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Untapped Human Resources: Women's Political Role in the Revival of the Japanese Economy

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Introduction

According to statistics compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in October 2003, Japan ranked 98th out of 127 countries in the percentage of female representatives in its legislature.[1] In other words, women comprised a mere 7.3 percent of Japan's lower house, meaning that out of 480 lawmakers, only 35 were women. While it can be argued that the representation of women in the legislature does not mirror the position of women in society as a whole – the United States, after all, came in at 60th place with women comprising only 14.3 percent of the House of Representatives – the case of Japan is distinctive in that in addition to its meager female representation, the nation is confronted by multiple crises, which may be alleviated by increased participation of women in the lawmaking process. Japan is entering its fourteenth year of economic recession and, with a declining birthrate and a rapidly aging population, faces a demographic crisis. Legislative amendments regarding the increase of female participation in the labor force and the handling of the declining birth rate are imperative to the revival of the Japanese economy. The need for such legislative reform is widely recognized in Japan, and yet the institutional change that has occurred thus far has been done so at an extraordinarily slow pace. Moreover, even when reform has occurred, it has often not translated into actual changes in society. This article examines Japanese political reforms that ostensibly aim to improve the position of women in society and mend related socioeconomic problems. More specifically, it looks at why these reforms, despite a recognized need to tackle the targeted multiple problems simultaneously, have faced significant obstacles.

First, this article will discuss the historical background and significant events preceding Japan's current predicament. In many respects, Japan has come a long way from the *ryosai kenbo*, or "good wives, wise mothers" national ideal set forth in the pre-war period. The constitution, rewritten in 1947, declared that, "All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status, or family origin."[2] As many scholars note, however, the attainment of women's rights as articulated by the constitution has not been fully realized in Japan. Moreover, an unequal social status for

[1] In terms of the percentage of women represented in the lower houses of parliaments or the single chambers of countries without bicameral legislative systems. See "Women in Parliaments," <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.
[2] Article 14 quoted in Louis D. Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 330.

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women that continues to be justified by "traditional cultural expectations," which are shared by both men and women in Japan. In order to understand the present challenges, it is important to trace the history of reforms related to the women's movement, as well as past and present involvement of women in the legislative procedure. This exploration includes an account of the challenges historically faced by women entering politics in Japan, as well as a comparative study with Vietnam.

Next, the current dilemmas being faced in Japan are examined. Particular attention is given to those issues which most affect the female population and that could possibly be improved with more women in control of legislative procedures. First, the matter of increasing women in the labor force is considered. As *New York Times* columnist Howard French noted in a piece about women in the Japanese workforce, "With women sidelined from the career track, Japan is effectively fighting with one hand tied behind its back."[3] The obstacles that Japanese women face as they try to advance in the labor force are looked at, along with the corresponding legislation regarding these obstacles. Interconnected with this issue is that of Japan's demographic dilemma. The various pressures on women as workers, mothers, and care providers (for both children and the elderly) are considered in this examination. Problems with the simultaneous increasing of women in the labor force and increasing of the population are dealt with as well.

The existing legislation on these gender-specific issues is looked at carefully, as is the question of why there has been such a lack of expediency in the making and implementing of these laws. To that end, the shortcomings of the existing legislation are revealed, and discrepancies between what is law and what is actually seen in Japanese society are brought to light. The measures which have not yet been accepted into society are also important to consider in view of the economic stagnation which Japan has experienced for the past thirteen years.

The conclusion of the article draws together the contributing factors of the current political and social dilemmas in the realm of women's involvement in order to explain why reform has been so drawn-out and unsuccessful in stimulating Japan's economy. Various models suggesting where political power in Japan is rooted provide ways for identifying the most effective means of political, social, and economic reform.

"ONE OF THE MOST PERSUASIVE REASONS FOR LOOKING AT THE HISTORY OF GENDER-SPECIFIC LEGISLATION IN JAPAN IS THAT IN THE PAST SUCH LEGISLATION HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED AND RESULTED IN FAR-REACHING REFORM."

Sweeping Reforms of Gender Policy in Japan: A Historical Background

One of the most persuasive reasons for looking at the history of gender-specific legislation in Japan is that in the past such legislation has been implemented and resulted in far-reaching reform. The accomplishments of past social restructuring are thus important to turn to when considering the possibilities for future change. While universal theories can be applied to the case of Japan, in many instances it is more useful to look at actual historical precedent. Examples from the past are useful in identifying social intricacies that may aid or hinder future political reform.

Most of the Meiji era reforms on gender

[3] Howard French, "Japan's Neglected Resource: Female Workers," *New York Times*, July 25, 2003.

