

# Gender equality discourse: a Japanese context

Gabriel Eweje, Hitomi Toyosaki, Kazunori Kobayashi, Sitong Michelle Chen and Masahiro Hosoda

Gabriel Eweje is based at School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia. Hitomi Toyosaki is based at College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ibaraki University, Mito, Japan. Kazunori Kobayashi is based at School of Management and Marketing, Massey University Business School, Auckland, New Zealand. Sitong Michelle Chen is based at the Department of Marketing and International Business, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Masahiro Hosoda is based at College of Business, Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan.

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This review paper aims to critically examine the discourse on gender equality in Japan, focusing on its socio-cultural, economic and political dimensions. By synthesising existing literature, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and barriers that influence the gender equality debate in Japan, while identifying gaps and opportunities for future research and specifying where practice can be recoupled to policy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An integrative literature review was conducted across four key institutional domains – markets, government/public sector, families and education – analysed at the macro, meso and micro levels. The synthesis is integrative rather than exhaustive, prioritising analytic coverage over completeness.

**Findings** – The dynamic relationship between institutional pressures and cultural norms reinforces traditional gender roles across domains. While global pressures and progressive policies have catalysed some change, entrenched routines and weak enforcement often constrain substantive transformation. Decoupling is concentrated at two interfaces: macro to meso (policy to organisation) and meso to micro (organisation to household).

**Originality/value** – This study integrates institutional multiplicity with the three-cycle social innovation lens to demonstrate how Japan's competing logics sustain policy–practice decoupling and to identify where recoupling can begin. It specifies two actionable interfaces (macro to meso and meso to micro), aligns practical levers to each and proposes illustrative indicators that make early recoupling observable for internal monitoring and public reporting, providing usable guidance for policymakers and organisations.

**Keywords** Gender equality, Gender norms, Institutional theory, Institutional multiplicity, Decoupling, Recoupling

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

[...] investing in women is not only the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do. I am deeply convinced that, in women, the world has at its disposal, the most significant and yet largely untapped potential for development and peace. Ban Ki Moon, former UN Secretary General (cited by [Kabeer and Natali, 2013](#), p. 6).

The above quotation by Ban Ki-moon in 2008 highlights the persistent lack of attention to gender equality, especially in terms of opportunities for women's well-being, agency and human rights ([Kabeer and Natali, 2013](#)). In spite of increasing prominence in international discourse and the focus of academia, business, government, NGOs and society, women's representation in senior roles across business, academia and politics, especially in Japan, remains limited ([Eweje and Nagano, 2021](#)). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further underscore the importance of gender equality, with SDG 5 calling for the empowerment of all women and girls, affirming that "gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and

sustainable world” (United Nations, 2018). Similarly, Grosser *et al.* (2017) emphasise the critical role of corporate responsibility in promoting gender equality, given corporations’ expanding influence in society.

In 2024, Japan ranked 118 out of 146 countries in gender equality, positioning it among the lowest-ranking members of the G7 (World Economic Forum, 2024). This type of ranking and report has historically prompted the Japanese government to draft policies such as the one aiming for at least 30% of executive roles in top companies to be held by women by 2030. Notably, a similar pledge was made by former Prime Minister (PM) Abe in 2013 under his “Womenomics” strategy, targeting 30% female leadership by 2020, a goal yet to be achieved (World Economic Forum, 2020). Takahashi (1994) observed that while legislative amendments such as the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law aimed to improve equality, the absence of penalties has limited their impact. In spite of progress in health and education, gender imbalances persist in decision-making, income, and opportunities (Mazur *et al.*, 2012; Nhamo *et al.*, 2018). The McKinsey and Company (2017) report highlighted that women make up less than 40% of the global workforce and only 25% of management roles, while performing the majority of unpaid care work. The report illustrates the economic benefits of gender diversity in leadership and business performance; however, progress is slow because of persistent barriers to advancement (Eweje and Nagano, 2021).

Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the IMF, supports this view, suggesting that gender equality would foster both fairness and prosperity globally, although progress remains impeded by legal restrictions in many regions (Picheta and Mirchandani, 2019). These perspectives underscore why gender equality remains a critical issue across business, politics, and society.

For Japan to achieve sustainable growth and maintain social vitality while facing a low birth rate and a shrinking population, it is essential to create a society where every individual can fully use their unique talents (Cabinet Office, 2019, 2020). Achieving gender equality is also an essential element for bringing about innovation in Japan’s economy and society (Cabinet Office, 2024). Recent efforts by the Japanese government and the business sector have steadily increased momentum for women’s empowerment (Cabinet Office, 2019, 2024). However, significant disparities remain, as some companies have made strides in promoting women while others continue to lag (Cabinet Office, 2024). In local communities, declining birth rates, an ageing population and overall population decline have caused labour shortages across sectors, from industry to community activities (Cabinet Office, 2024). Women’s participation is now more critical than ever (Cabinet Office, 2024).

Nevertheless, Japan exhibits stable decoupling: formal commitments coexist with routines that reward long hours and allocate caregiving largely to women (Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Nemoto, 2013). Under institutional multiplicity, such policy–practice gaps are common (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Thornton *et al.*, 2012). In this setting, symbolic compliance and institutional stalling recur. We therefore ask where and how practice can be recoupled to policy without requiring convergence of the underlying logics (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Hallett, 2010). To answer this, we conduct an integrative review across domains and levels, using the three-cycle social-innovation lens, and point to interface adjustments in operational spaces (van Wijk *et al.*, 2019; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Bévort and Suddaby, 2016). This remains a significant theoretical gap, given the lack of empirical research in the Japanese context.

Outside Japan, multiplicity and decoupling are well documented in professions, corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting and education, where organisations symbolically conform while practice lags (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Vigneau *et al.*, 2015; Hallett, 2010; Bromley and Powell, 2012). What is less clear is where recoupling can begin and how to observe it across multiple domains within a single national context. By comparison, several

European/Nordic settings reduce tension via generous leaves and shorter standard hours (OECD, 2020), while liberal-market settings rely more on firm-led flexibility with lower public commitments (Matten and Moon, 2008; Grosser and Moon, 2005). Japan combines strong macro targets and disclosure with persistent long-hour norms and family-centred expectations (Nagase, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024), making it a theoretically informative case for examining persistent decoupling and pragmatic routes to recoupling. Similar frictions are also evident in countries such as South Korea, Italy, Turkey, Mexico and Greece, where equality commitments intersect with everyday routines that mitigate their impact (World Economic Forum, 2024; OECD, 2020). This paper contributes by integrating evidence across domains, identifying interfaces as critical sites of change and introducing pragmatic practice indicators that render recoupling visible in everyday routines (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Bromley and Powell, 2012; van Wijk *et al.*, 2019).

While previous studies have extensively studied organisational behaviour, there has been insufficient focus on understanding how organisations' actions can either drive broader institutional transformation or preserve existing institutional structures (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011). Current studies tend to emphasise resource-related factors while largely overlooking the influence of institutional pressures. Our research addresses this gap by refocusing attention on the fundamental dynamics at the core of institutional theory (van Wijk *et al.*, 2019).

This review paper addresses pressing issues in Japan that significantly affect women's socio-economic development, including workplace exploitation, equitable career progression, pay equity, and incorporating women's perspectives in decision-making. Although gender equality has been widely studied globally, research focused on Japan remains scarce. In this context, Kobayashi and Eweje (2021) applied institutional theory to demonstrate how cultural norms shape institutional practices and societal expectations, providing a valuable lens for understanding gender dynamics in Japan. Zhang-Zhang (2024) proposed a framework of multi-level factors and a double-loop system that influence female labour participation, leadership positions and entrepreneurship in Japan. However, there is limited discussion on the drivers and barriers to gender equality in Japan based on a theoretical framework that highlights the interaction of competing logics at the micro, meso and macro levels. Gender inequality affects not only the workplace in Japan but also politics and society more broadly (Eweje and Nagano, 2021). Thus, Japan's gender equality discourse demands fresh perspectives and innovative approaches, as it remains a massive challenge with limited sustainable solutions in spite of attention from various sectors.

