

Women in Leadership and Public Life: A Comparative Analysis of India & Japan

Exploring Quotas, Workplace reforms and Cultural Barriers to Gender Equality

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Abstract— The past decade has witnessed a global surge in women's participation across nearly all spheres of work and public life and a renewed focus on gender issues. Globally, policies and practices aimed at achieving gender equality have been actively promoted. Achieving gender equality necessitates the effective participation and leadership of women in political, economic, and public spheres (United Nations). This paper explores the efforts of two major Asian countries Japan and India in achieving gender equality, their approach and progress toward this target over the past decade, highlighting achievements, challenges, and policy directions. The paper seeks to offer a comparative analysis, emphasizing the lessons each country can learn from the other to achieve gender equality. Japan's policy-driven approach and India's quota-based strategy have both led to significant successes in their respective contexts. Yet, sustainable progress requires integrating structural reforms with cultural change, supported by governments, industries, and civil society.

Index Terms— SDG 5.5, women's leadership, gender equality, Japan, India, comparative analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in the 21st century continues to be a critical concern despite the progress made in policies and social reforms aimed at reducing gender disparities and empowering women. The second decade of the twenty-first century saw renewed public interest and social debate on gender equality issues. Gender equality has once again taken centre stage among the discourses of world leaders. Globally, nations across the globe have understood the merits of diversity and are striving to create more inclusive and diverse societies. Gender equality is a crucial and multifaceted endeavor that necessitates the active engagement of various stakeholders such as governments, civil society organizations, and businesses. Strong collaboration between stakeholders can positively impact the development and implementation of policies, programmes, and initiatives that address systemic barriers and contribute to the cause. This collective approach must work in all directions, involving advocating legislative changes, encouraging gender-balanced leadership in all sectors, and fostering supportive work environments that empower individuals of all genders. The literature indicates that gender equality has a positive impact on economic development, although the nature and extent of this impact may vary depending on context. Mishra et al. (2020) found that achieving gender parity in health, education, employment, and democratic representation positively affected economic growth in Asia. The literature supports the notion that gender equality is beneficial for economic development with evidence of its positive impact on GDP growth, economic complexity, and inclusive growth (Mirziyoyeva & Salahodjaev, 2023; Mishra et al., 2020; Niimi, 2024). Strong empirical evidence of a positive correlation between gender equality and growth necessitates collaborative actions among stakeholders. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as a noteworthy example of international consensus and collaboration aimed at improving the well-being of humanity.

Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a significant transformation in the world's understanding of advancement and human well-being. (The 17 Goals | Sustainable Development, n.d.). They promote a comprehensive philosophy that unites human well-being with environmental conservation, acknowledging the complex interconnectedness of social, economic, and ecological frameworks. At their core are people, the planet, and prosperity, and the SDGs make an ambitious attempt to operationalize the ethical imperative of creating a just and sustainable world for all. They represent a global consensus on the moral obligation to address pressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and climate change, while also promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions. The SDGs reflect a more nuanced understanding of human well-being, which not only values economic growth but also social cohesion, environmental balance, and individual well-being. These goals are transformational and envision building an equitable world in which all human beings thrive and achieve their full potential. The universal nature of goals ensures that all stakeholders work in a similar manner to achieve the agreed goals. The SDG aims to synergize the efforts of the world and bring effective, innovative solutions to the challenges faced by the world. In its true essence, SDGs help the world to think globally and act locally. SDGs also recognize that partnerships are important in the process of attaining goals and that countries have a shared responsibility for a collective future. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), built on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), comprise 17 interconnected global objectives established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. These goals are designed to serve as a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all" by 2030. Each of the 17 goals had specific targets (169 in total) and indicators to measure progress. The 17 SDGs covered areas such as no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work, economic growth, and climate change.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

SDG 5 recognizes gender equality as not only a fundamental human right but also a vital prerequisite for building a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Focused efforts have been made worldwide to ensure that women, who make up almost half of the world's population, are aware of and enjoy their rights and are equally represented in all domains of public and private spheres. Sustainable Development Goal 5 has been instrumental in driving progress towards gender equality across the globe, focusing on various areas, including education, health, and economic empowerment. SDG Goal 5 addresses gender equality from a holistic perspective with targets and indicators emphasizing domains such as the provision of legal means to end discrimination; elimination of all forms of violence; elimination of harmful social practices; recognition of unpaid work; provision of equal opportunities in leadership and decision making; full and effective participation of women in economic, public, and political domains; universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; and access to economic resources. Notably, all the indicators are intertwined, interdependent, and not mutually exclusive. These indicators are monitored at national, regional, and global levels, thereby highlighting areas of improvement and challenges in achieving gender equality.

