

# Women's Social Agency and Activism in Japan

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia. In the current edition, we focus on the theme of “Women's Social Agency and Activism in Japan.”

Our authors discuss the possibilities, impacts, and limitations of women's roles and representation in key areas of contemporary Japanese social, political, and cultural life. They specifically focus on female agency and activism in social media (Petrovic), refugee support (Fukuoka and Slater), and political parties and parliament (Levy and Dalton). They demonstrate how the shifting dynamics between the personal and the political, the private and the public,

and the local, national, and global can enhance or restrict the empowerment of women in Japan.

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## Self-Governed Visibility: Japanese Women on TikTok

Sonja Petrovic

The visual language of the Japanese Internet remediates previous practices of photo-taking, selfies, and costume play, while users strive to camouflage certain aspects of their private selves. I suggest the concept of *self-governed visibility* to capture users' practices of navigating between complete visual anonymity and self-promotion, which often includes their effort to consistently post, interact, and garner followers while pivoting and being in disguise. There is no conventional separation of private and public space on TikTok, as users' practices show they can simultaneously conceal and promote or over-share aspects of the self. Thus, they can also create a way for self-exploration beyond the binaries of public and private.

I argue that the shift in visual language on TikTok entails more agency for young users, especially young women, to explore the visual terrain and video formats creatively and autonomously, experimenting with the movable concept of identity. TikTok allows young Japanese women to find new forms of self-expression through anonymity, manipulation, and hyperbolic self-promotion while manoeuvring how their bodies and identities are represented. These self-governing practices present the next step in a well-established Japanese girl culture, as seen in how young women utilise the platform to assert individuality and publicly empower themselves. They do so by crafting their narratives while, at the same time, critiquing and challenging gender stereotypes and norms.



Fig. 1: Japanese young women on the street taking photos. (Photo courtesy of GWMB, 2019, iStockphoto)



Fig. 2: Japanese high school girl on the train. (Photo courtesy of maroke, 2022, iStockphoto)

At the same time, practices aimed at attaining popularity and seeking fame to monetise work require young women to invest time and effort into their online media presence, and to leverage platform features to pick up new viral trends. The labour young women invest in developing their digital DIY careers, which promise creativity, autonomy, and self-expression, is often misrecognised as leisure and exploited by these platforms.<sup>1</sup>

### Self-promotion

The defining feature of TikTok is the algorithmically curated For You page, which shapes how content is discovered based on users' previous engagements and activity on the app. Scholars Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo suggest the term *algorithmised self* to explain how the algorithm presents users with access to content that “reflects their interests, likes, and personality, and which might be seen as a curated collection representing their inner ‘self.’”<sup>2</sup> Through the personalised For You page algorithm, central to their experience of the platform, users engage with versions of their identities, thus presenting a new idea of the self and modes of sociality on the app.

In addition to the individually customised video feed, For You's algorithm impacts how users' videos achieve virality. Users look for various ways to engage with TikTok's algorithms which can support recognition and fame-seeking, thus opening the possibility of becoming “TikTok famous.” The most common user practices to ensure visibility are likes, comments, and shares, as well as specific algorithm-related hashtags such as #fyp, #foryou, and viral trends. In this way, users'

self-fashioning practices are heavily guided by the algorithm and users' desire to be ‘seen’ and validated on the platform.

Young women playfully express themselves with the aim of developing a social media following as an influencer, which entails replicable and normative practices on the platform. One of the most prominent hashtags that reflects users' active role in interacting with the algorithm is #おすすめ. This is a shortened version of おすすめのりたい [“I want to be recommended as featured video”] and is aimed at garnering followers and increasing the content's visibility. In most videos, users showcase skills such as singing and dancing. Often, they also request feedback, indicating users' desire for validation by, and dependence on, other users for affirmation and content visibility. The features of duetting (side-by-side response to existing video), stitching viral videos (clipping and integrating scenes from existing video into one's own), creating memes, or joining trending challenges represent forms of engagement on TikTok that can enhance the visibility of a user's content.

One notable example is a 19-year-old person under the pseudonym Kiyomi who uses TikTok to promote her original songs and covers of popular Japanese songs. Interestingly, this user relies on a plain background and expression, despite the abundant effects and filters that the platform offers. She employs various other tactics to attain visibility. In almost all videos, the user engages in ‘algorithmic practices,’ patterned actions intended to drive up the engagement and help monetise



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her online performance. The most prominent is using the 'please recommend' hashtag or seeking attribution and acknowledgment from other users on the songs she has made (e.g., "please duet this video" or "please use this song"). This visual language that involves users' time and effort to employ different strategies to become noticed and prominent on the platform, including engaging with the algorithm, can be seen as a new form of self-expression in these short-video format platforms – an *algorithmic fame-seeking* self.

