Empowering Women by ICT towards Gender Equality: A Case of Japan[*]

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Abstract

This paper reviews the framework for gender equality formulated by the government and provides an overview of the current status of women in Japan with statistical materials made available by various government agencies and international organizations, and academic literature. One of the serious issues facing Japanese society is the declining birth rate closely interwoven with gender inequality. The overview reveals discriminations placed against women in society and industries that cause difficulties for them to participate in the labor market. The efforts made by the government seem to be having an effect on correcting the disparity between men and women to a certain degree. In reality, however, Japan lags way behind her counterparts in the advanced part of the world in terms of the proportion of women taking part in decision making processes and their active involvement in the labor market is still considerably low. Japan has yet to improve the situation that could be referred to as satisfactory. It points out a dilemma in achieving the goals of both increasing birth rate and promoting women's labor participation in that when one goes up the other goes down under the present circumstances. The paper introduces case studies focusing on well-educated married women challenging to cope with this dilemma by balancing work-life with "Tele-working," and lastly discusses a conceptual framework which may be of use in facilitating the argument of gender related-issues and advancing the status of women by the use of diverse technologies on networks if utilized appropriately without a single culture or political entity dominating.

Key words

gender equality, empowering women, work-life balance, ICT, networking

Introduction

⋯in no region do women enjoy equal legal, social, and economic rights. Women have fewer resources than men, and more limited economic opportunities and political participation. Women and girls bear the most direct cost of these inequalities —but the harm ultimately extends to everyone ⋯. Gender inequalities persist because they are supported by social norms and legal institutions, by the choices and behaviors of households, and by regulations and incentives that affect the way economies function. A strategy to reduce gender inequalities must address these factors. Foremost among the costs of gender inequality is its toll on the quality of human lives. Evidence suggests that societies with large and persistent gender inequalities pay the price of more poverty, illness, malnutrition, and other deprivations, even death. This makes a compelling case for public and private action to eliminate inequality. Public action is particularly important, since many social, legal, and economic institutions that perpetuate gender inequalities are extremely difficult for individuals to change (The World Bank, 2001).

In regard to gender inequality, Japan, despite the fact she assumes the status of the second economic power in the world, is no exception. Japanese women had long been suppressed due to the traditional values and social norms by which they were discriminated, and indirect biases against women still linger on in today's Japanese society.

According to the Statistics of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Human Development Index (HDI) for Japan in 2005 is 0.953, which ranks the country the 8th out of 177 countries. The HDI provides a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: A healthy and long life (life expectancy), opportunity for education (adult literacy and enrolment at the primary, secondary and tertiary level) and a decent standard of living (purchasing power parity,

PPP, income). The index, however, is not regarded as a comprehensive measure of human development since it does not incorporate in these achievements the degree of gender imbalance and other indicators such as respect for human rights and political freedoms which are difficult to measure. Hence the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) introduced in Human Development Report 1995 measures achievements in the same dimensions using the same indicators as the HDI but captures inequalities in achievement between women and men. It is simply the HDI adjusted downward for gender inequality. It indicates the greater the gender disparity in basic human development, the lower is a country's GDI relative to its HDI. Japan's GDI value, 0.94 when compared to its HDI value of 0.953, is 98.8%. Out of the 156 countries with both HDI and GDI values, 97 countries have a better ratio than Japan's.

The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) indicates whether women take an active part in economic and political activities in various fields of society. It tracks the share of seats in parliament held by women; the number of female legislators, senior officials and managers; and the number of female professional and technical workers and the gender disparity in earned income, reflecting economic independence. The GEM thus exposes inequality in opportunities in selected areas differing from the GDI. Japan ranks 54th out of 93 countries in the GEM, with a value of 0.557.

Factors causing Gender Inequality in general include:
- biological differences between men and women
- traditionally and culturally recognized gender roles
- direct and indirect biases
- lack of opportunity to education and skills
- lack of involvement in decision making
- digital divide in accessing ICT

These factors contributing to the gender inequality prevailing in the world are not mutually exclusive but closely interweaved and have caused cultural, socio-economic, and political issues in Japan and elsewhere.

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment ‐ An Overview

In order to cope with the gender inequality and empower women's status the Japanese government has formulated policies and taken some measures. The framework for gender equality in Japan took its root in Article 14 of the Constitution of Japan re-born after the Second World War which provides, "all of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex …" (The Constitution of Japan, 1947).

In 1994, the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender Equality under the Prime Minister was established within the Cabinet with all Cabinet Ministers as its members. In addition, the Office for Gender Equality and the Council for Gender Equality were set up by Cabinet Orders in the Prime Minister's Office. In the reform of the Central Government implemented on January 6, 2001, the Central Government was restructured from its former one Office and twenty-two Ministries to one Cabinet Office and twelve Ministries so it could more effectively deal with complex policy issues in the 21st Century. As part of this reorganization, a Cabinet Office headed by the Prime Minister was established in the Cabinet. Within this Cabinet Office a Council for Gender Equality was newly established along with a Gender Equality Bureau. The Council is chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary and composed of 12 Cabinet Ministers designated by the Prime Minister and the equal number of intellectuals appointed by the Prime Minister. The Gender Equality Bureau is mandated with the formulation and overall coordination of plans for matters related to promoting the formation of a gender-equal society, as well as promoting the Basic Plan for Gender Equality. In addition, The Bureau formulates and implements plans for matters not falling under the jurisdiction of any particular ministry.
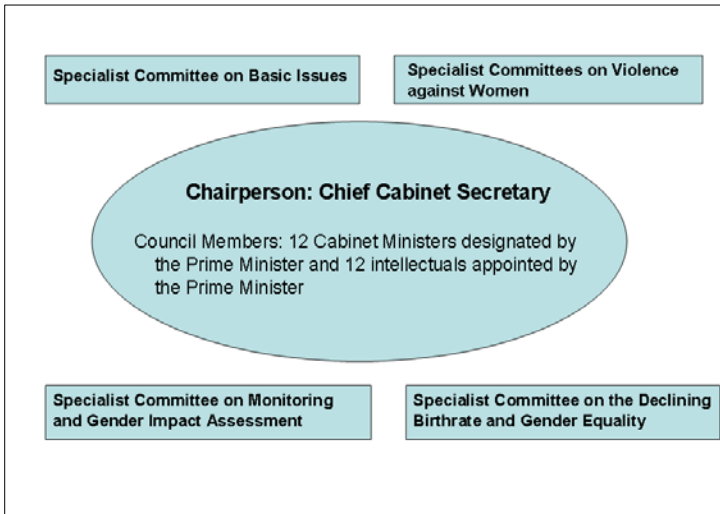
The practical measures were taken by enacting "Basic Law for Gender Equal Society" with unanimous approval of the National Dietin 1999, followed by "Basic Plan for Gender Equality" in 2000. It was the first comprehensive and cross-cutting policy planning to enhance gender