To address the gap identified in the literature review – namely, understanding why gender inequalities persist in spite of formal efforts towards gender equality – this paper adopts an institutional theory approach, complemented by the three-cycle model of social innovation. Prior research has effectively used institutional theory to demonstrate how cultural norms shape institutional practices and societal expectations, making it a valuable lens for understanding gender dynamics (e.g. Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Thornton *et al.*, 2012; Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021). Building upon this foundation, our study adopts a more nuanced, multi-level framework – a methodological approach increasingly used in recent institutional research (e.g. Bévort and Suddaby, 2016; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011). This combined framework helps examine how entrenched traditional norms and societal expectations coexist with progressive institutional pressures, generating complexities and tensions that shape gender dynamics in Japan (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Thornton *et al.*, 2012).

This review paper examines emerging trends in Japan's gender equality debate, exploring historical and contemporary perspectives. It addresses the following questions:

- Q1. What institutional barriers contribute to gender inequality in Japan?
- Q2. Why does the gender equality discourse persist in Japan?
- Q3. What measures can be adopted to improve gender equality in Japan?

Wang (2021) observes that in spite of Japan's status as a leading global economy, women's workforce participation remains limited because of cultural norms, social status, and organisational structures. Similarly, Kobayashi and Eweje (2021) note that while laws and initiatives aim to reduce the gender gap, there remains a significant gap between ambition and outcomes. Thus, achieving SDG 5 is crucial for Japan's future prosperity and equity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender inequalities in Japan. Okabayashi (2021) reports a substantial drop in female non-regular (part-time, flexible) employment in 2020, disproportionately affecting single mothers and widening the gender gap. Eda (2020) argues that the pandemic has highlighted the urgency of gender equality efforts, underscoring the need for swift action to incorporate more women into the workforce. These factors render the current analysis timely, as Japan's gender equality debate requires urgent attention and reform.

This review paper provides a crucial exploration of gender equality in Japan, adding new insights to academic discourse and serving as a resource for practitioners and policymakers. By examining barriers and drivers, the paper aims to catalyse national conversations that could lead to effective policy initiatives addressing gender inequality. Through synthesising the existing literature, this paper deepens theoretical understanding of gender equality challenges in Japan, identifies critical gaps, and proposes a framework to explore unique barriers and drivers in this context. It lays the foundation for future research and policy development aimed at advancing gender equity in Japanese society.

## 2. Research approach

This study uses an integrative review methodology to critically analyse and synthesise discourse on gender equality in Japan. An integrative review enables the examination and synthesis of diverse sources, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of complex and multidimensional topics (Torraco, 2005, 2016; Whitemore and Knafli, 2005). This approach is well suited for exploring theoretical connections and practical insights across varied domains – markets, government/public policy, families and education – and across micro, meso and macro levels of analysis.

To conduct the review, a search was performed across multiple academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the search included “gender equality”, “gender disparity”, “gender inequality”, “gender gap”, and “gender roles”. Additional search terms such as “Japan”, “Japanese”, “institutional norms”, “drivers and barriers” and “Japanese employment practices” were incorporated to ensure a broad, comprehensive exploration of relevant literature. Both academic articles and key reports from governmental and international organisations were included to provide a balanced view of the topic. Table 1 lists the 26 academic articles, showing the journals, publication years, and research methods. We also collected non-journal articles for the review: Eweje and Nagano (2021), Grosser *et al.* (2017), Kobayashi (2019), Kobayashi and Eweje (2021), and Wang (2021). To complement the academic literature, we also consulted reports from governmental and international organisations and newspapers that cover economic, industrial and market developments, such as the *Financial Times*, *Nikkei Asia* and the *Japan Times*.

Consistent with integrative review guidance (Torraco, 2005, 2016; Whitemore and Knafli, 2005; Snyder, 2019), we employed an iterative database and citation-chaining search that was updated in August 2025. Inclusion required a focus on Japan and an analytic discussion of drivers/barriers at the macro, meso or micro level in at least one of the four domains (markets, government/public policy, families or education). We included peer-reviewed studies and major policy reports; descriptive items without analysis were

**Table 1** List of academic journal articles

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Research method</i>	<i>Journal</i>	<i>Publisher</i>
Acker (1990)	Conceptual	<i>Gender &amp; Society</i>	Sage
Lee <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Quantitative	<i>Journal of Marriage and Family</i>	Wiley
Nemoto (2013)	Qualitative	<i>Gender, Work &amp; Organization</i>	Wiley
Eweje and Sakaki (2015)	Qualitative	<i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i>	Wiley
Zhou (2015)	Review	<i>Japan Labor Review</i>	The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training
Vigneau <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Qualitative	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	Springer
Fukuda-Parr (2016)	Review	<i>Gender &amp; Development</i>	Taylor & Francis
Coleman (2017)	Review	<i>Japanese Journal of Political Science</i>	Cambridge University Press
Groysberg <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Qualitative	<i>Harvard Business School Case</i>	Harvard Business Publishing
Duguet <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Quantitative	<i>Social Science Research Network (SSRN)</i>	Elsevier
Nagase (2018)	Review	<i>Asian Economic Policy Review</i>	Wiley
Kato and Kodama (2018)	Quantitative	<i>British Journal of Industrial Relations: An International Journal of Employment Relations</i>	Wiley
Kobayashi <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Quantitative	<i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i>	Wiley
Mun and Jung (2018)	Quantitative	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	Sage
Takami (2018)	Quantitative	<i>Japan Labor Issues</i>	The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training
Yoshikawa <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Review	<i>Industrial and Organizational Psychology</i>	Cambridge University Press
Yamaguchi (2019)	Review	<i>Finance &amp; Development</i>	International Monetary Fund
Kitada and Harada (2019)	Qualitative	<i>Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives</i>	Elsevier
Nomura <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Quantitative	<i>Psychiatry Research</i>	Elsevier
Goldstein-Gidoni (2020)	Qualitative	<i>Gender, Work &amp; Organization</i>	Wiley
Saitova and Di Mauro (2021)	Qualitative	<i>International Journal of Organizational Analysis</i>	Emerald
MacLeavy (2021)	Review	<i>Gender, Work &amp; Organization</i>	Wiley
Nagano and Hosoda (2023)	Qualitative	<i>Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal</i>	Emerald
Nagase (2024)	Review	<i>Asia Pacific Business Review</i>	Taylor & Francis
Zhang-Zhang (2024)	Review	<i>Critical Perspectives on International Business</i>	Emerald
Iida (2024)	Qualitative	<i>East Asia: An International Quarterly</i>	Springer

Source(s): Authors' own work

excluded. Our goal was theoretical coverage to enable synthesis, not exhaustiveness. As a light structuring aid, in addition to the integrative review, we used an analytic charting step. After an initial reading, each source was placed in a domain × level matrix (markets, government/public policy, families, education; macro/meso/micro) and summarised for mechanisms (e.g. policy–practice gaps, enabling alignment) and any practice indicators discussed. We refined the matrix iteratively. This procedure highlighted the interfaces most prone to decoupling and underpins our interface-focused propositions and the selection of simple indicators to make recoupling observable.

The analysis process followed a multi-stage approach inspired by Snyder (2019). First, abstracts and summaries were screened to identify relevant sources that addressed gender equality within the specified domains and levels. Selected articles and reports were then read in full, with data systematically coded and organised into thematic categories, focusing on drivers and barriers to gender equality. Key themes and patterns were mapped to identify interactions between institutional domains and levels, paying particular attention to the intersection of deeply rooted cultural expectations and structural constraints.

### 3. Developing a multi-level framework for gender equality in Japan

This section integrates institutional theory and the three-cycle model of social innovation to examine how traditional gender norms in Japan persist or shift. By focusing on institutional multiplicity, this framework highlights the interaction of competing logics at the micro, meso, and macro levels, providing insights into both barriers to and opportunities for gender equality. Institutional theory provides a valuable lens through which to explore Japan's persistent gender norms, because of its ability to capture interactions between formal institutional structures (e.g. government policies, corporate initiatives) and informal cultural expectations (e.g. family roles, educational norms). Prior research applying institutional theory has demonstrated how cultural norms shape institutional practices and societal expectations, making it particularly suitable for understanding complex gender dynamics in Japan (e.g. Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Thornton *et al.*, 2012; Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021).