Within SDG 5, indicator 5.5 specifically focuses on ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. Women's advancement and representation in decision making across public, economic, and political spheres play a crucial role in nations' development for several reasons. Women's participation in the workforce significantly boosts the productivity and economic growth of the nation, helping break the poverty cycle. In business, gender-diverse leadership is often linked to better governance and positive financial outcomes. Increasing women's representation in political and decision-making roles ensures that their interests and perspectives are included in policy formulation, which can lead to more equitable and effective governance (Kumari et al., 2024). Women who are educated and empowered are more likely to prioritize their children's health, which in turn results in better educational and health outcomes for generations. Additionally, studies have shown that when women have access to resources and opportunities, they are more likely to invest in their communities, leading to improved social and economic outcomes for entire communities. The arguments hence suggest that promoting gender equality and women's empowerment will not only benefit individual women and their families, but also the society as a whole. Hence, it can be asserted that women's advancement is not only a matter of social justice but also a fundamental driver of national development. Since the signing and implementation of the SDG, considerable efforts have been made by both India and Japan to promote gender equality and to increase women's participation in the workforce. Both countries have shown strong political will and action to address the issue of gender inequality by implementing various policies and enacting laws to promote women's socioeconomic empowerment. These affirmative actions have shown gradual results over time, yet on a global platform, both India and Japan are ranked low on the gender gap index (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2024). Therefore, a critical comparison of the policies and legislation of both India and Japan can yield valuable insights into novel approaches to policy formulation and implementation.

India and Japan: Shared Identity and Challenges

Despite their geographical distance and distinct cultural background, India and Japan share several similarities rooted in their century-old historical connections. Both countries strongly believe in their traditional values and take pride in and uphold their civilization practices and traditions. They have many common cultural traits such as democratic governance, religious diversity, strong family values, emphasis on education, emphasis on social norms and etiquettes, and non-Western modernity, both of which have modernized while retaining their distinct cultural identities. These similarities manifest differently in the two countries because of their unique historical, geographical, and cultural background. Currently, both countries are among the largest economies in Asia and they have an impact on global economic affairs. After World War II, both countries underwent rapid changes in their economies, and with the advent of globalization, both countries witnessed changes in their sociocultural contexts. This has led to the emergence of unique challenges in both the countries.

India and Japan have become compelling comparisons of gender equality, as both have similarities in their socio-cultural backgrounds and differences in socio-economic backgrounds, distinct policy approaches, and outcomes. Hence, a critical evaluation of both cases can provide valuable insights that are beneficial for both countries. Some key reasons for the comparison between Japan and India are as follows.

Significant gender gap: Both countries have a huge gender gap in workforce participation, leadership, and politics, despite being major Asian economies (Dino Bozonelos, 2022). Japan is a developed economy compared to India, which is still a developing economy, yet both rank low on global gender gap indices.

Cultural and historic gender norms: Both countries have deep-rooted traditional gender norms that impact women's participation in the public domain. Strong patriarchal norms, expectations of women's domestic roles, and strict gender roles continue to affect the status of women in both countries.

Impact of demographic and economic pressures: Japan has an aging population that creates a shortage of manpower, which necessitates labor reforms as compared to India, which has a high youth population that poses a different kind of challenge for the country in promoting gender equality.

Political Initiatives and Reforms: Both countries are signatories to the SDG and have promoted gender equality through various political and government initiatives. Japan and India exhibit distinct approaches to promoting gender equality. Japan has implemented policy rollouts and encourages businesses to adhere to these initiatives. By contrast, India employs constitutional guarantees and a quota reservation system. Both countries encounter challenges in enforcement that are influenced by their cultural contexts.