### Elevation of the self

An *manga* filter is a micro trend on TikTok that shows users transform into manga characters. Unlike other effects on the app that are applied to users' videos to add flair and customise the individual's face, body, or backdrop, the *AI manga* filter generates a cartoon version of the image. It prompts users to experiment with AI to achieve their desired manga portrait. This entails a challenge for users as they compete to produce the most elevated version of the self. Some observed practices include users who play with AI filters to achieve overly emphasised body attributes, such as young women placing toilet paper rolls or bowls on their chests to get large breasts or men holding an egg carton or bread buns to make AI generate abs and a 'masculine' body.

These are shared as hacks for tricking AI into generating an 'idealised' image and creating content that is intentionally meant to be mimicked and replicated. The trend shows that users strive to fit into prescribed formats of self-presentation to achieve visibility on the platform. However, these playful practices can be read as users' emphasis on the societal bias that the AI filter perpetuates by over-sexualising users' bodies, altering their physical features and appearance, and presenting them as conventionally desirable. Young women intentionally mock big breasts through exaggerated displays to reclaim agency and critique compulsory feminine looks and bodies. Similar instances are found among Japanese young women who used 'eropuri' or erotic photos in *purikura* (photo booths) to

denaturalise sexualised presentation through overtly sexual appearance and manipulation of erotic conventions.<sup>3</sup>

### Self-concealment

Interestingly, the self-fashioning practices originating from *purikura* culture are also used for self-concealment and obscuring one's identity. In some cases, we see how modification and manipulation of facial and bodily features obscure young women's physical characteristics and identity. In this way, enlarged eyes, blurriness, and brightened faces, combined with other visual features and effects, give users control over aspects of personality they want to present to their audience. 'Self as decoration' serves not only to facilitate self-expression through aesthetics, but also to conceal actual identities and make users unknown to the audience. Fabrication and camouflage of one's private or true self can be seen as a way of enabling young women to participate in the culture of public visibility on their terms, especially considering TikTok's emphasis on visibility.

In Japanese virtual space, anonymising and concealing one's appearance is considered an ordinary and culturally situated practice.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in TikTok, young women employ different techniques of concealing certain aspects of their identities, using costumes and masks, incorporating cute visual elements, blurring the face or image, avoiding close-ups through certain compositional arrangements, and obscuring one's voice, supported by the centrality of sound effects and lip-syncing on TikTok. Through different strategies to self-disguise and deliberately camouflage their identity, these young women engage in self-fashioning and create an online persona with agency and reality.<sup>5</sup>

However, girls' anonymity practices are not absolute, and they pick and choose the level of anonymity they want to present as part of *self-governed visibility*. This is contingent on users' choices of how much of their 'actual' self they want to share on the app. Japanese TikTok and its visual language entail young women's desire to be seen and validated on the platform, as seen in their intentional



Fig. 3: Japanese girl taking a selfie. (Photo courtesy of Satoshi-K, 2018, iStockphoto)

self-staging to navigate the platform's algorithmic recommender system and various tactics of boosting visibility. Alongside its potential to support young women's creative self-fashioning practices, TikTok is directing identity practices in ways that are profitable to the platform. Often, these practices are characterised by the quantified, standardised presentation of the self, driven by aspirations for social and economic capital.<sup>6</sup>

Although TikTok allows young women in Japan to be creative and embrace their self-expression, the app prioritises conventional and normative ideas of the self and lures users to rework aspects of identities to fit within the standardised frameworks of social identities. Additionally, given their vulnerable role in the Japanese digital economy, young women have a special position in the shift to immaterial forms of labour.<sup>7</sup> Their work and practices in the online space should not be reduced to frivolous self-promotion; rather, they represent a career and novel form of labour that often has exploitative aspects. My study finds that the visual language of Japanese TikTok entails the duality of discrete self-presenting under the veil of anonymity and users' desire to attract social currency through replicable

and viral trends. All of this is observed as a gendered phenomenon and a continuation of young women's playful use of language via adopting new technology.

