Womenomics vs. Women: Neoliberal Cooptation of Feminism in Japan

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Abstract

The recent gestures toward "womenomics" under Prime Minister Abe's leadership in Japan offers another location from which to examine the relationship between the prioritizing of market demands and what has been dubbed the "trickle-down feminism" of liberal feminist demands. This article addresses the blind spots of economic policies that focus on increasing work opportunities for an elite segment of women. While recognizing that the promise of promoting more women to higher-level positions does address long-standing frustrations about the institutionalized sexism of political and corporate culture in Japan, this paper seeks to reposition the rhetoric of "womenomics" alongside the reality of the feminization of poverty in Japan.

Keywords: *womenomics, neoliberalism, feminism, poverty*

Introduction

"Women are Japan's most underutilized resource."

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

Prime Minister Abe Shinzô advertises "womenomics"—a policy of opening top political and business positions to women—as a thematic centerpiece of his various proposed reforms to the structure of labor in contemporary Japan. As part of a package of structural innovations designed to bolster the lagging Japanese economy, encouraging more women to advance in the workforce is part of a strategy that, following the neoliberal model, seeks a more general deregulation of labor to make labor markets more flexible.[1] In Japan now, women's labor is becoming idealized as a new motor for economic change and the focus of discussions about neoliberal labor deregulation, in particular in a political climate where discussions about immigration are practically taboo. Abe seeks to tap into the economic potential of Japan's highly educated women to boost the economy, which he refers to as a "living thing."[2] Nurturing the economy at the top, however, shifts the conversation away from the hardship increasingly endured

[1] The "three arrows" of Abenomics are fiscal stimulus, monetary easing, and structural reform

[2] For example, in his November 18, 2014 press conference.

by those—both male and female—no longer able to secure a living. As David Harvey has pointed out in his studies of neoliberalism as it has developed globally since the 1970s, the ideal of market deregulation generally favors the needs of a "good business climate" over the needs of the "well-being of the population at large" (2007). Indeed, as these policies have been implemented around the world, Harvey has found that, "although neoliberalism has had limited effectiveness as an engine for economic growth, it has succeeded in channeling wealth from subordinate classes to dominant ones and from poorer to richer countries." Here I will explore how Japan's flirtation with neoliberal labor policies in the name of liberating the potential of many career-oriented women in Japan—for example, with more flexible work environments—can have different consequences for women, and men, seeking stability and sustainability with work. What in one context offers freedom, in another offers only the freedom to starve.

Key to this analysis is the relationship between a certain form of "feminism" and an economic policy such as "womenomics." In the mainstream press, the new emphasis on women in the workplace is lauded as progressive (Ito, 2014; NHK Online, 2011). Some far-right critics even accuse Abe of "conversion to feminism madness."[3] However, the mobilization of the term "feminism"—in any case never a monolithic system of beliefs and often a site of contestation and debate—in this case reveals how the liberatory language of women's emancipation can serve neoliberal goals of making labor markets more flexible and free. Following the models provided by scholars working in the context of the United States and its neoliberal economic transformations, I explore how Japan now also faces a critical historical juncture in which a "dangerous liaison" between feminism and free-market economics contrives to shift the political focus onto the national economy and away from the lives of most working women.[4] "Womenomics" emphasizes the capacity of elite women to break the glass ceiling at work, while many more women—and men—labor in part-time, insecure jobs, widening the gap between elite and non-elite workers (Ueno, 2013). I argue here for a critique of "womenomics" that remains aware of not only gender discrimination, but is also alert to other forms of inequity.

Encouraging Women to "Shine"

On September 26, 2013, Shinzo Abe made a speech at the United Nations General Assembly, at which he declared his goal to "create a society in which women shine." Central to his rhetorical strategy is an idea that encouraging women to "shine" will turn on, like a light bulb, the power of female labor to boost the national GDP. Article after article in contemporary mainstream economic publications estimate how much increased female participation in the Japanese workforce could contribute to the strength of the Japanese national economy (AFP-JIJI, 2014). Since immigration lacks public support and remains a politically taboo subject, the least controversial proposal to increase the workforce in Japan is to incorporate more women into the workforce. Kathy Matsui, the chief Japan equity strategist for Goldman Sachs and coiner of the term "womenomics," argued for this in her 2011 TED talk in Tokyo (2011). However, while these arguments are framed as offering women in Japan greater freedoms, the focus of all these arguments is on the national economy, rather than on the lives and livelihoods of not only women, but also their dependents. In the wake of Abe's 2013 UN speech, scholars Ayako Kano and Vera Mackie argued that, "In Abe's UN speech and in his actual policy decisions, 'womenomics' is a policy for recharging the economy and refortifying the nation, not for improving the situation of women" (2013). That the goal is indeed the strength and prestige of the Japanese nation over individual

