

How gender inequality is hindering Japan's economic growth

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Japan's economy is under pressure from rising energy prices and defense costs and the impact of the pandemic. Plummeting birth rates and an aging population further threaten the sustainability of its labor market. A [2023 study](#) by independent thinktank the Recruit Works Institute points to a labor supply shortage of 3.41 million people by 2030, and over 11

million by 2040.

Gender inequality is another significant pressure point. Research [shows](#) that a gender-inclusive society and workforce [leads](#) to innovation and [economic growth](#). However, Japan has one of the lowest levels of gender equality among G7 countries. It has slipped to its [lowest ranking yet](#) in the World Economic Health Forum's latest [Global Gender Report](#), particularly in terms of women in leadership positions.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida recently declared that Japan needs to urgently raise its birth rate. He also [vowed](#) to increase the percentage of women executives in Tokyo stock exchange-listed companies, from 11.4% to 30% or more, by 2030. A [policy draft](#) released in June indicates that this will be achieved through leadership quotas legally imposed on listed companies.

Japan has tried this countless times, however, and largely failed. As my research [shows](#), this is because [gender norms](#) are deeply embedded in Japanese society.

Socialization of gender norms

Gender norms in Japanese society are tightly connected to patriarchal hierarchies that have evolved historically from the influence of [Confucianism](#). The role of a man is linked to being the breadwinner and head of the family. Women, by contrast, are seen as wives and caregivers, ultimately subservient to the head of the family.

Children are taught these norms from an early age. Research [shows](#) that Japanese preschool teachers [position](#) children in various gender roles by encouraging gendered speech and behavioral patterns. Girls speak softly and act in a cute, non-threatening way. Boys, by contrast, use more dominant language and behavior. Children's books and TV programs

often perpetuate these hierarchical linguistic patterns and behavior.

These beliefs and values influence hiring practices and organizational behavior within the Japanese workplace, which is still based on the male-based breadwinner/female-dependent model.

From 1945 to 1991, a period which economists refer to as the [economic miracle years](#), most Japanese women were isolated from the leadership career path. This resulted in low levels of Japanese women in key decision-making positions.

Today, leadership is still seen as a male-dominated environment—even when the topic is about female empowerment. Japan was [the only country](#) to send a male delegate to the recent G7 delegation on gender equality and female empowerment.

Gaining promotions to higher-paid positions relies on long hours and commitment to the company, [regardless of gender](#). Gendered norms therefore result in a significant double burden on Japanese women.

Despite having one of the most generous paternity-leave provisions in the world, only [14% of Japanese men](#) took paternity leave in 2021, compared with Sweden's [90% rate](#) of uptake. Japanese men also spend [the lowest amount](#) of time doing unpaid housework (41 minutes a day) among OECD countries.

Both the highly gendered workplace and unequal division of household labor mean that women are [more likely](#) than men to miss out on promotions, take on lower-paid irregular jobs, and/or only consider having one child.

Work-life expectations are unrealistic. And in the workplace, women face discrimination and harassment, as well as restrictive expectations of

gendered behavior and [appearance](#). Yoshiro Mori stepped down as head of the Tokyo Olympics organizing committee in 2021, after [sexist](#) remarks he had [reportedly](#) made in a Japanese Olympic committee meeting caused an international furore. Mori was quoted as saying women talk too much, and that when "allowed into" high-level meetings, they take up too much time.

Failed solutions

Previous Japanese government initiatives to raise the birth rate and improve gender equality have focused on introducing quotas for female leadership and executive boards, more childcare places, and enhanced parental leave. However, these have either failed to reach their target or have become [tokenistic](#). In fact, recent [initiatives](#) are reported to have exacerbated [gender inequality](#) and driven some women into poverty.

Singapore recently embarked on a similar mission as part of a national gender equality review. Its government has gathered ideas and feedback from women's and youth groups, private organizations, academics, policymakers and the wider public. This has [resulted](#) in a policy wish list and report, the findings of which will be implemented into both policy and education.

My research shows that this approach would work for Japan, too. It could allow people to voice their opinions and wishes in an open debate—which chimes with Japan's [cultural preference](#) for decision-making achieved through consensus—rather than making direct criticisms of the patriarchal order.

Such a review would need to look at all stages of life and aspects of society that are involved in the socialization of gender roles, and the impact these have, from both a human rights and an economic perspective. There is already evidence that gender inequality is leading

to [mental health issues](#) in Japan, especially for divorcees and single mothers.

This review would also offer an opportunity for feedback from the younger generation. Research shows that many younger Japanese are becoming disenchanted with traditional gender roles. They are looking at [new ways of living](#) by choosing careers outside the echelons of power within Japanese society. They are also [rejecting](#) the institution of marriage.

Japan has the opportunity to rewrite its gender equality trajectory. Doing so would hopefully include other representations of [gender](#) and diversity that have so far not been widely accepted within Japanese society, or [protected](#) within the law. Same-sex marriage is [still unconstitutional](#) in some prefectures. Societal change at this level will take a generation. The conversation needs to start now.

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