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relations in Japan had to do with gaining support and approval from the West. Following seven centuries of feudalism and the opening to international trade in 1868, the concern over whether or not Japan was a "civilized" nation was at the forefront of the political agenda. In its struggle for global power, Japan was willing to improve the position of women to reflect those social structures of more "civilized" countries. The Meiji Six Society, an organization founded in 1873 and made up of intellectuals and government officials, promoted the integration of western ideas into Japanese society.[4] Writings by society members reveal that they saw the position of women as closely linked to the problem of Japan's weakness in the global political economy. For example, a piece by Fukuzawa Yukichi, a Meiji era publicist and influential society member, reads:

> In the civilized countries of the West, much of the social intercourse is managed by women, and even though they do not run society, they work in harmony among men and help smooth the situation . . . in carrying out the business of the nation, in the West both men and women divide the burden between them, while . . . [in Japan only half of them, the men only, carry the burden . . . the labor force that performs the national business is only half that of the West].[5]

It should be noted that Fukuzawa's statements were somewhat confined to the women of his own samurai class, who were not permitted to work, and did not apply directly to women of merchant, artisan, and peasant classes who were in fact working at this time. However, the fact that such discourse was being published is significant when considering the motives behind sweeping governmental reform. It was widely acknowledged that reform was necessary in order to modernize the nation and to lessen criticism coming from the West over Japan's "inferiority."

In 1872, the Education Ordinance was passed, stating "Learning is no longer to be considered as belonging to the upper classes, but is to be equally the inheritance of nobles and gentry, farmers and artisans, males and females."[6] The purpose of women's inclusion in educational reform was to produce women who were "good wives, and wise mothers," or *ryosai kenbo*. While the goals of this legislation may not fit the modern-day understanding of "progress," in the context of Japan's highly patriarchal and feudally-influenced society, it was a landmark development. Subsequent legislation both advanced and quashed the plight of women as influential members of Japanese society,[7] yet the evidence is clear that political reform was taking place and had profound effects on the Japanese society. The point here is not to try to trace the trajectory of women's empowerment, as Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945 resulted in such sweeping social and constitutional reforms that it would be quite complicated to link today's gender politics back to those of the pre-war period. Rather, the historical precedent makes it clear

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[4] Joanna Liddle and Nakajima Sachiko, *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters: Gender Class and Power in Japan* (New York: Zed Books, 2000), 32.

[5] Ibid., 35.

[6] Ibid., 45.

[7] The Police Security Regulations' Article 5, for example, was amended in 1890 to exclude all women from all forms of political activity. They were banned not only from the political parties, but from even attending political meetings. From Liddle and Nakajima, 47.

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that reform by means of government legislation has been and remains possible in Japanese society.

Women Enter the Political Arena

Under the charge of General MacArthur, the occupation government carried out extensive reforms with respect to women's rights, most notably the granting of female suffrage. On April 10, 1946, women voted and ran for political office for the first time in Japanese history.[8] Sixty-seven percent of women came to the polls – only an 11.5 percent gap behind the 78.5 percent turnout for men.[9] Perhaps even more importantly, of the 79 female candidates running for office in the Diet in the 1946 elections, 39 were elected. This meant that females made up 8.4 percent of the Lower House representatives, a number that remains unmatched to this day.[10] These 1946 election results revealed Japanese women of the day's desire to have their voices heard in the political arena.

Many significant social changes took place during the electoral terms of these immediate post-war Diet members. For one, reforms encouraging gender equality continued. In April 1947, the Labor Standards Law, or *Rodo Kijun Ho*, laid out several groundbreaking changes with respect to women in the labor force. Women were to receive "equal work for equal pay" (Article 4), and they were granted the right to maternity leave (Article 65), nursing leave (Article 66), and menstrual leave (Article 67). Such amendments facilitated the augmentation of the Japanese workforce by women in that they acknowledged and accommodated distinctively female needs. Furthermore, in 1947, a restructured Ministry of Labor added a new Women and Minors' Bureau (*Fujin Shonen Kyoku*), which was responsible for ensuring the protection of women in the workforce, implementing a ban on child labor, as well as monitoring the condition of domestic labor.[11] The effect that these postwar constitutional amendments had on women of the time was not uniformly positive – despite the increased opportunities to express their political views and participate in the workforce, many women were still bound psychologically to a patriarchal system, which valued the "male breadwinner," and thus were hesitant to take advantage of the reforms. However, the constitutional change in the 1940s planted the seeds for further reform in the future, as women's newfound capacity to vote enabled them to be heard in the political arena.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, women's legislation began to challenge the role of women as domestic laborers and common notions of the Japanese housewife. Through Japan's rapid economic growth, booming industrialization, and increased use of mechanical devices, which reduced the time spent on housework, housewives took advantage of increased opportunities to join the labor force or become involved in politics.[12] Political ideologies that had previously been considered dangerous, such as socialism, saw an upwelling of support among the female population. Several women, including Tanaka Sumiko and Doi Takako, even served as leaders of left-wing parties.[13] While the attitudes held by these smaller parties were not solely geared toward the advancement of women, the increased

[8] Susan J. Pharr, *Political Women in Japan: The Search for a Place in Political Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 22.
[9] This gender gap in voter participation closed rapidly. By the December 27, 1969 Lower House general elections, the percentage of women voters exceeded that of men for the first time.
[10] Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125
[11] Ibid., 130-131.
[12] Ibid., 133.
[13] Ibid.

