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# Strategies for Gender Equality in the Japanese Workplace

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## Abstract

This study explored the effects of organizational gender equality activities in Japanese workplaces. The Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka found that setting numerical targets for women managers could be successful in raising company awareness of the abilities of women, which was presently not practically used due to gender-based personnel management. Further, young women were found to be inspired to join companies that support women's empowerment. The results of this study demonstrated that setting numerical targets to increase the number of women managers can be effective in encouraging gender equality in the workplace and can highlight the inherent gender bias in current Japanese personnel management practices.

## Key Words

Gender equality, Numerical targets for women managers,  
Gender-based personnel management, Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka

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## 1. Introduction

This study explored the effects of organizational activities aimed at achieving gender equality in Japanese workplaces. The primary focus was on the establishment of numerical targets to increase the number of women managers and reveal the goal achievement processes of the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka, which is known as the forerunner of promoting active women participation in Japan.

Gender equality in the workplace is an important political issue to ensure equality across all members of the society. For this reason, the governments of many countries now prohibit gender discrimination and support women empowerment in employment. Advocates for women's rights have examined the political practices in many countries and pointed out at insufficiencies that still exist in women's empowerment policies are still insufficient. After the enactment of the Equal Pay Act of 1970 in UK, Crompton and Sanderson (1990) focused on job segregation based on gender to examine why average wages for women were still much lower than those of men. Besides, Under the Law for Equal Employment Opportunity of Men and Women in Japan, there are fewer career opportunities for women, except for those who can work similar to that of men (Takeishi 2006). To gain a clear view of gender equality, it is necessary to analyze policies and strategies from a gender perspective (Bryson 1999).

The Japanese government has stressed that the active participation of women in management is central to economic growth. To this end, the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace was enacted in 2015. To study how this Act is being implemented as well as its effectiveness over time, it is expected that gender equality strategies such as those promoted by the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka will be closely examined around the world.

## 2. Issues Regarding Gender Equality in the Japanese Workplace

Japan was a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1985 and the Japanese government has supported the empowerment of women in employment by enacting relevant domestic laws such as the Law for Equal Employment Opportunity of Men and Women (1986), the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law (1992), and the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society (1999).

Even though large companies, such as banks have attempted at times to “utilize women” in management, many still have gender-based job differentiation and career opportunities. This “utilization of women,” however, has tended to focus on jobs that “suit women;” thus failing to eliminate gender-based job segregation. This is primarily because this “utilization of women” by the banks has been no more than a ruse to overcome occasional management issues and has not been a long-term management strategy (Komagawa 2016). In an attempt to appear to meet the Law for Equal Employment Opportunity of Men and Women, large companies have introduced career tracking systems that tend to reinforce their gender-based personnel management. The career track (*sogoshoku*), which includes job rotation and promotion possibilities, usually require significant investment in human capital. Non-career track (*ippanshoku*), in contrast, is dominated by women, in often less demanding jobs who have little chance of promotion and have low human capital investment (Komagawa 2007).

Table 1 highlights the differences between male and female employees. As can be seen, women occupy only 8.7 percent of managerial positions and as Table 2 shows, Japan’s Global Gender Gap ranking is 101, indicating that Japanese female employees are insufficiently empowered.

**Table 1 Figures of men and women employees**

|  | Men          | Women        |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| average of age                         | 42.3 yrs old | 39.7 yrs old |
| average of length service              | 14.0 years   | 10.2 years   |
| average of cash wages/month            | ¥ 384,900    | ¥ 278,400    |
| ratio of managers (section manager up) | 91.3%        | 8.7%         |

*Source:* Labour Force Survey (2015).

**Table 2 Global Gender Gap Ranking (145 countries)**

|             | Overall | Economic Participation and Opportunity | Education Attainment | Health and Survival | Political Empowerment |
|-------------|---------|--|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Iceland     | 1       | 5                                      | 1                    | 105                 | 1                     |
| Rwanda      | 6       | 14                                     | 112                  | 91                  | 7                     |
| Philippines | 7       | 16                                     | 34                   | 1                   | 17                    |
| U.S.A.      | 28      | 6                                      | 40                   | 64                  | 72                    |
| Japan       | 101     | 106                                    | 84                   | 42                  | 104                   |

*Source:* The Global Gender Gap Report (2015).

### 3. Factors Needed to Ensure Gender Equality in Japanese Workplace

Two factors are needed to ensure gender equality in Japanese Workplaces: gender equality policies and economic environment.

International organizations have stressed to the Japanese government the importance of supporting working women. For example, The International Monetary Fund (IMF) found that Japan should (1) increase the number of female career track employees, and (2) provide support for working mothers (IMF 2012).

To promote the active participation of women in the workplace, the Japanese government under Shinzo Abe sought to make companies aware that their gender-based personnel management was irrational. In 2013, they announced that it was essential for the “power of women” to be fully utilized to stimulate economic growth (The Japanese Government 2013), followed by the 2015 enactment of the Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace.

