workplace wellbeing.

There are countless international best practices for building diversity-positive public policies and ecosystems that pave the way for constructive societal diversification and culture change. We need genuine political and corporate leadership that consciously and carefully disrupts and dismantles the post-WWII systems of taxation, employment and family law that perpetuate the instrumentalization of Japanese women as the caregivers of male citizens. More than 70% of Japanese citizens believe couples should be allowed to retain different last names after marriage, yet public policy has not been altered to allow for

6 McKinsey Report

7 2013. *State of the Global Workplace*. Gallup.

such a possibility.⁸ The fact is support for gender equality and diversity is present and vibrant at the grassroots among Japanese citizens, pointing to an increasing failure of representative democracy and a growing disconnect between the political elite and the Japanese citizens whom they are elected to serve.

To ensure that Japan remains an influential global economy, Japanese political and economic elites must disrupt patriarchal values and beliefs and finally recognize the tremendous and essential contributions of diverse women in all spheres of society. This will inspire younger generations to regain pride in Japan's performance as a G7 nation, as well as feel that their worth and individuality will find a rewarding home within Japanese society. These steps will nurture intergenerational hope for a more diverse, egalitarian, and vibrant Reiwa Era for all who call Japan home. We call upon Prime Minister Kishida to inspire diverse citizens and residents to believe in the potential of Japan to remain a respected and democratically leading nation. The Japanese economy within Asia requires constant gardening to evolve into an equitable, diverse and thriving community built upon inclusive innovation supported by a new public-private partnership by democratic and corporate design.

In this report, we shine an intersectional lens upon the outcomes for women and other groups who experience discrimination, exclusion and precarity. Across four different cases in Japan we look at the differential impacts of school closures and the burdens of care disproportionately upon women, economic losses and the impact of biased stimulus payments targeting men as heads of households, border closures and reduced mobility

8 株式会社インテージ [Kabushiki Gaisha Inteiji]. (2020 November 18). "47都道府県「選択的夫婦別姓」意識調査” [47 to dō fu ken' sentaku-teki fūfu bessei' ishiki chōsa]. *Sentakuteki Fufubessei Zenkoku Chinjyo Action*. <https://chinjyo-action.com/47prefectures-survey/>

impacting foreign residents and international marriages, as well as the mental and physical health of diverse women as a result of COVID-19 and mitigation policies. These case studies reveal the well-documented realities that echo reports from similar global studies⁹: women faced increased care burdens in the home coupled with less public and private support; women disproportionately faced greater rates of unemployment and income loss and struggled to access important social services (regardless of the cash-stimulus payments); women faced a compromised ability to meet some of their basic needs including food/physical safety, healthcare and mental health supports—with many foreign women separated from their families and other support networks due to discriminatory re-entry rules; and women faced higher exposure to emotional, psychological and physical violence by an intimate partner, a contributing factor to increased suicides and overall declines in women's mental health during the COVID-19 crisis.

This report then outlines the key findings of each case study and concludes with an analysis and policy recommendations, sharing best practices from Canadian public policy approaches to gender equality, LGBTQ+ inclusion, diversity integration, and multicultural cohesion, that urge the necessity of inclusive, evidence-based, gender-responsive policy prescriptions for future disasters and emphasise best practices and policy implications for effective crisis and risk governance, including:

- Evidence-based policies that involve disaggregated data, participatory data-gathering methods, and engagement with experts in intersectional analysis
- Participatory and democratic policy-making processes that are accessible, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs and identities of citizens—with substantive input from key stakeholders in civil society

9 UN Women Report

- Policies that are gender-and-equity responsive to the particular political, economic, and social inequalities and material realities for women, minorities, and other at-risk social groups in Japan, including robust enforcement and oversight measures that measurably reduce inequality



Case Studies

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS





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Case 1:

The economic impact of stimulus payments to families and the ability for women to address basic needs amidst higher unemployment

When the Japanese government declared the first state of emergency in early April 2020, this precipitated a flood of business closures and layoffs, reduced hours and/or wages for employees, interruptions of regular public services, and a steep decline in economic activity. As a policy measure, the Japanese government distributed ¥100,000 to every resident of Japan, paid to the head of the household. Yet, despite this subsidy, the pre-existing economic precarities for women were exacerbated by the states of emergency and economic downturn as a result of pandemic mitigation policies. These were far beyond the ability of a single stimulus payment to rectify.

- In April 2020, when job losses peaked in Japan at around 970,000, 73% of the total job losses were among women.¹⁰
- There was a clear gender disparity in the economic impact, as 1.4 times more women

experienced a change in employment conditions compared to men and 1.6 times more women became unemployed.¹¹

- “Women working in irregular, face-to-face, and rigidly scheduled jobs experienced economic losses equivalent to 9.8% of their earnings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 5.2% of earnings for men in these jobs.”¹²

Women, and especially single mothers, were already facing decreased lifetime earnings and lower incomes than men, despite the fact that their economic contributions from part-time and precarious work are playing an increasingly important role in family economic stability and ability to meet basic needs.

- Women with “full-time, permanent work

¹⁰ Pesek, W. (2020, June 17). *Coronavirus fallout highlights failure of Japan's womenomics*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Coronavirus-fallout-highlights-failure-of-Japan-s-womenomics>

¹¹ Zhou. (2021).