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#### Notes

- <https://www.dukeupress.edu/invisibility-by-design>
- <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20563051221086241>
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## Making Refugees Feel at Home in Japan

Christina Fukuoka and David H. Slater

Japan annually allocates large donations to international organisations and Japanese NGOs' overseas activities to support refugees outside its borders, but there are few organisations that focus on supporting refugees already in Japan. As the number of refugee applicants grows – and as the number of those not accepted due to restrictive immigration policies grows as well – the bureaucratic procedures increasingly treat people as 'cases' rather than as people to be granted asylum, or until the decision is made, as people to support.<sup>1</sup> This interim support is one of the fundamental requirements of all signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which Japan signed in 1981.

Much of the care of asylum seekers, until their cases are reviewed, is outsourced to the few refugee support groups. It usually takes almost three years just for their first application to be reviewed, and then approximately only 1.7 percent between 2017 and 2022 were accepted.<sup>2</sup> There are many asylum seekers who cannot go back to their home country, and thus they are caught in limbo. Those who work in these support organisations – knowing the poor chance of getting refugee recognition and understanding the lack of support resources available to refugees – are often quite pessimistic, a feeling that is communicated to asylum seekers.

While refugees do not expect much sympathy or care from the immigration

officers, more perplexing is the coldness that many report feeling from the non-profit and non-governmental supporters in Tokyo. Even when providing aid, a lot of the supporters and volunteers from this civil society sector personally distance themselves from refugees – the very people they are there to support – by not making any attempts to engage directly with them.

### Ibasho: creating a home in the host society

For any refugee fleeing persecution, 'home' is a complex and often contested notion that differs by nationality, age, gender, and personal biography. 'Home' includes material housing but is also related to the immaterial and intangible senses of belonging and identity.<sup>3</sup> It can also encompass 'familiarity,' an in-depth knowledge of the place and people built over time, as well as feelings associated with safety, security, comfort, privacy, and connection.<sup>4</sup> But the characteristics of home are more complicated for those who experience forced migration. What if one

cannot find a sense of 'home' – a feeling of familiarity, safety, and connection – in their host lands?<sup>5</sup>

Home is not something that can be taken for granted or assumed. It is an ongoing process, a set of practices with a goal of finding connectedness, belonging, and safety. But in the most fundamental sense, the very definition of refugee means being away from, and temporarily without, a home, seeking refuge in a place that is not home. Even without material stability and geographical fixity, refugees and other displaced people still seek these affective qualities – in Japan, we might say 'anzen'

