

Promoting Female Participation in the Labor Market in Vietnam and Japan

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Abstract

Facilitating women's participation in the labor force is a significant social issue in Vietnam and Japan today. There are various socio-economic factors that prevent women from joining the labor force in both the countries. The governments in Vietnam and Japan, want women to develop their capacities and contribute to the development of the country. Both countries have introduced policies to eradicate gender inequality and promote women's participation in the labor market. This paper explores the current situation regarding the participation of women in the labor market. The questions that arise is, what are the main causes that prevent women from entering the labor market? In the context of population aging today, Japan has implemented many measures to promote women's participation in the labor market. The paper also highlights the similarities and differences between Japan's and Vietnam's female labor-force participation.

Keywords

labor force, women, Japan, Vietnam, gender, human resources

Women's participation in the labor market has become a matter of concern for many researchers in Japan and other countries. There are many socio-economic reasons that prevent women from participating in Japanese businesses. Furthermore, there is a gap between government policies related to women's rights and the social reality (Iida 2018). After the Second World War, the proportion of Japanese women engaged in political activities was relatively high. However, along with economic development, social factors also affect the activities of Japanese women (Kankawa 2016). The working environment involves long hours, irregular mandatory timings, and a lack of mechanisms to facilitate both childcare and working, which makes it difficult for women to continue working. Apart from taking care of themselves, the responsibility to look after the family also has a strong impact on

women's decision to work (Zhou 2014).

In Vietnam, research on labor market participation and the position of Japanese women in society is generally limited. Promoting the role of women in society is now a policy goal of the government. Therefore, research on promoting women's participation in the labor market in Japan is essential as an example for Vietnam.

This paper uses document analysis and comparative methods to provide an insight into the role of women. The survey data used

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are secondary data from reliable sources. The main questions are as follows: What are the main causes that prevent women from entering the labor market? What are the similarities and differences between Japan and Vietnam's female labor-force participation?

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR MARKET IN VIETNAM

This section provides an insight regarding the current legal, political, and economic status of women's social participation in Vietnam and also sheds light on the factors that impede their social participation in the country.

Vietnam's Perspective on Female Labor-force Participation

An effort has been made in Vietnam to ensure favorable conditions for women to be able to participate in the labor market, thereby encouraging their contribution to the country's development. Vietnam's 2006 Law on Gender Equality, Point 3, Article 5 affirms, "Gender equality indicates that man and woman have equal position and role, are given equal conditions and opportunities to develop their capacities for the development of the community and family, and equally enjoy the achievement of that development" (Joint Cooperation Program between the Government of Vietnam and the United Nations on Gender Equality 2011:14). However, it is necessary to understand that gender equality is a part of social equality, wherein women and men have the same social position, and the natural differences between them are respected. The comprehensive development of each person (man and woman) is considered to be a part of the development and progress of society. Equality is not only recognized in law but also guaranteed in real life by ensuring special treatment for women.

An advance in the process of ensuring gender equality in Vietnam was seen at the first National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at the 11th session

adopted the Law on Marriage and Family on December 29, 1959. Vietnam was also one of the first countries in the world to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on July 29, 1980, ratified on November 27, 1981. This affirmed the country's intent and effort to fulfill the common goals of humanity to protect human rights and women's rights.

Based on the highest legal bases and the policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam on gender equality, to further institutionalize gender equality rights, the 10th session of the 11th National Assembly adopted the Law on Gender Equality on November 29, 2006, and this came into force from July 1, 2007. The law consists of six chapters and 44 articles, and focuses on issues and provisions to ensure gender equality in the country. This was the first time in the history of the country that a law to regulate gender equality and protect the rights and interests of women was introduced. This law introduced principles and measures to ensure gender equality in all fields of social and family life. It established the responsibilities of agencies, organizations, families, and individuals in ensuring gender equality, and established a framework for inspection, monitoring, and handling of violations of the law. The law states that, "The gender equality goals are to eliminate gender discrimination, to create equal opportunities for man and woman in socio-economic development and human resources development in order to reach substantial equality between man and woman in all fields of social and family life" (Joint Cooperation Program between the Government of Vietnam and the United Nations on Gender Equality 2011:14). This is the first law in Vietnam to regulate institutions ensuring gender equality in a centralized manner, thereby creating a legal base for the implementation and promotion of gender equality and the progress of women.