¹² Feng, Y. (2020, August 3). *Japan's Women Disproportionately Hurt by Covid-19 Income Slump*. BloombergQuint. <https://www.bloombergquint.com/global-economics/japan-s-women-disproportionately-hurt-by-covid-19-income-slump>



Figure 1: Pictogram depicting the percentage of jobs lost according to gender.

contribute 42.7% of their household income, and even women with contract work contribute 23.8% of their household income.¹³

- About 60% of working married women earn less than 2 million yen (roughly \$16,000 USD) annually. Many of these women, especially those with children, dropped out of the labour force during the pandemic.¹⁴

As a result, even with the stimulus payment, many families continued to struggle with food and housing insecurity and an inability to meet all monthly expenses.

- One study found that “of the one in five households where women’s income decreased, more than 10% are tightening their food budget and the rate of occurrence of unpaid bills is twice to four times more than before.”¹⁵

This was especially the case for women experiencing compound marginalities, such as migrant women, women with disabilities, single mothers, and sex workers, who all struggle to access basic public

13 Zhou. (2021).

14 “Conducted mainly by Shintaro Yamaguchi (Professor, The University of Tokyo) at the “Study Group on Impacts and Issues on Women Under Corona” (September 2020-April 2021)

15 Zhou. (2021).

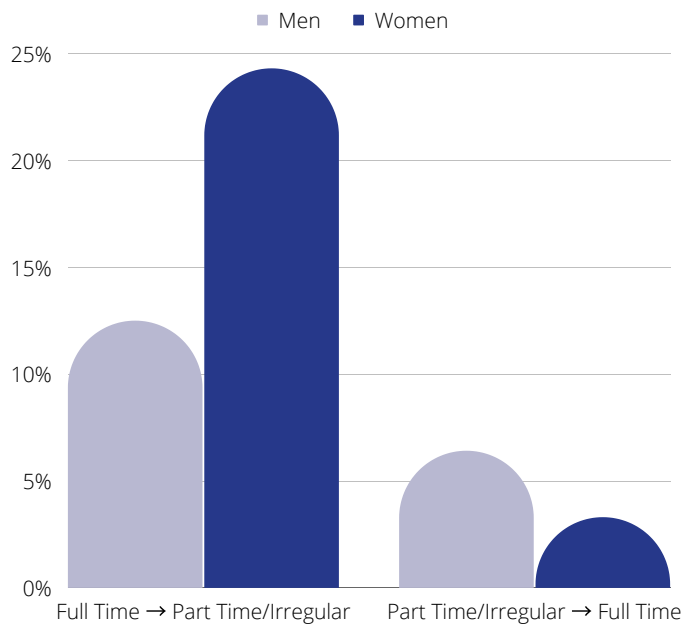


Figure 2: Change of employment type in those who experienced a change in working conditions (Zhou 2021).

services due to complicated bureaucratic rules, lack of knowledge among public officials, and poor information sharing.

- One survey among Vietnamese residents, a majority of whom were women, found that 53.5% of respondents experienced income reduction and 27.0% experienced housing environment deterioration during the COVID-19 epidemic.¹⁶
- Single mothers faced job losses and furlough rates of 8.7% due to their job types and the inability to find adequate child care.¹⁷
- The director of an NPO called Childrearing (Kosodate) Palette, which provides support services for single mothers, noted that their organisation “received a flood of applications from more households than [they] could accept.”¹⁸

16 Ito, T. (2020). A Survey On The Health of Vietnamese Individuals Living in Japan Under a Declared State of Emergency Due to COVID-19: A Cross-Sectional Survey. *Research Square*. Published. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-36025/v1>

17 Zhou. (2021).

18 及川.夕子. (2021, January 4). 1杯のうどんを子どもと4人で. . .母たちを襲うコロナ貧困の現実 [1-Pai no udon o kodomo to 4-ri de. . . haha-tachi o osou korona hinkon no genjitsu]. FRaU | 講談社 [Furau | Kōdansha]. <https://gendai.ismedia.jp/articles/-/78974>

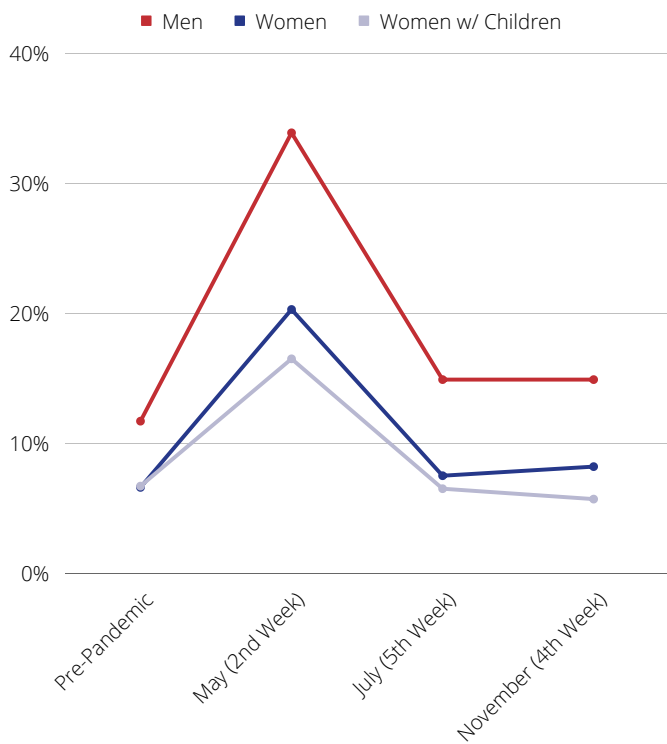


Figure 3: Percentage of employees teleworking at least one day a week (Zhou 2021).

