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# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLICY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN JAPAN

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## INTRODUCTION

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During the past three decades women have made great strides in Japan, pushed mainly by UN initiatives, as in many countries. In 1980, especially, Japan amended several domestic laws in advance in order to clear away all probable barriers to signing the UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Because of these amendments, restrictions on employing women at the port and shipping yard and other jobs which had been traditionally considered as only for men, were all removed. Night jobs, which used to be prohibited to women under the protection code, were now made available to them. Curricula at schools were made available to both girls and boys without any distinction. Thanks to these amendments, Japan could ratify the Convention without making any reservation. In 1985, an Equal Employment Opportunities Law was passed, which highlighted all these efforts. In 2005, 10 years later, regulations forbidding women to work in the mines (at the pit) were removed, and that was the last case of removing regulations restricting women's labour under the protection code.

Nevertheless, we are still unable to say that Japanese women now fully enjoy a sense of gender equality. One fact that symbolizes the general problem is that women are drastically lacking in numbers in the process of policy decision-making.

In 1996, following the year of the fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing, the Japanese government mandated the Office for Gender Equality to formulate and promote the Basic Plan for Gender Equality. To boost representation of women in the policy decision-making process, the Office set a goal of a 20% participation rate by the end of FY2000 and a 30% participation rate by the end of FY2005, and that was achieved in the nominated years. In 1999, the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society was enacted, and in 2000, the Office for Gender Equality was promoted to the Department of Gender Equality, so that the equal participation by both women and men in decision-making posts was supposed to be further accelerated

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## STUDY BY THE FIGURES

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However, the question now to be asked is this: Has the situation been improved in response to these government actions? Let us examine the figures to see how the rate has curved upwards in recent years. The figures are related first to posts in national bureaus

[Fig. 1], then in local government offices [Fig. 2 (a) (b) (c)], in advisory councils [Fig. 3], the National Diet [Fig. 4], and private industries [Fig. 5:(a) (b) (c)].

## 1) CIVIL SERVANTS IN NATIONAL BUREAUS:

FIG.1 FEMALE NATIONAL CIVIL SERVANTS IN SPECIFIED ADMINISTRATIVE POSTS  
(BY THE RANK OF GRADE 9 AND ABOVE)

FY	Total	Women	Percentage
1975	6,938	20	0.3%
1980	8,018	42	0.5
1985	8,118	40	0.5
1990	8,789	67	0.8
1995	9,352	90	1.0
2000	9,739	122	1.3
2001	9,806	136	1.4
2002	9,867	130	1.3
2003	9,805	145	1.5
2004	8,456	142	1.7

SOURCE: NATIONAL PERSONNEL AUTHORITY, "WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLICY-MAKING,"  
SURVEY ON GENERAL CIVIL SERVICE APPOINTMENTS, JANUARY 2006

The above figures show that, within 30 years between FY 1975 and 2004, the number of women in administrative posts (at the rank of Grade 9 and above) in the national civil services is steadily increasing. However, they also show that women are amazingly few as a percentage of the total number of those engaged in these posts.

## 2) CIVIL SERVANTS IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

FIG.2 (A) WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS IN PREFECTURE GOVERNMENTS

Total		Total		Women		Ratio	
		2004	2006	2004	2006	2004	2006
Prefectures	Governors	47	47	4	5	8.5%	10.6%
	Vice Chancellors	65	73	5	5	7.7%	6.8%
Cities	Mayors	700	768	7	9	1.0%	1.2%
Towns	Town Head	2,494	1,568	6	7	0.2%	0.4%

SOURCE: SURVEY BY THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, 2007

What can be read from the above chart is that while women governors, vice-chancellors as well as mayors and town heads remain almost the same in numbers in the years 2004 and 2006, the more the total numbers for mayors and town heads grow, the lower the percentage of women elected. Thus, basically, it is obvious that heads of the office in local governments are outstandingly men, and the positions are not equally allocated to women.

Now, let us examine how numbers are growing for women office-holders in local governments. First, we will study the total number of women who are engaged in administrative posts. Then, in the next chart, we will see the numbers according to ranks.