Subsequently, on November 21, 2007, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control was introduced by the National Assembly. The law consists of six chapters and 46 articles, clearly specifying what is

considered as an act of domestic violence and documents the measures to be taken to protect and assist victims of domestic violence. The law is meant to ensure equality between men and women in the family, thereby building an environment of equality, progress, prosperity, and happiness, along with the progress of women.

The introduction of the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control, and the legislative documents of guidance and implementation have contributed to the institutionalization of the party's guidelines and policies and have created a framework to overcome gender discrimination and real gender gaps. These laws are important achievements to put in place a proper legal system to ensure gender equality and the progress of women and are also an effective legal tool to promote the process in Vietnam. This further affirms the determination to realize the goals of gender equality and regional and international integration in Vietnam.

On the basis of achievements and shortcomings in ensuring gender equality in the period from 2011 to 2020, the "National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2011-2020 Period" issued under the Prime Minister's Decision 2351/QĐ-TTg dated December 24, 2011, was approved. This is a continuation and affirmation of the relentless efforts of the party, the state, and the people, to achieve the goal of gender equality, and the common goal proposed by the 11th Party Congress: building a country that ensures "democracy, justice, and civilization." This strategy also clearly puts forth the opinion of the party and the state on gender equality. Article 1 of this strategy states that "The National Strategy on Gender Equality" is an important part of the national socio-economic development strategy. Gender equality work is one of the basic elements to improve the quality of life of every person, every family, and the whole society. The strategy also proposes general and specific solutions to implement each objective. The concretization of objectives in each period and specific solutions to implement each

objective affirms that the party and the state have considered practical situations while proposing guidelines and policies to ensure gender equality.

Situation of Women's Participation in the Labor Market in Vietnam

According to the "Overview report on female workers in Vietnam: Women, jobs and wages" issued by the Network of Action for Migrant Workers (Mnet) (Hoa 2018), Vietnam's female labor-force participation is 72%. This is higher than the average rate in the world (49%), as well as that in the Asian region and in the group of lower-middle income countries. The number of female laborers in Vietnam accounts for 48.4% of the total labor force. However, the percentage of employed Vietnamese women is 9% lower than that of men. Currently, there are 7.8 million female employees working in the informal sector that has unsecured working conditions. The percentage of female laborers in the informal and vulnerable work sector is 59.6%, while that of men is 31.8%. Hoa (2018) states that female laborers have a lower status than men in the employment structure. Women account for only 26.1% of the leadership positions but contribute to 52.1% of the unskilled workers and 66.6% to the household workers segment. This shows that there are still many barriers for women to gain access to the career opportunities that are available for men.

Female workers are usually the first to be laid off when businesses are cutting costs and downsizing. Numerous reasons are cited for this, including unsecured health and lack of conditions to improve skills, thereby resulting in low labor productivity. Furthermore, Hoa (2018) revealed that up to 57.3% of unemployed women are in the group of untrained laborers and 50.2% are in the group of workers with vocational training. Notably, the share of female laborers with tertiary education in the unemployed group is 55.4%, which indicates that employment access for female laborers is more difficult than for men in almost all qualification

quintiles, especially the lowest and the highest. Furthermore, female laborers have to work in poorer conditions than those of male laborers. Only 49.8% of female laborers in the salariat group have signed labor contracts with their employers, while the percentage is 58.8% among men. Additionally, in terms of foreign-invested companies, the proportion of male laborers with signed contracts of indefinite duration is at 73.91%, as compared to only 67.67% for females (Hoa 2018).