This Act required all government agencies, local governments and companies with more than 300 employees to implement action plans for the promotion of women’s participation and advancement. To do this, these government organizations and private companies were required to do the following things: 1. Collect and analyze data on gender and employment issues such as the number of female managers and newly hired female employees and the gender gap in years of continuous employment and in working hours; 2. Devise and disclose action plans to improve gender equality with concrete objectives and measures based on these analyses; 3. Publicly disseminate data on women’s participation and advancement. The most important issue in the action plan was the setting of numerical targets for women’s participation and advancement, with one of the more important issues being how organizations and companies planned to increase the number of women managers.

There are two economic environment factors that have pressured companies to change their gender-based personnel management practices to approaches that favor the promotion and utilization of the abilities of women.

Komagawa found that these factors were related to “efficient management” and “the instability of the male workforce” (Komagawa 2015). “Efficient management” implies that a company should update its management practices to encompass present day needs, such as those required for the global economy. Megabanks, for example, promoted diversity management because of mid-2000s changes in the globalization of business and the increasing sophistication of the investment market.

Second, the term “the instability of the male workforce” refers to the need for a company facing a lack of stability in such predominantly male workforce to expand its pool of potential employees. Many Japanese companies introduce a system of simultaneously recruiting new graduates and assuming longtime employment exclusively for men. Because of the declining birthrate, however, it is becoming difficult to secure sufficient numbers of male employees, especially in the small-and medium-sized enterprises in local society.

Therefore, Japanese companies have been forced to adapt their gender-based systems of personnel management to ones that are gender equal.

#### 4. Hypotheses and Methods

This study examined two hypotheses. The first was that setting numerical targets for women managers was effective in increasing the number of women managers (H1) and the second was that the establishment of numerical targets for women managers exposed the inherent gender bias in workplace practices (H2). For H2, it was recognized that three areas could have inherent gender bias: “personnel management systems,” “job assignments,” and “personnel assessments.” With regard to the first element, if there is gender inequality in the personnel management system, there is sexual discrimination in the workplace. In terms of the second element, if assignments segregate jobs by sex, career opportunities are also often segregated. In terms of the third element, if managers have evaluation standards based on sex, this compounds the sexual discrimination and results in unfair personnel assessments.

This study was conducted using two surveys. The first targeted the purposes and strategies of the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka, which encourages companies to hire and promote women to managerial positions by setting numerical targets for women managers. As of June 2016, there were 212 companies within the Fukuoka regional business community that had approved these strategies and had committed to specific numerical targets to advance women managers within a certain period of time; in addition, these companies have made their goals public on the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka website.

The second survey was conducted at a credit union, the Fukuoka Shinkin Bank which is involved in activities to examine how human resources are selected and how

women employees are prepared for higher positions. Fukuoka Shinkin Bank is a well-known financial institution in the regional economy. However, in the past, it has had few women managers and has seen many women taking early retirement due to the rigid gender-based job segregation under which women have only been eligible for lower paid positions with fewer responsibilities.

Interview-based surveys were conducted at both organizations and key personnel in the following organizations: Kyushu Economic Federation, Kyushu Bureau of Economy, Trade and Industry, Fukuoka Prefecture, The National Association of Shinkin Banks, The North Kyushu Association of Shinkin Banks, Fukuoka Shinkin Bank, Mr. Wataru Asou (the last Fukuoka Prefectural Governor and advisor to the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka), Ms. Yuriko Hisadome (joint representative of the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka), Ms. Miyuki Matsuda (director of the Fukuoka Gender Equality Center), and Ms. Yukari Murayama (the last director of the Fukuoka Gender Equality Center). Data were collected from July to October 2015.

## **5. Gender Equality Strategies in the Workplace**

### **5.1 Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka**

The Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka started in May 2013, before the 2015 promulgation of the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace. Further, economic organizations and companies in the regional business community had started gender-equal activities because of the predicted future labor shortages resulting from the declining birthrate.

Fukuoka's Gross Prefectural Product is ranked 9<sup>th</sup> out of the 47 prefectures in Japan. Because Fukuoka is home to manufactures, such as the Toyota Motor Corporation, the economy is reasonably strong. Nonetheless, enterprises in Fukuoka realize they need to support the empowerment of women to hedge against future labor shortages.

The most important activity of the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka is to encourage companies to increase the number of women managers by setting numerical targets. These numerical targets vary depending on the industry, company size, and the current employment status of women in the company. For example, in a company with no women manager, the goal could be "We shall promote at least one women manager with the next 5 years." For other companies the goal could be

“Women managers will comprise 20 percent of all managers by 2020,” or “One new woman manager will be promoted every year.”

H1 stated that setting numerical targets for women managers is effective in increasing the number of women managers. However, as these activities are currently ongoing, it is not yet possible to determine whether or not this is true. Key people involved in these activities, however, have stated that some companies have already achieved their targets and have developed new goals. In addition, many companies have started to hire more women to train and eventually promote to management positions. In this sense, it is expected that H1 will be proven over the coming years.