FIG.2 (B) WOMEN IN ADMINISTRATIVE POSTS IN PREFECTURE GOVERNMENTS

	Total	Women	Percentage
Governors' Offices (1994)	11,347	251	2.2
Governors' Offices (2004)	18,135	553	3.0
Governors' Offices (2006)	19,188	659	3.4

SOURCE: SURVEY BY THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, 2007

FIG.2 (C) WOMEN BY POSITIONS IN ADMINISTRATION IN PREFECTURE GOVERNMENTS

	Total Women in Adminstr.Posts			Directors			Deputies			Section Chief		
	1994	2004	2006	'94	'04	'06	'94	'04	'06	'94	'04	'06
Gov'nors' Offices	251	553	659	13	36	42	28	46	54	210	471	563
Percent/ %	100.0	100.0	100.0	5.2	6.5	6.37	11.2	7.2	8.19	83.7	74.8	85.4

SOURCE: SURVEY BY THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, 2007

As observed from the figures above, women office-holders are steadily increasing yearly, even though their numbers would not be remarkable enough. However, an interesting fact to be noted is that while the numbers of women office-holders are larger in the lower positions of administration, the higher the ranks go up, the fewer the women engaged.

### 3) ADVISORY COUNCILS ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

There are number of Advisory Councils at both national and local levels, and each of them belongs separately to the ministries and bureaus of the government by serving in an advisory function. In earlier years, some advisory councils were totally closed to women on the ground that women, mainly through lack of specific experiences, would not adequately manage the jobs. At present, in principle, all councils are open to both women and men and in 2006, there is only one council that does not include a woman member. The members of the councils are selected by appointment by ministries or bureaus, as recommended on the basis of expertise and experiences. Let us examine the case of advisory councils on the national level.

FIG. 3. FEMALE MEMBERS OF ADVISORY COUNCILS

FY	ACs/ Total	Nr ACs/ w/women	Ratio (%)	Members/ total	Women	Ratio (%)
1975	237	73	30.8	5,436	133	2.4
1980	199	92	46.2	4,504	186	4.1
1985	206	114	55.3	4,664	255	5.5
1990	204	141	69.1	4,559	359	7.9
1995	203	174	85.7	4,496	589	13.1
2000	199	188	94.5	4,201	857	20.4
2001	98	94	95.9	1,717	424	24.7
2002	100	97	97.0	1,715	429	25.0
2003	102	100	98.0	1,734	465	26.8
2004	103	102	99.0	1,767	499	28.2
2005	104	103	99.0	1,792	554	30.9
2006	106	105	99.1	1,804	565	31.3

SOURCE: PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, 2007

Within 30 years since 1975, a remarkable growth in women's participation was achieved in this field. Although the advisory councils, due to the systematic change made for political reasons, were reduced in total numbers in 2001, the ratio of women members to men members has been steadily advanced. The system of appointment by setting a certain target to be achieved within the limited time has certainly demonstrated success. Local government has followed the same pattern and has achieved a similar result. The question remains, however, whether, because of a lack of human resources among women, the same woman could be doubly assigned to different posts, thereby giving a false picture of the total number of women involved..

#### 4) NATIONAL DIET

FIG.4. NUMBER OF FEMALE DIET MEMBERS

FY/Mon	Diet			Lower House			Upper House		
	Total	Women	Ratio	Total	Women	Ratio	Total	Women	Ratio
50/11	699	24	3.4%	449	12	2.7%	250	12	4.8%
89/02	752	29	3.9	500	7	1.4	252	22	8.7
89/07	749	40	5.3	497	7	1.4	252	33	13.1
90/02	763	45	5.9	512	12	2.3	251	33	13.1
92/03	751	46	6.1	502	12	2.4	252	34	13.7
92/07	752	49	6.5	500	12	2.4	252	37	14.7
93/03	749	49	6.5	497	12	2.4	252	37	14.7
94/03	761	52	6.8	509	14	2.8	252	38	15.1
95/03	753	51	6.8	503	13	2.6	250	38	15.2
00/09	732	79	10.8	480	36	7.5	252	43	17.1
03/01	727	67	9.3	480	34	7.1	242	33	13.6
05/10	722	78	10.7	480	44	9.2	242	34	14.0
06/11	720	79	11.0	480	45	9.4	240	34	14.2

SOURCE: LOWER AND UPPER HOUSE SECRETARIES, 2007.