Gender inequality not only leads to a negative psychological and physical impact in female laborers but also affects their families and the society as a whole. According to a 2017 survey in the electronics assembly industry in Bac Ninh, where female workers occupied 90% of the workforce, 71.8% of the female employees had to work for over 30 hours a month as overtime and 54.5% worked for more than 45 hours a month. Currently, overtime income accounts for 32% of the total income and more than 50% of the average basic wage of laborers in the electronics industry (Ngan 2018). This implies that without working overtime, female employees would not be able to earn enough money to cover their essential requirements.

According to a study carried out by Oxfam Vietnam in 2015, female laborers

working in industrial zones and export processing zones are migrant workers (Thuy 2018). These migrant workers and their children have difficulty in accessing fundamental social security services. Specifically, up to 71% of migrant workers do not have access to public health services at their location of work, and 21.2% of the children aged 6 to 14 who live with their parents do not attend school. This is alarming in terms of the number of children who do not have access to the educational system. Only 7.7% of migrant children go to public kindergartens and 12% go to public preschools. The rest attend private kindergartens or are a part of home-based childcare groups (Thuy 2018).

The percentage of women elected to the National Assembly of Vietnam fluctuates and has been approximately 25% since 2007. Currently, it is 24.4%, which is lower than the previous three terms. Although Vietnam ranks high in the Asia-Pacific region for women's participation in the National Assembly, in the last four terms, the rate of women elected to assembly has not exceeded 30% (UNDP 2012). This is an important indicator that shows that the decrees and resolutions aimed at increasing the rate of female representation in politics have not been effective. A reason for the low

Table 1. Structure of Delegates Participating in the National Assembly through Stages

	Female (%)	Male (%)
1st National Assembly (1946-1960)	3.0	97.0
2nd National Assembly (1960-1964)	13.7	86.3
3rd National Assembly (1964-1971)	16.7	83.3
4th National Assembly (1971-1975)	29.7	70.3
5th National Assembly (1975-1976)	32.0	68.0
6th National Assembly (1976-1981)	26.0	74.0
7th National Assembly (1981-1987)	21.8	78.2
8th National Assembly (1987-1992)	18.0	82.0
9th National Assembly (1992-1997)	18.8	81.2
10th National Assembly (1997-2002)	26.2	73.8
11th National Assembly (2002-2007)	27.3	72.7
12th National Assembly (2007-2011)	25.8	74.2
13th National Assembly (2011-2016)	24.4	75.6
14th National Assembly (2016-2021)	26.8	73.2

Source: UNDP. 2012UNDP.

female representation is the limited number of female candidates who are selected or nominated in elections. According to the UNDP (2012), women accounted for only 31.4% of candidates in the national election in 2011. Of the 260 female candidates, only 122 were elected (47%), while the proportion of male candidates who were elected was 67% (UNDP 2012). This clearly indicates the inequality in political activity in Vietnam.

Gender equality policies and the commitments aimed to bridge the gender gap in Vietnam have led to significant progress, but the employment prospects for women are far from equal to those available for men. Additionally, the persistent challenges and obstacles that women face reduce the ability of society to build economic growth paths along with social development. Therefore, eliminating the gender gap in employment should be a priority if Vietnam wants to achieve gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls by the year 2030.

Social Causes Prevent Vietnamese Women from Entering the Labor Market

The study “Social Determinants of Gender Inequality in Vietnam was conducted with 8,424 women and men from nine provinces and cities in Vietnam” from 2012 to 2015 with the support of the Australian Government, Ford Foundation, and Oxfam Novib. The results indicate that in recent years, progress in ensuring gender equality has not been in proportion to the socio-economic development achievements of the country. Vietnamese women are strongly influenced by traditional conceptions (mostly Confucianism) of the family and believe they should be willing to sacrifice both their progress and happiness to fulfill the role of caring for their families. Women do not have time for themselves, are not trusted in general, often suffer from prejudice, and have fewer opportunities to work (Ngu 2016). Thus, traditional beliefs also prevent Vietnamese women from participating in the labor market.

