

## Report

# Abenomics and Gender Beliefs: A Preliminary Report

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## 1. Introduction

When Shinzo Abe was re-elected Prime Minister of Japan in December of 2012 he took the helm of a country that was in a decade-long period of low growth and periodic recession.<sup>1)</sup> Japan has also gone through several decades of low birth rate, an ageing population, and most recently, a year on year decrease in population. Current trends are expected to continue and the depopulation of Japan, especially in rural areas, to accelerate as the total fertility rate remains low and the number of child-bearing women continues to decline.<sup>2)</sup> This decline in population is of special concern to the government as it portends dire consequences for Japan's economic vigor in the coming years and decades as the labor pool decreases and the ratio of dependent people to workers increases.<sup>3)</sup> With a stagnant economy and declining population and workforce, the Abe administration proposed an economic policy aimed at reviving Japan's stalled economy and adding workers to the labor pool. The policy has

come to be known as the three arrows of "Abenomics" and targets three areas; (1) monetary policy, (2) fiscal policy, and (3) growth strategies. Of particular interest here are the growth strategies which are aimed at addressing current and future labor shortages as the population continues to decline. In particular, Abe has embraced "Womenomics"; the idea that industrialized economies will experience a paradigm shift in corporate demands on employees due to the increased value of women in the economy and in employment, to changing attitudes of women towards work, and in some cases the general population, and to an increased interest in balancing work and personal life. Many of the growth strategies that Abe has proposed are aimed at promoting the continued employment of women after marriage and child-birth, and increasing the percentage of women working full-time, especially young mothers of whom nearly 65% drop out of the workforce, many permanently, at the birth of their first child. The government has already encouraged corporations to introduce programs that promote the employment of women, increase gender equality in the workplace, and support work-life balance for employees with young children by providing corporate tax incentives. In addition, Abe intends to create 400,000 new spaces in nursery schools and day care centers by 2018 to allow more mothers to remain in, or return to, the labor force. The plan

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also includes policies that will increase the number of spaces in after-school care in elementary schools nationwide for 300,000 students. The administration also intends to expand job search services for mothers with young children to assist them to return to employment after child bearing or child rearing. The goals for these policies are ambitious; to increase full-time employment of women aged 25 to 44 from 68% in 2012 to 73% by 2020, and to increase the percentage of women in leadership positions from 11% (2012) to 30%. The Abe administration's interest in increasing the number of women in the workforce is fueled by the belief that if Japanese women's labor participation rate were to equal that of most other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, then Japan could see an increase in GDP per capita by 4%, and by a possible 8% if the participation rate were raised to that of Northern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Others have postulated that if Japanese women's rate of labor participation were equal to men's, GDP could increase by as much as 16%.<sup>5</sup>

Although the administration's objectives would be a boon to those women who wish to be fully employed in a, hopefully, satisfying career like their male counterparts, we believe that the prevalent and strongly held traditional gender beliefs' makes success unlikely. Throughout the past decades many surveys have shown that most Japanese, male and female alike, believe it better for mothers to stay home as caregivers while their children are young, especially until the children enter elementary school. For a mother with two children this means that she may well be out of the workforce for eight to ten years. Reentering the fulltime workforce after so long a hiatus has proven difficult and most reenter as part-time or

non-regular workers. Perhaps Abe is relying on the widely held belief that the younger generation of Japanese who grew up in an era of "gender equality", gender education, and the emergence of "ikumen", will be more likely to exhibit gender equality traits and that the future workplace and home will allow wives and mothers to enter, exit, and reenter the workforce in significant numbers.<sup>6</sup> But, do the younger generation, in particular the current generation of university students, hold more egalitarian gender beliefs that will allow the home and workplace to change and subsequently allow women to participate in employment at levels at or near their OECD counterparts? In order to investigate whether the current generation of university students have different gender beliefs from previous generations a survey was carried out.

## 2. Method

This study is a cross-sectional quantitative study by self-administered questionnaire completed by Japanese university students. Questionnaires were distributed directly to students, completed, and then immediately collected by research collaborators. There were 1073 (97.9%) valid responses. The questionnaire collected information about individual attributes such as age, gender, year in school, university name and area of study, current living situation, and parents' employment history and current employment status. Participants were questioned about their anticipated future life course and employment patterns (married, single, career course, working while raising young children, etc.), and were asked to respond to statements about gender roles at home and work, attitudes towards child rearing and housework, women

working before and after marriage, and before and after having children.