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participation of women in politics generally underlined a slow but steady trend toward increased activity outside of the domestic context.

To this day however, despite the progress stemming from the radical political reforms of the late 1940s, successful realization of the above legislation has yet to be realized. For example, women's wages still do not match those of men for comparable jobs, and social security and other related schemes, such as taxation and the pension system, are still geared toward a patriarchal system.[14] While legislation has continued to be created and amended with the apparent goal of improving women's opportunities in the workforce, loopholes and oversights in the utilization of these measures have meant that the advancement of Japanese women has stagnated.

"WHILE LEGISLATION HAS CONTINUED TO BE CREATED AND AMENDED WITH THE APPARENT GOAL OF IMPROVING WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES IN THE WORKFORCE, LOOPHOLES AND OVERSIGHTS IN THE UTILIZATION OF THESE MEASURES HAVE MEANT THAT THE ADVANCEMENT OF JAPANESE WOMEN HAS STAGNATED."

Johanna Liddle and Nakajima Sachiko offer one suggestion for why reform has ultimately been unsuccessful. They assert that constitutional reforms following the war arose not so much from a US desire to see Japan democratized as it did from a US desire to see Japan demilitarized in order to consolidate US dominance.[15] Likewise, reforms for women's rights had less to do with women's liberation than with the securing of a US control. Examples cited include the US's ultimate lack of support for women's political organizations, as well as a government-mandated initiative to expand systems of prostitution during the US occupation.[16] The US thus did not back these reforms for the purpose of advancing women's rights, and as a result, the post-war women's movement got off to a shaky start and had little fundamental support from the US. The political alliance between the US and Japan has historically been powerful and significant in shaping Japanese policy, a fact which was recently highlighted by Japan's decision to send troops to Iraq.[17] The lack of support by the US in Japan's early stages of reform to women's rights, therefore, had far-reaching effects and continues to negatively impact the rate of improvement.

Susan Pharr also has examined the difficulties experienced by the early women's political movement in Japan. She cites several reasons as to why the movement did not take off as it did in many other nations around the same time period and why it remains weak in a global context. In particular, she argues that the timing of the introduction of suffrage and other political rights for Japanese women was abrupt and did not follow a wave of turmoil over issues of human equality and individual rights as it did in Western nations such as New Zealand, England, Germany, and the United States. In addition, the movement to grant women the right to vote was more of an external rather than an internal force, and

[14] For a thorough study on these inequalities, see Eiko Shinotsuka, "Women Workers in Japan: Past Present, Future," in Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, eds., *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 95-119.

[15] Liddle and Nakajima, 153-54.

[16] Ibid., 155.

[17] Since Article 9 of the Japanese constitution states that Japan shall have no offensive army, the Self-Defense Force troops currently stationed in Iraq are essentially being protected by US troops. Popular opinion is of the belief that Japan sent the delegation as a symbolic act to show its support for the US.

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domestic support for the new rights was not as strong as in other nations.[18]

Japanese Reforms: A Comparison with Vietnam

Interesting comparisons can be drawn between the plight of women in Japan and that of women in Vietnam – another nation that faced radical social reforms following a war and holds many other similarities with Japan. First, Japan and Vietnam share cultural traits. For example, most Vietnamese people (like the Japanese) historically identify themselves with Buddhism, but have a secular government.[19] Furthermore, 90 percent of Vietnamese citizens are ethnic Vietnamese. Japan's population is 99 percent ethnic Japanese. Thus, the similar secular and cultural determinants of the two countries make them ideal cases to compare.

With respect to politics, Vietnam and Japan use similar rhetoric in their constitutional amendments regarding the rights of women. The first constitution (1946) of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam states that "women enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres."[20] Although Japan's post-war constitution similarly stated that "there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, or social relations because of . . . sex,"[21] the directives seem to have been realized to a much greater extent in Vietnam, particularly with regard to women's capacity as lawmakers. As Japan's Lower House has seen a steady decrease in female representation from its all-time high of 8.4 percent following the election of 1946, there have been a growing number of female lawmakers in Vietnam. Interestingly, the percentage of women in Vietnam's National Assembly has risen from 2.48 percent in 1946 to 27.3 percent as of now.[22]

Vietnam's socio-political history from 1946 to the present has been turbulent, with the Vietnam War serving as a key turning point for the nation as a whole. An ancient Vietnamese saying declares, "When war comes, even women have to fight."[23] During the period from 1945 to 1975, Vietnamese women were active participants in the conflicts between North and South Vietnam and the US and its allies. The Communist Party advocated women taking up the role of fighters (a group which came to be known as the "long-haired warriors"), and Vietcong propaganda encouraged the active participation of women in the war as opposed to them acting as domestic laborers.[24] Many women in this period also held significant political posiions and were instrumental in the shaping of Vietnamese policy. One such woman was Nguyen Thi Binh, who served as the Foreign Minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government and as a Vietnamese representative during the long peace talks in Paris from 1968 to 1973.[25] While the creation of legislation cannot be attributed to one individual such as Binh, it is nonetheless important to note that many significant reforms which affected women took effect while she was in office.[26]

On July 2, 1976, the Democratic

[18] Pharr, 174-5.