## 5.2 Fukuoka Shinkin Bank

Fukuoka Shinkin Bank is a regional credit union operating within a limited geographical area. It was established in 1925 and was founded with the mission to “Serve the local society and contribute to its prosperity.” Fukuoka Shinkin Bank has a network of 14 branches and one shop and has 161 employees (men: 60 percent, women: 40 percent). In July 2015, 18.4 percent (from proxy up) of managers were women.

Fukuoka Shinkin Bank has no career tracking system. It has introduced an ability-based grading system consisting of grades 1 to 4 for clerical-level staff and the proxy positions, deputy manager, branch or section manager, and department manager level (Table 3). Promotions are determined by a combination of bank clerk certifications and personnel assessments, so there are no differences between promotion opportunities for men and women.

**Table 3 Ability-Based Grade System in Fukuoka Shinkin Bank**

|         | Position                          | Grade | Grade requirements                              |
|---------|-----------------------------------|-------|---|
| Manager | Department manager                | 8     | Personnel assessment (whole)                    |
|         | Branch manager<br>Section manager | 7     | Personnel assessment (as manager)               |
|         | Deputy manager                    | 6     | Personnel assessment (as deputy manager)        |
|         | Proxy                             | 5     | Certification (senior) and Personnel assessment |
| Other   | Chief                             | 4     | Certification (basic) and Personnel assessment  |
|         | Ordinary employee                 | 3     | Personnel assessment                            |
|         |                                   | 2     | Personnel assessment                            |
|         |                                   | 1     |   |

*Source:* Compiled from Fukuoka Shinkin Bank materials.

Fukuoka Shinkin Bank approved of the activities of the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka and consequently established a numerical target to advance women managers: “Women managers shall comprise 25 percent or more of all managers (proxy up) by 2019.” To achieve this goal, the bank has implemented two main practices. In 2015, it started training all female employees and also supported the training of female employees by the North Kyushu Association of Shinkin Banks. The bank also collects and analyzes data on female employee positions and grades. This has allowed the bank to “discover” women who meet the requirements for promotion, with the first woman being promoted to section manager in 2014. Further, young women are inspired to join a company that supports women’s empowerment and also feel encouraged to seek certification to become future managers.

H2 stated that having numerical targets for female managers would reveal the gender bias practices in the workplace. In line with this hypothesis, it was assumed that the three elements required to promote women to managerial positions - “personnel management system,” “job assignments,” and “personnel assessments” - would have inherent gender bias. These elements were examined at the Fukuoka Shinkin Bank.

The first element, “personnel management system,” was found to be unrelated to gender. Table 3 shows that the grade requirements at the bank are gender-neutral and can be applied to both men and women, as the focus is on the abilities necessary to become a bank clerk or a manager.

When investigating “job assignments,” the findings from Fukuoka Shinkin Bank were possibly the same as in other credit unions. For example, the “deposit clerk,” and “teller” positions were filled mainly by women, whereas “marketing staff for sales and financing” positions were filled predominantly by men. Therefore, there appeared to be rigid job segregation by sex because typical gender roles were embedded within the actual job assignments. “Deposit clerk,” for instance, was seen as being “suited to women,” because “women are attentive to detail” and “women are courteous in their dealings.” This is evidence of how career opportunities have been developed on the basis of gender stereotypes.

The third element of gender bias was also found in “personnel assessments” at Fukuoka Shinkin Bank. Managers use gender-biased evaluation standards when assessing staff. For example, a female employee who met the requirements for promotion was given a low assessment and not recommended for promotion by her immediate superior. When the personnel department asked him the reason why, he

said that she was bossy and was alienated from her colleagues. If she were a man, she would have been called a hard worker and a leader. This manager judged this female employee using stereotypical gender evaluation standards that were unrelated to the skills needed for bank clerks and managers.

In this way, H2 was supported by job assignment and personnel assessment processes.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the effects of organizational activities that sought to achieve gender equality in Japanese workplaces. The focus was on the implementation of numerical targets to increase the number of women in managerial positions and the study examined the goal achievement processes of the Coalition for Advancing Women in Fukuoka.

Accordingly, this study was built on two hypotheses. H1 stated that setting numerical targets for female managers would be effective in increasing the number of women in managerial positions and H2 stated that establishment of these numerical targets exposed the inherent sexual discrimination practices operational in the workplace. H1 could be neither confirmed nor denied as there has not yet been enough time to judge the success. However, it is expected that with the introduction of targets, in a few years, there will be a higher percentage of women managers. For H2, inherent gender-biased practices were found in two elements: “job assignments” and “personnel assessments.”

It was found that stereotypical gender beliefs were embedded within job assignments and personnel assessments in Japanese workplaces, exacerbating sexual discrimination and unfair personnel management practices. This study demonstrated that setting numerical targets to increase the number of women managers could be effective in encouraging gender equality in the workplace as such practices could reveal the inherent gender discrimination in personnel management.

The findings of this study contribute to the establishment of gender equal policies. These strategies being developed in Japanese workplaces could assist in highlighting gender equality issues in countries that have rigid gender biased job differentiation and career opportunities.

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# 日本の職場におけるジェンダー平等に向けた取り組み

駒川 智子\*\*

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