The disproportionate economic impact on women means that, despite the government interventions, fiscal programs, and stimulus money, it will be insufficient to overcome the systemic inequalities that keep women at a disadvantage and “it is doubtful whether these relief measures will be sufficient in coping with the novel coronavirus over an extended time.”¹⁹

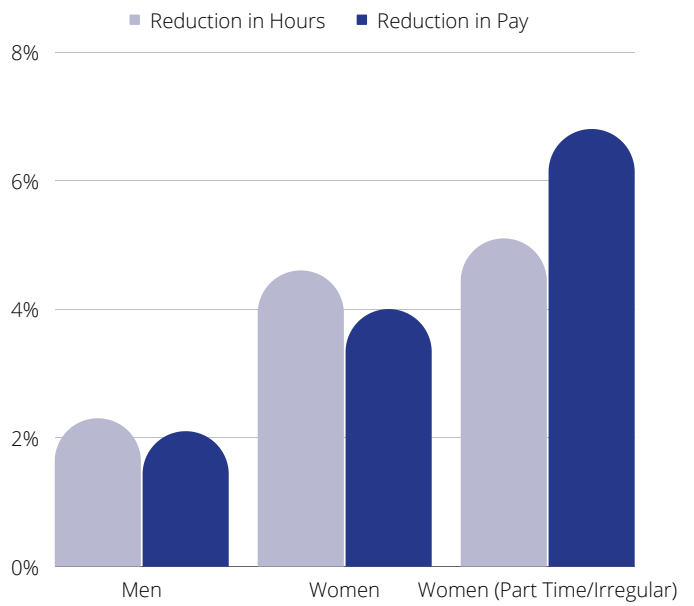


Figure 4: Percentage of employees who experienced a reduction in pay, hours, or both according to gender (Zhou 2021).

¹⁹ Zhou. (2021).



The socio-economic impact of public school and childcare service closures on the care burden of women in Japan

When former Prime Minister Abe made the abrupt decision to close all schools on March 2, 2020, despite low coronavirus case numbers (241) and deaths (3) and no consultation with an expert panel, the decision left women scrambling for childcare solutions. A systemic lack of public or private investment in childcare services for women, who are expected to provide the bulk of caregiving while also participating in the labour force, proved especially detrimental during the pandemic and compounded their existing care burden.

- According to the most recent OECD time use surveys, women in Japan spend an average of 224 minutes (or 3.7 hours) per day on unpaid work, Meanwhile, Japanese men spend an

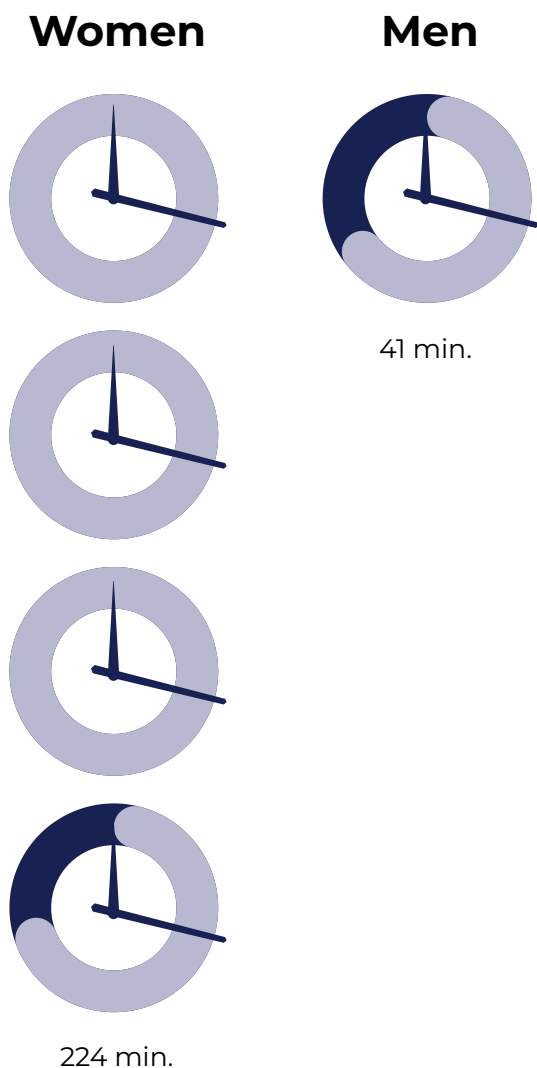
average of 41 minutes per day, the lowest among all OECD countries.²⁰

While many men were able to more easily work from home, and some took on greater responsibilities, overwhelmingly, women reported being more stressed by increased care and housework duties while simultaneously trying to maintain employment and pay.