Key Challenges in Promoting Gender Equality

While both India and Japan have made consistent efforts to bring about gender equality and improve women's participation in the workforce and representation in parliaments, they have faced continual challenges owing to their inherent socio-cultural context, which views women as nurturers and caretakers, predominantly in domestic roles. The Global Gender Gap rankings published by the World Economic Forum in 2024, where the rankings of India and Japan are 129 and 118, respectively, out of 146 countries in the world, are the outcome of the same. Some key challenges faced by both countries in women's advancement are as follows:

Traditional Gender Roles- Both countries have deep-rooted traditional roles that impact the representation of women in the workforce and leadership roles. In both countries, men are predominantly viewed as breadwinners, and women are seen as primary caretakers and responsible for all domestic chores.

Cultural Emphasis on Marriage and Family: Both countries are patriarchal societies that place significant importance on marriage and family, leading women to bear the largest share of familial duties and care. The social roles of care and nurturing are considered women's responsibilities, thus impacting their prospects for joining work outside their homes. Moreover, women who join the workforce face significant challenges in work-life balance.

Low workforce participation despite of educational attainment: In both the countries, women have access to education, and their educational attainment scores have improved significantly; however, this has not led to a change in their workforce participation (The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992| National Portal of India, n.d.).

Gender Pay Gap: Both countries grapple with the challenge of the gender pay gap, although the nature and extent of the challenge differ.

Underrepresentation in politics: Both countries exhibit a lower representation of women in their respective national parliaments than their global counterparts.

Given the similar nature of the challenges faced by the two countries, a critical analysis of the initiatives undertaken by their respective governments can yield valuable insights into potential strategies for advancing gender equality. An analysis of the initiatives taken by both countries will help to reveal the multifaceted approach adopted by each country in addressing the issue of gender inequality. By scrutinizing the success and shortcomings of each approach, policymakers can identify best practices, adapt successful strategies to local contexts, and develop more comprehensive strategies to address gender inequalities.

II. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses secondary sources and investigates publicly available information and data on the efforts of the Government of India and the Government of Japan to promote gender diversity in the workplace. The analysis of these initiatives provides valuable insights into the efforts of two major Asian economies to address gender inequality. This study examines various aspects of these initiatives, such as legislations/policies towards increase women's participation and leadership in political, economic, and public life; to ensure equal pay and opportunities; measures to improve work-life balance; programs to support women's career advancement; and efforts to change societal attitudes towards working women. The analysis was guided by the following questions: What initiatives have been taken by both the governments? What was the impact of these initiatives? What are the limitations and challenges of these initiatives? By analyzing data from both countries, this article offers a comparative perspective on the approaches taken by India and Japan, highlighting similarities, differences, and potential areas for improvement in their respective strategies to enhance gender diversity in the workplace.

III. ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Key initiatives taken by India to promote women's participation

India has taken a series of affirmative actions that are both ambitious and targeted towards increasing women's participation and leadership in political, economic, and public life, as per Sustainable Development Goal 5.5. These actions acknowledge the long-standing barriers that have restrained women's representation and demonstrated a commitment to making proactive changes. Ranging from constitutional modifications to policy initiatives, India's approach encompasses both legislative measures and grassroots empowerment tactics. Consequently, notable progress has been made, particularly in local governance, although challenges remain to be addressed in ensuring full gender parity in leadership positions across all sectors.

Reservation for women in local self-government & parliament

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments enacted in 1992 made Panchayats and municipalities "institutions of self-government." It mandated that a minimum of one-third of the seats and offices of chairpersons in Panchayats and municipalities be reserved for women. This created a system with over three million elected Panchayat representatives, almost half of whom were women. In 2006, Bihar was the 1st State to provide a 50% reservation for women in Panchayat bodies. (The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992| National Portal of India, n.d.). Currently, more than 20 states have 50% reservations for women at panchayat level. After 30 years of implementation of these amendments, the 106th Amendment Act, in the form of the Women's Reservation Act (2023), was enacted by the Indian government, providing 33% reservations to women in Lok Sabha and State legislative assemblies. (Women's Reservation Bill 2023 [The Constitution (One Hundred Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023], n.d.)

Corporate governance reforms

Corporate governance reforms in India have played a crucial role in advocating greater gender diversity in leadership roles, particularly on boards. These reforms have been implemented through a combination of legislative modifications, regulatory mandates, and market-driven initiatives. The key initiatives were as follows:

Companies Act, 2013: This landmark legislation mandated that every listed company and every public company with a paid-up share capital of 100 crore rupees or more or a turnover of 300 crore rupees or more must have at least one female director on their board. This was a significant step towards ensuring women's representation of corporate leadership.

