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The Contradictions of the Womenomics Campaign: Abe Shinzō's Employment Reforms and Japan's Public Service Workers

Charles Weathers

Japan, in economic terms, is possibly the most gender-unequal of post-industrial democracies. Over half of female salaried workers are relegated to non-regular status, suffering large differentials in wages and benefits, and the ratios of women holding management level positions in corporations or the civil service remain exceptionally low.¹ Yet that very situation provides the government of Abe Shinzō, prime minister since 2012, an excellent opportunity to sponsor reforms that might not only reduce workplace inequality but also stimulate economic growth (Shibata 2017) and strengthen political support for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) by bolstering its faltering support among women.² Indeed, the Abe government has made women's workplace advancement a pillar of its economic agenda. Under the rubric of Womenomics, the government has launched campaigns to reduce the country's large pay differentials and expand the childcare and elder care systems, policies that could greatly benefit women and childrearing couples (Dalton 2017a). Moreover, the timing is fortuitous. Japanese employers have long resisted equality-enhancing measures that could raise costs or weaken managerial control over workers, but steady economic growth has created a margin for additional spending and increasingly severe labor shortages have forced many companies to improve their treatment of non-regular employees and to introduce work-life balance (WLB) measures to attract workers.³

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Rather than take advantage of the favorable economic environment to assertively advance women's economic opportunity, however, the government has continued to press policies that—contrary to its rhetorical proclamations—closely reflect past patterns of conservative and neoliberal policymaking. Corporate executives and free market-oriented academics, for example, continue to play leading roles in formulating many important labor- and welfare-oriented proposals, and the government has emphasized reducing taxes for corporations over funding social services and other programs that would advance gender equality. In addition, while calling for equality-enhancing practices, the Abe government continues the longstanding conservative practice of avoiding use of the term “equality” (*byōdō*) itself in policymaking documents (Eto 2016). To be sure, many women, especially those needing child and elder care services, stand to benefit from Abe government policies—the problem is that the government is not supporting the people who provide those services.

This report shows that the Abe government, while claiming to advance working women's interests, in reality ignores—and often even undermines—the interests of hundreds of thousands of workers in public service occupations such as education and care work. These occupations often hold low social status but are essential to advancing women's interests both because they account for large numbers of employed women and because they provide services crucial for working parents. However, the Abe government has continued to use neoliberal policies such as outsourcing and privatization that degrade the employment conditions of public service workers. Moreover, Japan's public sector unions, already too weak to effectively support workers, are still sometimes targeted or marginalized by conservative policymakers. This article takes up these issues as follows: Part One explains the general policymaking issues regarding public service workers in Japan; Part Two outlines problems in the major sectors, including childcare and education; and the conclusion sums up the argument: the Abe Government's neglect of public service workers contradicts its claims to be advancing working women's interests.

Part One: Public Service Workers and Policymaking Problems

Public Services and Female Workers

Today, nearly all advanced economic democracies seek to use WLB (or family-friendly) policies to raise women's workforce participation rates and to reduce inequality. Robust public services are important to both objectives: they provide essential support, especially to working parents, and, if properly funded, provide good jobs for women, who in most countries still account for greater numbers of “outsider” workers than men (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Iversen and Soskice 2015). Sweden and Denmark are exemplary cases

of countries that have sharply raised women's labor force participation rates largely by expanding public sector employment (Huber and Stephens 2001, 116-117, 126, 129). On the other hand, the Netherlands has a smaller public sector, but assertive collective bargaining conducted with active women's participation has brought enhanced workplace equality, helping in turn to raise the women's workforce participation rate (Thelen 2014, 166-169; Takenobu 2002, 165-191).

In contrast to these Northern European countries, Japan lacks an assertive union movement, strong leftist political parties, and a cohesive women's movement. Nevertheless, the women's employment participation rate has risen steadily from a decade ago to a record high 66 percent in 2016. However, 55.9 percent—well over half—of wage-working women that year were relegated to non-regular status (including part-timers, agency temporary employees, and contract employees) according to statistics from Sōmushō (the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, hereafter MIAC), and they earned, on average, only 56.6 percent of what regular workers earn on an hourly basis, according to the quasi-governmental Japan Institute of Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) (cited in *Nihon keizai shinbun* 2017a). The real ratio is even lower once fringe benefits are factored in.

One reason for the high ratio of non-regular workers is that Japanese governments have long slighted public services—notably teaching, care work, civil service positions, library work, and counseling services, all sectors accounting for large shares of women's employment in advanced economic democracies. Although vital to the functioning of modern societies and economies, public services such as education and care work produce little visible value, especially in the short term. Well-educated youth, for instance, are obviously essential to long-term economic growth, but investments in education must be made upfront, while the economic payoffs take years to attain realization. Further, many public services, notably care work, have historically been performed largely by women working for relatively low wages. As Nancy Folbre (2012, 283) observes, “Paradoxically . . . those who concentrate their efforts on developing human capital aimed to improve the human capital of others do *not* acquire much individual bargaining power.” These problems are compounded in Japan because public sector unions have weakened over the decades, undermining their ability to protect public services as well as workers. In addition, some sectors, especially education and childcare, are divided between public and private sectors. This greatly aggravates the segmentation of workforces in Japan because regulations and labor laws differ greatly, making it difficult to aggregate worker interests.