equality in Japan. In 2005, the Second Basic Plan for Gender Equality was formulated for promotion of comprehensive and systematic measures.

The Five Basic Principles provided in the Second Basic Plan for Gender Equality for the promotion of a gender-equal society by the Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office are:

1. Respect the Human Rights of Men and Women:
   To respect the dignity of women and men as individuals, avoid gender-based discrimination, and secure opportunities for women and men to exercise their abilities as individuals.

2. Consideration to Social Systems or Practices:
   To consider the modification of social systems or practices so that women and men can take part in various social activities, being free from the stereotyped perception of gender roles.

3. Joint Participation in Planning and Deciding Policies:
   To secure opportunities in which both men and women can participate in the decision making of various policies as equal partners in society.

4. Compatibility of Activities in Family Life and Other Activities:
   To enable men and women to act as equal family members, while cooperating with each other, receiving support from society, and fulfilling their role in the family, and to work and take part in learning and to participate in activities in local communities.

5. International Cooperation:
   To move forward together with international society to create a gender-equal society, make efforts in cooperation with other countries and international organizations (Gender Equality Bureau, Chief Cabinet Office, 2006).

The Figure 1 shows a mechanism established in January, 2001 by the Japanese government in order to enforce the measures toward constructing a gender-equal society.

Figure 1. Council for Gender Equality

The plan set the goals for women to expand their participation in policy-decision making process to fill 30% of the leadership positions in all spheres of society by the year 2020, to secure equal work opportunities and treatment for men and women, revise the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, and eliminate all forms of violence against women. In June 2006 the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was revised and it introduced the concept of indirect discrimination and measures to eliminate it.

It is to promulgate the principles provided in the Basic Plan for Gender Equality, to enforce the gender-related laws such as for equal employment opportunities, and to cope with gender issues in general women's participation in decision-making processes. In the international ranking Japan is still low in women's participation in policy-making (see Figure 2).

Rank	Country	Lower or single House				Upper House or Senate			
		Elections	Seats*	Women	% W	Elections	Seats*	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	9 2008	80	45	56.30%	10 2003	26	9	34.60%
2	Sweden	9 2006	349	164	47.00%	---	---	---	---
3	Cuba	1 2008	614	265	43.20%	---	---	---	---
4	Finland	3 2007	200	83	41.50%	---	---	---	---
5	Argentina	10 2007	255	102	40.00%	10 2007	72	28	38.90%
6	Netherlands	11 2006	150	59	39.30%	5 2007	75	26	34.70%
7	Denmark	11 2007	179	68	38.00%	---	---	---	---
8	Angola	9 2008	220	82	37.30%	---	---	---	---
9	Costa Rica	2 2006	57	21	36.80%	---	---	---	---
10	Spain	3 2008	350	127	36.30%	3 2008	263	79	30.00%
11	Norway	9 2005	169	61	36.10%	---	---	---	---
12	Belgium	6 2007	150	53	35.30%	6 2007	71	27	38.00%
105	Barbados	1 2008	30	3	10.00%	2 2008	21	4	19.00%
106	Kenya	12 2007	224	22	9.80%	---	---	---	---
107	Gambia	1 2002	53	5	9.40%	---	---	---	---
"	Japan	9 2005	480	45	9.40%	7 2007	242	44	18.20%
"	Romania	11 2004	330	31	9.40%	11 2004	137	14	10.20%
108	India	4 2004	541	49	9.10%	6 2008	243	23	9.50%
"	Turkey	7 2007	549	50	9.10%	---	---	---	---
109	Brazil	10 2006	513	46	9.00%	10 2006	81	10	12.30%
110	Cote d'Ivoire	12 2000	203	18	8.90%	---	---	---	---

Source. Inter-Parliamentary Union, October, 2008

Figure 2. International Comparison: Women in National Parliaments

Japan is ranked 107th along with Gambia and Romania in international comparison of female national parliamentarians according to the statistics provided by Inter-Parliamentary Union as of October, 2008. However, in terms of the seats in the National Diet as the result of the 2005 general election in which all the female candidates from the LDP, the ruling party, were successful female candidates.

Not only in policy-making positions but also in other various fields the numbers in managerial and leadership positions assumed by women in Japan have steadily been increasing over the past years. Does this reveal that the policies and the measures taken by the government for women's participation have been taking effect in empowering women?