SEBI Regulations: The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) further strengthened these provisions. In 2018, SEBI mandated that the top 500 listed entities have at least one independent female director by April 1, 2019. This requirement was extended to the top 1000 listed entities on April 1, 2020.

Disclosure Requirements: SEBI has introduced requirements for listed companies to disclose the gender composition of their boards and top management in their annual reports, creating transparency and accountability.

Capacity Building Programs: Various initiatives, both government-led and private, have been launched to prepare women for board positions. For instance, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) conducts programs to train women in board roles.

Mentorship and Networking: Corporate India has seen a rise in mentorship programs and networking platforms specifically designed to support women in leadership roles and prepare them for board positions.

These reforms led to a significant increase in the number of women on corporate boards in India. According to a 2020 report by Deloitte, women held 17.1% of the board seats in India, an increase from 6.7% in 2013.

Labour Law Reforms

The Government of India (GoI) has implemented multiple initiatives to encourage greater female participation in the workforce through amendments to certain labor laws and more stringent enforcement of existing legislation. The government has also undertaken various initiatives to address gender disparities in the workforce by implementing skill-development programs, social security reforms, and providing better educational opportunities. The key initiatives are as follows:

Welfare provisions under various Acts: The government has provided various provisions in labor laws to ensure the welfare of female employees. These provisions include the availability of crèches, separate hygienic washrooms and restrooms, and canteens that serve as healthy and nutritious foods. These provisions aim to improve female employees' overall well-being and provide them access to better work environments.

a) **Safety Provisions:** A stringent anti-sexual harassment law has been enacted by the government to provide safe work environments for women and proactively address sexual harassment in the workplace.

b) **Parental Leaves:** The Maternity Benefit Amendment Act 2017 provided for 26 weeks of maternity leave for female employees. The Act also mandates that childcare facilities within work premises ensure convenient and safe spaces for children and working mothers during work hours.

c) **Pay Parity:** The Labor Laws Payment of Wages Act, 1936, The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, play a significant role in eliminating gender-based discrimination in wages. These acts ensure and emphasize providing wages at regular intervals, meeting the standard minimum guidelines for compensation, and equal pay for equal work.

Labor laws, to some extent, have attempted to bring parity to the pay and working conditions of women in the workforce. However, it is important to note that labor laws in India are primarily focused on protecting the rights of workers in non-managerial roles. However, certain laws extend the protection to managerial employees.

Impact of the Initiatives: India

These initiatives have had a positive impact on addressing gender equality within the public and political domains over time. This impact is reflected in the increased participation of women at various levels of governance. At the grassroots level, India has a sizeable number of women who serve as elected members of the Panchayati Raj Institutions/Rural Local Bodies, constituting 46% of the elected representatives. In a report by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the representation of female members in the Lok Sabha progressed from 5-10% in 2004, to 13.6% in the current Lok Sabha, and to 13% in Rajya Sabha. Furthermore, the number of female candidates who contested the elections gradually increased, reaching 9.5% of all candidates who participated in the elections. The national average of women's representation in State Legislative Assemblies stands at a 9%, with no state having more than 20% women legislators. Globally, India ranks 143 out of 185 countries in terms of women's representation in the lower house of the Parliament, according to the Parline Database of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. (Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments, n.d.). World Bank data on the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments indicate a steady increase in the percentage of women occupying national seats in India, which, as of 2024, stands at 13.65%.

The Periodic Labor Force Survey reports 37% females in the workforce in year 2022-23 which has grown significantly from 23.3% in 2018. This number is higher in rural India than in the urban areas. Of the total women in the workforce in urban areas, almost half work on a regular wage/salary, 40% are self-employed, and approximately 9% work as casual labourers. In contrast, the majority of the women in rural India (71%) were self-employed. ((Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Report 2022-2023 Released, n.d.). According to the SDG progress report of India, there are approximately 210 women in managerial positions among every 1000 persons and the female-to-male labor workforce participation ratio is 0.48. The female-to-male earnings ratio for regular wage salaries is 0.76. The above data imply that, for every 100 men, only 48 women are engaged in economic activities, and on average, they earn 76% of what men are earning to perform similar work. The World Bank report on the percentage of females in middle and senior management positions indicates a steady increase since 2018, followed by a steep decline in the post-COVID period. As of 2023, this percentage is 12.72%. This could be attributed to the layoffs during COVID.