However, remarkably, it is still assumed

that housework is entirely the responsibility of women, and in many cases, they have to silently endure domestic violence to preserve “harmony” (Ngu 2016). Consequently, this limits women’s opportunities to study, participate in social activities, and pursue careers, thereby affirming their position in the political, economic, cultural, and social environment.

To ensure conducive conditions for Vietnamese women to actively participate in the labor market, it is necessary to change the attitude. This primarily implies changing the traditional thought process wherein the role of women is to raise children and take care of the family. To attain the same, men should be encouraged to share the responsibility for family burdens, and women should increase their autonomy, seize opportunities, and attempt to undertake a leading role in both family and social affairs.

The research findings also emphasize the role of education (especially of the young generation), the media, and the officials who are responsible for making policy decisions related to women’s rights. Furthermore, they emphasize the need to strengthen gender equality-related law enforcement, improve social services to reduce the burden of housework for women, and introduce policies that promote women’s access to development opportunities (economics, culture, education, and career).

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR MARKET IN JAPAN

This section discusses the political and legal status of women’s social participation in Japan and the factors that hinder their participation.

Japan’s Perspective on Female Labor-force Participation

The United Nations (UN) declared 1975 as International Women’s Year with the goal to ensure greater gender equality, recognize the full participation of women to plan their lives in general, build friendly and

cooperative relations between countries, and recognize the increasing contribution of women toward strengthening world peace. The decade from 1976 to 1985 was declared as the “United Nations Decade for Women”, and in 1979 the CEDAW was adopted. This requires all member states to take reasonable measures, including introducing legislations to eliminate discrimination against women in all fields including employment (this came into force in September 1981).

As a response to the UN-initiated movements, Japan also established the Planning and Promotion headquarters for Women-related Policies in 1975, after the first World Conference on Women, and devised a National Action Plan in 1977. Furthermore, the Equal Employment Opportunity Code was introduced in 1985 to meet the conditions for CEDAW approval.

The 1985 Code led to a major change in Japan’s legal framework for gender equality in employment, by prohibiting discrimination at all stages of employment, from recruitment, assignment, promotion, education/training, to termination of employment (including dismissal and mandatory retirement).

In 1997, the code was amended and supplemented. The most important amendment is the change in the obligation of attempting to avoid discrimination in the

above-mentioned recruitment, assignment, and promotion process, to prohibit discrimination. Other areas of amendment include systematizing the obligation of examining employers’ workplace sexual harassment and removing restrictions on making all education/training programs a subject of the discrimination prohibition order. These changes have been well received.

The second amended Equal Employment Opportunity Code was enacted in 2006 and came into force in April 2007. The biggest change is the transition from a law that prohibits discrimination against women to one that prohibits gender discrimination, including discrimination against men.

Initially, when this code was established, the scope of its regulations and legal validity were incomplete, and it came across as a law designed to provide protection against discrimination for female workers. However, through amendments in 1997 and 2006, it has been transformed into a law against gender discrimination, and it includes not only anti-discrimination provisions but also provisions of positive action and against sexual harassment.