Besides the seats in the National Diet, the following shows the increasing number of women holding responsible positions (indicated in percentages to the total number) in various fields over the past years:

- National Advisory Councils and Committees

  | | 1975 | 2.6% | 2005 | 30.9% |

- National Public Officers (Managerial Positions)

  | | 1998 | 1.2% | 2003 | 1.5% |

- Local Government Assemblies

  | | 1975 | 1.2% | 2004 | 8.1% |

- Candidates for career bureaucratic positions

  | | 2001 | 14.8% | 2007 | 25.1% |

- Professional Staff at the United Nations Secretariat

  | | 1996 | 57.6% | 2005 | 59.6% |

- Judiciary:

(Judges)	1977	2.1%	2005	13.7%
(Public Prosecutors)	1977	3.3%	2005	12.5%
(Lawyers)	1977	1.0%	2005	9.5%

- Medical Doctors | 1992 | 7.9% | 2005 | 11.9% |

Source. Framework for Promotion of Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, 2006

In reality, however, Japan lags way behind her counterparts in the advanced part of the world with the proportion of female parliamentarians standing at around 9% of the total, and that of women serving as public officials in managerial positions being around 1.9%. Japan has yet to attain a status that could be referred to as satisfactory in terms of women's participation in decision-making positions.

Another field that is yet to require considerable efforts in increasing women's participation is the academic community in regard to the number of female researchers. Japan among major advanced countries ranks the lowest in the number of research positions filled by women. Also, in their proportion to the total researchers the percentage of women has not been more than 5%, much lower than the percentages compared with the women in other fields as shown in Figure 3.
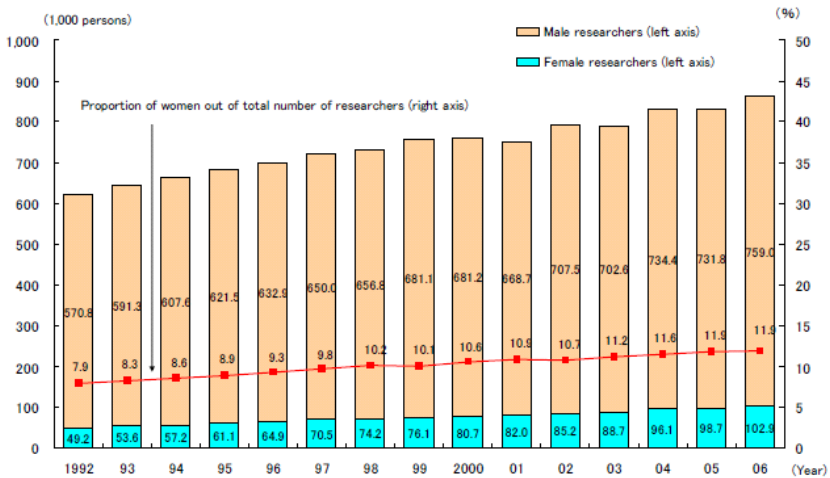
Note. Compiled from Survey into Science and Technology Research, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

Source. Minister Kamikawa's Presentation, The 2nd East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting Held in New Delhi, Dec. 2007

Figure 3. Trends in Number of Female Researchers and Their Proportion to Total Researchers

According to the statistics by Japan Inter-Society Liaison Association Committee for Promoting Equal Participation of Men and Women in Science and Engineering (EPMEWSE), the proportion of female researchers in Japan is 12.4%, which falls far behind 34% in the USA, 28% in France, 26% in the UK and lower than 13% in Korea. The Ministry of Education (MEXT) has thus taken a special measure to enhance the situation by subsidizing part of the personnel cost and initial research fund amounting to six million yen per a newly hired female researcher. The financial support will be provided for three years to universities and research institutions that prove their strong determination to increase more female researchers. The Ministry has made the decision in view that the measures just providing support staff and nursing facilities to create a better working environment for female researchers are not sufficient (Asahi Shimbun, 2008).

Declining Birthrate and Depopulation

Not too long ago the declining birth rate caused a cabinet member to make a slip of the tongue referring women to the issue as if they were baby producing machines in coping with the continuous drop of population, which met a chorus of criticism and created a political turmoil in the ruling party.
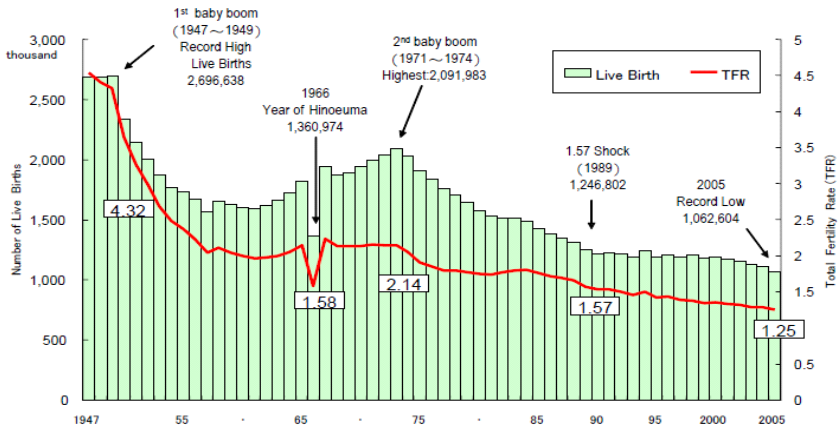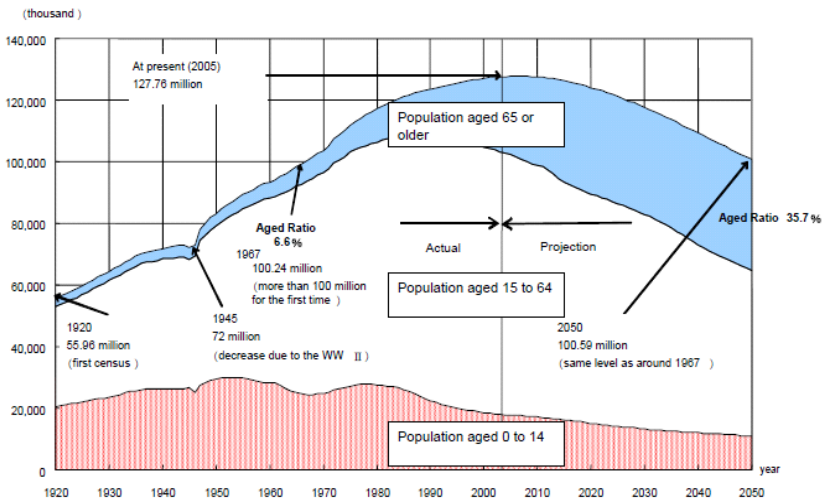