Limitations and Challenges of the Initiatives -India

India faces multifaceted challenges in accomplishing the goals of SDG 5.5 a few of them are as follows:

a) **Effectiveness of Quota System-** While quota systems in local self-governance helped giving an initial boost and increasing women representation in local self-governance bodies, it has also given rise to "tokenism" where men are in charge of the positions with women being the face of the positions. Some researchers and theorists have argued that it restricts competition based on merit in the absence of strong leadership pipelines in the local

b) **Delayed implementation of policies:** India has grappled with the delayed implementation of policies and acts. For instance, the Women's Reservation Bill was almost delayed by three decades and enacted in 2023. Delays of this nature not only have a detrimental impact on the development process but also cause missed opportunities.

c) **Structural Barriers:** Women's access to political parties, which is essential for contest elections, is limited. Women whose families have political ties are more likely to enter politics than common women. In India, contesting for an election requires a humongous financial backup, and women have limited access to these finances. In addition, due to the patriarchal mind-set, women are not trusted enough to lead or forgo domestic duties to pursue a time-demanding career, like politics.

d) Drop out of women from the labour market: A wide range of studies explain that women drop out of the labor market for reasons majorly related to marriage, family care, motherhood, husband's income, and education; that is, if the husband's income suffices for the family needs, a woman is less likely to enter the job market. Domestic responsibilities are seen as women's areas of concern, leading to the burden of unpaid work on women, resulting in their withdrawal from the workforce.

e) Occupational Segregation of work: Women in job markets not only deal with unconscious biases and glass ceilings at the workplace but are also pushed to lower-paying jobs or part-time jobs due to gender discrimination.

f) Absence of Support Services: There very few public policies that tackle the social and familial barriers that hinder women from participating in the labor force, and there are insufficient arrangements for domestic duties and care work. These facilities are not only scarce as standalone schemes but are also rarely included as components of broader initiatives.

g) Policies for women lack gender component: Policies aimed at women are often devoid of a gender-specific focus, and initiatives designed to boost female workforce participation frequently fail to include measures to address proactive gender bias. These policies focus on encouraging women's participation, and less focus is placed on policy communication, positive gender messaging, gender sensitization, awareness campaigns, and so on.

The data indicate substantial gender disparities in political and workforce participation, representation of women in managerial positions, and women's earnings. While India has implemented various policies and initiatives and provided constitutional guarantees and reservations, the data indicate that these efforts have yet to yield substantial results across sectors. The inequalities observed indicate the presence of systemic barriers and societal norms that hinder women's full and equal participation in public and economic life. Addressing these challenges will require a multifarious approach and collective efforts from governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations.

Key initiatives taken by Japan for improving women's participation

Japan has steadily and modestly advanced the presence of women in its leadership roles. Japan improved its standing in the Global Gender Gap Report, published by the World Economic Forum in 2024, moving from 125th to 118th place. This positive shift was driven by the increase in the number of female ministers in the Japanese government. Despite recent improvements, Japan's gender parity remains significantly behind that of other G7 and OECD countries. As of 2021, women accounted for approximately 10% of the seats in the lower house and 23% in the upper house. In the realm of private companies, women hold approximately 15% of management positions. The low percentage of women in public and private institutions suggests persistent barriers that continue to hinder their professional opportunities and advancement.

The following section briefly outlines Japan's major initiatives to enhance gender parity in the workplace.

"Womenomics" Policy

This policy was introduced by the former late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2013 to promote women in the workforce. This was communicated as a strategy for tapping into Japan's under tapped workforce. To advance its "Womenomics" initiative, the government established targets and proposed several policies to help women stay and advance in the workforce and promote gender parity (A New Vision from a New Japan, World Economic Forum 2014 Annual Meeting, Speech by Prime Minister Abe (Speeches and Statements by Prime Minister) | Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, n.d.; Emma Chanlett-Avery, Rebecca M. Nelson, 2014). In the realm of "Womenomics" policy various policy proposals and initiatives were suggested, which were implemented in varying stages. Following section briefly discusses these policies and initiatives.

Establishing new targets for the participation and advancement of women in the workforce: Under the policy the administration pledged to increase the participation of women (aged 22-44 years) in the workforce to 73% by 2020, which was 68% in 2012. An increase in the percentage of women in leadership positions from 10% to 30% by 2020 was also pledged. These targets necessitated the public and private firms to take active measures in recruiting and retaining women in workforce.