The four institutional domains – markets, government/public sector, families, and education – were chosen because of their direct and well-documented impact on gender norm reproduction and change, as consistently identified in the institutional theory literature (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton *et al.*, 2012). These domains encompass both formal institutions (e.g. regulatory frameworks, organisational policies) and informal institutions (e.g. family roles, educational practices), allowing for a thorough examination of how institutional multiplicity manifests across interconnected societal contexts. Specifically, these four domains are central to the reproduction and transformation of gender norms and have been widely examined in studies on institutional dynamics and gender equality, particularly in Japan (Eweje and Nagano, 2021; Fukukawa and Teramoto, 2009; Nemoto, 2013). Other potentially relevant institutional domains include media, religion, and civil society. Media and religion can shape public perceptions and moral values, respectively, but their influence on contemporary gender norms in Japan tends to be indirect and contextual, rather than constituting direct domains of daily action compared to the four selected domains (Hamada, 2018; Kitada and Harada, 2019; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020). Civil society, though increasingly advocating for gender equality, lacks the structural power to significantly influence entrenched norms (Mun and Jung, 2018).

Additionally, the multi-level analysis approach (micro, meso, and macro) was adopted to systematically examine individual decisions (micro), organisational and family-level interactions (meso), and broader societal and structural influences (macro). This methodological choice aligns with recent institutional research using multi-level frameworks to unpack institutional complexity and dynamics (e.g. Bévort and Suddaby, 2016; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011), thus providing a comprehensive analysis of the institutional dynamics underlying gender equality challenges in Japan.

#### 3.1 Institutional theory: understanding persistent gender norms in Japan

“Rational myths” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) are socially constructed beliefs widely accepted as legitimate, even if not necessarily accurate or rational, which justify and perpetuate gendered roles within society; for example, the persistent notion in Japan that women naturally prioritise caregiving. While socio-economic changes have occasionally expanded women's roles, traditional family structures often reassert themselves, solidifying into cultural expectations that persist today.

Although policies promoting gender equality have been introduced, these deeply ingrained beliefs resist substantive change (Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021). Japan's formal gender policies often exhibit “decoupling” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), referring to situations where formal policies or institutional practices become disconnected from actual organisational behaviours. Organisations symbolically adopt reforms to align superficially with international standards without genuinely addressing underlying inequalities internally (Aguilera and Grøgaard, 2019). This persistent gap between policy and practice underscores the

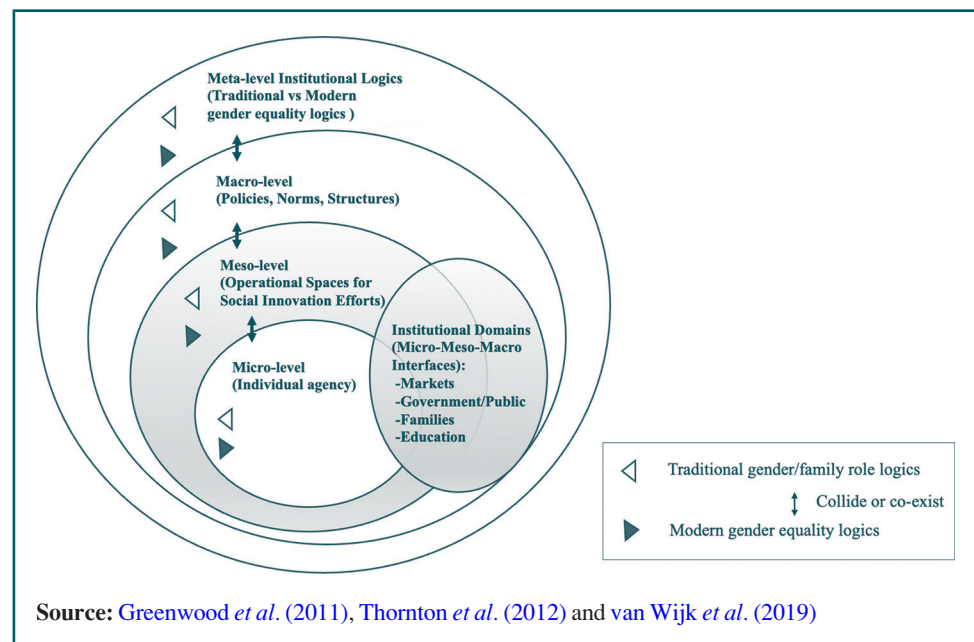
influence of culturally rooted norms, highlighting the need for a framework that recognises both symbolic compliance and the barriers to meaningful reform.

### 3.2 Adapting the social innovation model for a multi-level analysis

Building on institutional theory, the three-cycle model of social innovation developed by [van Wijk et al. \(2019\)](#) provides an additional framework to understand how change may unfold within even the most rigid institutional settings. This model analyses how innovative social changes emerge, evolve or face resistance across multiple analytical levels: micro (individual actors), meso (organisations and groups) and macro (societal and structural influences). This study adapts the original van Wijk et al.'s framework by incorporating an additional "meta-level" to reflect Japan's unique institutional context, characterised by deeply entrenched competing gender logics (traditional family-centred versus modern gender equality), which prior literature identified as a critical gap ([Fukukawa and Teramoto, 2009](#); [Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021](#); [Nemoto, 2013](#)). Thus, the adapted model presented here enables a more nuanced multi-level analysis by examining gender equality dynamics through four interconnected analytical levels (meta, macro, meso and micro), each playing a distinctive role in reinforcing or challenging traditional gender norms.

As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), this adapted framework visualises interactions across the micro, meso, macro and meta levels. At the micro level (individual agency), personal decisions either conform to or challenge established gender roles, directly shaping gender norms within daily practices. The meso level includes organisational contexts and local institutional spaces, defined as "operational spaces for social innovation efforts", where concrete

**Figure 1** Multi-level framework for social innovation in gender equality: institutional multiplicity and underlying cultural contexts. The framework highlights institutional multiplicity through competing traditional and modern gender equality logics at the meta level and demonstrates dynamic mutual interactions among micro level (individual agency), meso level (operational spaces for social innovation efforts) and macro level (policies, norms and structures). Institutional domains (markets, government/public sector, families and education) serve as critical interfaces clearly linking these three analytical levels



efforts, policies and practices around gender equality are implemented or actively resisted. The macro level includes broader societal structures represented by national policies, cultural norms, and regulatory frameworks, shaping the overarching institutional environment within which micro- and meso-level actions unfold. Finally, the meta level highlights the presence of competing institutional logics (traditional family versus modern gender equality logics), indicating how deep cultural expectations and normative logics inform gendered behaviours and institutional practices at all analytical levels.

A distinctive feature of this framework is the explicit positioning of four institutional domains (markets, government/public sector, families and education) as critical interfaces bridging micro-, meso-, and macro-level contexts. These institutional domains reflect dual aspects: they embody macro-level policies, norms, and structures while simultaneously serving as operational spaces at the meso level where policies are implemented, negotiated or contested. Moreover, they influence and shape individual agency at the micro level, as actors navigate and respond to gender norms and institutional expectations within these domains.

This conceptualisation is particularly relevant in the context of Japan's gender equality discourse, where institutions traditionally embody deeply entrenched normative structures that permeate multiple societal levels simultaneously (Nemoto, 2013). Prior research on Japan emphasises that institutions such as families, workplaces, educational systems and governmental entities not only reflect and uphold macro-level gender norms but also actively shape local practices and influence individual gender-role expectations and behaviours (Fukukawa and Teramoto, 2009; Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Nemoto, 2013). By situating these institutional domains at the intersection of micro-, meso- and macro-level contexts, this study extends previous institutional approaches by clarifying how Japanese institutions simultaneously serve as sites of cultural reproduction, active negotiation, and potential transformation regarding gender equality (cf. Thornton *et al.*, 2012; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011).

Interactions occur dynamically and continuously across these analytical levels, represented visually by two-way arrows indicating mutual influence. These mutual interactions illustrate how individual decisions at the micro level can gradually reshape organisational and local institutional practices (meso), which can subsequently influence broader policy and normative structures (macro). Conversely, macro-level norms and structures constrain or facilitate changes at meso and micro levels. This dynamic view offers practical insights into potential pathways to accelerate social innovation and overcome persistent institutional barriers to gender equality in Japan.

#### 4. Gender equality discourse

No country has successfully attained complete gender equality (Stephens *et al.*, 2018). In spite of the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979, progress has been slow, and gender inequality continues to hinder global human development (Stephens *et al.*, 2018). Grosser (2009) highlights that the right to live free from gender discrimination is protected under international and European law. Since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the European Union has implemented policies addressing workplace discrimination, work–life balance, decision-making equality, and violence against women.