- According to one study, “women with child rearing responsibilities faced a severe reduction in work hours (22.7%) during the peak of school closures, only rebounding close to pre-closure levels by August. This was two times larger than

²⁰ OECD. (2018–2021). *OECD.Stat Time Use* [Dataset]. https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TIME_USE

Figure 5: Minutes per day spent on unpaid labor, by gender.



that of men.”²¹

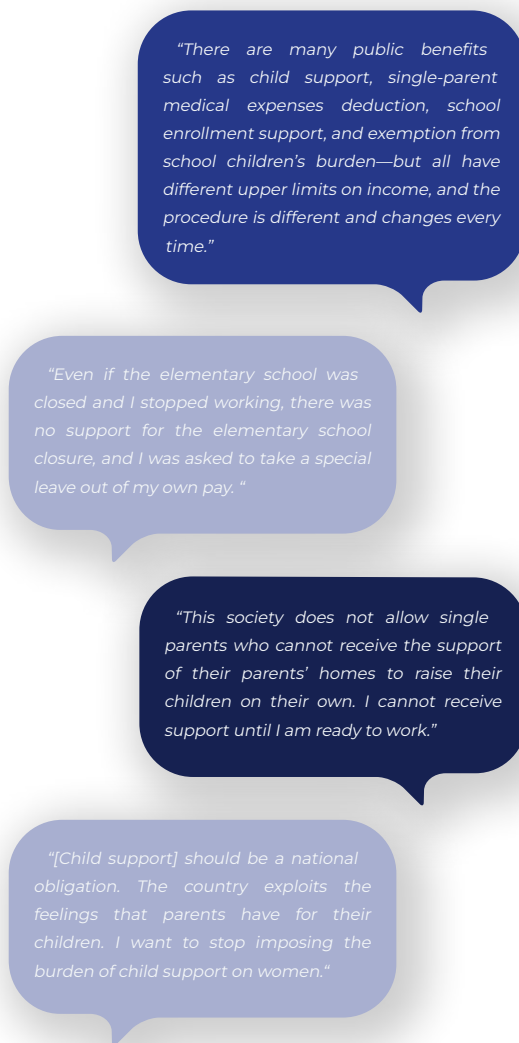
- In a survey sent out by the Single Mothers Forum, 11.2% of respondents lost work during the pandemic, 16.6% stopped working and 14.1% experienced reduced working hours due to school closures, placing a strain on the family budget.²²

Closures of public schools and childcare services (as

21 Zhou, Y. (2021, March). コロナショックと女性の雇用危機 [Koronashokku to josei no koyō kiki]. The Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training. <https://www.jil.go.jp/institute/discussion/2021/documents/DP21-09.pdf>

22 しんぐるまざあず・ふぉーらむ [Shin guru ma zāzu fuo-ra mu]. (2020, April 21). 新型コロナでの影響：シングルマザー世帯への支援策に関するアンケート結果（2020/04/13暫定版） [Shingata korona de no eikyō: Shingurumazā setai e no shien-saku ni kansuru ankēto kekka]. <https://www.single-mama.com/topics/covid19-support/>

Figure 6: Responses by Single Mothers to a Survey on the Impacts of the Coronavirus Pandemic



many daycare centres elected to close along with schools) forced women to suddenly take on extra burdens typically provided (and funded) by the public sector, including education, elder care, and nutrition, while they received little substantive or monetary support for these extra care duties.

- According to a Ministry of Education survey, only 5% of all schools were able to offer online instruction to students, with most relying on textbooks and paper-based learning materials and assignments—with about 20% being able to provide other digital/TV-based activities.²³

23 文部科学省 [Bun bukagakushō]. (2020, April 16). 新型コロナウイルス感染症対策のための学校の臨時休業に関連した公立学校における学習指導等の取組状況について [Shingata koronauirusukansenshō taisaku no tame no gakkō no rinji kyūgyō ni kanren shita kōritsu

- Additionally, during the state of emergency only 4% of schools had plans in place to provide meals to children.²⁴

These issues were compounded for women facing compounded marginalities, such as single and low-income mothers, who already face stigmas that prevent them from accessing greater social support services.



gakkō ni okeru gakushū shidō-tō no torikumi jōkyō ni tsuite. 文部科学省: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan. https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20200421-mxt_kouhou01-000006590_1.pdf

24 文部科学省 [Bun bukagakushō]. (2020).



The socio-economic impacts on women and girls' access to basic services and support networks

In addition to school closures and states of emergency, the Japanese government enacted harsh border control measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Foreign residents who left Japan after April 2020, including permanent residents and spouses of Japanese nationals, were not allowed to re-enter Japan once the border measures were put into effect.

- Conditions for return were not laid out at the outset of the ban, and even after requirements were stipulated, “return [was] not guaranteed. Before leaving the country, travellers [had to] sign a document acknowledging that they may not be allowed to return.”²⁵

- Japan was the only country among G7 nations to impose such heavy restrictions on foreign residents and other legitimate visa holders, while others allowed such individuals re-entry subject to testing and quarantine requirements.

The border closures and reduced mobility from states of emergency compromised the ability for various groups of women in Japan to access basic needs and services. For women of various nationalities and/or work visa statuses, the border policy physically distanced them from family and traditional support networks while placing unequal burdens on these tax-paying residents to manage their finances and other expenses while navigating strict and opaque travel ban rules. Many were unable to return to their home countries to attend to important personal matters, such as weddings

²⁵ Dooley, B. (2021, May 18). *Coronavirus Leads Japan to Lock Borders, Shutting Out Foreign Workers*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/business/japan-entry-ban-coronavirus.html>



Figure 7: Percentage of Vietnamese foreign residents who received a reduction in pay.

and funerals.

- The travel ban directly affected anywhere between 100,000 to 200,000 foreign residents of Japan who had travelled or had need to travel outside the country.²⁶
- Early estimates suggested that, “as many as 17,000 long-term residents of Japan could remain stuck outside the country, according to government data.”²⁷

Even women who stayed in Japan—especially migrant populations, the elderly, and disabled—were cut off or had reduced access to important social services, health care, and other basic needs.