[19] The sect of Buddhism in the two countries varies, however. Vietnamese Buddhists are Hinayana, while the Japanese are Mahayana. Hinayana Buddhists do not believe that any woman can reach enlightenment without first being reborn as a man.

[20] UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, "Status of Women: Vietnam" (Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 1989), 49.

[21] Hayes, 330

[22] UNESCO, 49.

[23] Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 9.

[24] See "Vietcong Tells Girl Recruits to Make War, Not Love," March 13, 1969, cited in Taylor, 147.

[25] Following the end of the war, Binh served as the Minister of Education and later on became a member of the National Assembly and served as the Vice President of Vietnam. Ibid., 124.

[26] In 1991 a labor law was promulgated to protect the welfare of women workers, and in 1993 new policies to control prostitution and AIDS were put into place. See Karen G. Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 1998), xvi.

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Republic of North Vietnam and the Republic of South Vietnam united to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Prior to this time, little detailed information about Vietnamese gender issues was available, as Western scholars were not permitted to enter the country without communist guides and interpreters by their sides.[27] The new constitution adopted in 1980 established the National Assembly as the highest governing body, with Assembly members elected directly by the people to serve five-year terms.[28] In 1984, the Vietnamese Communist Party put forth Directive 44 and Resolution 176a,[29] both of which aimed to promote women's emancipation and equality between genders. They state explicitly that the state will be strengthened through the increase of women playing roles in economic and state management, as well as resolving that at least one-third of all elected bodies are to be comprised of women.[30]

Following the adoption of market reforms in 1986, the formal political ideology of Vietnam experienced a significant degree of change. Although the country was still officially socialist, it gave up on central planning and restructured the economy to allow a much greater role for the market. Following these reforms, more scholarship became available with respect to the role and impact of women in Vietnamese politics and the economy.[31] In addition to the steadily growing number of women in Vietnam's legislative system, areas such as agriculture have seen a "re-feminization" as men have gravitated toward urban areas to find jobs. As a result of men leaving their families in rural areas to look for urban jobs, there has also been a marked increase in the number of women serving as the head of the household.[32] While post-socialist countries often see setbacks in gender equality as women move from the labor force back into the home, Vietnam's women have had a different experience.

One view regarding the relative success of reforms in Vietnam states that union activity has been particularly strong and therefore helpful in mobilizing women. Indeed, Vietnamese unions overall are largely comprised of women, and they are very proactive in securing women's rights. The Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), as stipulated in Resolution 176a, serves a focused role, namely strengthening the state's efficiency in enforcing women's rights policies. The Union submits drafts of policies and laws to the state aimed at ensuring women's full participation in politics and meets once a year with the Council of Ministers to review the implementation of such laws. The VWU also has special programs in cooperation with different branches of the government to increase legal literacy among women.[33]

On the other hand, Japan's unions – and women's unions in particular – have historically been poorly organized and overall unsuccessful. Japan legalized labor unions following the Allied occupation, but although the number of female workers rose, the

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[27] Jayne Werner and Danièle Bélanger, "Introduction: Gender and Viet Nam Studies," in Jayne Werner and Danièle Bélanger, eds. *Gender, Household, State: Dôi Mói in Viet Nam* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 2002), 14.
[28] Ronald Cima, "Vietnam: Historical Background," in V. Largo, ed., *Vietnam: Current Issues and Historical Background* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2002), 76.
[29] For the texts of Directives 44 and 176a, see the website of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, <http://www.na.gov.vn/english/index.html>.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Werner and Bélanger, 15.
[32] Ibid., 36. According to the World Bank, 27 percent of all households were headed by females in Vietnam in 1993.
[33] UNESCO, 53.

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percentage of those who unionized continued to decline after peaking at 51 percent in 1949. The drop in participation was quite drastic, down to 30.9 percent only five years later in 1954.[34] This decline may have been due to a variety of factors, including a lack of organization or a general shifting of interests. Today, one issue of contention with respect to unions is that of the "temp," or part-time worker in Japan. Unions generally exclude these part-time workers, and considering that there are almost a million registered temps (90 percent of whom are female), this is a significant group of women to exclude from union activity.[35]

The United Nations' "Consideration of Reports" notes that women in Vietnam enjoy equality with men in all political activities, such as voting and standing for election to state bodies. In 1995, the Vietnamese government drafted the National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women, which listed eleven explicit goals. This is theoretically the same system in place in Japan. The National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam, however, also states that a major objective is to have women make up twenty to thirty percent of elected government officials and to have fifteen to twenty percent of government agencies and advisory bodies at all levels be comprised of women.[36] A National Plan of Action such as this, which mandates a specific figure, could alleviate the huge gender discrepancies in the Japanese government.

> "JAPAN'S UNIONS – AND WOMEN'S UNIONS IN PARTICULAR – HAVE HISTORICALLY BEEN POORLY ORGANIZED AND OVERALL UNSUCCESSFUL."