The Council of Europe (1998, pp. 7-8) defines gender equality as equal visibility, empowerment, and participation of men and women in all aspects of life while recognising and valuing their differences and societal roles. Similarly, the International Labour Office (2007) describes gender equality as the equal enjoyment of rights, opportunities and treatment by both men and women.

Research underscores the detrimental impact of gender inequality on economic growth, as it reduces average human capital and harms productivity (Schober and Winter-Ebmer, 2011). Grosser and Moon (2005) argue that advancing gender equality requires a combination of legal frameworks, business strategies, and social policies. Supporting this view, former Nike CEO Mark Parker emphasised the economic value of gender equality, stating that investing in it yields the highest return on investment (cited by Calkin, 2016).

CSR and sustainability discussions have increasingly integrated gender equality concerns, such as equal pay, career advancement for women, and representation in leadership roles (ISO, 2010; Austin *et al.*, 2021). Stakeholders are calling for greater accountability, with growing emphasis on performance indicators such as the gender pay gap and the proportion of female managers, which have been linked to enhanced financial strength and competitiveness (Austin *et al.*, 2021; Miles, 2011). As a result, many organisations have begun incorporating gender equality into their sustainability agendas, regularly reporting on their progress (Grosser and Moon, 2005).

## 5. Gender equality in Japan

Interest in gender equality in Japan stems from growing domestic and international concerns about its societal and economic impacts (Eweje and Nagano, 2021). Aoyagi (2020) reported that approximately 1 million women in Japan exited the labour force between December 2019 and April 2020 as COVID-19 spread across the country. Women frequently bear greater societal pressure, facing heightened guilt for falling short of being the “ideal mother” or the “ideal employee”. Compared to men, women reported feeling significantly more guilt for missing caregiving responsibilities because of work commitments. Aoyagi further observed that Japan’s voluntary six-week economic shutdown in April 2020 disproportionately affected women, largely because of a persistent “guilt gap” between genders, which compels women to prioritise family responsibilities over professional advancement. Similarly, Nomura *et al.* (2021) found that, as of September 2020, women in Japan faced a greater suicide burden from COVID-19 than men, with rates 20–30% higher than in previous years. They identified excess female suicides in July, August, and September 2021, partly driven by increased violence against women. This highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated Japan’s gender divide. In spite of being the world’s third wealthiest country, with its women ranking among the most educated and literate globally (World Economic Forum, 2024), gender inequality persists. For instance, Tomizawa (2019) noted that while over 30% of those passing Japan’s National Examination for Medical Practitioners in the past two decades were women, female physicians constituted only 21.1% of all doctors in 2016, with even fewer women working as surgeons.

The current gender equality discourse in Japan has stemmed from considerable adverse publicity. The most notable incident occurred just before the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, when former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, then head of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics committee, made an inappropriate remark about women, leading to his resignation. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a Japanese governor controversially suggested that men should do the “grocery shopping” because women “take too long” (Jozuka *et al.*, 2021). These incidents and others could be surmised to refer to Fukuda-Parr’s (2016) argument that SDG 5 embodies gender equality and women’s empowerment as a multi-dimensional process, addressing issues such as gender-based violence, harmful practices, unpaid care, reproductive health and rights, economic inclusion and legislative reform. Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2016, cited by Groysberg *et al.*, 2017; Eweje and Nagano, 2021) emphasised:

Women are indispensable for Japan’s growth [...] Japanese women are an underutilised resource, and I concluded that to tap and leverage this human resource would bring about robust growth for Japan. I have promoted a more active role for women as a matter of economic policy, which would make people aware of its great benefit to everyone, rather than promoting it as a matter of social policy.

The late PM Abe's statement underscores growing awareness in Japan of the importance of gender equality for national progress. In spite of significant social, political, and economic advancements since the early 20th century, support for women to achieve higher roles in business and public life remains insufficient. As [Lee et al. \(2010\)](#) noted, Japan's evolving political, economic, and social systems have created distinct generational contexts for beliefs about gender.

Gender inequality in Japan extends beyond the workplace, affecting politics and society ([Eweje and Nagano, 2021](#)). Indeed, in October 2024, the newly inaugurated Ishiba (new Japanese Prime Minister) cabinet faced criticism for appointing only two female ministers out of 19 cabinet members. This is viewed as a significant step back compared to the former PM Kishida's cabinet, which had included five women in key ministerial positions. Although PM Ishiba expressed his commitment to promoting women's participation in society during his policy speech, the limited number of women in his cabinet has raised doubts about the sincerity of his efforts towards gender equality ([Iki, 2024](#)). Reflecting this, the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report ranked Japan 118th out of 146 countries ([World Economic Forum, 2024](#)). Similarly, [the McKinsey and Company \(2017\)](#) report highlighted that Japan lags behind the Asia-Pacific average in gender parity in work, emphasising that improving female labour participation, education, and leadership roles is crucial for economic growth. However, gender-segregated career paths ([Yamaguchi, 2019](#)), long working hours ([Iida, 2024](#)), and expectations for domestic responsibilities significantly hinder women's advancement. Female managers face additional challenges, including limited career opportunities and the burden of balancing work with family commitments ([Ho, 2020](#); [Matsuo and Matsuura, 2022](#)).

To address these disparities, Japan has introduced various policies, such as the 2015 law requiring large corporations to report on gender diversity ([Eweje and Nagano, 2021](#)). The late PM Abe's "Womonomics" policy aimed to boost female labour force participation and leadership, reduce childcare waiting lists, encourage men to take more active roles in parenting, and improve work-life balance ([Coleman, 2017](#)). Abe highlighted that increasing women's participation could add 7.1 million workers and raise GDP by 12.5% ([Groysberg et al., 2017](#)). [Nagase \(2018\)](#) observed significant impacts, including more mothers entering permanent employment and better career prospects for women. The Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) has also set a target for women to hold 30% of top managerial posts by 2030 ([Suwa, 2020](#)). In spite of these efforts, achieving gender parity remains a slow and challenging process.

As posited by [Nagase \(2024\)](#), the former Kishida Government's policy under the new capitalism encompasses human capital investment and an augmented role for women in the economy, in addition to an expanded role for men in family care. In response to the persistent decline in fertility, former PM Kishida considered policies to facilitate child rearing, transform workplace culture to enable fathers to assume a more prominent role, and promote the appointment of women in managerial positions ([Nagase, 2024](#)). To facilitate child rearing, former PM Kishida planned to increase income levels for young people, extend childcare leave entitlements to non-regular workers, and increase childcare leave allowances to 80% of income for fathers ([Nagase, 2024](#)). He also aimed to reform traditional Japanese work practices, such as lifetime employment and long working hours, which have been identified as obstacles to achieving a healthy work-life balance ([Nagase, 2024](#)). Moreover, to promote the appointment of women to managerial positions, former PM Kishida mandated that companies with over 300 employees must disclose both the gender pay gap and the number of female board members ([Nagase, 2024](#)). Such a disclosure may be perceived as indirect pressure from investors on companies to promote women to managerial positions ([Hayashi, 2024](#)). Furthermore, former PM Kishida directed companies listed on the Prime Market to pursue the objective of achieving a minimum of 30% representation in executive positions by 2030 ([Shiozaki, 2023](#)). In alignment with these

goals, the Japanese government's approach to family policy reflects an evolving vision to shift from the traditional breadwinner–housewife model to a “worker–carer” model, thus fostering dual-income households (Nagase, 2024).

Conversely, Tomizawa *et al.* (2016) and Tomizawa (2019) highlight that the conservative belief that “women should stay home” remains deeply rooted in Japan. They also note that Japanese women often feel a strong sense of duty towards family responsibilities, including the care and education of their children. In contrast, men are perceived as breadwinners (Nagase, 2024). Japanese family norms and the educational system shape the way of thinking of institutions, families, mentors, and individuals, thereby exerting a continuous and pervasive impact on women's career decisions and men's attitudes (Zhang-Zhang, 2024). As such, the proportion of childcare and housework undertaken by Japanese men still remains significantly lower than that undertaken by women (French *et al.*, 2023). Women continue to occupy lower positions and receive lower salaries than men in the workplace (French *et al.*, 2023). Women also work fewer hours and thereby their income decreases (Tomizawa, 2019). The promotion of women to managerial positions may not necessarily result in a complete overhaul of gender roles within the family (Iida, 2024). In such cases, women may still be expected to fulfil the duties of managers while bearing the brunt of the housework, which remains as high as it was previously (Iida, 2024). Nagase (2024) posited that the gender pay gap and gender-role division of labour within the family will persist unless further efforts are made to advance these policies.