Increasing the availability of day care and after-school care: While over 2 million children are enrolled in childcare centres across Japan, a significant number remain on waiting lists. Under the policy the government committed to a "zero childcare waiting-list project" by enhancing childcare capacity by 2017. To achieve this objective, the government proposed the establishment of additional childcare centres through the utilization of a rental system and government-owned land, the recruitment of new childcare workers, the subsidization of small-scale childcare enterprises, the facilitation of registration for unregistered childcare centres, and the support of on-site childcare facilities within business premises. Furthermore, the government intended to undertake measures to improve the availability of after-school care for elementary school children.

Encouraging the private sector to promote more women and provide data on the advancement of women. The Prime Minister asked company leaders to proactively promote women within their companies, requesting that companies appoint at least one female executive officer. The Administration has proposed supporting companies that encourage female employees to pursue both careers and families through subsidies and tax measures. The government has also encouraged companies to disclose information on women's promotion of executive and management positions. The government publishes these statistics on its own website. Participation in private sector companies is voluntary. The government mandated listed companies to disclose the number of women in their executive positions in their financial reports.

Recruiting and promoting women in government: Under the aegis of the "Womenomics" policy, the government proposed hiring and advancing more women in the government structure and supporting them, as they balance both career and family life. The government promoted female public officials in top-ranking national positions.

Expansion of childcare leave benefits: In line with the proposed policy, the government, in April introduced reforms in the childcare leave benefits increasing the payments to new parents from 50% to 67% of their salary during the first six months of parental leave. The pay for the remaining six months of parental leave was kept constant at 50% of the salary. The government also encouraged and provided incentives to fathers to take childcare leaves.

Many other provisions concerning the review of tax structures and permissions of foreign housekeepers in special economic zones were proposed to encourage women to join the workforce under the "Womenomics" policy adopted by the Japanese government.

Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace.

Japan also passed a law in 2015, the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace, with the purpose of promoting and advancing women's participation in the labor force (Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace - English - Japanese Law Translation, n.d.). The law was based on the principle of proactively

providing opportunities to hire and promote women, improving the environment so that women can balance work and life, and respecting women's choices with regard to the balance between their work and family.

Under the Act, the national government shall formulate Basic Policies to promote women's participation and advancement in the workplace, which local governments shall be obliged to implement at their levels. Based on these guidelines, business owners were required to share action plans. The law is applicable to government agencies, local governments, and private sector corporations with more than 300 employees and requires them to provide data, as mentioned below, in light of the suggested guidelines.

- a) Collect and analyze data on issues of gender and employment, such as
 - rates of female employees newly hired
 - gender gap about years of continuous employment
 - working hours
 - compensation rates of female managers
- b) Devise and disclose action plans to improve gender equality with concrete objectives and measures, based on these analyses.
- c) Announce the data regarding women's participation and advancement to the government, on the basis of which the government may bring out best practices in businesses.

As a component of the support measures outlined in the Act, the national government offers vocational training, employment referrals, and educational support to promote women's participation in workplace advancement. The Act came in as an extension of the "Womenomics" policy with the intent of strengthening it.

Basic Plan for Gender Equality

As enacted in 1999, this plan aimed to create a more gender-equal society. As part of the plan, a cabinet office was established in 2001 with the primary goal of deliberating on fundamental policies and issues to achieve gender equality. It also monitors implementation and assesses the impact of various initiatives from a gender perspective. This plan was revised every five years. The fifth basic plan for gender equality (2020) emphasized the importance of developing a society in which all women and girls can thrive and reach their full potential. It reiterates the necessity of multilevel collaboration to achieve these objectives. Regarding women's participation in decision making, it set a goal to increase women's involvement in politics and achieve 35% participation in national and local elections by 2025. It also aimed to improve women's employment post-maternity, targeting an employment rate of 70 %. The plan encourages workplace equality through equal pay and treatment for regular and non-regular employees, and promotes male parental leave.

The plan also focuses on other dimensions of gender equality, such as eliminating violence against women, improving educational enrolment in STEM, regional revitalization to tackle stereotypes in rural areas, reforming legal systems, inclusion of women in disaster and environmental policies, increasing awareness and education on gender bias, and promoting international collaborations. It also aims to improve the implementation and monitoring of gender initiatives and to collect more gender-aggregated data.