*Continued overleaf*

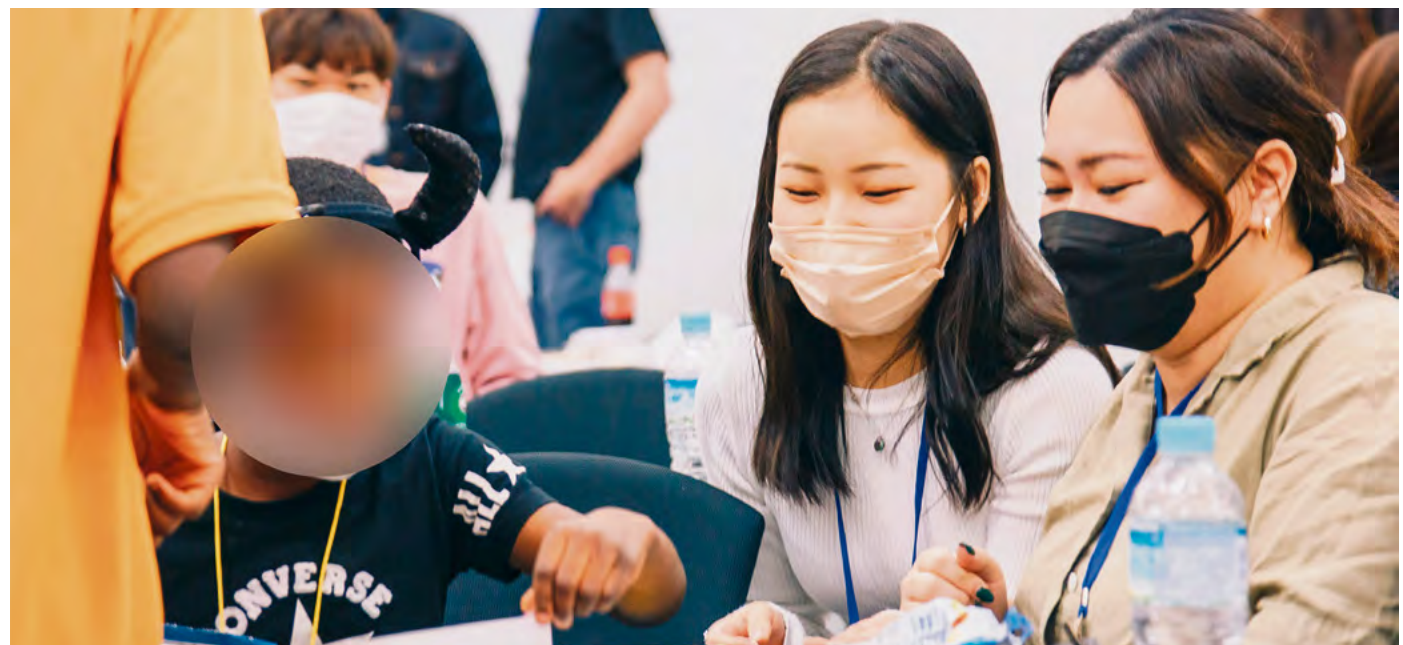


Fig. 1: Playing with children with refugee backgrounds. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2022)



(安全, physical safety) and 'anshin' (安心, emotional security). This is exactly what the word *ibasho* (居場所) points to.

*Ibasho* is a term that became popular through the neoliberal fragmentation of family and work during the 1990s in Japan. It was a way to identify a collection of immaterial and affective needs that were once taken for granted: the personal, social, and economic grounding in a secure (if at times stifling) Japanese post-war society. *Ibasho* is a term that has no exact equivalent in English as it is used colloquially.

Scholars have defined *ibasho* in multiple ways: "a place where one can feel secure and be oneself", "a place or community where one feels at home"<sup>6</sup> or even "any place, space, and community where one feels comfortable, relaxed, calm, and accepted by surrounding people."<sup>7</sup> It is interrelated to one's well-being, identity, and belonging. Some have pointed out that *ibasho* has three elements: it is a physical or virtual place where one feels comfortable, accepted, and secure, where good relationships are found, and marginalised people can envision a future for themselves in the current society.<sup>8</sup> At best, studies have depicted how *ibasho* can lead to empowerment, serving as a refuge through which the excluded and oppressed can change their society.<sup>9</sup>

Now with the rise of foreign residents and transnational marriages in Japan, the idea of *ibasho* has allowed scholars to recognise and reconceptualise the problems that multicultural students and immigrants face, especially linked to their marginalisation from education and housing in Japan. However, studies on *ibasho* for refugees in Japan – those who seek asylum by crossing international borders – remain scarce.

### Sophia Refugee Support Group: a home for female refugees

Refugees are in great need of connection, respect, dignity, and belonging in the unfamiliar and foreign environment of their host country. Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG), a student-run volunteer group based at Sophia University in Tokyo, seeks to provide this. In SRSG, we realised that what is missing



Fig. 2: Bonding at SRSG's Café. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2022)

alongside other direct material support, such as food deliveries and Japanese language classes, is a sense of belonging and place. In short, we seek to provide *ibasho*.

With the goal of creating a more welcoming Japanese society regardless of one's race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender, SRSG has seven main activities to support refugee-migrants in Japan: awareness raising, food deliveries, hygiene deliveries, Japanese language classes, translations for refugee applications, and immigration detention centre visits.<sup>10</sup> To create a sense of *ibasho* where the socially marginalised feel accepted, safe, and connected, SRSG has also been holding informal social gatherings called 'Refugee Cafés' since its establishment in 2017. These informal get-togethers with 40 to

50 refugees and students are held monthly on Sophia University's campus and have a different theme depending on the month. During these Cafés, people are given the opportunity and the safe space to socialize, share, and create new friendships through food and games: a chance to bridge socially and culturally different realities.

Since its establishment, SRSG has supported nearly 300 refugees across Japan. They usually find us by word-of-mouth, through churches and institutional refugee support organisations. Among this number, most of the refugees in Japan, including those who receive SRSG's support, are male. Nevertheless, SRSG strives to create a space for our female refugee friends through these Cafés, which often become the only place in their lives where they can interact with others. The majority of SRSG's student members are female, so we are able to create intimate gendered bonds across otherwise contrasting life experiences. It was our female members who realised the need for personal hygiene care, including sanitary napkins, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, we began the assembly and delivery of hygiene products to those who could not leave their homes, and we continue sending out these packages today.