Source. National Institute of Population and Social Security Research Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare

Figure 4. Population Vital Statistics (1947-2005)

The birth rate in Japan has been declining precipitously. The falling population has been causing the emergence of serious socioeconomic, political and cultural issues in Japanese society. In the 30 years following the second baby boom between 1971-1974, the total fertility rate and number of births has been on a downward trend. In 2004, the total fertility rate was recorded as 1.25 and the number of births stood at 1.06 million both of these figures marking historic lows (see Figure 4)

According to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, if this declining birth rate trend continues, it is projected that by 2050 the total population could fall below 100 million. It is further

projected that the aged ratio could rise to 35.7%, which would make Japan a "super aging society" as shown in Figure 4. On the assumption that the present birth rate and mortality rate remain constant, it is projected that statistically by year 2100 the population in the country could fall to a level of one-third the present population and by the year 3000 there would be eventually only one person remaining in Japan. It poses a serious threat to the Japanese society already suffering from the burden of the younger generations having to support the social security and welfare system for increasing senior citizens.

Source. National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare

Figure 5. Population Projections for Japan

Declining Birthrate and Women's Labor Force Participation

Among the issues caused by the declining birth rate and the falling population facing Japanese society is women's participation in the labor market. The increase in Japan's rate of female labor force participation from 1970 to 2000 is the smallest of the 24 high-income member

countries of OECD that have per capita GDP greater than US $10,000. Japan increased its rate by 5.2 percentage points, while the average increase was 23.3 points for these 24 countries. On the other hand, the decline in Japan's birth rate was about average rather than small. Japan declined by 0.8 points, while the average decline was 0.9 points for the 24 countries. These statistical figures apparently indicate a correlation between women's participation in the work force and the birth rate. The tendency appears the higher the women's labor participation rate, the lower the birth rate tends to be, naturally.

Total fertility rate

Female labor force participation rate (15-64 years of age) (%)
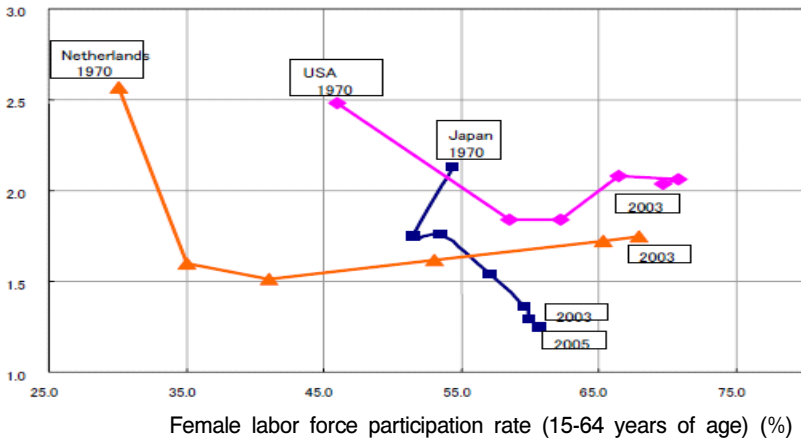
Note. Six Time Points: 1970, 1980, 1985, 1990, 2000, 2003. (Seven Time Points for Japan Including up to 2005)

Source. Minister Inoguchi's Presentation, The 1st East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting Held in Tokyo, June, 2006

Figure 6. Birthrate and Female Labor Force Participation

The goal of the Japanese government towards constructing a gender-equal society has come under the context of declining birth rate and aging population. The Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society enacted in June 1999 and the subsequent policy development have deeply been interwoven with the declining birth rate. In this regard, a researcher in

Hong Kong holds that the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society and the measures taken by the government so far still fall short from enforcing gender equality and do not affirm equality as a human right, and addresses a contradiction that since the pursuit of gender equality is a means to boost the birth rate, when there is a contradiction between these two goals, the former will be conceded. She goes on and claims that delaying marriage and reluctance to have babies has been understood as women's resistance to the unfriendly social policy for them to harmonize work and family life (Huen, 2007, p.1)

"The Husband Should be the Bread Winner, the Wife Should Stay at Home"
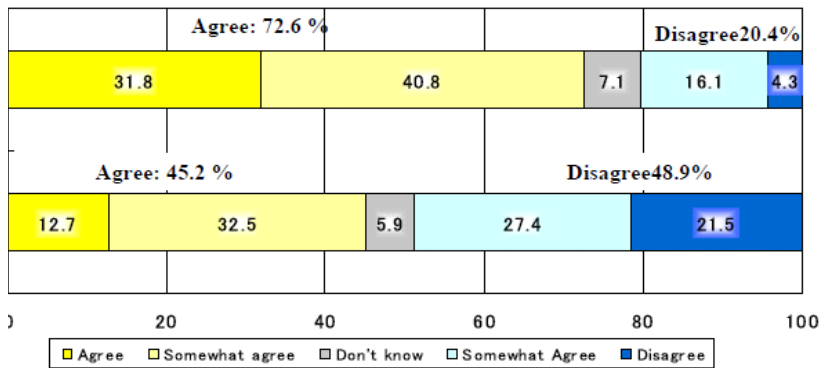
Source. Public Opinion Polls on a Gender Equal Society, Cabinet Office, 2004