As compared to Advisory Councils, an entirely different aspect is observed in the area of the National Diet. In fact, in 2006, a world survey of the number of women members of Parliament, made by UNDP as part of Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM), ranks Japan as the 44<sup>th</sup> of 75 countries for the Upper House and 126<sup>th</sup> of 189

Countries for the Lower House. The survey would unfortunately be confirmed by the data shown above. Moreover, since a new electoral system was introduced in 2003, women without a strong political background find it more difficult to win election.

## 5) PRIVATE INDUSTRIES

Now, as the final data case-study, let us examine how the allocation of women to administrative posts would be in private industries. First, we will look at the figures to see how many industries have appointed women to decision-making posts [Fig. 5 (a)], and what the difference would be if only major industries employing more than 500 are exclusively surveyed [Fig. 5 (b)]. Finally, we will study the ratio of women to all the administrative posts in private industries.[Fig. 5 (c)].1

FIG. 5. (A) INDUSTRIES APPOINTING WOMEN TO POLICY DECISION-MAKING POSTS

	Directors	Chief	Section Chief
1995	14.3%	30.6%	72.1%
1998	5.8	17.1	32.2
2000	7.4	19.0	31.2
2003	6.7	20.2	32.0

FIG.5.(B) MAJOR INDUSTRIES APPOINTING WOMEN TO POLICY DECISION-MAKING POSTS (IN INDUSTRIES WITH MORE THAN 500 EMPLOYEES)

	Directors	Chief	Section Chief
1995	21.4%	72.2%	96.7%
1998	19.0	65.8	74.3
2000	23.8	75.8	74.4
2003	37.0	74.1	71.9

FIG.5. (C) RATIO OF WOMEN TO ALL POLICY DECISION-MAKING POSTS IN PRIVATE INDUSTRIES

	Directors	Chief	Section Chief
1995	1.5%	2.0%	7.3%
1998	1.2	2.4	7.8
2000	1.6	2.6	7.7
2003	1.8	3.0	8.2

SOURCE: SURVEY BY THE MINISTRY OF LABOR, 2004

## 6) ANALYSIS OF THE CASE STUDY

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Summarizing these statistics, we can read first that a steady yearly increase, though slow, has been recorded in every set. The second indication would be that, although the increase has been made, the higher the ranks, the fewer the women who have been appointed. Thirdly, the increase is very remarkable for women members of advisory councils, who are appointed, while extremely slow in the increase for female Diet members, who are elected. Finally, in private industries, we see the same result, that while the increase is smaller in higher positions, it is larger in lower positions. However, interestingly enough, in the large-scaled industries, appointment of women to decision-making posts is relatively flexible and fairer than in smaller scaled industries. As a whole, however, the increase of ratio of women to men in decision-making posts in industries is disappointingly slow

## SOURCES OF BARRIERS

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Why have the situations not been improved for so long? One of the barriers against women is a conventional concept and practice, sometimes submerged in consciousness, against women. Are there not ideas still dominant in society, in workplaces, in communities, that place women as subordinated to men? Are there not ideas still that consider that women should remain in the house to be responsible for housekeeping, while men are considered bread-earners for the family? There is apparently a gap between laws and facts.

Another factor that might have caused a delay in promoting women is a lack of available women to be appointed. Most of the experienced women office-holders at present were born and raised in the period when not many women were engaged in jobs outside, or at least not too many remained permanently in the office after they got married or had children. This makes a big difference between their generation and the younger one. We are, therefore, in the transition period for women taking responsible positions. The problem is not caused by lack of quality in women but by the lack of career experiences. For this, education and training are the key factors to improve the situation.