Political Power Flow in Japan

An examination of how political power is structured in Japan may perhaps shed further light on ways in which change could be implemented. If we are to believe that power flows from the top down, then the difference in the number of men and women in the Diet is a matter of concern. However, some scholars, such as Joyce Gelb and Robin LeBlanc, contend that power in Japan can flow from the bottom up, namely from local, interest-based political factions, which often have much higher concentrations of women than ones at the national level. In identifying the origins and paths of political power, the most efficient means of rapid social reform can be recognized and relevant political groups can be targeted. As such, several different theories will be briefly examined.

One theory of Japanese political power is that it is rooted in various governmental agencies that exert great influence over both the Diet and the general population. For example, political scientist Chalmers Johnson asserts that, "Although it is influenced by pressure groups and political claimants, the elite bureaucracy of Japan makes most major decisions, drafts virtually all legislation, controls the national budget, and is the source of all major policy innovations in the system."[37] With respect to the influence of women in politics, Johnson's model implies that an increase in the percentages of females in the various governmental ministries would be the most effective means to advance women's rights.

[34] Mackie, 131.
[35] Charles Weathers, "Changing White-collar Workplaces and Female Temporary Workers in Japan," *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2001), 201.
[36] United Nations 2002 International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights report, 15
[37] Chalmers Johnson, "MITI and the Japanese Miracle," in Curtis Milhaupt *et al*, eds., *Japanese Law in Context: Readings in Society, the Economy, and Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 515.

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At present, women are underrepresented at all levels of the bureaucracy, especially in the higher civil servant positions. The number of women taking the higher civil service exam is miniscule compared to that of men, and the percentage passing is lower as well.[38] According to Johnson's model, a lack of Japanese women in bureaucratic positions translates to a lack of power being exerted on their behalf.

Some scholars do not see the seat of political power in one particular branch as in Johnson's model, but rather see power as something that can flow from different levels of the populace. Zhao Quansheng looks at the "politics behind politics" in his book, *Japanese Policymaking*. Though his case studies focus primarily on the making of foreign policy toward China, his findings are significant and applicable to various other realms of politics. Zhao argues that in contrast to conventional analyses of Japanese policymaking as formal and "patterned,", informal practices and channels bear a significant weight in policymaking. He examines the Japanese policymaking process on three levels: the societal level, the institutional level, and the individual level. As opposed to Johnson's model, Zhao sees the bureaucracy not as *the* major source for innovations, but as part of what he calls the "ruling tripod," meaning the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the business community, and the higher elite corps of the bureaucracy.[39] Zhao concludes that social networks[40] are one of the most efficient means by which to synchronize different interests and to attain consensus among the political elite.[41] While Johnson's analysis of the bureaucracy is important in that it points out a major source of political control in Japan, Zhao's examination incorporates this bureaucracy along with other influential groups to provide a broader picture of power flow.

"ZHAO'S ASSERTION THAT INFORMAL SOCIAL NETWORKS ARE KEY IN JAPANESE POLITICS CAN BE SEEN IN PRACTICE WHEN LOOKING AT WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN JAPAN."

Zhao's assertion that informal social networks are key in Japanese politics can be seen in practice when looking at women's movements and women's organizations in Japan – an illustration of political activity taking place outside the formal structures. Indeed, post-war women's movements have exerted significant social and political influence in Japan. While prior to the Second World War the *ryosai kenbo* ideal severely limited the extent to which women's movements could assert political influence in any form, following post-war constitutional reforms, women's organizations were able to gain both legitimacy and influence in Japanese politics.[42] This influence can be seen in the number of legislative initiatives that feminist organizations were able to directly change. The most influential of these post-war organizations was the Women's Democratic Club, later the Fighting Women's Group (*gurupu tatakau onna*). This group, sometimes acting alone and sometimes in alliance with other movements, managed to abolish legalized prostitution in 1956, affect the price, quality, and safety of consumer

[38] Hayes, 63.
[39] Zhao Quansheng, *Japanese Policymaking: The Politics Behind Politics* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 195.
[40] "Social networks" as used here has a variety of different meanings, but broadly refers to any political activity which takes place outside of state structures such as the legislative, executive, or judiciary branches.
[41] Zhao, 185.
[42] Kathleen Uno, "The Death of 'Good Wife, Wise Mother'?" in Edward R Beauchamp, ed., *Women and Women's Issues in Post-World War II Japan* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 249.

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goods in the 1960s, prevent the tightening of abortion law in both 1973 and 1982, and remove the home economics requirement for high school girls.[43] These acts, which were aimed expressly at creating a more equal environment for women, serve as proof that the political power necessary to create social reform does not need to stem from formal branches of the government and that groups united for a single cause have the power to generate legislative change.