- Many clinics postponed scheduled surgeries for breast cancer and cancelled breast cancer screenings. One study noted that, “based on the previous year’s figures, approximately 90% of population-based cancer screenings were not performed.”²⁸

- In a survey of Vietnamese foreign residents, the majority of whom were female (89.2%), “82.7% respondents [felt] difficulties in visiting Japanese health institutes...In total, 53.5% experienced a decrease in income.”²⁹
- One study found that at least “nine hundred disability service providers across Japan [suspended] their caregiver dispatch services and refused clients who [were] predisposed to infection and illness,” putting a greater care burden on women.³⁰

Many of these precarious groups had little to no public support to turn to. On top of existing discrimination and barriers, the pandemic closed many of the regular public and private facilities and reduced staff and other volunteers who provide these important services.

- One vulnerable migrant population includes Nepali women, of which there are 29,992 under the status of “dependent” in Japan, which is a visa that lacks many of the protections of other classes.³¹
- Many community organisations that typically provided services to these marginalised groups “greatly scaled back their support, while others have stopped their activities completely.”³²
- 74.8% of respondents from a survey said that help with basic needs (i.e. goods and other utilities) should be a priority for government support³³

26 NHK. (2020, July 10). 再入国拒否で日本に戻れない外国人たち [Sai nyūkoku kyohi de Nihon ni modorenai gaikoku hito-tachi volume_up]. 外国人“依存”ニッポン [Gaikoku hito “izon” Nippon volume_up] NHK. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/izon/20200710kyohi.html>

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31 Tanaka, M. (2020).

32 Slater. (2020).

33 Suppasri et al. (2021).



Case 4:

Connections between states of emergency and unemployment to domestic violence and mental health issues among women

A declaration by UN Women early in the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the spike in worldwide cases of domestic violence, which it dubbed the “shadow pandemic.” In Japan, states of emergency, stay-at-home orders, and the subsequent economic fallout had serious psychosocial consequences for women and other at-risk groups as well. Isolated from support networks and faced with increased barriers to access services, women experienced greater rates of domestic violence and suicides.

- According to a survey by the Cabinet Office, “the total number of domestic violence (DV) cases consulted in [April] 2020 through November last year reached 132,355, the highest number ever.”³⁴ This is a 140% increase in consulted cases.³⁵

34 アジア女性資料センター [Ajia josei shiryō sentā]. (2021 February 17). 【COVID-19とジェンダー】 コロナ禍でDV相談件数が過去最多 [[COVID - 19 to jendā] korona wazawai de DV sōdan kensū ga kako saita]. <https://jp.ajwrc.org/4361>

35 Calculated using statistics published by [The Japan Times](#) in

- From the beginning of the state of emergency declaration, consultations on domestic violence to national and local government offices increased by 60%.³⁶

While the government mounted a modest response and set up an expanded consultation service called “Domestic Violence Consultation Plus,” they were unable to provide adequate resources to these vulnerable groups.

- The government allocated \$3.5 million to the All Japan Women’s Shelter Network (AJWSN) to set up the expanded consultation service and provide access to shelters across Japan.
- Yet 85.7% of women who had experienced domestic violence during the state of

2019. Calculated April 10, 2022.

36 Nomura, S., Kawashima, T., Yoneoka, D., Tanoue, Y., Eguchi, A., Gilmour, S., Kawamura, Y., Harada, N., & Hashizume, M. (2021). Trends in suicide in Japan by gender during the COVID-19 pandemic, up to September 2020. *Psychiatry Research*, 295, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113622>

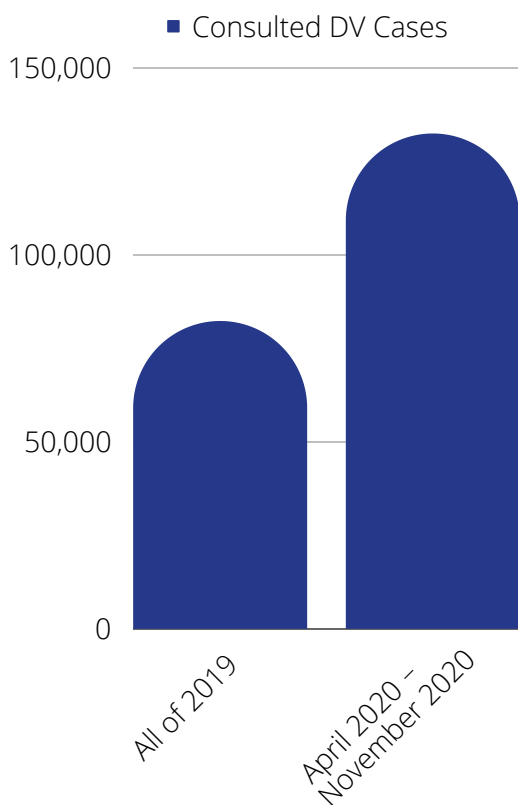


Figure 8: Consulted domestic violence cases in 2019 versus 67% of 2020.

emergency could not easily seek help.³⁷

- The DV Consultation Plus service was not expanded sufficiently to meet demand. Early during the state of emergency the phone connection rate was a mere 20%, “leaving 80% of survivors waiting to be connected.”³⁸

Moreover, the one-time stimulus payment paid to the head of household was useless for many women trapped in households with their abusers. Other mitigation policies also did not consider the specific needs of other marginalised groups such as women with disabilities and migrants.