Cafés are also a place where the women refugees can more easily talk with refugee men. As other places, including the scattered refugee communities, are often dominated by men, Cafés serve as a place where refugees, both women and men, can openly speak about their experiences with compatriots but also with members of the host society, on

an equal footing. Additionally, many student members in SRSG are mixed-race (ハーフ, *hāfu*), have experience crossing borders and returning to Japan (帰国子女, *kikokushijo*), or are exchange students (留学生, *ryūgakusei*). While we are in no way comparing the scope of the challenges of our experiences to that of our refugee friends, the experience of displacement and alienation is not completely unfamiliar to most of us.

During SRSG's Cafés, people are given the time and platform to share and listen to other participants' stories about their homelands—including Japan—and their current situation. An Iranian refugee spoke about the brave young women in her home country who are challenging religious oppression. Another refugee shared updates on the 2021 military coup d'état that continues to affect Myanmar. While to most people in Japan, these are far-away happenings, such events are a reality for our refugee friends and their loved ones. Sharing stories is an opportunity to talk about loved ones and share some of the reasons they have ended up so far away from home.

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Fig. 3 (above): Celebrating a refugee's birthday at SRSG's Café. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2023)

Fig. 4 (right): Female Iranian refugee singing in Persian. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2022)



#### Notes

- [https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/press/07\\_00035.html](https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/press/07_00035.html)
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- <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1324199.pdf>
- <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1324199.pdf>
- <https://sophia-sdgs.jp/efforts/4315/>



## The Political, Social, and Economic Empowerment of Tokyo Women

Hiroko Ide Levy and Emma Dalton

The only prefectural assembly in Japan where women represent more than 30 percent of members is the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly (TMA), which represents the largest metropolis in the world with a population of approximately 14 million. In 2021, the citizens of Tokyo elected 41 female members for the 127-member assembly, making women 32.3 percent of representatives. Tokyo has often outpaced the national government in the pursuit of gender equality. The title of Tokyo's basic ordinance on gender equality uses the term *danjo byōdō sankaku* (equal participation of men and women, 男女平等参画). This contrasts with the term used for the national basic law on gender equality: *danjo kyōdō sankaku* (joint participation of men and women, 男女共同参画), which is suggestive of a half-hearted approach to gender equality at the national level.

Following female assembly members' calls to address deeply entrenched gender norms, Tokyo's revised plan for the promotion of women's advancement (2022) includes a chapter that promotes changing people's mindsets towards gender equality.<sup>1</sup> The Tokyo government also introduced a 40 percent quota for women for its councils, and it achieved that goal in 2022. Other measures for women's advancement include a support centre for women who are considering returning to work, financial incentives for small and medium-sized companies that contribute to women's advancement, and a website through which women can consult with mentors experienced in combining work, raising children, and caring for family members.

Governor Koike Yuriko, the first female governor of Tokyo and founder of the Tokyoites First Party, is a conservative and tends to mention women's advancement in the context of growth and development. Since becoming the governor of Tokyo in August 2016, she has focussed on addressing the problem of childcare shortages and has had some success: the number of children on childcare waiting lists in Tokyo dropped from 8586 in 2017 to 300 in 2022. Still, there are concerns about the quality of childcare, with staff shortages and limited facilities such as playgrounds.<sup>2</sup> Discussions in the TMA also suggest that having a female governor made it easier to raise women's issues such as economically vulnerable women who have difficulty purchasing menstrual products.

### Ongoing gender inequality

We have been investigating issues raised by female members at the TMA to see if female representatives of different political parties pursue different types of women's issues. We analysed statements made at plenary and committee meetings by female politicians from three political parties that had relatively high numbers of women at the TMA between 2017 and 2021. The 2017 TMA election resulted in 36 female members being elected to the assembly (28.3 percent of the total).

Our analysis of the statements found that most were concerned with women's work-related issues such as work hours and carer's leave, but that women from different political parties focussed on issues ranging from pregnancy and health to violence against women. Whereas women of the Tokyoites First Party (*Tomīn Fāsuto no Kai*), who secured 18 TMA seats after the 2017 election, had a tendency to support career-oriented women through their pregnancy and child-rearing, women of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), who gained 13

seats at the 2017 election, tended to support vulnerable women by addressing issues of violence against women. These two different groups of women (career-oriented women and women in vulnerable circumstances) often coincide with higher and lower socio-economic statuses, respectively.

Regardless of political party affiliation, many TMA female assembly members raised gender inequality issues related to work and called for measures to address them. Compared with men, far fewer women are working in managerial positions,<sup>3</sup> and many more women are non-regular workers.<sup>4</sup> Both of these disparities result in lower wages for women overall.<sup>5</sup> In Japan, people are often employed in the managerial career track (*sōgō shoku*, 総合職) or the clerical track (*ippan shoku*, 一般職) and most of those in the clerical track are women.