Robin LeBlanc's *Bicycle Citizens* further explores these means of informal political influence, mainly by looking at the political world of the Japanese housewife. LeBlanc dispels the myth that Japanese housewives are without a political world by revealing the multitude of volunteer and social welfare activities in which they participate. Many of the housewives LeBlanc interviewed felt that national politics are far removed from their own lives, but that their voices can be heard at local interest-based political groups. LeBlanc provides the example of the Netto movement to illustrate this. All of its elected representatives are women, and the majority of its support comes from housewives.[44] Another noteworthy feature of the Netto movement is that in the mid-1990s, a time when Japanese national politics experienced "chaotic disintegration"[45] as the LDP fractured and lost control of the Diet, Netto grew in size and strength and was able to achieve its political objectives. These objectives were met by Netto members claiming seats in prefectural assemblies, an accomplishment that led supporters, housewives, to feel that their perspectives were represented.

Similarly, Joyce Gelb and Margarita Estevez-Abe, in "Political Women in Japan: A Case Study of the Seikatsusha Network Movement," maintain that the Seikatsu movement has been an incredible vehicle for mobilizing women in both community activities and electoral politics. It has, they claim, also redefined many women's goals and given them a new sense of empowerment.[46] LeBlanc, Gelb, and Estevez-Abe's research thus ascribes political power in Japan as something that can come from the grassroots level upwards. Altogether, these suggest that local and informal political networks and movements may be key in driving social reform. They may have little bearing on Japan's international affairs or non-socially-related national politics, but it can be observed that when the issue strikes close enough to home, housewives and other common citizens do have the ability to organize and create change.

In the broader picture, the various paradigms on Japanese political power flow all are reasonable and more or less applicable to various political situations. Johnson's and Zhao's assertions that power rests in the bureaucracy and in networks which include the bureaucracy are important to consider if one is primarily concerned with the fact that women are historically underrepresented in these power-wielding groups. Indeed, if the bureaucracy and related groups are to be taken as the most important sources of political power, then the best way to exert a real influence on women's issues would be to increase the number of women in those groups. However, as LeBlanc, Gelb, and Estevez-Abe make clear, political power is not monopolized by the government, and local networks and movements have been

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Robin LeBlanc, *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 123.
[45] Ibid., 195.
[46] Joyce Gelb and Margarita Estevez-Abe, "Political Women in Japan: A Case Study of the *Seikatsusha* Network Movement," *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1998), 263.

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effective in the past when it came to reforming issues that were important to women. In order to further gauge whether or not local politics are the key to social reform, an investigation of some of the current socio-political issues is in order.

Conflicting Interests: Working Mothers and Japan's Demographic Dilemma

Women in present-day Japan are forced to juggle multiple roles as mothers, wives, care-providers, and workers. This is not unique to Japan, of course, as women in many societies are forced to balance family life with their participation in society. However, current economic pressures impinge upon women's options as many expect women to boost both the economy and the population of Japan, as well as care for the increasing population of elderly individuals. The solution seems to be to tackle multiple problems simultaneously through legislation enabling mothers to be workers, workers to be care-providers, and vice versa. However, because the issues involved are complex, multidirectional legislation will be necessary to mend most of these problems.

Women have comprised a large part of the Japanese labor force for most of the past century. The jobs with the highest concentration of women have shifted from being agricultural, in the early part of the twentieth century, to clerical positions in the present-day workforce. As Rodney Clark states, however, "It is admittedly true that no industrial society gives women genuine parity with men in economic affairs, but Japanese women are more rigidly discriminated against than their Western counterparts."[47] Women may make up a significant portion of the workforce, but they do not usually experience the same kind of psychological and material benefits that working men in Japan can attain. Women are expected to provide concentrated maternal involvement in child-care once they enter motherhood. Consequently, the pattern of women's employment in Japan has developed into an "M-curve," with the first peak of employment coming in the years before marriage and childbirth, and the second in the middle-age years once childrearing responsibilities have declined.[48] Women's care-giving roles are not limited to children, either, as wives and daughters-in-law have traditionally held the responsibility of caring for frail, elderly relatives.[49] As Japan is the most rapidly aging country in the world, this issue of care for the elderly will continue to grow in its effect on women's roles and on the economy in coming years.

When their care-giving responsibilities cease and women reenter the workforce, it is often as part-time employment. As such, these women have different contracts from full-time employees, which do not permit them to receive the same benefits, such as retirement pensions and health insurance, even though they often work up to 35 hours a week.[50] In addition to social pressures such as care-giving, the tax system in Japan is geared toward a patriarchal family structure, with the male encouraged to take on the role of sole breadwinner and female that of a dependent housewife: the national income tax deduction for dependent spouses and children, which was introduced in 1961, provides more income support if the wife stays at home or

[47] Rodney Clark, *The Japanese Company* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 234.
[48] Elise Tipton, "Being Women in Japan, 1970-2000," in Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, eds. *Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Globalization* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 215.
[49] Susan Orpett Long and Phyllis Braudy Harris, "Gender and Elder Care: Social Change and the Role of the Caregiver in Japan," *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2000), 21.
[50] Ibid.