- One domestic violence survivor who was surveyed noted, “I can’t apply for financial support directly under my own name, I’m afraid to do it.”³⁹
- According to the 2016 Implementation Report

37 Suppasri et al. (2021).

38 Suga. (2021).

39 Ando. (2020).

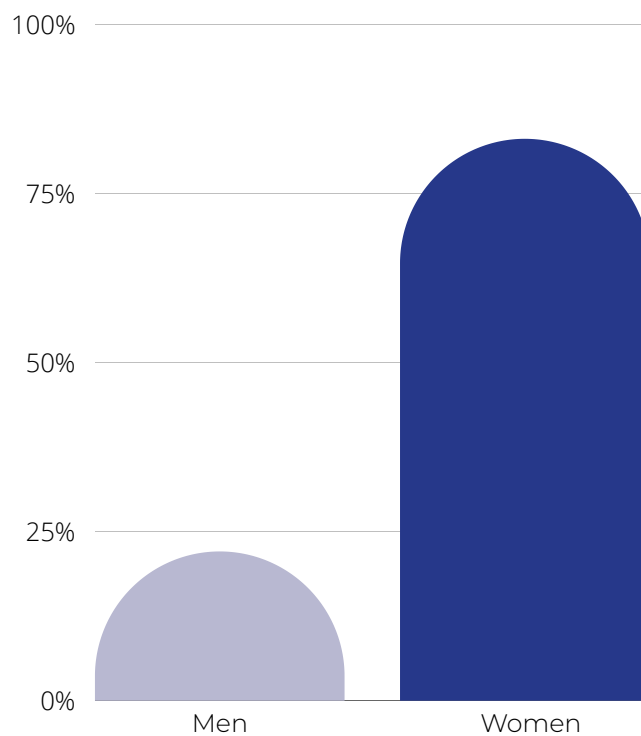


Figure 9: Percentage increase in suicide according to gender.

on the Women’s Protection Project, “47.3% of women admitted to Women’s Protection Facilities have some kind of disability or disease” yet policies do not address their particular needs.

- Another migrant woman found, “that she could not get [social] support due to her visa status as a ‘dependent.’ Despite the threat of physical violence her husband poses, she knows that she cannot extend her visa if she chooses divorce.”⁴⁰

The ongoing stigma against reporting such issues suggests the increased official numbers of domestic violence cases still do not capture the whole scope.

- In a survey by the Cabinet Office on Violence Between Men and Women, “only 2.2% of women who experienced domestic violence actually reported their case to the police, while nearly 50% of participants did not tell anyone.”⁴¹

40 Tanaka, M. (2020).

41 Ando. (2020).

Whether because of domestic violence, increased care burdens, economic precarity, isolation, or some combination thereof, the pandemic and its mitigation measures took a serious toll on the mental health of women in Japan—in a country where affordable, accessible mental health care remains scarce.

- In October 2020, suicides had “increased by 83% for women, while it was 22% for men compared to the same months in the previous year.”⁴²
- Already 3,633 women committed suicide in the first six months of 2021, an increase of 742 people than the previous year”
- The percentage of mothers who “had symptoms of postpartum depression” rose to about 24% among 2,132 mothers who had given birth less than a year earlier.⁴³

Many nonprofits stepped in to fill gaps left by inadequate government policy and resources, though they also found themselves overwhelmed by demand. Without the support of such organisations that stepped up during the pandemic, it is likely the outcomes for women would have been much worse.

- One such nonprofit, Lifelink, which works to prevent suicides, reported “about 3,000 consultations in March, but in September, after the second wave of the pandemic hit, the figure rose to 15,000. About 70 percent of those sending messages were women.”⁴⁴

42 Zhou. (2021).

43 藤田日向子. (2021, September 27). 「産後うつ」倍増か～1人で苦しまないで [‘Sango utsu’ baizō ka ~ 1-ri de kurushimanaide]. NHKニュース. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20201016/k10012665491000.html>

44 Asahi Shimbun. (2021, January 23). *Isolation due to COVID-19 a key factor in suicide surge in 2020*. The Asahi Shimbun | Asia & Japan Watch. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14130555>

Policy Analyses & Proposals

THE CURRENT PUBLIC POLICY AND HOW IT NEEDS TO CHANGE



Analysis and Implications of Present Policy

At present, Japanese public policy requires attention in three distinct areas: intersectional data, diversified representation, and intersectional policy design.

Dearth of Disaggregated Intersectional Data

The goal of this research report was to survey the impact of policy prescriptions during the coronavirus pandemic on gender equality measures in Japan. However, most studies and statistics continue to employ a binary approach to the term “gender” and typically even misuse this term interchangeably with “women.” This tendency overlooks the variability and social construction of gender and does not adequately consider the various rights and needs of multiple groups that do not fit within the gender binary. To continue with frameworks that do not extend the meaning of “gender” to include the intersectional complications faced by other marginalised or at-risk groups with complex gendered identities further exacerbates disadvantages in times of disaster. Yet, the Japanese government has not yet embraced an intersectional diversity lens through which to assess vulnerabilities and resilience, nor for policies and their impacts.