It is pertinent to mention that some Japanese organisations have implemented gender equality initiatives, including reducing long working hours, promoting work–life balance and setting targets to increase female managers. These efforts, supported by flexible working options and childcare policies, aim to advance women's careers, though their impact remains limited (Eweje and Sakaki, 2015; Kato and Kodama, 2018; Kobayashi *et al.*, 2018; Mun and Jung, 2018).

However, companies often achieve limited progress in spite of target setting and initiatives (Kobayashi, 2019; Nagano and Hosoda, 2023; Saitova and Di Mauro, 2021). A prevalent issue experienced by companies is that “some female employees repudiate promotion” (Kobayashi, 2019; Takami, 2018). For example, a 2016 survey of white-collar workers found that most female workers (72%) were unwilling to seek promotion, while the percentage of male workers unwilling to do so was 44% (Takami, 2018). The female workers' low career motivation could be linked to the prevailing overtime culture. For example, in organisations with an “overworking” reputation, men are more likely to be assigned overtime jobs than women, which in turn could lead to gender disparities and impede women's skill development, confidence and motivation in their work experience (Takami, 2018). In addition, female employees may not be attracted to manager roles if it means “adding overwork to housework” (Kobayashi, 2019; Zhou, 2015). Accordingly, the pursuit of an ambitious goal to improve the situation and increase the proportion of women in management is undermined by “gendered” organisational practices entrenched in Japanese society's gender norms and structures (Acker, 1990; Grosser *et al.*, 2017). To illustrate this phenomenon, even Japanese companies listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange's Prime Market are experiencing difficulties in increasing the proportion of female managers. This is due in part to a dearth of internal female talent and difficulties in recruiting external candidates, as there are still social norms that hinder women's promotion in the workplace (Nomura, 2024). It seems unlikely that the efforts of the Japanese government, business, and education to achieve gender equality will be met with success unless there is a notable alteration in the prevailing social norms, values, and beliefs in Japan (Zhang-Zhang, 2024).

## 6. Gender disparity in Japan – drivers and barriers

There is strong evidence that women in Japan continue to face significant barriers in their careers, particularly in attaining senior leadership roles and achieving equal pay (Kray and Kennedy, 2017). In spite of advancements in gender equality policies, the Japanese labour

market reflects entrenched gender norms that position caregiving and domestic responsibilities primarily with women, sustaining the “rational myth” of women as natural caregivers (Fukai *et al.*, 2023).

In this section, we apply the multi-level theoretical framework to identify key drivers and barriers to gender equality across Japan’s major institutional domains: markets, governments, families, and education. Examining micro, meso, and macro levels clarifies how Japan’s institutions hinder or support gender equality. Table 2 summarises the multi-level analysis of drivers and barriers across key institutional domains influencing gender

**Table 2** Multi-level drivers and barriers for gender equality in Japan

Domain	Level	Drivers	Barriers
Markets	Macro	Investor demand supports gender equality for financial performance (Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021)	Conflict between traditional norms and global equality expectations (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Nemoto, 2013; Zhou, 2015)
		Positive link between equality and profit attracts investors (Kato and Kodama, 2018; Nakagawa and Schreiber, 2014)	Limited prioritisation of gender equality because of caregiving expectations (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Nemoto, 2013)
	Meso	Companies adopt equality measures to attract investment (Vigneau <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	Superficial compliance with equality targets, lacking cultural transformation (Matsui, 2019)
Government/ public domain	Micro	Pro-equality investors influence organisational practices (Kato and Kodama, 2018)	Individual investor biases limit organisational equality efforts (Matsui, 2019)
	Macro	National policies promoting gender equality (The 2015 Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace) (Zhang-Zhang, 2024)	Lack of enforcement mechanisms in gender equality policies (Iida, 2024; Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
		Shift in public support for dual-career roles reflects evolving views (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023)	Legal and employment structures reinforcing traditional roles (Nagase, 2024; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
Families	Meso	Political party promotes gender equality through policies such as the 2018 Law for the Promotion of Gender Parity in Politics	Overwork culture and weak policy enforcement inhibit women’s political roles (Nemoto, 2013)
	Micro	Politician and public sector workers can individually support gender equality (Wang, 2021)	Cultural biases among officials limit proactive equality efforts (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
	Macro	Shift towards dual-income families indicates evolving family roles (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023)	Cultural expectations assign primary caregiving to women, limiting career options (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Nagase, 2024; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
Education		Working fathers lead a change (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020)	Husbands’ long work hours reinforce traditional gender roles (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Hamada, 2018; Iida, 2024)
	Meso	Grandparents provide childcare support, enabling mothers to work (Yamaguchi, 2019)	Dependence on family reinforces traditional caregiving roles for women (Nagase, 2024; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
	Micro	Supportive husbands/partners share household duties (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2022; Nagase and Brinton, 2017)	Limited male involvement in household responsibilities constrains women’s careers (Nagase, 2024; Iida, 2024)
Education	Macro	National policies incorporate gender equality into school curricula (Yamaguchi, 2019)	Limited scope of policies to challenge cultural norms (Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
	Meso	Schools/universities encourage gender equality awareness (Kitada and Harada, 2019)	Career guidance channels girls into traditional fields (Yamaguchi, 2019; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
	Micro	Female participation in STEM fields challenges stereotypes (Zhang-Zhang, 2024)	Gendered assumptions limit women’s career diversity (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Yoshikawa <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)
	Micro	High academic achievement among girls shows potential for gender parity (OECD, 2020)	Socialisation discourages girls from competitive fields, reinforcing norms (deeply rooted cultural expectations) (Yoshikawa <i>et al.</i> , 2018)

Source(s): Authors’ own work

equality and disparity in Japan. Each domain is examined at the macro, meso, and micro levels to illustrate how various actions and expectations intersect to support or impede progress.

As summarised in [Table 2](#), multiple barriers persist at the macro, meso and micro levels, reflecting deeply rooted cultural expectations and institutional resistance across domains such as markets, government, families and education. For example, in spite of national-level gender equality policies (macro level), inadequate enforcement mechanisms limit their effectiveness in transforming organisational practices at the meso level ([Iida, 2024](#); [Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023](#); [Zhang-Zhang, 2024](#)). This phenomenon exemplifies “decoupling”, clearly illustrating macro/meso tensions within Japan’s institutional environment.

### **6.1 Markets and gender equality in Japan**

This section analyses the institutional dynamics within Japan’s market domains and their influence on gender equality initiatives. By examining interactions across different levels, we explore how economic pressures intersect with cultural norms, either supporting or hindering gender equality.

Capital market investors exert influence by expecting Japanese companies to disclose gender equality metrics, such as the proportion of women in senior management and on boards ([Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021](#); [Vigneau et al., 2015](#)). [Matsui \(2019\)](#) argues that while investors may favour gender-diverse companies, societal norms still shape gender expectations, especially in senior roles. Moving to organisational level, Japanese companies in different sectors respond uniquely to gender equality pressures. Companies in sectors with a high female consumer base, such as retail, are more inclined to adopt gender diversity initiatives to align with customer demographics ([Duguet et al., 2017](#)). In contrast, male-dominated sectors, such as heavy industry, see fewer incentives for gender equality.

At the individual level, labour market segmentation significantly affects individual choices and reinforces gender disparities. Japan’s dual labour market structure – where men predominantly hold stable, full-time positions while women occupy part-time, non-regular roles – continues to create barriers to gender equality. Seventy percent of part-time workers in Japan are women, reflecting caregiving expectations that limit career advancement ([Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021](#)). This dual structure contributes to a persistent gender pay gap, with Japan having the highest pay disparity among G7 countries, at 25% ([Matsui, 2019](#); [Yamaguchi, 2019](#)). COVID-19 intensified these challenges, further limiting women’s workforce participation ([MacLeavy, 2021](#)). These micro-level choices, shaped by macro-level societal expectations, highlight the deep-rooted nature of gender-based labour segmentation in Japan ([Zhang-Zhang, 2024](#)).

