

The Political, Social, and Economic Empowerment of Tokyo Women

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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.¹ 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.² 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,³ and many more women are non-regular workers.⁴ Both of these disparities result in lower wages for women overall.⁵ 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 1985.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ Meanwhile, many unmarried men over 40 years old say they are not financially stable.¹⁰ 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,¹¹ a female governor, and a climate where women Assembly members feel comfortable raising women-related policy issues,¹² 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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- <https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/192374>
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Figure 1: People Crossing the Street in Japan. (Photo courtesy of Tony Wu, 2018)