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works only part time.[51]

In 1985, Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was passed in an initiative to expand employment and career opportunities for women.[52] However, the actual application of this law still lacks consistency, and its effects thus remain limited. The law stipulates that employers should not discriminate against women in job training, fringe benefits, mandatory retirement age, resignation, and dismissal. The law also "requests" that employers try not to discriminate against women in recruiting, hiring, and promotion. Employers who violate the law are not sanctioned, however, because compliance is voluntary, not mandatory.[53] The number of women in the workforce did not increase drastically following the passing of the EEOL, and much criticism has ensued over the intent of the law and the government's lack of enforcement. Millie Creighton, like Liddle and Nakajima, argues that the equal employment legislation passed in Japan was not aimed at shifting the role of women in Japan, but rather reflected Japan's desire to be accepted by the international community.[54]

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Sociologist Ueno Chizuko has further criticized the EEOL by saying that it is "like a sieve" because the law stipulates "good faith" compliance without any penalty for not observing it. In order to meet the requirements of the law, she explains, companies have created a two-track personnel advancement system consisting of a career track and a non-career track. This is because the law does not allow companies to designate certain jobs as "for males" or "for females."[55] Less than one percent of newly hired women, however, enter the career track.[56] Ueno's suggestion as to why the number of women who work continuously has not increased drastically following the creation of the EEOL is twofold. First, there has been no improvement in the conditions under which women have to balance work and childrearing. And second, young women do not find the lifestyle of personal sacrifice attractive, and such sacrifice is viewed as necessary to succeed. In fact, she argues, the EEOL has resulted in an increased desire for young women to become full-time housewives.[57] The fact that the actual results of this seemingly well-intentioned legislation run counter to the goal of expanding opportunities for women is significant. The creation of the legislation alone has not been enough to kindle major changes in the breakdown of gender-role stereotypes, which suggests that the implementation of more stringent compliance rules should be considered.

Many women choose alternate forms of

[51] There are four main categories of tax deductions: basic allowance, spousal allowance, special spousal allowance, and allowance for dependents (children and elderly parents). Each of these deductions is worth 380,000 yen (US$3,518), or even more if the child is aged 16 to 22. Therefore, a typical family consisting of a male breadwinner with a non-working wife and two children can write US$11,000-US$13,000 off their yearly income. See Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report No. 107, January 2003, 21.

[52] Millie Creighton, "Marriage, Motherhood, and Career Management in a Japanese 'Counter Culture,'" in Anne E. Imamura, ed., *Re-Imaging Japanese Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 192.

[53] Asia Program Special Report, 22.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Mackie, 185.

[56] Ueno Chizuko, "Women and the Family in Transition in Postindustrial Japan," in Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, eds., *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 34.

[57] Ibid., 35

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employment so as to avoid making personal sacrifice. One of the most common alternatives to full-time employment is part-time work. Part-time employees, or "temps," are hired to reduce labor costs and raise the productivity of companies.[58] These workers, however, receive lower pay, no benefits, and enjoy little job security. Charles Weathers asserts that the part-time employment system has also helped to perpetuate gender segregation and age discrimination, as ninety percent of registered temps are woman and companies usually do not hire temps over 35 years of age.[59] The result is a further rift in gender-role expectations by both employers and employees. Companies have come to expect to be able to hire cheap female "temp" labor, and many women seem to have come to accept the status quo.

Another hindrance to the working woman in Japan is the issue of child-care, and the difficulties faced when trying to work and be a mother simultaneously. Yoshiko Tomizawa, a working mother-turned-politician, recounts her experience with the child-care problem:

> I had a child in 1983. After my maternity leave was over, I decided to enroll my baby in a day nursery, but none of the public facilities in Suginami Ward, Tokyo, would take an eight-week-old child. The only places I could find were private nurseries, where the conditions were poor, so I found myself in a tight spot. I had to choose whether or not to resign from my job. Until that time I had believed the nursery care system was an elementary issue in the equality between men and women and had thought it was more advanced. The social conditions that would allow women with children to continue to work simply did not exist.[60]

In the early 1990s, the Japanese government finally began to address the problem of child-care because of concerns over labor shortages and the social problems caused by illegal alien workers. The government passed the Child Care Leave Law in 1991 in order to allow women and older people to compensate for the labor shortages. The law, however, does not guarantee pay during the term of the mother's leave (up to one year), and this greatly limits the extent to which it is used.[61] As Tomizawa describes in recalling her crusade to reform child-care laws, most politicians, men and women alike, believe that paternalism is natural. This cultural mindset can help to explain the historically slow pace of women's rights legislation. While the Japanese workforce may offer "equal opportunity" to men and women in Japan, it is clear that "equal employment" is far from being realized.

Two demographic shifts, namely falling birthrates and the aging population, present other significant sources of pressure on the Japanese economy. With Japan's stringent naturalization laws, the only way to increase the population is for Japanese women to have more children.[62] The trend toward fewer children began in the 1950s, after abortion had been legalized and the government sponsored programs encouraging contraceptive use to try to curb population growth in the post-war period of economic devastation and poverty. By the 1960s, however, Prime

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[58] Weathers, 201.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Tomizawa Yoshiko, "From Child-Care to Local Politics," in AMPO – Japan Asia Quarterly Review, ed., *Voices from the Japanese Women's Movement* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996), 196.
[61] Shinotsuka, 114.
[62] Since this time, the birthrate has continued to decline further below replacement level (2.1 children per woman).