Japan’s market structures present both opportunities for and barriers to gender equality. At the macro level, global investor expectations challenge traditional norms, while meso-level organisational responses vary by sector, reflecting the influence of consumer demographics. At the micro level, labour market segmentation and societal expectations shape individual career choices, reinforcing gender disparities. While market dynamics offer potential pathways for promoting gender equality, they are limited by structural and cultural barriers, indicating that market forces alone may not be sufficient to drive substantial change.

### **6.2 Government/public domain and gender equality in Japan**

In this section, we examine how actions within Japan’s government and public domain at national, local, and individual levels affect gender equality. In spite of policy initiatives aimed at promoting equal opportunities, cultural norms and structural constraints limit the effectiveness of these efforts across various government and public sector institutions.

At the national level, policies such as the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace aim to improve gender equality but lack enforceable measures. While public perception has shifted, with more Japanese now supporting dual career-family roles, the effectiveness of these policies remains limited because of the absence of penalties (Iida, 2024; Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023). This lack of enforcement allows companies to meet only minimum requirements without implementing substantive changes, reflecting broader societal resistance to altering entrenched gender norms (Zhang-Zhang, 2024).

In addition, Japan's employment legislation reinforces a dual labour structure, where protective laws for regular employees predominantly benefit men, while women occupy flexible but less secure non-regular roles. This system maintains gender inequality by constraining women's career development within low-paid positions, shaped by societal norms that prioritise women's caregiving roles (Duguet *et al.*, 2017). Tax incentives that discourage full-time employment for married women further reinforce this pattern, illustrating how legal and economic policies continue to sustain traditional gender divisions within the workforce (Nagase, 2024). Wang (2021) stated that the Japanese government has not yet promoted statutory gender quota regulation for political and business leadership, as introduced in Scandinavian countries. In the political sphere, political parties are also expected to contribute to gender equality through policies such as the Law for the Promotion of Gender Parity in Politics. However, similar to corporate settings, these efforts lack strict enforcement, resulting in minimal impact on female political representation (Osaki, 2018).

On an individual level, the actions and decisions of public sector workers and politicians in Japan contribute to gender equality efforts, albeit with mixed outcomes. Some government employees promote workplace equality, while others conform to traditional norms because of overwork culture (Nemoto, 2013). The under-representation of women in politics limits diverse perspectives and constrains efforts to promote inclusive policy changes. These individual-level dynamics underscore how deeply embedded cultural norms influence personal and professional choices, affecting the broader impact of gender equality initiatives within the public domain.

In summary, government actions at various levels – the national framework, political party compliance and individual choices of public sector workers – demonstrate both support for and impediments to gender equality in Japan. While policies have established a foundation for equality, their limited enforcement and cultural contradictions within the tax and employment systems maintain significant barriers. Overcoming institutional and cultural obstacles requires stricter and culturally sensitive measures.

### ***6.3 Families, public perception and gender equality in Japan***

This section examines the influence of family dynamics on gender equality in Japan, focusing on the roles of husbands, extended family members, and broader cultural expectations. As a core institution, the family serves as a site where gender norms are both reinforced and, in some cases, challenged, affecting the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives.

At the societal level, Japan's traditional family model of "men at work and women at home" persists, reinforcing a division of labour that limits women's career options (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020). Public opinion is slowly shifting; surveys show a steady increase in the percentage of women who believe it is better to continue working after having children, from 30.3% in 2000 to 57.7% in 2019 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023). However, societal expectations continue to exert pressure on women to prioritise caregiving, demonstrating the enduring influence of cultural norms even as attitudes evolve (Nagase, 2024). In addition to these societal expectations, broader family networks provide both

support and reinforcement of traditional norms. Extended family members, particularly grandparents, often play a vital role in supporting working mothers, filling gaps left by insufficient childcare options. Their involvement highlights the significance of broader family networks in mitigating gender disparities.

Within individual families, gender equality is largely influenced by individual behaviours, particularly husbands' limited involvement in household duties. Men contribute 7.6 h of domestic work weekly compared to women's 39.2 h (Nagase, 2024). This disparity restricts women's ability to balance work and family, reinforcing traditional norms that expect women to prioritise family roles over career advancement (Iida, 2024). Furthermore, while public support for gender equality has increased, with a growing number of men desiring more involvement in housework and childcare (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2022; Nagase and Brinton, 2017), long working hours limit their participation, illustrating the gap between intention and practice (Nagase, 2024). For example, Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) noted that the traditional "men at work and women at home" family model became very influential in Japan, which reinforces gender inequality. This dual membership becomes particularly challenging in such cultural contexts, making it harder for women to feel successful or confident in fulfilling either their family or professional roles.

Family members (including husbands), extended family and broader cultural expectations are essential stakeholders in advancing or hindering gender equality. Persistent barriers within the family include husbands' limited household involvement, the reinforcement of gendered norms in multi-generational households, and societal expectations that place primary caregiving responsibilities on women. While families can serve as catalysts for change, traditional expectations around caregiving and career roles continue to constrain progress. The family domain's complex interactions at the micro, meso and macro levels underscore that achieving gender equality in Japan requires addressing deeply rooted norms within familial structures.

On the other hand, men's willingness to participate in housework and childcare is increasing; however, long working hours remain a significant barrier (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2022). When asked about their desire to adjust their time spent on housework and childcare, the majority of men with children across all age groups expressed a desire to "increase" their involvement, with 27.7% of men in their 20s–30s and 14.3% of those in their 40s–60s wanting more time for these activities. This is particularly evident among younger men.

However, men's rate of taking parental leave remains low. Because of wage disparities between men and women, it is often economically rational for the lower-earning partner, typically women, to handle domestic work and childcare, a factor that may hinder women's career advancement. Additionally, in Japan, resistance to outsourcing domestic tasks (e.g. housework and childcare) and the financial burden of such services are also seen as obstacles to women's employment continuity and career development. Although over 90% of people use store-bought meals or food delivery, less than 5% outsource time-consuming tasks such as child transportation, and babysitter usage remains under 5% (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023). Meanwhile, around 20% of people, particularly younger generations, express a desire to use these services, suggesting both economic concerns and generational differences in attitudes towards outsourcing household tasks.

#### **6.4 Education and gender equality in Japan**

The Japanese education system shapes gender norms and career expectations through a complex interaction of national policies, school-level practices, and individual student experiences.

Japan's national education policies promote gender equality in academic achievement and curriculum design, aiming to create a foundation for equal opportunity. High academic

achievement among girls shows potential for gender parity (OECD, 2020). Additionally, recent national initiatives have encouraged the inclusion of gender equality as a formal topic within school curricula, promoting the value of gender equity as an educational and societal goal (Yamaguchi, 2019). However, while these policies highlight gender equality as important, they do not sufficiently address the cultural norms that continue to steer students towards traditional gender roles, limiting the policies' impact on real-world career outcomes (Zhang-Zhang, 2024).

At the organisational level, schools and universities in Japan play a key role in shaping gendered expectations through their institutional practices. Career counselling often channels female students towards fields aligned with traditional gender roles, such as caregiving or clerical positions, while encouraging male students to pursue STEM and leadership pathways (Yamaguchi, 2019). Additionally, participation in extracurricular activities and the encouragement of subject choices are often subtly gendered, with boys encouraged to take on leadership roles and girls guided towards more supportive roles. While some schools have implemented initiatives to encourage female participation in diverse fields, the persistence of these gendered pathways reflects societal norms embedded within the educational system, reinforcing traditional career expectations before students even enter the workforce (Zhang-Zhang, 2024).

At the personal level, individual interactions within classrooms and peer groups influence students' self-perceptions and aspirations, often in ways that reinforce gender norms. Teachers and peers subtly reinforce traditional gender roles through daily interactions, encouraging boys to be assertive and girls to take on supportive roles (Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2018). These interactions shape students' confidence and career aspirations, particularly for girls, who may feel less inclined to pursue competitive or male-dominated fields such as STEM in spite of their academic capabilities (Zhang-Zhang, 2024). This socialisation process limits girls' long-term career ambitions by fostering self-concepts that align with traditional gender roles, even when their academic performance suggests they could succeed in a broader range of fields (Zhang-Zhang, 2024). Further, Kitada and Harada (2019) argued that cultural and social norms in Japanese society typically support the accepted division of labour, such as between *rikei* (science and technology) and *bunkei* (humanities) fields (Kitada and Harada, 2019). To eliminate barriers to women's career inclusion, Japan's vocational education and training (VET) systems should be restructured with a focus on gender mainstreaming. Lifelong VET could also contribute to greater gender equity.