[3] For an example, see Nakagawa Yatsuro's personal blog: http://nakagawayatsuhiro.hatenablog.com/

[4] The phrase "dangerous liaison" has been used by both Hester Eisenstein and Nancy Fraser to describe the relationship between feminism and free-market economics. I draw on their analyses here.

women was made clear in a more recent speech of Abe's. Opening the World Assembly for Women (WAW!) in Tokyo in September 2014, Abe pointed out his appointment of five women as Cabinet ministers as one of his major achievements, noting that this single act improved Japan's international standing "remarkably," lifting up Japan's position from 29th to 11th as measured by women in Cabinet posts (Abe, 2014).

This kind of thinking, in which the focus is on how Japan stands from moment-to-moment in global ranking systems, marks the obsessions of "womenomics" and its role in Abenomics, which aims at bolstering the economy and the nation. Advocates of women's rights in Japan, however, remain wary of Abe, whose cabinet during his first turn as Prime Minister (September 2006-September 2007) declared gender equality a threat to Japanese culture and family values (Itô, 2015). Abe has stumbled in re-branding himself as an advocate of women, at first boasting about his inclusion of women in his cabinet, and then inviting a backlash when two of them resigned over violations of voting laws and the inappropriate use of political funds. Even before that, however, Abe's decision to appoint right-wing female lawmakers drew criticism (Shirai, 2014). By doing so, Abe made a gesture toward some vaguely progressive idea of "feminism," while also promoting only women who took a far-right position on Japan's war responsibility and nuclear power, two political positions that, while not exclusive to male politicians, certainly clash with the self-identified feminist movement in postwar Japan.[5] For example, networks of feminist activists throughout Asia, and feminist scholars in Japan such as Suzuki Yuko and Ueno Chizuko, have organized across national borders since the 1980s to launch critiques of the sexism behind the recruitment, and even abduction, of women pressed into sexual service throughout territories occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army, whereas Inada Tomomi, appointed by Abe as the LDP's new policy chief, signed a 2007 advertisement in The Washington Post rejecting the Japanese government's role in the "comfort women" system during World War II (Aoki & Johnston, 2014; Suzuki, 1993; Ueno, 2006). In the meantime, Abe's dissolution of the Lower House and call for a snap election in November 2014 left all the political parties unable to put forward many female candidates. While Abe's own party falls far short of his stated goal of 30% female participation, with only 10.5% female candidates, the party closest to the goal is the Japan Communist Party, at 25.1% (Yomiuri shinbun, 2014). As one observer noted, Abe seems to lack real interest in meaningful gender parity, while the policies closest to his heart actually seem to be ideological rather than economic (Kingston, 2014). Nevertheless, and confusingly, voters are sold on "Abenomics," which includes "womenomics," even as other potentially dangerous policies on constitutional revision and state secrets get rolled into the political package.

A Feminist Critique of "Trickle-Down Feminism"

However, even if "womenomics" manages to improve the standing of some women in upper-level politics and management, what are the larger implications of this kind of "trickle-down feminism"? The term "trickle-down feminism" plays on the political idea of "trickle-down economics," which suggests that benefits provided to those at the top will "trickle-down" to benefit all of society. Abe's vision of feminist advancement, focusing on female access to top careers, is in line with a "trickle-down feminism" policy. However, many young scholars in the anglophone world, where similar initiatives are underway, have voiced concern to the uneven distribution enjoyed by different segments of the female population under gender equality programs that target elite women (Cameron, 2003; Cottom, 2012; Jaffe, 2013). The discursive gestures toward empowering women also fits the kind of affinity between feminism and neoliberalism that Nancy Fraser traces in her study of Western post-welfare state politics.

[5] For example, among other women-focused groups, the Women's Action Network and the Fujin Minshu Club in Japan both organize around anti-war and anti-nuclear activism.