However, a portion of capable women in Japan have not yet entered the labor market. According to an OECD report published in September 2014, the proportion of working

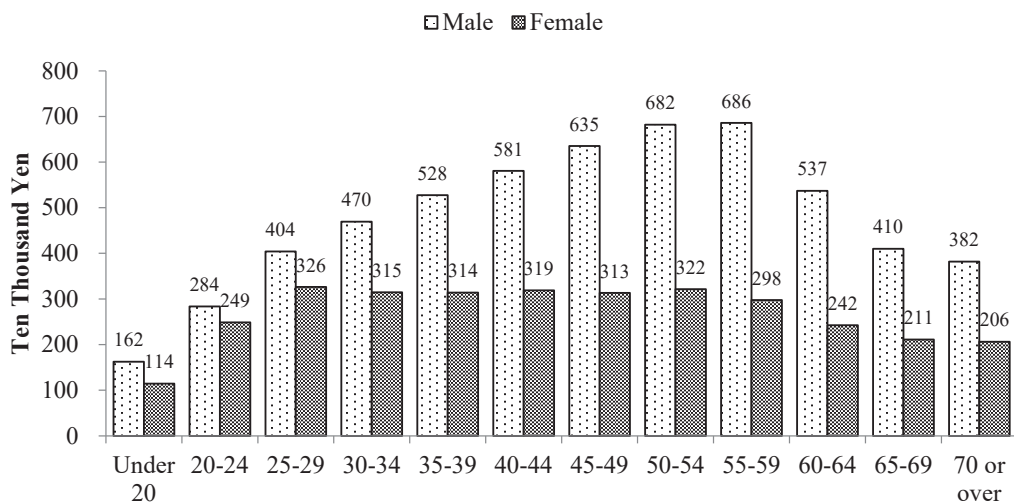


Figure 1. Average Annual Income of Men and Women by Age in 2012
(Japanese National Tax Agency 2018)

women with a university degree or higher is 69% in Japan, ranking 31st among 34 member countries. This rate is 92% for men and Japan ranks 2nd. In Japan, more than 60% of women have to give up their jobs when their first child is born. Statistics show that among the working segment, more than 40% are women, but more than half are informal or part-time workers. The percentage of women in management positions in Japan is about 10%, which is much lower than the rate of 30 to 40% in European and American countries. Approximately 40% of women in management positions are unmarried, and 60% do not have children (Yomiuri Shinbun 2014). The opportunities for promotion, higher pay, or training for women are limited. Consequently, the lack of opportunity to develop capability has an adverse impact on Japanese women's aspiration to work.

Additionally, the difference between the genders is also reflected in the income. The Japanese national tax agency has been studying the gross national income situation since 1978. The difference between the income of men and women in Japan can be seen in Figure 1.

Inequality has also been observed in women's political participation. Although a growing trend has been seen in the number of women participating in politics around the world, the rate is still low in Japan, and there is no mechanism to increase this. After the Second World War, the first election took place in 1946 (Shōwa 21), with 39 female

MPs accounting for 8.4% in the lower house. This figure was fairly high compared to the average rate of 3% in the world at that time. Fusae Ichikawa was one of the activists for women's political participation. Activities for women before the war have not come true until now. However, 70 years later, the number of women in the lower house was 45, accounting for 9.5%, which implies that there was barely any change in terms of proportion. Comparing women's political participation rate among 195 countries in the world, Japan ranked at 156 (Table 2) (Kankawa 2016).

On June 24, 2014, the Japanese Cabinet decided to adopt a growth strategy. This strategy places women in an important position to boost the Japanese economy and proposes policies to create favorable conditions for female labor-force participation. According to experts, Japan's working-age population (aged 15 to 64) is gradually declining; therefore raising the proportion of female laborers could help to increase the gross domestic product (GDP). The government is not only considering women as an important segment of the labor force but is also attempting to leverage their ideas.

Why Is It Difficult for Women to Enter the Labor Market?