### Participants

The participants were 1073 university students enrolled in two national universities and eight private universities in central Japan; Hiroshima Prefecture (8), Okayama Prefecture (1), and Kyoto Prefecture (1). Participants were from first year students to graduate and post-graduate students with the mean year in university at 1.7 (SD 0.9). The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 29, the mean age was 19.7 (SD1.2), 48.7% were male and 51.3% female. Participants were enrolled in various departments including medical, education, sciences, and social science.

### Measures

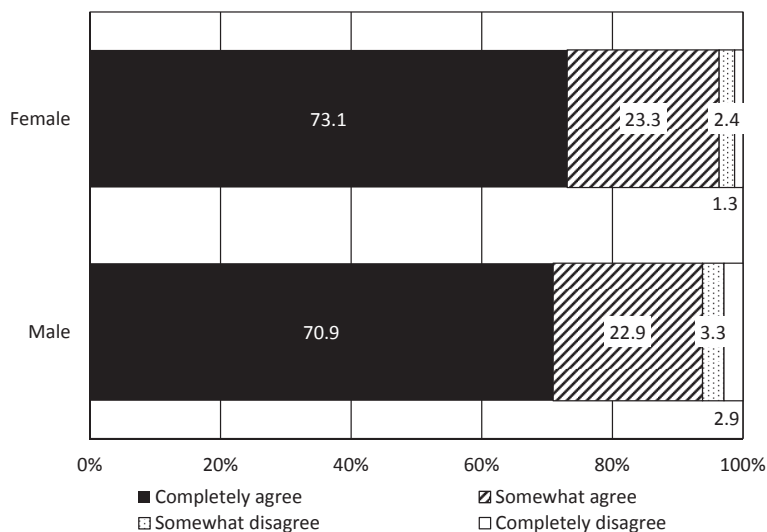
In order to compare the gender ideology of the participants in this survey with the general population, questions were selected from several standard surveys investigating gender ideology that have been conducted in Japan over the past few decades. Questions about gender ideology and gender roles at work and home are taken from the International Social Survey Programs' (ISSP) Family and Changing Gender Roles II (1994), and III (2002).<sup>7)</sup> Questions on whether it is desirable for mothers with young children to work or not are from the ISSP and the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research's (IPSS) Japanese National Fertility Survey: Attitudes toward Marriage and Family Among Japanese Singles (2010), and the IPSSs' Surveys on Family in Japan and the Division of Family Labor (1993, 1998, 2003, 2008).<sup>8)</sup> Other questions are the authors own and have been

validated.

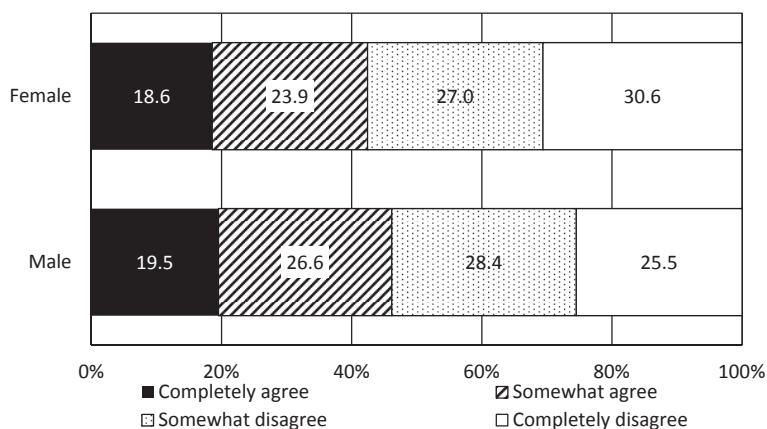
### 3. Results<sup>9)</sup>

Japan has a highly educated workforce, with 50.9% of males and 55.5% of female high school graduates advancing to junior college or university in 2013.<sup>10)</sup> The Japanese government predicts that this will continue and is relying on an educated female workforce, that is, graduates from universities and junior colleges, to fill predicted labor shortages, particularly in mid and upper management positions. To investigate attitudes towards equality of education for males and females, participants were asked their response to two statements. First, participants were asked to respond to the statement "It is just as important to educate daughters as it is to educate sons" (Figure 1). Not unexpectedly, 96.4% and 93.8% of female and male respondents, respectively, somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, with only 1.3% of female and 2.9% of male respondents strongly disagreeing. Second, participants were asked about equality of education for males and females in higher education, that is university, with the statement, "Sons in a family should be given more encouragement to go to university than daughters" (Figure 2). Disagreement with this statement indicates a belief in male/female equality in higher education. The response rate for strongly or somewhat disagree was 57.6% for females and 53.9%. In other words, 46% of male and 42% of females somewhat or strongly agreed that sons should be encouraged to go to university over daughters.