Impact of the Initiatives: Japan

The implemented measures proved instrumental in facilitating Japan's progress towards broadening women's participation in the public, political, and occupational spheres. The impact of these initiatives can be summarized as follows.

a) **Increased Female Labor Force Participation:** The most significant impact of Womenomics was the increase in female labor force participation. The participation of women in the Japanese workforce reached 74% in 2019, while the percentage of women in senior and middle management positions increased to 14.72%, as per World Bank SDG reports. Following 2019, a slight decline in numbers was observed, which can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these numbers have improved since then.

b) **Improved Childcare Infrastructure:** This policy led to increased investment in childcare facilities, making it easier for women to balance work and family responsibilities. Day care facilities have improved by 27% from 2012 to 2018 (Ivka Kalus, 2020). The availability and expansion of childcare infrastructure has led to the retention of women in the workplace, and about 53.1% (2015) of women are reported to have continued working post birth of their first child as per the Fifth Basic Plan Gender Equality Report published in 2021.

c) **Corporate Culture Changes:** There has been a gradual shift in corporate culture, with more companies implementing family friendly policies and promoting work-life balance. To improve this, men in private corporations are also encouraged to take parental leaves, and approximately 7.48% of men in 2019 availed of these leaves.

d) **Increased Awareness:** Policies like "Womenomics" have brought the issue of gender equality in the workplace to the forefront of Japanese public discourse. Efforts have been made toward policy implementation.

Limitations and Challenges: Japan

a) Persistent gender inequality and gender pay gap: Despite increased participation, the gender pay gap remains significant in Japan across industries. Both men and women start with no pay gaps as they progress; the gap widens and is seen to be highest as women progress at senior levels (Tagami Kota, 2023). Research also highlights that there is a considerable imbalance in the distribution of management positions, and the length of service in Japan's labor market, particularly with regard to gender, represents a substantial aspect of the broader issue of gender inequality.

(b) Limited progress in leadership positions & quality of employment: While more women work, there has not been a corresponding increase in women in top leadership positions. On the contrary the reports are suggestive that women are systematically moved to part time or lower paying 'non-regular' jobs with very less benefits (Mark Crawford, 2021). Many new jobs for women are part-time or non-regular, often offering lower pay and less job security. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women first lost their jobs.

c) Persistent traditional gender roles: Deep-seated cultural norms regarding gender roles continue to hinder the implementation of "Womenomic" policies. The narratives of female fertility being inversely proportional to workforce participation are evident in Japan, despite contrary empirical evidence (Ivka Kalus, 2020), leading to delayed attainment of targets of gender diversity in organizations.

d) Slow Progress in work-life balance: Despite policy efforts, achieving work-life balance remains a significant challenge for many Japanese women. Until 2020, reports suggest that the gender division of labor tilts more towards women engaging in domestic/household work than toward men. Most of the gender equality targets, apart from a few such as parental leave, childcare

assistance, and working hours, are voluntary, and the organizations show low commitment to achieving them, hence delaying progress.

In conclusion, while Womenomics and legislation enacted as part of the larger policy for increasing women's participation in the workplace has helped bring attention to gender equality issues in Japan, its impact on fundamentally changing gender roles and achieving equality in leadership positions has been limited. The policy has made some progress, but significant challenges remain in fully realizing its goals.

IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

All though, both the countries have made significant strides in achieving gender equality, there is a long way to achieve the goals set under UNSDG. The complex socio-cultural fabric of both the countries alongside deep-rooted gender biases and stereotypes makes this task more challenging. Both the governments have taken separate outlooks towards achieving the gender equality, none of them have been able to fully achieve the outcome. Both the countries despite of being from different economic and demographic contexts can benefit from each other's learnings in the process, primarily because of the similarity in the nature of the challenges and socio-cultural context both the countries. India and Japan can benefit from exchanging knowledge and best practices in their efforts to achieve gender equality.