The Japanese education system illustrates both progress and challenges in promoting gender equality. National policies and academic achievements reflect a foundation of gender parity, yet institutional practices and daily interactions within schools continue to socialise students into traditional roles. While Japan's education system has made strides, comprehensive reforms are needed to reshape career pathways and support gender equity.

## 7. Discussion

This section synthesises cross-domain patterns, highlighting persistent frictions at the intersections of macro-level signals, meso-level practices and micro-level routines. These frictions are shaped by two cultural scripts: the ideal-worker long-hours norm and the maternal-care norm. Table 3 maps these intersections and focuses on points of decoupling; these motivate the propositions in Section 7.2 and anchor the practical levers and indicators in Section 7.3.

### 7.1 Domain-level interactions and multi-level analysis

Table 3 highlights critical intersections between institutional domains, revealing how interactions across these domains reinforce persistent gender norms. For instance, market

**Table 3** Interactions and intersections between institutional domains in shaping gender equality in Japan

<i>Interaction/intersection</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Analysis</i>
Markets and government	Investor demand for gender equality aligns with government targets, encouraging companies to improve transparency in gender metrics. However, lack of policy enforcement limits the substantive impact of these drivers, leading companies to adopt superficial changes without fostering genuine cultural transformation (Iida, 2024; Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Nagase, 2024)	Reflects deeply rooted cultural resistance to enforcing gender equality norms; limited impact because of insufficient enforcement and alignment with societal expectations in Japan
Markets and families	Job structures within market domains often require long working hours, reinforcing family expectations where caregiving is primarily a woman's role. This sustains gendered labour divisions, as women are more likely to pursue flexible or non-regular employment to balance family responsibilities (Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Nagase, 2024; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)	Market demands for long working hours align with traditional family expectations, reinforcing gender disparity as women adapt career choices around caregiving roles (deeply rooted cultural expectations)
Government and education	National policies incorporate gender equality into school curricula, aiming to promote awareness among students. However, the limited scope of these policies, combined with school culture, often fails to challenge deeply ingrained gender norms, thereby limiting the broader societal impact of such initiatives (Nagase, 2024; Yamaguchi, 2019; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)	In spite of government policies promoting gender awareness, educational institutions indirectly reinforce traditional gender roles, aligning with societal expectations (deeply rooted cultural expectations)
Families and education	Family expectations often intersect with educational guidance, reinforcing traditional career paths for girls. Schools sometimes subtly encourage career paths that align with societal norms, steering female students away from high-earning fields and into traditionally female-dominated sectors (Yoshikawa et al., 2018; Yamaguchi, 2019; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)	Families and educational institutions mutually reinforce traditional career paths, as family norms and school guidance often align, deterring girls from non-traditional fields. Reflects a socialisation process shaped by societal norms
Government and families	Tax incentives and social policies often reinforce traditional family structures by encouraging women to limit their paid work. These policies, although aimed at economic stability, intersect with family expectations to constrain women's workforce participation and career progression (Nagase, 2024; Iida, 2024; Zhang-Zhang, 2024)	Government policies inadvertently support traditional family roles, where financial incentives align with societal expectations, limiting women's economic roles outside the home (deeply rooted cultural expectations)

Source(s): Authors' own work

demands for extended working hours interact with traditional family caregiving roles, systematically constraining women's career choices (Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Nagase, 2024). This intersection exemplifies the interface between macro-level institutional expectations and meso-level operational practices, reinforcing gender inequality at the individual (micro) level.

The intersections between these domains provide deeper insights into the persistence of gender disparities. The alignment between investor demand for gender equality in markets and government objectives to improve gender transparency has the potential to influence change. However, the lack of policy enforcement frequently results in superficial compliance, with businesses meeting international expectations without addressing ingrained practices (Iida, 2024; Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021). This phenomenon reflects "institutional stalling", where policy and market pressures fail to disrupt entrenched cultural

norms. As mentioned earlier, such market demands for long working hours further reinforce family expectations, systematically sustaining gendered divisions of labour as women adapt their career choices around caregiving responsibilities (Nagase, 2024; Zhang-Zhang, 2024). The interaction between government and education highlights another critical intersection. While national policies introduce gender equality awareness into school curricula, their limited scope and the persistence of traditional school norms constrain their societal impact (Yamaguchi, 2019). Similarly, family expectations often intersect with educational guidance to reinforce traditional career paths for girls. Schools, intentionally or otherwise, may encourage career choices that align with societal norms, steering female students away from high-earning fields and into traditionally female-dominated sectors (Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2018; Zhang-Zhang, 2024). Addressing this alignment requires educational institutions to foster diverse career pathways and promote broader opportunities for female students in culturally sensitive ways. Government policies also intersect with family dynamics, as tax incentives and social policies aimed at economic stability frequently reinforce traditional family roles. These policies inadvertently limit women's economic participation outside the home, reflecting and sustaining societal expectations (Nagase, 2024; Iida, 2024). This intersection exemplifies the explicit role government policies and family norms jointly play in perpetuating macro-level gender expectations, significantly affecting women's agency at the micro level.

## 7.2 Theoretical implications

We build on work that distinguishes decoupling (policy–practice gaps) and discusses recoupling processes that tighten the link between formal commitments and daily routines (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Hallett, 2010). We draw on two lenses. From institutional theory, we use the concepts of multiplicity, decoupling and recoupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Bromley and Powell, 2012; Hallett, 2010). From social innovation, we use the three-cycle view to identify change at micro, meso, and macro interfaces (van Wijk *et al.*, 2019).

This study contributes to institutional theory by clarifying how institutional multiplicity – characterised by the contested collision of traditional and modern logics – shapes gender inequality discourse in Japan. Institutional multiplicity inherently involves tensions between competing logics, creating persistent conflict within institutional settings (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Thornton *et al.*, 2012). In contrast to typical Western contexts, where modern logics often gradually replace traditional ones (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011), we argue that Japan's deeply embedded cultural expectations continuously reproduce conflicting institutional logics at a meta level, sustaining persistent institutional tensions (Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Fukukawa and Teramoto, 2009; Nemoto, 2013). Thus, institutional collision is not a temporary disruption but an enduring condition influencing gender equality dynamics (Zhang-Zhang, 2024).

Specifically, we position deeply rooted cultural expectations as meta-level institutional logics, framing institutional multiplicity as a persistent collision rather than a resolvable debate. While such enduring collisions often lead to decoupling or stalling, where formal policies symbolically conform to modern expectations without substantive change (Aguilera and Grøgaard, 2019; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), we identify opportunities for incremental social innovation, particularly at the interfaces between macro-, meso-, and micro-levels and across institutional domains (Markets, Government/Public Sector, Families and Education). Recent institutional research increasingly acknowledges these interfaces as crucial sites for understanding and navigating institutional complexity (Bévort and Suddaby, 2016; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; van Wijk *et al.*, 2019).

Our explicit theoretical contribution, therefore, is a refined institutional perspective acknowledging persistent institutional collision as a natural, enduring condition (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011) and highlighting how meaningful progress

towards gender equality can occur even amidst ongoing conflicting logics. This refined perspective enhances institutional theory by offering robust analytical tools, particularly relevant for understanding institutional dynamics within non-Western or similarly entrenched contexts.

We frame decoupling in Japan as most evident where macro commitments intersect with meso-level practices and micro routines. Using the three-cycle social innovation lens, we consider these interfaces as the practical units at which change can be enacted when logics continue to collide:

*P1* (conceptual). Policy–practice decoupling is most likely at interfaces where macro commitments encounter misaligned meso practices and micro routines.

*P2* (conceptual). Alignment at micro–meso interfaces can increase uptake of equality measures without requiring convergence of underlying logics; light macro transparency can then support diffusion.

We use recoupling to denote the process of tightening the link between formal commitments and everyday routines; in this context, progress is expected to appear as small, observable routine changes at interfaces, rather than wholesale logic convergence (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Hallett, 2010).

### 7.3 Practical implications

Practically, recognising persistent institutional collision implies that fostering gender equality in Japan requires coordinated incremental efforts across markets, government, families, education, and related institutional domains. Policymakers must acknowledge the enduring coexistence of traditional and modern gender equality logics and accordingly design structural reforms targeted at incremental cultural and institutional shifts, rather than symbolic compliance alone.