Recommended Best Practice: Evidence-based policies that involve disaggregated data, participatory data-gathering methods, and engagement with experts in intersectional analysis

Lack of Diversified, Participatory Representation in Decision-Making Processes

There also remains a lack of substantive, intersectional representation in policy making and analysis as Japanese women and other under-served citizens, such as people with disabilities, LGBTQ, and indigenous citizens remain

systematically underrepresented across all levels of government and other institutions of democratic power.⁴⁵ The numerical dominance of men and their perspectives in the fields of political science, law, policy making and implementation in Japan leads to an absence of critical reflection on the various complexities and impacts of the “politics of race, of sexualities, of age and disability” in how resources and power are shared.^{46 47} These systemic biases generate cumulatively nefarious and long-term consequences for Japan in the post-COVID rebuilding phase, as diverse women and men remain underrepresented among recovery-focused laws and policies.⁴⁸

Recommended Best Practice: Participatory and democratic policy-making processes that are accessible, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs and identities of citizens—with substantive input from key stakeholders in civil society

Lack of Results-Based, Intersectional Policy Design and Policy Enforcement

Furthermore, these policy making practices are exacerbated by existing policies and institutions in Japan which systematically disadvantage women and men of diverse nationality, ethnocultural or racial background, ability and sexual orientation. For example, the Japanese family register system largely posits Japanese national men as the presumptive heads of households, under the post-WWII hetero-normative model of male breadwinner/housewife socio-economic organization. Excluding common law heterosexual couples and all same-sex couples,

45 Steele and Miyake. (2021).

46 Enarson, E., & Pease, B. (2018). Men, masculinities and disaster: an action research agenda. In *Men, Masculinities and Disaster (Routledge Studies in Hazards, Disaster Risk and Climate Change)* (1st ed., pp. 219–233). Routledge.

47 Steele, J. F. (2016b). Japanese political science at a crossroads? normative and empirical preconditions for the integration of women and diversity into political science. *European Political Science*, 15(4), 536–555. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-016-0074-7>

48 Tanaka, Y. (2020, September 17). *Gender and Diversity in the Time of Covid-19: Lessons from 3.11* [Slides]. Google Slides. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1neInqGIA68tWEn5CmUjbDq7iNbeHVkyU/view?usp=sharing>

this one biased model of legally married, patriarchal, patrilineal family household continues to serve as the base unit for ethno-nationalist and patriarchal policies. This model unjustifiably privileges married heterosexual male heads of household as the “ideal citizen”, to the detriment of the full diversity of individual taxpayers and citizens/residents with diverse needs that ought to form the basic unit of a modern constitutional democracy and G7 nation.

Beyond laws and policies, corporate culture in Japan and the norms around corporate warrior salarymen roles discourage men from taking parental leave, while simultaneously placing a double burden on employed Japanese women who continue to shoulder the bulk of caregiving, childrearing, and household management on top of full-time labour force participation. This care burden experienced by Japanese women, and the inadequate market-based policies, styled “Womenomics” by previous Prime Minister Abe that purported to empower women while treating them as disposable economic resources⁴⁹, have persisted in holding back achievements of true gender equality for women in Japan, contributing to the persistently embarrassing rank of 120th place internationally of this otherwise leading G7 nation.

Recommended Best Practice: Policies that are gender-and-equity responsive to the particular political, economic, and social inequalities and material realities for women, minorities, and other at-risk social groups in Japan—including robust enforcement and oversight measures that measurably reduce inequality

Implications

As Steele notes, structural inequalities that manifest across the legal and bureaucratic institutions in

Japan have been shown to result in improvised and non-performing policy measures that have not supported greater equality for women and diverse, under-served residents and citizens, nor led to greater substantive democratisation.⁵⁰

Indeed, in the case of COVID-19, gender-blind policies that lack a holistic, intersectional approach to diversity have stymied Japan’s economic performance and recovery while exacerbating the precarity of families with increased social/emotional risks due to increased domestic violence, mental health burdens and suicide. This is all amidst decreasing access to the essential social services mitigating these risks throughout the 24 months and counting length of this global pandemic. This paints a bleak picture for Japan’s future economic, societal and household resilience as we prepare to enter Reiwa year 4.

The analysis and calls for action here seek to lay the foundation for renewed investments in the best practices and wise approaches most apt to build a more equitable, resilient, and vibrant Japanese society. This report aims to raise the urgency and also appeal directly to political and economic decision-makers and policy practitioners to prioritise evidence-based commitments for sustainable and systemic change towards the substantive enjoyment of democratic equality for all who call Japan home.

49 Wilson, K. (2020, October 12). *Japan Needs a New Path for Womenomics and Gender Equality*. Tokyo Review. <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2020/10/japan-needs-a-new-path-for-womenomics-and-gender-equality-in-post-abe-era/>

Best Practices and Policy Recommendations for Effective Crisis Risk Governance

Global economies built upon the foundations of rule of law associated with advanced democracy must take seriously the contemporary demands and implications of “diverse citizenship” and what “economic resilience” requires as a collective strategy. For governments, private sector actors, and civil society, this implies a coherent, evidence-based “diversity and equity” strategy and implementation, led by government and supported by the private sector, to ensure democratic equality is ensured within peace times as a means of supporting economic resilience and societal stability in crisis times.

Create Systems of Disaggregated, Intersectional Data

Best Practice: Evidence-based policies that involve disaggregated data, participatory data-gathering methods, and engagement with experts in intersectional analysis.

Recommendation 1: Consistent, longitudinal collection of reliable quantitative demographic data that tracks and disaggregates across multiple intersecting risk factors on an individual level and by historically marginalised or under-represented social groups.

- The current method of data collection by head of household leads to under-reporting of the diverse needs and perspectives of women and younger generations

Recommendation 2: Consistent investments in long-term qualitative data and participatory research with affected communities through an

intersectional lens that makes visible the differential experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and vulnerability.