In the context of renewed calls for free market capitalism to address Japan's economic woes, Fraser's insight stands: "Disorganized capitalism turns a sow's ear into a silk purse by elaborating a new romance of female advancement and gender justice." According to Fraser, neoliberal ideas about the "free, unencumbered, self-fashioning individual" can also harness "the dream of women's emancipation" to "the engine of capitalist accumulation" (2013b, pp. 220–221). She offers a timely warning that "feminism" as a program of advancing individual women's careers can become an ideological support for exploitative economic systems.

While addressing an aspect of the second-wave feminist discourse, initiated in the United States in part by Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, which explored the oppressive nature of relegating educated middle-class women to domestic "women's work," such a focus on breaking the glass ceiling now in particular obscures the changes to labor under the influence of neoliberalism. Under labor deregulation, the struggle is not only that of expanding the breadwinning wages enjoyed by men under state-led capitalism in places like England, the United States, and Japan. In the case of England and the United States, anglophone writers and activists note the increased economic inequality in the wake of the neoliberal reforms of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. As the English leftist writer and critic Laurie Penny recently put it, "don't worry about the glass ceiling—the basement is flooding" (2011). Ai-Jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance in the United States, notes that the conditions long attributed to domestic work and other "pink-collar" service work gendered feminine now increasingly define all work: American workers, male and female, face the instability, low pay, and reduced access to career advancement that once defined "women's work" (as quoted in Jaffe, 2013). Many workers in Japan now find themselves facing similar trends. Recently, anthropologist Anne Allison explored the social landscape of what she called "precarious Japan," in which a key factor is the increase of less secure and more contingent work (2013). If in a previous economic formulation, developed in the postwar period of prosperity, the gendered labor encouraged and enforced by the welfare state was the target of feminist activism, the economic circumstances of regulated and flexible labor for a broader swath of the population demand a feminist critique that considers not only "women" as a category, but also emphasizes class. As many have pointed out, this is not a new idea, and socialist feminists in Japan and elsewhere formulated their critiques of "patriarchy" from a position that also considered the exploitative structures of imperialism and capitalism (Fraser, 2013; Mackie, 2003; Shigematsu, 2012). Abe's collapsing of all categories of women into one homogenous group threatens to obscure an economic critique.

A feminist perspective that questions the gendered nature of labor exploitation also remains necessary, especially in Japan. This is because of the potential appeal of "womenomics" in a place where the ideological underpinnings of the exploitation of female labor historically displayed such contempt for women in general. The continuation of sexism in various environments, from the workplace to the political sphere, confronts women of all statuses daily. Recent incidents in which female lawmakers were heckled demonstrate the pervasive sexism embedded in politics at the highest level. Both Ayaka Shiomura (Your Party) and Sayuri Uenishi (Japan Restoration Party) were interrupted on two separate occasions in the past year with remarks such as "you are the one who should get married as soon as possible" and "hurry up and have children" when they presented on more general issues such as raising children and the declining population (The Asahi Shimbun, 2014, 2014). If Abe can convince many women that his economic policies promise liberation from that kind of everyday harassment and prejudice, the economic links of "womenomics" to a more general neoliberal restructuring of work will be easy to overlook. Disturbingly, however, both cases involved members of Abe's LDP, and neither faced serious consequences for their actions.

So while the feminist dimension of "womenomics" taps into demands to liberate women from

sexism, it also favors neoliberal marketization, displaying the potential ambivalence of feminism's call for emancipation, described by Nancy Fraser. It is on this basis that Fraser critiques recent "liberal feminism" focused on individual female emancipation: "Insufficiently attuned to the rise of free-market fundamentalism, mainstream feminists have ended up supplying the rationale for a new mode of capital accumulation, heavily dependent of women's wage labor" (2013, p. 240). Women incensed by news of the stubborn double standards facing women in political and corporate cultures may find themselves inspired by the new discourse of "shining" women. However, a feminism attuned to the economic implications of emancipating women will try to understand the various roles played by women's labor in Japan, rather than simply understanding liberation as expanded access for elite women.

Women's Work

A dimension effaced by claims that "womenomics" will encourage women to work is the fact that economic growth in modern Japan has long depended on women's work as cheap and temporary labor. Looking back at the foundation of Japan's modern economy, the nation's textile industry, key to its industrialization and export earnings from the 1870s to the 1930s, depended on the cheap labor of "factory girls" (Hunter, 2004; Tsurumi, 1992). One can make a case to counter Abe that historically women in Japan have not been an "underutilized resource," but rather an exploited one.