Collaborative Learning Opportunities

Both countries can collaborate and gain insight into the challenges they face. Some collaborative learning opportunities are presented below:

a) Addressing cultural barriers: Addressing cultural barriers is crucial for improving gender equality in India and Japan, because these barriers are deeply embedded in societal norms and have a significant impact on the perpetuation of gender disparities. In India, the intersectionality of gender with other forms of identity, such as caste, ethnicity, and religion, creates complex layers of discrimination against women, affecting their access to education, healthcare, and professional opportunities (Haq, 2013). Similarly, in Japan, cultural expectations and the rational myth of gender roles within core institutions, such as markets, governments, and families, act as persistent obstacles to achieving gender equality (Kobayashi & Eweje, 2021). Both countries could share strategies to change societal attitudes and behaviors.

b) Work-life balance strategies: Work-life balance is a vital component in the pursuit of gender equality in both India and Japan. It is impacted by cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors that influence women's involvement in workforce and leadership positions. By addressing work-life balance, there is an opportunity to establish more equitable professional prospects and contribute to broader socioeconomic development in both nations. Both countries face challenges in helping women balance work and family responsibilities. They can exchange best practices and policy approaches in this area.

c) Mentorship and sponsorship for leadership development: Mentorship and leadership are pivotal for enhancing gender equality as they provide women with the necessary support to overcome cultural and systemic barriers. Both countries could benefit from stronger mentorship. In India, women face cultural hurdles such as family pressures and caste stereotypes, which can be mitigated through mentoring and career development tools, thereby advancing women's leadership and contributing to the economic transformation of the country (Smetana et al., 2018). Similarly, in Japan, despite legal frameworks to promote women's participation, the lack of a strong political will and insufficient advocacy for transformative changes in gendered practices have hindered progress. Partnerships and advocacy are essential for effective implementation of these laws (Hatano, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to establish support networks and create opportunities for women to connect with experienced professionals, who can guide them in their careers. In addition, providing access to training and development resources tailored to women's unique needs will help foster a culture of inclusivity and empowerment. Both countries could benefit from stronger mentorship programmes and leadership development initiatives for women.

Exchange of Best Practices

Drawing from the successful evidence based practices the policy makers of both the nations can explore innovative approaches to address the issues related to gender disparity. By tailoring these practices in their respective socio-cultural and economic context both the countries can make significant advances in achieving gender equality. The following section explores some best practices which both the countries can learn, adapt and implement in their respective countries.

a) Policy-driven approach to women's workforce participation: Public policies have the potential to significantly impact women's participation in the workforce by establishing conducive environments that tackle recognized obstacles. Policies that address gender gaps, support working mothers, and promote gender equality can lead to higher female labor participation and have broader economic benefits. Japan's Womenomics Policy provides a comprehensive framework to increase women's participation in the workforce. India can adopt a similar top-down policy-driven approach to complement its grassroots effort.

b) Investment in childcare infrastructure: Japan has invested significantly in childcare facilities to support working mothers. India could prioritize similar investments to address one of the major barriers to women's workforce participation. Although India has a National Crèche Scheme and mandates the provision of crèche facilities under the Maternity Benefit Act, its effectiveness and implementation remain uncertain.

c) Quotas and reservations in politics: India's experience with quotas for women in the local government (Panchayati Raj) has significantly increased women's political participation at the grassroots level. Gender quotas are a significant mechanism for increasing women's representation in politics, and their effectiveness is contingent on specific design and implementation contexts. They not only contribute to a higher presence of women in political offices, but also have the potential to influence broader gender issues and cultural perceptions of women's roles in society. Most countries that rank high in political representation of women have applied gender quotas to achieve higher representation. Japan can take similar measures to boost women's political representation.

d) Entrepreneurship initiatives & Grassroots Mobilization: Entrepreneurship and self-help groups (SHGs) are instrumental in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, aligning with the objectives of SDG 5.5. SHGs provide a platform for women to develop self-employment opportunities and leadership skills, whereas entrepreneurship offers a pathway for women to participate in economic decision making and growth. India's various schemes to promote women's entrepreneurship, such as Mudra Yojana and Stand-up India, could provide insights for Japan to encourage more women to start businesses. India's experience with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and women's collectives could offer lessons for Japan in mobilizing women at the community level for economic empowerment.

Conclusion

The experiences of Japan and India demonstrate that achieving gender equality requires a multifaceted approach that combines legislative reforms, cultural shifts, and grassroots movements. The progress and challenges observed in the approaches of both countries reinforce the understanding that achieving gender equality is an ongoing process that requires sustained commitment and adaptability to the ever-changing sociocultural ethics of the country. In conclusion, by learning from each other's successes and challenges, India and Japan can develop effective strategies for achieving gender parity. This exchange of ideas and practices can contribute to accelerated progress towards achieving gender equality and, subsequently, the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 5 in both countries.

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