This two-track system emerged around the time when Japan signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and legislated the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1985.<sup>6</sup> Instead of eliminating discrimination against women, however, a separate career track was created in an attempt to avoid accusations from the international community related to gender discrimination in Japan. What supports this practice is a gender norm that men should work long hours at their paid work while women take care of family at home, unpaid.

A 2019 government survey showed that younger people tend to express their opposition to the idea that "husbands should work outside the home and wives should protect the home," but this deeply entrenched gender norm still negatively affects married women who work outside the home.<sup>7</sup> Married women themselves, as well as people around them, often expect wives to take care of family even when they work full time. In addition to raising children, Japanese women are often expected to take on the work of caring for parents and/or parents-in-law.

At the TMA, it was also pointed out that women who have left work to raise children tend to start considering working outside the home again when the youngest child starts primary school. However, they tend to face a mismatch between their skills and needs on the one hand and available jobs on the other. There are not many jobs where they can utilise their skills and experience (now many women leave work in their 30s) but have working hours that allow them to continue their caring work as well. Assembly members called for measures such as promoting job-sharing and supporting companies that re-hire women who have left work earlier.

Even if not as slow as women's political empowerment, the pace of women's economic empowerment has been far from ideal in Japan. Recent governments have introduced workplace reforms related to reduced work hours and equal pay for equal work. They have also revamped parental leave policy (only 17 percent of men are taking parental leave). While governments

have accelerated efforts towards gender equality after the Council for Gender Equality (*Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shingikai*, 男女共同参画審議会) was established in 1994, these efforts have not always been motivated by genuine concern for women's welfare.

Osawa Mari, who was a member of the Council when it submitted a report called 'A Vision of Gender Equality: Creation of New Values for the Twenty-first Century' to the government in 1996, identified two approaches to gender equality coexisting within the report: (1) gender equality as an objective, and (2) gender equality as a means to an end.<sup>8</sup> The former approach addressed "the deeply ingrained prejudice against women" that had hindered the effect of existing measures such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. This approach is often promoted by feminists and the progressive side of politics. The latter approach regarded women's participation in the labour force as necessary to tackle urgent issues such as an aging population, which resonated with discourse within business and the conservative side of politics.

### Making Tokyo a better place for working women

While recent statements by female TMA members reveal many serious issues for working women in Japan, Tokyo is one of the prefectures that is leading the country in relation to promoting women's advancement. An example of this is that the Tokyo government's executive positions are held by a higher proportion of women compared with other prefectures.

At the same time, an emerging buzzword suggests that women's advancement is creating another type of gap in society: similar to 'power couple' in English, '*pawā kappuru*' (パワーカープル) means a married couple with each earning a high income. In the book that is said to be the origin of the buzzword, economists Tachibanaki Toshiaki and Sakoda Sayaka highlight that the disparity between higher- and lower-income households is growing as women with higher levels of education and high-income husbands are increasingly entering the workforce in Japan.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, many unmarried men over 40 years old say they are not financially stable.<sup>10</sup> While gender equality and women's advancement have a long way to go and surely remain an important political agenda for some time to come, this new development invites us to acknowledge that women's advancement could lead to economic inequalities between high-income couples on the one hand and low-income singles and couples on the other hand.

Furthermore, cross-party alliances between women are not common, and women from different parties do not necessarily have the same policy goals. Koike Yuriko's TFP pursues 'gender equality' of the neoliberal variety, characterised by

the idea that women become economic replicas of men; the Komeito is often more concerned with women's health and maternal policies; and the JCP tends to use a human rights framework to seek better conditions for women.

Work-related issues prevail when women TMA members talk about gender-equality issues, regardless of affiliation. This is likely to do with the fact that Tokyo has a very large population of young professionals, and thus the TMA's gender equality claims converge around the idea of making Tokyo a better place for working women.

With a critical mass of women on the Assembly,<sup>11</sup> a female governor, and a climate where women Assembly members feel comfortable raising women-related policy issues,<sup>12</sup> the TMA has the potential to be a relatively progressive workplace for women, including its elected representatives. Moreover, it has the potential to create women-friendly policies for the citizens of Tokyo. Improvement in working conditions for women in politics and elsewhere nonetheless requires 'critical actors' to make effective changes – numbers alone are not enough.

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#### Notes

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Figure 1: People Crossing the Street in Japan. (Photo courtesy of Tony Wu, 2018)