In calling for women to participate more actively in the workforce, "womenomics" also ignores another aspect of female labor that has long contributed to the national economy in Japan: the "affective labor" of "kinwork" and "caring labor," such as care for children and the elderly within the family. Indeed, one can, along with Michael Hardt, argue that, "capital has incorporated and exalted affective labor and that affective labor is one of the highest value-producing forms of labor from the point of view of capital" (Hardt, 1999). What this means in the Japanese case is that the labor of women in Japan has historically been used to expand the national economy, although a large portion of female labor, as the "affective labor" of running households, and even of running neighborhoods as the managers of residents' associations and school associations, has often been unpaid. Concepts not entering the discussion about "womenomics" are terms that have long been familiar to feminists and scholars. For example, the "double burden" of housework that greets many employed wives when they clock out. According to a comparative study about housework and employment in Japan, South Korea, and the United States, in the mid-1990s, husbands in Japan performed the least mean hours of housework by far (only 2.5 hours compared to 12.6 hours by South Korean husbands and 7.8 hours by husbands in the United States). The percentage of husbands who did not housework approached half, at 43.1 percent (32.5 percent of South Korean husbands, ten percent of American husbands did not housework). In addition, the study showed that when both housework and employment were added together, the "double burden" of (oftentimes) temporary employment and housework actually yielded a longer working week for wives in Japan: a mean of 54.7 hours versus husbands' 48.1 hours (Tsuya, Bumpass, & Choe, 2000). It is this kind of disparity, and the fact that household labor undergirds all industrial labor, that sparked the "wages for housework" movement in Italy and the United States in the 1970s (Costa & James, 1975; Federici, 2012).

In Japan, state policy that has often defined women's social roles as primarily domestic succeeded in motivating tremendous commitment from (male) full-time employees, while also making it possible to tap women as a reserve of part-time workers. For example, state labor policies in the mid-1960s sought to mobilize female labor to manage a shortage in workers. However, as the Economic Deliberative Council's 1963 report emphasized, the ideal form of work for married women remained part-time work and "reentry employment" taken on after a woman's children entered school and allowed

her time to work outside the home again. This allowed for women to perform the demands of "kinwork," while married women also functioned as a flexible workforce that supplemented the full-time employment of unmarried women and unmarried and married men (Uno, 1993). Full-time work and "breadwinning wages" remained structured around the assumption of a male household head. Not only employers, but also labor unions increasingly emphasized the role of women as part-time work and support for waged husbands in the period of postwar prosperity (Gerteis, 2010).

Even now, women continue to make up the bulk of temporary employees in Japan. According to the internal affairs ministry, 12.47 million of the 18.13 million non-regular employees in 2012 were women (Ito, 2014a). "Womenomics" frames the conversation around helping women break through to higher ranks in management and political leadership (Ito, 2014b). However, the issue that is more pressing is that of how temporary work now deepens the "feminization of poverty." Although a 1996 Japanese White Paper on the National Lifestyle declared that Japan avoided the feminization of poverty seen in the United States—in which a disproportionate number of the nation's poor are women—many activists and scholars have traced the emergence of this phenomenon in Japan (Kimoto & Hagiwara, 2009). Akiko Suzuki, with the non-profit Inclusive Net, described how her personal experience working to address poverty issues in Japan led her to realize a link between an increase in women facing economic insecurity and a general rise of insecure work: "After years of working with low-income people, I link the increase in females grappling with poverty to the rising number of part-time or contract jobs that are replacing full-time positions in companies" (as quoted in Kakuchi, 2014). These are the hard facts on the ground, and economic policy needs to grapple with these issues, rather than conflating the interests of an elite segment of women with issues faced by all women.

While confronting institutionalized sexism remains important, an awareness of the larger implications of liberalized labor policies and attention to the widening socio-economic gap in Japan today should guide feminist critiques of state policies. Defining economic health as a booming stock market or in terms of national rankings will not address the everyday needs of workers, just as feminism fixated on the glass ceiling will not "trickle-down" to an increasingly vulnerable (and increasingly female) segment of the population. "Womenomics" must be understood as a proposal that can benefit only a select group of individual women and corporations; Japanese women are already working, and most of them never get far enough up to glimpse the glass ceiling. Scholars interested in social, economic, and political policies that can benefit working women need to think in terms of access not only to top positions in corporations, but also in terms of programs to address unpaid affective labor and to relieve the economic stresses of non-regular workers.

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