In Japan, women have to make a choice between work or family. The failure to develop this highly qualified human resource

Table 2. Percentage of Women in National Parliaments (IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) 2019)

No.	Nation	Proportion of Women in Lower or Single House (unit: %)
1	Rwanda	61.25
7	Sweden	47.28
18	France	39.69
39	United Kingdom	32.00
46	Germany	30.89
58	France	26.20
63	Viet Nam	26.72
77	United States of America	23.50
125	Republic of Korea	16.67
164	Japan	10.11

is a great loss for the Japanese society. The working environment with long working hours, irregular mandatory timings, and lack of mechanisms to facilitate childcare and working, makes it difficult for women to continue working. According to the Employment Status Surveys in 2007 and 2012, the number of women who left their jobs for childbirth and childcare amounted to 1,260,000 in a span of five years. Out of the 6,650,000 employees who were raising children, only 1,410,000 used the maternity regime (Suzuki 2013).

The problem of “children waiting for day nurseries” (i.e., they want to go to nurseries but cannot because of insufficient supply) still exists in Japan. According to statistics from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan, as of April 1, 2014, the number of children waiting for nurseries was about 21,000. Although this number reduced by about 5,000 as compared to the highest observed in 2010, it was still fairly high (The Huffington Post 2015). A year later, on April 1, 2015, the number of children who were unable to go to nurseries was 23,167, which indicates an increase of 1,796 as compared to the previous year. Similarly, after five years, the number of children who had to wait for nurseries had increased as compared to the previous year (Honda 2013).

More than half of the children waiting for nurseries are up to two years old (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan 2020). Even though the Japanese government promotes the opening of nursery schools for childcare every year, it does not meet the actual needs. These figures indicate the need for policies for childcare support.

Japanese Policies to Promote Women's Participation in the Labor Market

Support for Women to be Assured for Pregnancy, Childbirth, Childcare, and Family Care.

This policy focuses on supporting women during pregnancy and childbirth. After a woman gives birth, new forms of support for families and childcare, such as offering support services to ensure good childcare and family care, are made available. The country intends to implement plans to eliminate the problem of children waiting for nurseries, and to pay attention to after-school activities to deal with the social issues arising when children go into first grade. It attempts to create a good living environment for households with children, ensuring harmonious development of the children. Additionally, it is intended to change the working environment and the awareness of

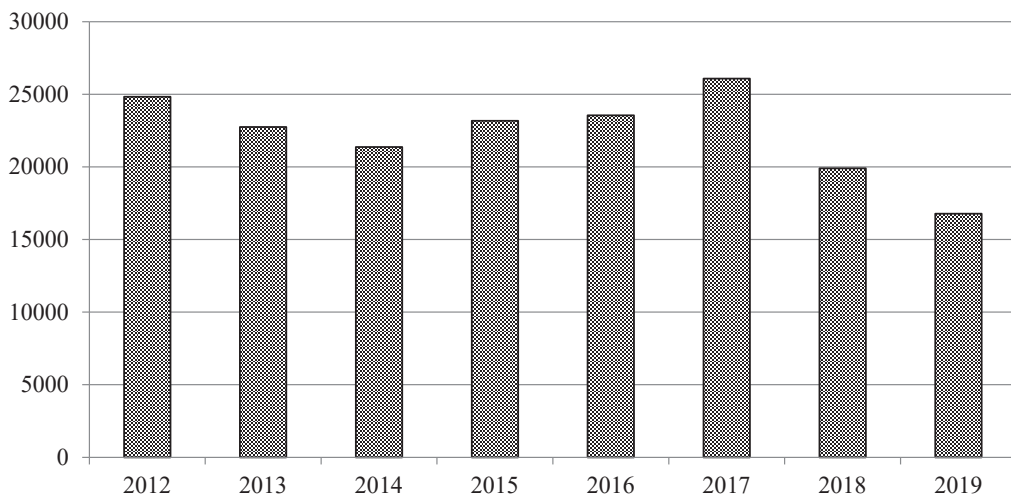


Figure 2. Number of Children Waiting for Nurseries
(Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan 2019)

men, and to motivate them to participate in housework and childcare, thereby reducing the burden on women.

Create a Flexible Environment at Work.