Figure 7. Changing Views on fixed Gender Stereotypes

Indeed, because of the lack of support both at work and home working married women find themselves in a tough situation to cope with balancing their career and family life. On top of this problem, there has been a latent social and traditional bias regarding the fixed gender roles as the division of labor between men and women despite that the opportunities for women to work have been widely expanded and their enrolment in higher education has remarkably risen in the post war society. According to a public opinion poll on a gender equal society

(Gender Equality Bureau, 2004), the result showed changing views on fixed gender stereotypes in response to the statement: "The husband should be the breadwinner, the wife should stay at home". While in 1979, more than 70% of the respondents supported stereo-typical gender roles, by 2004 the percentage dropped to 45.2%, but the percentage still remains high (see Figure 7).

Of all working women, nearly 70% leave their workplace upon the birth of their first child and stay at home for child rearing (Figure 8). Once quitting the job, it becomes extremely difficult for them to get back to the same position or land another full time job with similar working conditions, especially in cases of well-educated women.
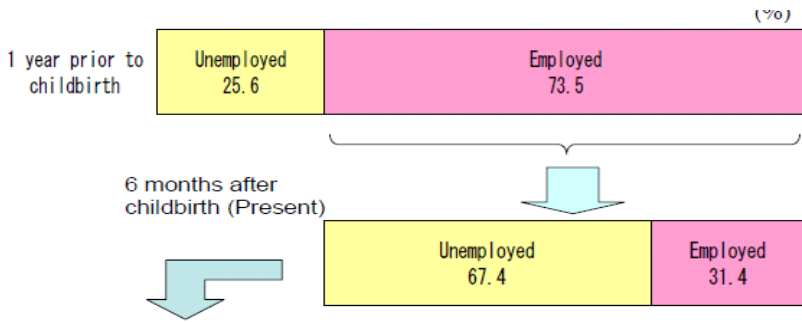
Source. Minister Kamikawa's Presentation, The 2nd East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting Held in New Delhi, 2007

Figure 8. Childbirth and Employment Status of Women

Because of the situation the employment pattern of Japanese women has long been said to be M-shaped. Women aged around 25 most actively participate in the labor force. When reaching the age over 30, however, many women leave the workplace to have babies and after child rearing return to the labor force. Thus the ratio in 30-40 age group forms the bottom of the M-shaped curve.
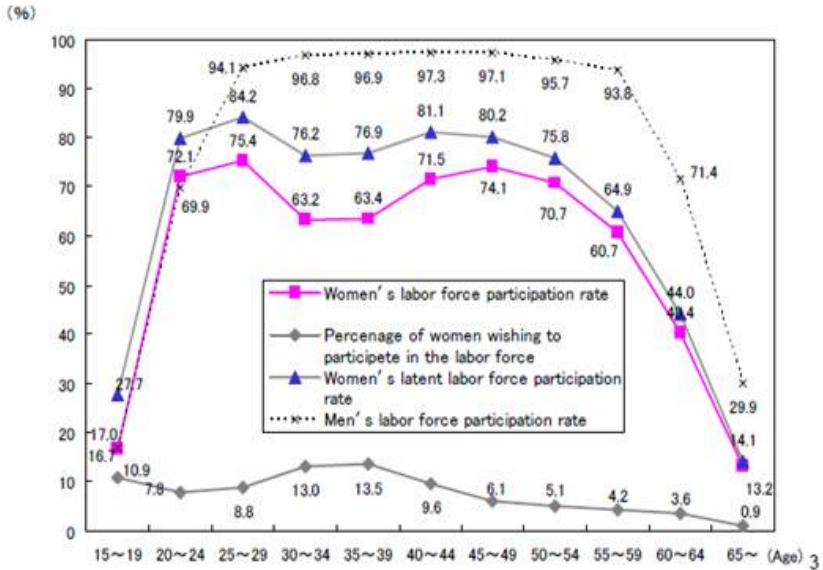
Source. Minister Kamikawa's Presentation, The 2nd East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting
    Held in New Delhi, 2007

Figure 9. Women's Labor Force Participation Rate by Age Bracket Showing an
   M-shaped Curve

Another important factor that needs to be addressed is the discriminatory wage system against working women. There has been clear disparity in the wages of standard workers in the Japanese labor market that discriminates against women. According to the Basic Statistical Survey on Wage Structure conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2003), the standard net monthly salary paid to standard female workers, whose average age was 38.1, and average length of continuous service of 9.0 years, in June 2003 was 239,400 yen, while standard male workers (an average age of 41.2 and average continuous service length of 13.5 years) were paid a standard net monthly salary averaging 368,600 yen, indicating a considerable disparity in wages between men and women (see below).