Recommendation 3: Annual investments in and capacity-building/training with civil society partners and women’s organisations with expertise in the intersectional gendered implications of crisis/disaster risk reduction.

Ensure Diversified, Participatory Representation in Decision-Making Processes

Best Practice: Participatory and democratic policy-making processes that are accessible, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs and identities of citizens—with substantive input from key stakeholders in civil society.

Recommendation 4: Hold annual, multi-level government public policy fora, exchanges, and learning communities that are diverse, cross-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder.

Recommendation 5: Hold annual report-back and consultations with feminist thought leaders and women’s organizations for best practices and implementation of international standards on gender equality and intersectional equity.

Recommendation 6: Invest in local to national and international dialogues and hold annual participatory gatherings on gender and intersectional equity-responsive practices to drive critical innovations in Japanese law, policy and statecraft.

Recommendation 7: Ensure the participation of a minimum of 40% women, 40% men, as well as representation of trans and gender fluid residents⁵¹

⁵¹ In the interests of displacing and decentring binary gender as the “norm” of conceptual understanding of gendered identities and biological sex, we intentionally use the term “gender fluid” rather

from diverse sectors and backgrounds in all governmental policy-making and decision-making bodies.

- Representation of women and marginalised groups in decision-making bodies and leadership positions remains exceptionally low in Japan

Relentlessly Pursue Results-Based Gender Equality Policy Design and Policy Enforcement

Best Practice: Policies that are gender-and-equity responsive to the particular political, economic, and social inequalities and material realities for women, minorities, and other at-risk social groups in Japan, including robust enforcement and oversight measures that measurably reduce inequality.

Recommendation 8: Invest in universally accessible social safety nets, including for caregiving, domestic violence, and mental health, that are responsive to gender and intersectional inequalities and that intentionally, measurably reduce the vulnerabilities facing diverse women.

- Supports for victims of Domestic Violence (DV) in Japan are chronically underfunded, with high procedural barriers to access
- Mental health counselling is not currently covered by National Health Insurance schemes
- Tax laws based on family registry and male breadwinner model deny women's rights to independent legal standing as individual citizens and residents
- Current border reentry policies and regulations unjustifiably punish women who are non-Japanese permanent residents

Recommendation 9: Develop and implement

than “non-binary” as the latter inadvertently accords legitimacy to the idea that gender should be thought of along a dualistic binary offering but two options and legal categories.

meaningful, equity-based hiring policies with clear, effective compliance mechanisms and sanctions to incentivize corporations to reform employment and labour practices in ways that that are responsive to gender and intersectional inequalities and that intentionally, measurably reduce the vulnerabilities facing diverse women.

- Existing labour contracts and Japanese labour market practices approach women as non-regular, expendable, contract-based labour
- Rigid corporate practices demanding long facetime working hours in a fixed office location systematically disadvantage employees with caregiving responsibilities and actively discourage men’s participation in caregiving
- Access to public support for unemployment or low income households often involves complicated paperwork and opaque, indiscriminate bureaucratic rules

Recommendation 10: Invest in reforms and innovation of the national taxation, education, daycare, eldercare, pension, and healthcare systems in ways that that are responsive to gender and intersectional inequalities and that intentionally, measurably reduce the vulnerabilities facing diverse women.

- Laws and policies currently define women as dependents of male Japanese nationals—systematically externalising collective care and social production burdens onto women and other marginalised groups
- National household taxation rules limit women’s income through economic incentives that encourage the externalisation and privatisation of care onto the family and women
- Existing public and private childcare and healthcare services in Japan fail to integrate a holistic equity-based approach to ensure anti-sexist, anti-racist, LGBTQ-inclusive service

provision

- The Japanese national childcare and education systems teach national standardised curricula that fail to meaningfully integrate considerations for equity, gender equality, diversity, and inclusive learning goals



Conclusion

We are aware that our recommendations may be serious and systemic in scale, and would counter that such resolutions are necessary for such a serious and systemic problem.

Japan is not unfamiliar with overhauling legal and bureaucratic processes. The implementation of the MyNumber system in the 2010s, for example, demonstrates the ability of the government to overhaul processes in the face of both tradition and controversy. What was needed then, and what is needed now, is pressure from economic and corporate ecosystems to focus the attention of the Japanese Diet.

Our recommended policies are not solely about avoiding repeated negative outcomes. Companies and governments in all areas of the world have implemented policy lookalikes to great success, most notably [Canada](#) and the [United Nations Women](#).

We are confident that, given proper encouragement, Japanese citizens and legislators can craft public policies that adopt the spirit of these recommendations while remaining wholly and uniquely Japanese. After all, such action would benefit not only intersectional women living within Japan, but all citizens.



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Secondly, UNESCO Beijing reached out in 2021 to commission a Japan-focused research report that empowered us to deepen our findings and analysis on the realities impacting diverse women in Japan. That research report forms the backbone of this practitioner report, introducing an explicitly intersectional analysis of women's experiences of complex inequality during the pandemic.

Finally, we wish to convey our appreciation to Megumi Ishimoto, Founding Member of the Single Mothers Research Project, for sharing original research findings from their survey on single mothers implemented during the early phases of COVID19 and throughout the pandemic. Without the dedicated efforts of researchers and civil society collaboration working at the grassroots, the stories and qualitative voices of single women's significant caregiving burdens and economic predatory would not have been captured.

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