One factor inhibiting women's increased participation in the labor force is the belief that preschool children suffer when a mother works, and that it is important for mothers to concentrate



**Figure 1** University Students - It is just as important to educate daughters as it is to educate sons.

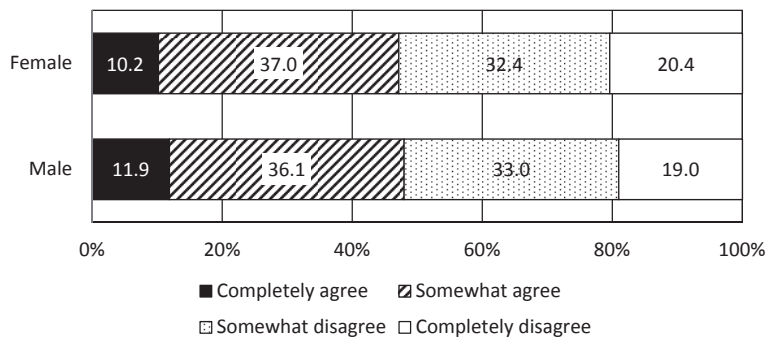


**Figure 2** University Students - Sons in a family should be given more encouragement to go to university than daughters.

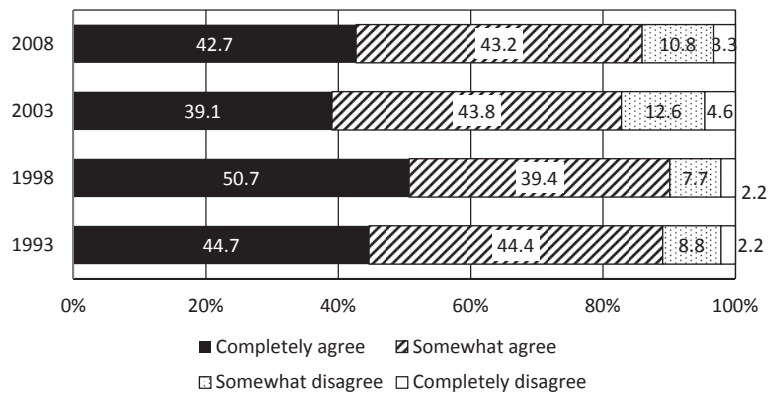
on childrearing when children are young. Japanese attitudes towards women working when children are small have been measured by responses to the statement “A preschool child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works” (Figure 3).<sup>11)</sup> Male and female responses in this survey were remarkably similar with 47.2% and 48%, respectively, completely agreeing or somewhat agreeing with the statement. A similar statement has been asked in the IPSSs’ Surveys on Family

in Japan and the Division of Family Labor, “Mothers with children under 3 should concentrate on child rearing.”<sup>12)</sup> Responses to this question have been remarkably consistent the four times the survey was carried out, beginning in 1993, and nearly 90% of respondents in the most recent 2008 survey strongly or somewhat agree with the statement (Figure 4).

One of the main components of the current administrations growth strategy is to eliminate