Table. 1 Wages of Standard Workers: Discriminatory Wage System Against Women Workers

	Average age (Years)	Average Continuous Service(Years)	Standard net monthly salary(1000)	Prescribed monthly salary(1000)	Bonuses and other special salary(1000)
Total	40.3	12.2	325.8	302.1	923.5
Women	38.1	9.0	239.4	224.2	617.5
Men	41.2	13.5	368.6	335.5	1054.9

Source. Basic Statistical Survey on Wage Structure, Ministry of Health and Labor, 2003

According to the findings of the survey, the gender-based wage gap (expressed as indicators when the male level is assigned the value 100.0) shows a long-term trend of gradual contraction in terms of both the standard net monthly salary and the prescribed monthly salary. In 2003, the indicators were 64.9 for the standard net monthly salary and 66.8 for the prescribed monthly salary (see wage structures on the table and Figure 10).
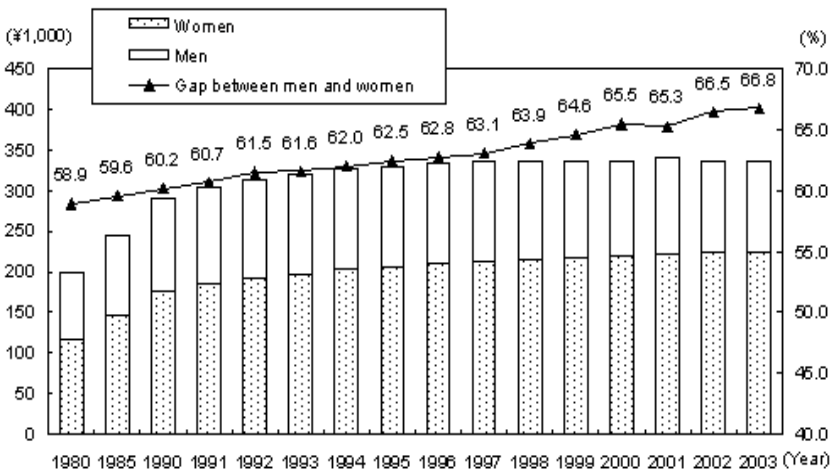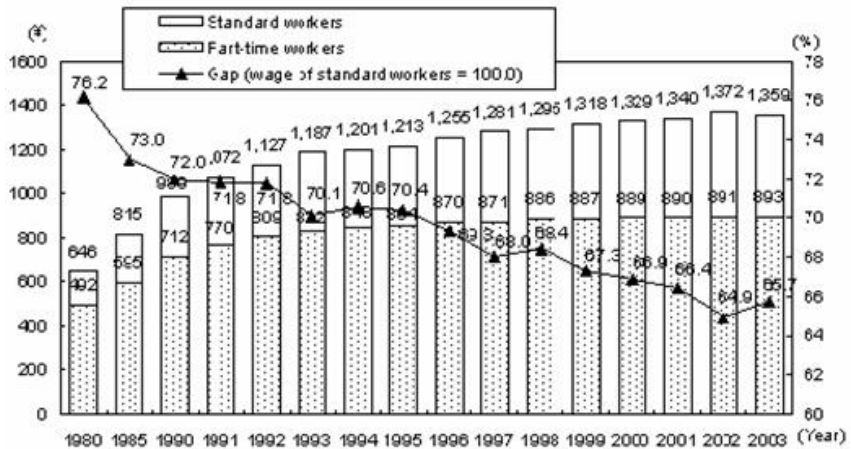

Source. Basic Statistical Survey on Wage Structure, Ministry of Health and Labor, 2003

Figure 10. Trends in Prescribed Monthly Salaries and the Wage Gap Between Men and Women

This discriminatory wage system continuously practiced in the labor market is obviously due to the traditional view held by the employers that women are not as useful as men because once they get married they quit the job or require to take a lengthy maternity leave before and after the child birth incurring loss to the company. Therefore the employers are reluctant to hire female workers and place them in responsible positions, causing inequality in women's participation in the labor market.

Furthermore, when trying to get back into the labor market and find a job after child rearing the women usually must be satisfied with part-time work and much less wage while still coping to balance work and family life. The same 2003 survey shows that the indicator for the wage gap between part-time workers and standard workers was 50.3 in the case of female workers taken separately. Specifically, when the prescribed monthly salary for standard workers in 2003 is converted into hourly terms and assigned the value 100.0, the indicator for part-time workers was 65.7 (Figure 11).

Source. Basic Statistical Survey on Wage Structure, Ministry of Health and Labor, 2003

Figure 11. Changes in the Wage Gap between Women Part-Time and Standard Workers

The wage gap between female part-time and standard workers brings about even more disadvantage for the married women trying to find employment again, especially those educated women. After finishing child rearing, the obstacles facing the middle aged mothers who have been absent for nearly ten years in the labor market in trying to find jobs commensurate with their education and qualifications are age limitation combined with lack of support from their husbands in child caring and an inadequate support system for work-life balance in the private industries.

There seems to exist a dilemma in achieving the goal of increasing the birth rate and women's active participation in the labor market. When one goes down the other goes up. The country is in urgent need to cope with the contradictory situation with more combined social and political efforts to enlighten the ignorant public about gender issues and to provide more adequate support for women with children to continue participating in the labor market.

Case Studies in Work-Life Balance

As described in the preceding pages, the employment pattern of the Japanese women has long been characterized by an M-shaped curve. However, in the case of well-educated women once leaving the workplace, Sasagawa (2005) maintains that they do not necessarily fit into this usual M-shaped curve. In her investigative research study conducted in work-life balance based on interviewing working and non-working women between 1998 and 2000, Sasagawa explored if home-based Tele-working could be a work style to fulfill the career aspirations, the demands for continuous work and extra income, and the self-satisfaction of educated mothers. Some of the findings of her study are:

- White-color, well-educated women do not fit into the usual M-shaped Curve after quitting the job.