This policy focuses on facilitating the return of women to work after childbirth. Japan promotes policies to implement a plan to support women's aspirations. An integrated policy aimed at training and recruiting young people, including young women, and at the same time supporting occupations in areas where women are less involved, has been proposed.

The current traditional Japanese way of working has been reviewed and attempts are being made to improve the remuneration for female workers. Projects have been introduced to increase the number of official employees and to reduce the number of informal employees. New ways to balance work and personal life have been identified. Additionally, social security regimes and tax regime for mode of working have also been re-evaluated.

Conditions have been created in Japan to support women to continue working after childbirth. Company programs are implemented to support women to work in the company and perform housework, such as technology to work at home. Men are encouraged to participate in housework and childcare while reforming the work methods and awareness. This creates a culture that gives precedence to childcare at work and in the society, urging companies not to dismiss women, or cause harm during pregnancy and childbirth.

Japan offers a social environment that maximizes the capability of women. It promotes the autonomy of women in companies with a focus on flexibility, and encourages companies to offer financial support and public services. The country also actualizes programs to develop women's contribution to the company.

Support for Work and Development in the Neighborhood.

The localities promote plans to support women's aspirations, by creating an environment to expand employment opportunities for them, including in certain areas that are considered to be more suitable for men, such as the fire force.

Build a Stable and Healthy Life.

The government has identified the need to expand services to support and offer advice about women's health, and strengthen the mechanisms to integrate support for single parents, specifically women. The government continuously and comprehensively supports the poor to ensure that they can be independent, and builds a social foundation for everyone to have a comfortable life.

Create a Peaceful and Safe Life.

Japan promotes crime prevention measures targeting women, and attempts to eliminate domestic violence. The country has strengthened measures against harassing women, and is building a social environment free of harassment, such as thoroughly eliminating sexual harassment as well as implementing measures to support victims of sex crimes. Furthermore, the disaster recovery program is promoted with the participation of both the genders.

Information Access Support.

Japan provides information related to support that meets the aspirations of women. It supports a group activity network and has set up websites to support women's activities, by creating regional networks with many organizations, such as centers with the participation of both genders.

CONCLUSION

The above analyses highlight some similarities and differences in the primary causes that prevent women from entering the labor market in Vietnam and Japan.

Vietnamese and Japanese women play an important role in their families. In the past,

women mostly spent time at home, and were responsible for housework, and looking after and educating their children. Today, they not only fulfill this function, but also participate in the labor market and play an active role in society.

The authorities of Japan and Vietnam are attempting to promote women's participation in the labor market. Both countries have introduced laws to reduce gender inequality in the labor market. The roles of Japanese and Vietnamese women have changed considerably as their level of education has increased, and they now participate in the labor market and socio-political activities.

However, gender inequality in the labor market still exists in both countries, such as in terms of income and promotion. The proportion of women participating in the cabinet of Japanese and Vietnamese governments is below 30%, which is lower than that of other developed countries. Thus, policies to promote women's participation in politics in Japan and Vietnam have not been very effective.

In different socio-cultural environments, Vietnamese women can work and take care of their families, while most Japanese women find it difficult to balance the two and have to choose between work and family. Therefore, Vietnam's female labor-force participation rate is somewhat higher than that of Japan. However, in terms of the nature of work, many Vietnamese women participate in simple work or are domestic workers.

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with uneven development levels; therefore there is a disparity in the awareness about the role of women in the society in different regions. On the other hand, Japan has equal development with people of homogeneous ethnicity, and therefore, the perception is relatively homogeneous.

The Vietnamese government's measures aim to change both men and women's perception of women's role in society, while the Japanese government's measures, especially those of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration, aim to change the social environment that enables women

to enter the labor market.

Japan advocates women's participation in the labor market, but it is imperative to review the way of working that is deeply ingrained in the Japanese work culture, which validates and accepts long working hours and overtime work. It is difficult for a woman with a child to work in such an environment and therefore till this is addressed, it would be difficult for women to truly participate.

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