**Figure 3** University Students - A preschool child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works.

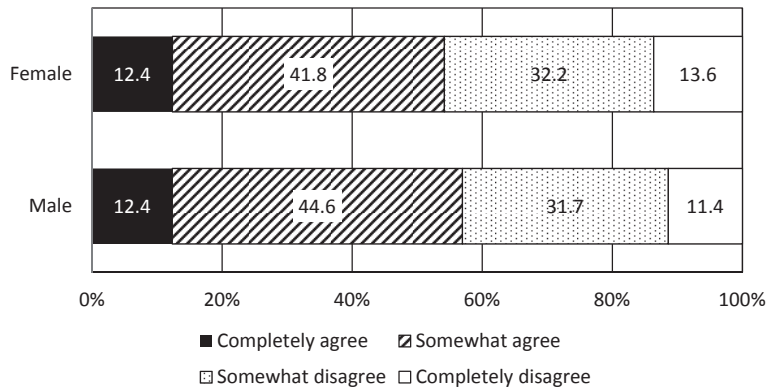


Source: The Survey of Japanese Family Households Report 2010

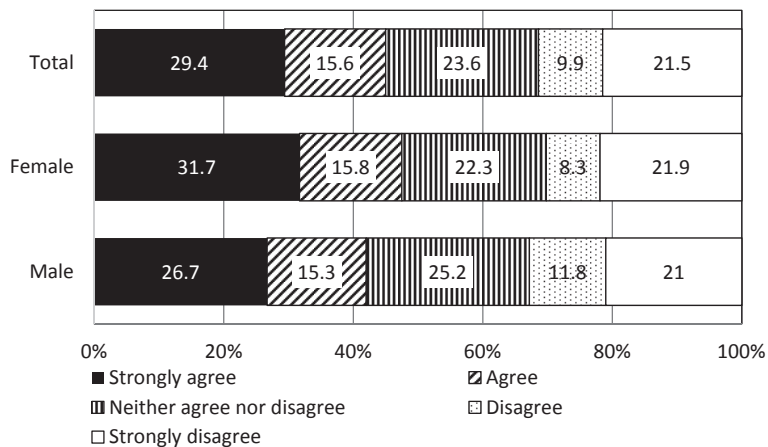
**Figure 4** Mothers with children under three should concentrate on child rearing.

structural impediments to women's participation in the workforce and assumes that, if given the opportunity, more women would enter employment and remain employed throughout their lives. To evaluate participants' attitudes towards women's real (by female participants) and perceived (by male participants) future aspirations we asked them to respond to the statement, "A job is alright but what a woman really wants is a home and family" (Figure 5). Again, responses were remarkably similar with 54.2% of females and 57% of males agreeing with the statement. This response rate is similar to the 2002 ISSP survey that surveyed the general public (Figure 6).

Finally, in order to ascertain how students felt about the relative worth of male and female careers we asked them to respond to the following statement; "If a woman can make a better career than her husband, he should help her with her career rather than try to get ahead in a career of his own" (Figure 7). For the first time responses indicate a significant difference between male and female participants. Fifty-eight percent of male respondents somewhat or completely agreed with the statement while only 29% of female respondents did. This may indicate that female participants believe a man's career is more important than a woman's and that wives should be supportive. An alternative interpretation is that

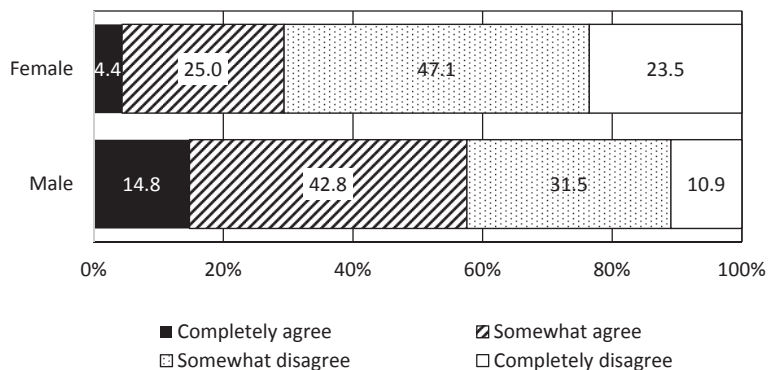


**Figure 5** University Students - A job is alright but what a woman really wants is a home and family.



Source: International Social Science Program, Family and Changing Gender Roles III 2002

**Figure 6** A job is alright but what a woman really wants is a home and family.



**Figure 7** University Students - If a woman can make a better career than her husband, he should help her with her career rather than try to get ahead in a career of his own.

women in this survey would rather not be the main breadwinner in a family but would rather rely on the traditional husband's role as main provider of income.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this investigation have shown that male and female university students hold remarkably similar traditional gender beliefs about educational equality and opportunity, that is, a male's access to higher education is more important than a female's. Furthermore, they believe it is important for a mother to be present in the home when a preschool child is present, and that women ultimately want to be housewives and mothers instead of being employed. In addition, female participants in this study believe that men's careers should take precedence over women's, which we believe makes it more likely that women will exit the workforce after marriage or childbirth, just as previous generations have done.