- Unlike the high school graduates the labor participation ratio of the women with university degrees coming back into the labor market remains low, not going up again after reaching the peak at the age of early 20s and going down towards early 30s on the M-shaped curve.
- Among university-graduated non-working married women there remains a strong desire for working again if they can find challenging jobs.
- Age limitation restricts their desire for finding again the kind of work commensurate with their education and qualifications as white-color workers.
- Simple part-time jobs at a supermarket, factory, etc. are usually readily available for middle-aged house wives wanting to work.
- Factors that keep educated women from finding part-time jobs with low prestige are self-esteem, university degree (nothing but obstacles in finding menial part-time jobs), and difficulty in getting their husbands (being at the peak of their career) to support them with household affairs and childcare.
- Those married women who want to continue working after childbirth engage themselves in home-based Tele-work (on their own home turf called, SOHO – Small Office Home Office and/or Sweat Office Happy Office) by the use of computer, the internet and telecommunication networks. Many of these Tele-workers are well-educated mothers.
- Advantages are flexible work scheduling, self-satisfaction, enhancing work-life balance situation.
- Some problems exist, however, such as high start-up cost, difficulty in marketing and securing the work, unstable income level, lack of accessibility to new knowledge and skills to enhance and improve the quality of work.

It is vital, Sasagawa stresses in conclusion, that more opportunities be provided for recurrent education and online training programs to facilitate

Tele-working and assist those challenging married women with children. She hopes that higher education institutions offer courses by distance mode to enhance IT literacy for working women. There exists ample information for fundamental knowledge and skills on a number of web sites provided by various government external organizations but not much information for high level professional skills required to enhance the work of those women engaged in home-based Tele-work.

Tele-work is defined as "a way of working anywhere and anytime by using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) without restriction of time and place". It could be a solution to the everlasting dilemma in achieving the goal of both promoting the gender equality and keeping the birth rate from declining if supported appropriately by government and society as a whole.

The following is an article of a magazine (President, 2006) covering a story of a career mother in Kobe who beautifully succeeded in balancing Work and Family Life and promoting her project by the effective use of media and the Internet with support of her company and husband.

"Womama"

A membership web site to support amateur mothers built by P & G External Relations PR Manager

An innovative idea to market new products via internet

Figure 12. "Womama" —a Successful Case of Working Career Mother

A mother of two children, she was put in charge of a multi-brand project called "Womama" as its PR manager. The planning of the project was based on an innovative and challenging idea to market the company's new products such as sanitary napkins via internet, difficult to advertise in the media. She constructed a membership web site to support amateur mothers by providing helpful information on child rearing, cosmetics, etc. and also the information on the company's new merchandise. She promoted this innovative project in collaboration with other companies and widely publicized the Womama project effectively utilizing the media and the Internet. The Womama memberships exceeded 40,000 and the site was visited by more than 950,000 people. The response rate to its mail magazine advertisements exceeded 15%, an amazing rate for this sort of PR.

The article introduces a truly successful case that is proof of what a talented career mother with challenging spirits combined with company' support, an understanding for Work-Life balance, and the effective use of ICT could accomplish. This brilliant female PR manager who accomplished this big success happens to be a former student of the author of this paper.

Conclusion - Gender Sensitivity and Diversity in ICT

An Africa Prize Laureate winner and activist in fighting for women's rights, Sara Longwe believes that ICT have popularized her gender struggles. "All communication facilities cost money and this is expensive in Africa. Operating from the business centers is expensive and when it involves paying for information access, women are less likely to be able to pay. I have access at my home and in my office. This has helped me manage to publicize my work" (Zulu, 2004).

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can be no doubt a useful tool for promoting gender equality and dealing with various issues contained therein to empower women. ICT can help women voice their beliefs and popularize their activities as in the case of Sara Longwe.

ICT can provide a means for women to enhance their work-life situation as in the case of the Japanese married women engaging themselves in Tele-working. ICT can be used to offer various courses in the form of e-Learning to educate and train women to be economically independent. ICT build networks of people beyond time and space to engage them in dialogue and "participatory democracy" across different cultural and political boundaries.

In concluding this paper a conceptual framework is suggested that may be of help in coping with Gender-related issues and empowering women by the use of ICT. The following are some of the useful concepts and notions:

> **"Right to Communicate"** is an old dilemma becoming obsolete but could still be relevant to deal with gender-related issues for women. The variations of the R+C Concept is valid in dealing with gender sensitivity and equality, particularly in the developing part of the world to exercise women's rights and empower their status. A number of articles on various categories including gender have been published by the UH Press, the Center for Communication Rights. The compilation of development on the Right to Communicate contains the landmark work by Harms and Richstad on its history and original concept (1977). The Right to Communicate concept involves all kinds of definitive characteristics of more specific rights, such as a right to privacy, a right to education, a right to be different, a right to preserve, a right to participate… at the individual, community, and national levels. The R+C must impose an obligation somewhere in order to be effective. With this regard, just as one has a right not to listen to what a salesman knocking at the door has to say, developing countries in Asia and elsewhere have the right not to be communicated to because information from the outside world may threaten autonomous nation building. In the same way the R+C may be

applicable to assure women to exercise their rights who to communicate to, not to communicate to, or not to be communicated to, in their social relationships with men (Kobayashi, 1978).