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Minister Sato began to encourage women to have more children again in order to provide the workforce to sustain the nation's economic growth. Politicians also continued to urge women to have more babies throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and this was one of the major forces behind the repeated refusals to legalize the birth control pill.[63] Some of the reasons cited by women today as to why they are not having more children include the costs of education, the economic recession, and limited housing space.

Concurrent with the declining birthrate is an increasing elderly population. The Japanese enjoy the longest life spans in the world, with males living to an average of 77.8 years and females to an average of 85, and someone needs to provide care for this graying population. Paul Hewitt argues that most of Japan's economic ills arise either directly out of, or are being exacerbated by, the demographic imbalance that is taking shape. He claims that Japan's political culture and its labor market institutions are not suited to deal with the demographic change. With a diminishing number of workers, Japan will continue to see its GDP decline unless productivity rises faster than the rate of labor force decline. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that Japan's labor force will decline by an average of 0.7 percent a year between 2000 and 2025, and 0.9 percent a year between 2025 and 2050, which means an increasing drag on GDP growth. There are several other problems which Hewitt links to Japan's "hyperaging" dilemma, including depressed consumption and increased unemployment rates.[64]

"TWO DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS, NAMELY FALLING BIRTHRATES AND THE AGING POPULATION, PRESENT SIGNIFICANT SOURCES OF PRESSURE ON THE JAPANESE ECONOMY."

Other scholars, however, take a slightly less alarmist viewpoint. Usui Chikako, for example, believes that with policy adjustments and in labor, welfare, family, and educational institutions, Japan will be able to cope successfully with its demographic shifts. An interesting solution which she poses for dealing with the economic factors of the aging population is to draw from an "untapped supply of labor," namely middle-aged and older females.[65] She further asserts that the position of women is a critical factor in any discussion of population aging, for not only do women serve as a source of labor, but their postponement of marriage is a driving factor behind demographic change. She notes that the significance of marriage has steadily declined, with premarital sexual activity becoming more tolerated and more women being university-educated.[66] She also mentions the problems associated with raising children in Japan, such as the high costs of education and the lack of adequate child-care facilities for working mothers.[67] Usui's conclusion is that the demographic dilemma in Japan is resolvable with policy adjustments, and that the government should restore the public's confidence by re-conceptualizing the relationships between social policies, demographic shifts, and the changing economy. Her observations make the link

[63] Lobbying by large pharmaceutical companies and medical organizations, however, helped pass legislation to legalize the Pill in 1999.

[64] See Asia Program Special Report.

[65] Ibid., 5 and 19.

[66] Women tend to want to marry men who are at least as well educated as they are, yet men prefer to marry women who are somewhat less educated than themselves. The result is a constriction of the pool of desirable men, which persuades women to postpone marriage. Ibid., 19.

[67] Ibid., 20.

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between socioeconomic factors and women's status in Japan clear: without legislation geared toward rapid improvements in the conditions under which women can work and be care-providers, the demographic problem will worsen, and the economy will continue in the downward spiral that it has been in for the past thirteen years.

Conclusion

Japan still lags behind most industrialized nations in terms of its empowerment of women.[68] While Vietnam is a socialist state and has a different political system than Japan, in many instances the Southeast Asian state has done a better job of advancing women's rights. The National Plan of Action for the advancement of women, for example, which sets forth concrete goals, has had a profound impact on gender relations in Vietnam. It has resulted not only in more women wielding lawmaking power, but in more women in managerial positions in the workforce as well. Legislation such as the Vietnamese National Plan of Action is imperative at this critical junction in Japanese history. As past legislation regarding the working conditions and overall rights of women in Japan has been implemented for ambiguous reasons and too often poorly followed through on, the changes in the social status for women have been slow and inadequate.

A column that appeared in the Japanese women's magazine *Wife* in 1990 was entitled "From '*Okusan*' to '*Sotosan*,'" meaning "From the woman who 'resides in the inner part [of the house]' to the woman who 'is outside.'"[69] Because "*okusan*" also means "wife," or "housewife," the title suggests that the ideology of housewives of the 1990s had begun to shift,. This sentiment indeed seems to be growing, with feminist groups increasingly drawing attention to the lack of government action to enforce progressive legislation. Despite protests by women's groups, however, the pace of legislative reform remains far too slow to keep up with Japan's demographic decline and economic woes. Women's desire to see change, coupled with the critical need for reform in order to boost the Japanese economy, makes the lack of governmental focus on these issues particularly puzzling.

The power to create change can come from any level of the Japanese political structure, as we have seen that past legislation has been ushered in by individuals ranging from ordinary housewives to the Prime Minister and by international pressure as well. What remains to be determined is whether or not further political reform in Japan will eventually have the capacity to shift the current national consciousness that is unwilling to foster extensive societal changes.

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[68] This year the World Economic Forum ranked Japan 69th out of 75 member nations in empowering its women. See French, "Japan's Neglected Resource: Female Workers."

[69] Tipton, 218.