Organisations can leverage these insights by introducing culturally sensitive practices clearly aligned with both modern equality expectations and traditional family norms. Examples include designing diverse career pathways and adaptable work arrangements responsive to persistent caregiving expectations. Families represent critical negotiation spaces, where incremental innovation – such as encouraging shared domestic responsibilities – can gradually reshape societal expectations. Educational institutions need to acknowledge and actively navigate these persistent institutional collisions, promoting diverse and non-traditional career paths to incrementally shift deeply embedded norms (Yamaguchi, 2019). Collectively, these coordinated incremental social innovation efforts leverage the interfaces between persistent traditional norms and modern equality logics, empowering individuals and institutions to navigate and balance cultural sensitivity with meaningful progress.

To translate the analysis into action, we focus on the two interfaces where decoupling is concentrated: macro to meso (policy to organisation) and meso to micro (organisation to household). Table 4 summarises concrete levers at these interfaces and three lightweight practice indicators that allow regulators and firms to track early recoupling in everyday routines. These are illustrative examples rather than an exhaustive list; they are chosen for simplicity, measurability, and cross-sector use.

### 7.4 Policy implications

Our study finds that the role of government is fundamental to any improvements in women's issues, particularly when policy is designed to align organisational practices with household routines, rather than relying solely on targets. Thus, to promote gender equality and reduce the inequality that women experience in Japan, we suggest policymakers focus on strengthening legal frameworks, such as enforcing equal pay for equal work and anti-

**Table 4** Interfaces, levers, and practice indicators (Japan—illustrative examples)

<i>Interface (level to level)</i>	<i>Dominant mechanism</i>	<i>Practical lever (scope to apply)</i>	<i>Practice indicators (to track recoupling)</i>
Macro to meso (policy to organisation)	Symbolic compliance; long working hours culture	Declare core working hours for meetings and constrain scheduling outside them	% of meetings held within core hours
	Weak enforcement	Mandatory disclosure of the practice indicators above	Public reporting coverage and compliance rate
Meso to micro (organisation to household)	Gendered caregiving norms	Default flex job design and predictable rosters	% of roles designated default
	Low fathers' uptake of leave	Non-transferable fathers' leave plus manager support	Fathers' leave uptake and average duration

**Note(s):** "Organisation" includes firms, public agencies and schools/universities. The levers and indicators are examples; organisations may adopt functionally equivalent measures suited to their context while keeping the same interface logic (macro to meso; meso to micro)

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

discrimination measures, while incentivising work–life balance through expanded parental leave and flexible working arrangements, with features that enable uptake in organisations and households, not only formal availability. Increasing female representation in leadership through measurable targets and government-sponsored training programmes will help a great deal and improve gender equality. Integrating gender equality education into school curricula and supporting women entrepreneurs with funding and mentorship can help challenge societal norms and empower women. Addressing gender-based violence through stronger laws, support services and public awareness campaigns is also fundamental.

Specifically, to strengthen government policies beyond targets-only, box-ticking approaches, policymakers can enforce stricter compliance mechanisms for corporate gender diversity targets (e.g. quotas for female board representation, penalties for non-compliance); expand paternity leave policies by making them non-transferable and incentivising uptake through financial bonuses for companies with high male participation; reform tax and social security systems that currently discourage dual-income households (e.g. spousal tax deductions that penalise full-time working women); mandate disclosure of the Table 4 practice indicators or functionally equivalent, sector-appropriate measures; and mandate gender-disaggregated data reporting across industries to track progress and hold institutions accountable.

In addition, it is important for managers to consider organisational culture including work structure, long hours and male-dominated leadership that are limiting women's advancement. To do so, managers need to institutionalise flexible work arrangements (e.g. remote work, staggered hours) as a default option rather than an exception; introduce "returnships" and mid-career hiring incentives to reintegrate women who left the workforce because of childcare; implement blind recruitment and promotion processes to reduce unconscious bias in hiring and leadership selection; and provide leadership training and sponsorship programmes for high-potential women, ensuring they have equal access to mentorship and career development.

Moreover, policymakers need to reform family and caregiving structures. In doing so, policymakers must subsidise high-quality, affordable childcare and expand after-school programmes to reduce the "childcare cliff" that forces women out of the workforce; launch nationwide awareness campaigns to shift norms around caregiving (e.g. promoting "Ikumen" [involved fathers] and shared domestic labour); introduce financial incentives for companies that achieve gender-balanced leave uptake (e.g. bonuses for firms where  $\geq 30\%$  of men take paternity leave); and legally recognise diverse family structures (e.g. single parents, LGBTQ+ families) in social welfare policies to ensure equitable support. Together,

these measures operationalise the macro–meso levels in [Table 4](#) and, via organisations, transmit change to the meso–micro interface while leaving room for local adaptation.

## 8. Conclusions and future research

This paper investigated the drivers for and barriers to gender equality in Japan by applying institutional theory, with a focus on institutional multiplicity and its interaction with deeply embedded cultural expectations. Through an analysis of key domains – markets, government, families and education – at macro, meso and micro levels, this study demonstrated how entrenched norms and institutional pressures interact to reinforce gender inequality. While recent policy initiatives, such as Womenomics and corporate diversity reporting, have introduced incremental progress, the stalling pattern identified in the Introduction continues to hinder transformative change. To address these challenges, coordinated actions across stakeholders are necessary to reverse reinforcing barriers and create new cycles of institutional drivers for gender equality.

Operationally, our results specify where to act (two interfaces: macro–meso and meso–micro), what to adjust (e.g. core hours, default-flex roles, fathers' leave design), and how to detect early movement (three practice indicators). [Table 4](#) provides a compact checklist for disclosure and internal audit, enabling comparable measurement of early recoupling without prescribing a single organisational model.

A critical insight of this study is that institutional multiplicity – the coexistence of traditional and modern logics – provides both challenges and opportunities for change. For progress to occur, key stakeholders must make simultaneous, coordinated efforts to align their choices with new institutional norms. This involves not only individual decisions by husbands and wives to balance work and family but also systemic shifts by organisations, governments and other institutional actors to create enabling environments. Without such alignment, powerful institutions will continue to stifle individual and collective aspirations, leaving gender equality goals unfulfilled.

Achieving this alignment requires sustained, society-wide dialogue that fosters cooperation among stakeholders across all domains. Such dialogue must go beyond symbolic initiatives to address deeply rooted structural and cultural barriers. While it is beyond the scope of this study to prescribe specific outcomes, a more equitable future could involve changes such as increased opportunities for women to balance careers and childcare, shifts in organisational cultures that normalise flexible work arrangements and policy reforms that promote shared responsibilities in households and workplaces. These changes must be pursued simultaneously across markets, families, education and government for a cumulative and reinforcing impact.

The findings also highlight the potential economic and social benefits of advancing gender equality. Japan's highly educated female population remains an underused resource, and greater representation of women in decision-making roles across business, politics and society could contribute to national growth and development. However, the persistence of rational myths and deeply ingrained norms requires more collaborative and focused policy interventions. Governments, businesses, and civil society must work together to design and implement policies that remove barriers to women's participation and leadership, leveraging their education and skills.

Future research should explore the actual changes occurring within Japan's institutions and organisations, focusing on what has worked, what has not and why. Studies could examine the dynamics of successful initiatives, the barriers that hindered past efforts, and the mechanisms required to ensure meaningful implementation. Particular attention should be given to understanding how institutional multiplicity can be harnessed to introduce gradual but impactful shifts in cultural and institutional logics. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term effects of gender equality initiatives on organisational

cultures and societal norms. Future research should also empirically investigate which industries and sectors are effectively implementing initiatives to address and reduce barriers to gender equality, thus contributing a holistic perspective to the existing literature.

This study contributes to the discourse on gender equality by offering a theoretical framework that integrates institutional theory and social innovation to explain the persistence of barriers and the potential for change. By identifying actionable intersections across institutional domains, it provides a foundation for policymakers, practitioners, and organisations to collaborate effectively. Transforming Japan's gender equality landscape requires breaking through entrenched myths and fostering alignment among stakeholders, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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## Corresponding author

Kazunori Kobayashi can be contacted at: [K.Kobayashi@massey.ac.nz](mailto:K.Kobayashi@massey.ac.nz)

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