Initiatives by International Organizations: "Education for All (EFA)" and "Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)"

In order to promote EFA and ESD in the developing part of the world the Japanese government has appropriated special funds for various projects to enhance access to educational opportunity and alleviating the existing digital divide between nations, communities and individuals, e.g, Japanese Fund in Trust (JFIT). While EFA aimed at enhancing the quantitative aspect of education centering in the developing countries, ESD deals with the qualitative aspect of education not just in the developing part of the world but also in the advanced countries. Linking EFA and ESD is important in selecting specific agenda such as "Capacity Building" in women's empowerment for sustainable development. Gender, as well as other basic problems facing humankind like peace, poverty, hunger, ecology, energy, HIV, multiculturalism, etc., is an important agenda for ESD activists, advocators, and policy makers to tackle by the use of ICT. For instance ICT may be used for enlightening women to be aware of the basic gender-related problems, capacity building and various training programs available to them, especially in rural areas. The issue, however, exists in the accessibility to appropriate ICT especially for those women living in rural villages. The fact that the ICT/Internet language is predominantly English poses a serious difficulty for uneducated women to access the sources of knowledge, skills and technology itself (Hafkin, 2002).
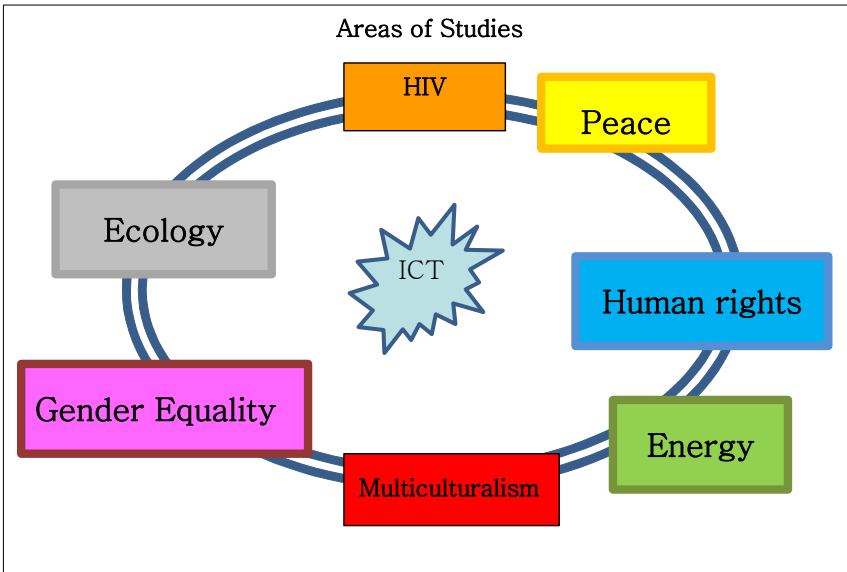
Figure 13. Promotion of ESD by ICT

"Global Learning Networks (GLN)"

GLN have emerged as a result of a series of interrelated developments such as the advent of ICT, cheaper communication, proliferation of computers, moves towards globalization. It means "Networks of people involved in learning and sharing through ICT on a global scale" and has become an indispensable part of our lives today (Kobayashi, 2005). Through collaborative international networks and communities of practice GLN facilitate the forming of networks of people and world opinions and morale beyond cultural boundaries through the Internet and other technologies on a global scale. GNL also facilitate ICT-based training and information exchange, the accumulating of knowledge banks and databases that provide unprecedented opportunities for policy-makers, educators and practitioners to share knowledge and experience. Last but not least, GNL also deal with the problems derived from the

fundamental human rights including gender struggles we have in common. GLN have enormous potentials in facilitating the argument of gender related issues and advancing the status of women if utilized appropriately without a single culture or political entity dominating.
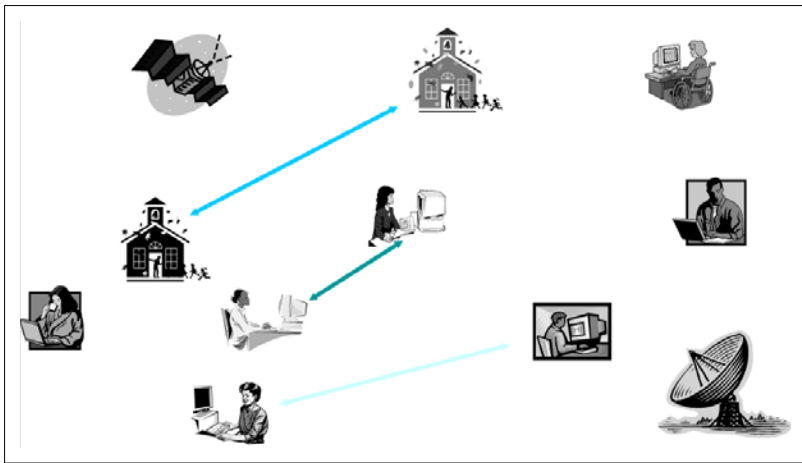

Figure 14. Global Learning Networks (GLN)

Use of Appropriate Technologies: Conventional Media as Soft Power

There are diverse technologies available for use, both high-tech and low-tech. In view of the diversity in available technologies and the difficulty for women to access highly innovative technologies, we can continue using traditional educational media. "If a country like Japan, the most developed nation in Asia cannot efficiently implement online learning in more than a decade, what hope do less developed nations have of doing so? One can be grateful that there are still world-class educators who use media which really do reach the student population. Via imaginative fusions of radio, TV, and the web, people can learn from them how ODL delivery practices must be driven by accessibility rather

than novelty" (Baggaley, 2008).

The conventional media such as TV & Radio can be effective soft power tools to publicize and disseminate gender struggles as seen in the case of "Oshin", a Japanese TV soap opera broadcasted by NHK. Viewed by people in more than 60 countries, "Oshin" especially helped bring awareness of the gender inequality to young women in male dominated societies where gender struggles prevail and make them aspire to be successfully participating, like the challenging heroine of the Japanese drama.

Gender inequality does exist in a variety of forms whether in the advanced part of the world or developing countries. We have technologies, accumulated knowledge and wisdom to bridge the gaps and to deal with the gender issues. The Time is ripe and the tide is rising for international collaboration with the use of appropriate ICT in promoting cross-border learning activities toward fostering global learning networks and, enhancing worldwide educational communication networks, and advancing the status of Women.

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