

# Gender balance and soft power: the case of Japan

## Interview with Renge Jibu



Renge Jibu holds a B.A. in Law and an MBA from the Hitotsubashi University. Prior to her current position, she worked as a business journalist for Nikkei Business Publications and as a freelance journalist. Renge Jibu was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the University of Michigan. Her field of work is gender analysis of corporate governance, policymaking and media. She also lectures, writes articles, and consults with corporations and government organizations.

**Question 1: Japan's gender balance ranking is rather low, what are the main factors behind this situation?**

There are many interrelated factors. One of the main factors is the imbalance in the distribution of unpaid care work.

If you look at the proportion of women in the Japanese labor force, it is over 40 %. In European countries, the ratio is almost the same. But as for managerial positions, the ratio of women is about 15 %, which is lower than in other developed countries such as

France (35 %).

In this situation, the gender gap at work is related to the gender gap at home. Regarding the statistics on time spent on childcare and housework by mothers and fathers whose children are under 6 years old, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Sweden and Norway are almost the same. In all countries, mothers spend more time on housework and childcare than fathers. The gender gap at home is a universal issue. In Japan, however, the gap is much wider than in other countries.

In general, in developed countries, mothers with young children do almost twice as much unpaid care work as fathers. In Japan, mothers do almost six times as much unpaid care work as fathers.

Since all human beings have only 24 hours a day, women who spend a lot of time at home cannot spend much time at work. It is very simple arithmetic. So, in order to encourage more women at work, we need to encourage more men at home. The key is how we change our gender norms and culture.

According to a UNICEF study published in 2019, the Japanese government offers the most generous childcare support policies for new fathers compared to OECD and EU member countries.<sup>1</sup> But in reality, the rate at which Japanese fathers take parental leave is not high. This is not because of a lack of public policy, but because of the workplace culture. There are many Japanese men who would like to take a parental leave but are reluctant to exercise their rights for fear of breaking gender norms. All in all, changing gender norms and having more fathers at home allows mothers to take on responsibilities at work, which in turn would offer them more opportunities for advancement.

Last but not least, I would like to emphasize the importance of the participation of political leaders in care work as an example.

Iceland, for example, is the most gender equal country. According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, Iceland has been ranked No. 1 for the past thirteen years. The president of Iceland has taken a parental leave five times. 40 % of the cabinet members in Iceland are women.

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<sup>1</sup> Ekaterina Chzhen, Anna Gromada, Gwyther Rees, [Are the world's richest countries family friendly?, Policy in the OECD and EU](#), June 2019.

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**Question 2: What were the positive elements and limitations of former Prime Minister Abe’s “Women who Shine” policy?**

The late Prime Minister Abe’s “Women Who Shine” policy was a strategy launched in 2013 to revitalize the Japanese economy. Therefore, Prime Minister Abe gave a speech on this topic in London, at the City, and in New York, at the Stock exchange. It was a means of communicating with international investors.

This was necessary and sensible because foreign investors were concerned about Japan’s declining population and labor force. It was important to reassure them that Japan would have more women in the workforce.

As a result of Prime Minister Abe’s policies, the number of women in business leadership positions increased. For example, in the 10-year period from 2012 to 2022, the number of female board members increased 5.8 times. However, the proportion of women in leadership positions in Japanese business is still lower than in other countries.

Because the “Women who Shine” policy focused on economic issues, human rights and gender issues sometimes tended to be left behind. To achieve true gender equality, the government should focus on women’s empowerment, including combating gender-based violence and supporting vulnerable women.

**Question 3: How can Japan improve the situation in order to consolidate the effectiveness of its soft power as leader of the G7 this year?**

To be frank, like with other issues, filling the gender gap cannot be done overnight. I do not expect that the Japanese government will be able to change the current situation in one year.

However, there are several important policy changes that we can observe. At the end of February 2023, the Ministry of Justice published a proposal to change the criminal law related with gender-based violence. The details and conclusion are yet to be determined, but the trend is positive from the perspective of civil society which has been advocating victim’s rights.

For women’s advocacy to G7, an official engagement group called W7 (Women 7) was established in 2018. It has a consulting role involving civil societies and including the younger generations. Leaders of the W7 come from international NGOs with knowledge and experience supporting women globally. I hope that such kind of discussion and policy change will increase during this important year.

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