## SOLUTION TO THE SITUATION

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Under the Constitution, educational barriers against women no longer exist in Japan in terms of opportunities. High percentages for college/university attendees shows no difference between women and men. A tendency once dominant, that only a small number of women students would major in natural science, technology, medicine, politics and economy is gradually changing. At schools and universities, various curricula have now been prepared for students to study about gender equality and empowering women. These topics are not confined to gender studies alone, but often scattered among many other majoring subjects connected to building the career of students in later years. However, such an effort should be further expanded in order to penetrate the minds of students at universities as well as girls and boys at schools. .

Specified programs and skill training should be also provided. The National Womens Educational Center (NWECC), for example, serves this purpose. The Center, a research center as well as an information disseminator on gender studies, provides annual programs suitable for training women leaders. Another training course, centered on ICT, is offered to foreign career women who had established in respective governments. In Japan, there are some 361 local women's centers, and they program somehow close to what the NWECC is running.

On the other hand, industries themselves, pushed mainly by ideas of the times as well as by their own needs, are now expanding innovative projects to assist women to be engaged in decision-making. According to research done in 2007, Toyota and Nissan Automobile Companies, Matsushita Electronic Industry, Japan IBM, All Nippon Airways, Tokyo Electric Company, SOMPO Japan Insurance Company, and Shiseido Cosmetic Corporation have launched specific projects to get women involved in a diversity of career development through educational training, assistance programmes, systematic reviews for staff management. Some industries have already set a numerical target to increase women senior staff. However, at present, among big industries listing their stocks in the market, the figure for the company to have women in the post of decision-making is only 1.2%.

Another element that might contribute to building up women's career is a networked activity by NGOs. JAUW, in line with the action programme launched by IFUW, carries biannual nationwide seminars. Because of the expertise of members and the international network developed by IFUW, JAUW members are showing role models for career women, and their voices, through statements, appeals and research programmes, are affecting society and the nation. In collaboration with other women groups, they also launch useful seminars and appeals to society. An official cultural exchange programme between Japan and the Middle East which runs twice in every year is one of the examples where 10 internationally organized women groups in Japan, including JAUW, collaborate to carry out a government project for advancing the status of women in Japan, Jordan, Egypt and Palestine.

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## CONCLUSION

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Now, coming back again to the figures showing women's participation in policy decision-making processes, many might feel helpless and pessimistic because of the slow movement. However, I am in the position to take it not too pessimistically. Though slow the movement, it is steadily growing in numbers and its curve is moving upward by the year. Though not adequately reflected in the figures of GEM, the growth of career women is remarkable in the area of legal practice and technical specialisation. The growth is also stable in farming and fisheries. If further political initiative were taken, the pace of change would be accelerated. If a role model were established for a career woman by the accumulation of experiences and achievements, a conventional view toward women workers would be changed. School education, systematic training by professional institutes and universities and NGO networking can all serve to provide women as appropriate resources eligible for responsible positions. I am therefore more or less optimistic for the future perspective.

What depresses me more seriously at present, however, is that while the percentage of women engaged in decision-making grows slowly, the numbers of women victims of domestic violence, sexual crimes and trafficking of women are steadily increasing. While we have to battle against these crimes against women, the issue of empowering women will be overshadowed. It is tragically recorded that those men who have experiences of acting violently against women at home have stronger tendencies to stick to conventional concepts that women should be subordinated to men, and should stay at home instead of looking for a career. Respect for women and men equally as human being is the fundamental question of human rights. By ignoring this simple factor, we will not be able to achieve a real gender equal society.

When we discuss placing women in policy decision-making processes, the question is not simply a matter of numbers, of how many women should be in responsible positions. The question is whether women can be truly eminent in influential positions when we have to decide something important that can affect our life, our society, our national policy and our value for human



beings. Through participation, women would be a voice against what has been dully accepted as a fixed and conventional rule which has long deprived them of human rights. Equal participation by women in policy decision-making processes, therefore, is a fundamental key issue in realizing gender equality in society.