These traditional gender beliefs, which are similar to the gender beliefs of previous generations, have important implications for the success or failure of the policies being put forth by the Abe administration. As stated above, current policies aim to address the structural barriers to a woman's increased participation in the labor force, and especially for those women with young children. Increasing space in daycare and extending after school care hours would be welcomed by many families, in particular single parent families, (85% of which are headed by women), and those families in which a dual income is a necessity.<sup>13)</sup> However, for those families who have sufficient economic resources to make work or non-employment a viable choice for wives/moth-

ers, the proposed policies offer little inducement to remain in or reenter the workforce after marriage or childbirth. This is particularly true for those women who have gone on to higher education. Data indicates that men and women tend to choose partners that have similar educational backgrounds, that is, university graduates marry each other and high school graduates marry each other.<sup>14)</sup> This has great significance for a couple's potential earnings; a male university graduate earns nearly the same income as dual income couples who have only graduated from high school. Thus, if the female participants in this study follow in the footsteps of the previous generation and marry university graduates they will have less economic incentive to continue work after marriage or childbirth. Indeed, their traditional gender beliefs; that a mother is necessary for raising children, that young children suffer when a mother is not present in the home, and that a man's career is more important than a woman's, will only reinforce the decision to leave the workforce and only return to work as part-time or irregular workers at some later time. Compared to high school graduates, a relatively smaller number of women who have graduated from universities or graduate school return to work after they quit their jobs during marriage or childbirth, and the majority of those who do return to work do so as part-time or non-regular employees.<sup>15)</sup> Indeed, of those women who were not employed but wished to return to work in 2012, estimated to be some 3.03 million, only 17% desired a full-time regular position, with 72% wanting non-regular employment.<sup>16)</sup> Thus, even if the Abe administration's growth strategies are successful in reducing the barriers to full-employment for women, it is unlikely that many more

will take advantage and return to full-time work. Other measures will be necessary to induce women to remain in the workforce in sufficient numbers to affect the current and future labor shortages.

### Notes

- 1) Abe also served as Prime Minister from September 2006 to September 2007.
- 2) Most experts agree that the only way to stop the decline of Japan's population is to reverse current immigration policy. That is, to allow many more immigrants to settle in Japan as permanent residents than is now the case. The current immigration policy is to not allow the percentage of foreign residents to exceed 5% of the total population. In order to offset the decline in population Japan would need to accept over 20 million immigrants by 2050. Referenced in "The Future of Japan's Immigration Policy: a battle diary", Sakanaka Hidenori, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 2005.
- 3) In 2012 each person over the age of 65 was supported by 2.4 people of working age (20-64). By 2060 each older person will be supported by 1.2 people of working age. Japan Nursing Association; *Nursing for the Older People in Japan*, 2012.
- 4) Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund. <https://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2014/091214.htm>
- 5) Hillary Clinton. <http://time.com/65673/shinzo-abe-japan-interview/>
- 6) "Ikumen" is a word derived from combining the Japanese "ikujii" (child care) and the English word "men". Ikumen is officially defined as a "men who enjoy parenting and grow through parenting or those who wish to do so in the future" (MHLW, 2012).
- 7) The ISSP is a continuing annual program of cross-national collaboration on surveys covering topics important for social science research. <http://www.issp.org/>
- 8) <http://www.ipss.go.jp/pr-ad/e/eng/index.html>
- 9) Although the survey investigated many areas of participants' gender ideology, ideal and predicted life course, and gendered roles in the home and workplace, this preliminary report is limited to several of the most significant results obtained.
- 10) Fifty-four percent of new entrants to university were male, and 45.6% were female, while 1.1% and 9.5% of male and female high school graduates, respectively, enter junior colleges. Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, Culture and Technology – Japan, 2013. <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/statistics/>
- 11) Pre-school in Japan begins at age 3.
- 12) This survey has been carried out four times, 1993, 1998, 2003, and 2008. In the latest survey there were over 11,000 respondents aged from 20 to over 75 years old.
- 13) In 2014 there were 1,463,000 single-parent households in Japan and only 15%, or 223,000, were headed by single fathers. Fifty-four percent of single-parent families have incomes that set them below the poverty line. (the highest rate in the developed world). November 7th 2015 <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/11/07/business/no-relief-sight-japans-poor-single-parent-families/>
- 14) Toward Active Participation of Women as the Core of Growth Strategies: Summary, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2013, p. 7.
- 15) Ibid, p. 4.
- 16) Ibid, p. 5.