The problem is not that Japanese leaders ignore services—indeed, policymakers are concerned to raise the birthrate by improving services, and they learn extensively from

other countries' practices (on childcare, for example, see Boling 2015). The core problem is neglect of both quality and employment conditions. Childcare is an emblematic case. The government has made expanding and improving childcare services a policy priority since the early 1990s in order to encourage women to remain in the workforce, with the larger objective of stabilizing or raising family incomes so that couples will bear more children. However, policymakers have attempted to improve childcare inexpensively, especially by using deregulatory policies to encourage private operators to enter the field (Ninomiya 2003; Kobayashi 2015). Private operators—especially large corporations—frequently emphasize profits over service quality, so the result has been steady downward pressure on pay and work conditions, especially since workers in public services typically have weak market positions.

The Employment Policymaking Environment

Since launching his second prime ministership in December 2012, Abe has proclaimed his commitment to revitalizing economic growth through his Abenomics agenda while simultaneously advancing working women's interests through his Womenomics policies. At present, the Abe government's main policy proposals for supporting working women are equal work for equal pay and expanding care services (Kojima et al. 2017). However, promoting pay equality is difficult because the employment system has historically featured sharp distinctions between regular and non-regular employees. From the 1980s, gender came to overlay the original structure of inequality, as employers increasingly shifted women into non-regular employment (Gordon 2017). Institutionalized differentiation has facilitated the advance of segmentation despite rising support for gender equality worldwide. The 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law prohibited discrimination against female employees and job-seekers, but the law was weak and the use of women as complementary workers was well institutionalized, making it easy for managers to utilize women in lower-paid non-regular jobs (Hamaguchi 2015, 187-234).

The country's major private sector unions—mostly enterprise unions representing primarily their own firms' regular employees—have provided little support to non-regular female employees. Until the 1990s, most private sector unions tacitly accepted unequal employment practices for women, regarding them as buffers for the core male employees, and many unions still quietly refuse to support workers demanding equal treatment or redress for discrimination (Weathers 2005, 72-73).

Public enterprises and public sector unions have played important roles in advancing equality in many countries, but most of Japan's public enterprises have been restructured, and its public sector unions were weakened during long decades of conflict with conservative governments. Nikkyōso, Japan's leading teachers' union, was relatively

gender-progressive following World War II, but by the 1990s the union was too weak to protect even basic work conditions. Wearying of conflict with the government, Nikkyōso and other major public sector unions like Jichirō (local civil servants) and Zentei (Post Office) steadily moderated their stances in the 1970s and 1980s, only to see the shares of non-regular employees in their sectors climb steadily from the 1990s. Today, the Japan Post Holdings (the restructured and nominally privatized Post Office) is Japan's largest employer of non-regular workers (with 203,000, comprising nearly half the 430,500-strong workforce), and is currently being challenged by small independent unions struggling to end discriminatory personnel practices (Takeshita et al. 2018). Restructuring has put pressure on public corporations to reduce costs, reducing the ability of either unions or managers to respond to women's or families' needs. Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Company (NTT), for example, was once a leader in establishing childcare leave rights (although perhaps more for managerial than social concerns) but became less able to provide such support after being restructured (Kamuro 1999; Hamaguchi 2015, 213-216).

The lack of attention to women's work issues also reflects the political weakness of women in Japan. The women's movement is active but fragmented. Activists have been able to win some important court cases and to press United Nation councils into holding Japanese governments accountable for failing to uphold international equality norms, but they have been unable to influence national policymaking effectively (Weathers 2005, 82-83). This lack of influence reflects the low numbers and lack of stature of female politicians in Japan (Dalton 2017b; Rich 2017; Nihon keizai shinbun 2017e, 2017f). Japan's political parties, even on the left, lack institutional mechanisms for nominating female candidates (Dalton 2017b, 12-23, 37-43, 103-121), and nominate them in substantial numbers only when the electoral advantages seem clear (Gauder 2015; see also Dalton 2017b, 55-61). Consequently, just 10.1 percent of members in the Diet's House of Representatives are women (ranking 158th globally according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Nihon keizai shinbun 2018e, 2), along with 20.7 percent in the Upper House. The situation is similar at lower levels, with women accounting for 12.8 percent of representatives in local (especially municipal) assemblies and 9.9 percent in the 47 prefectural level assemblies in 2017 (Nihon keizai shinbun 2018d, 2). Abe's rhetoric notwithstanding, only 7.5 percent of the candidates for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in the October 2017 election were women (Nihon keizai shinbun 2017f). That was the lowest figure among major political parties.

Even when elected, many female politicians, especially from the LDP, have been less than progressive. In the early 2000s, Yamatani Eriko played a leading role in fighting the gender equality campaign on behalf of the ruling party (Kano 2011, 52-53; Eto 2016, 380). Other high-profile LDP politicians voice pro-gender talking points but fail to take

advantage of their positions to support lower status workers. Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko (who left the LDP to form two new political parties, Tokyo Citizens First [Tomin fāsuto no kai] in 2016 and Party of Hope [Kibō no tō] in 2017) plays up her commitment to resolving the childcare service shortage (currently a *de rigueur* stance for many, especially female, politicians) but displays no concern for the childcare workers. Noda Seiko, who currently heads the Ministry for Women's Empowerment as well as the powerful MIAC, commands great attention for championing women's interests. According to civil servant union officials, however, Noda plays no role in shaping policies that affect employment conditions for the several hundred thousand poorly treated non-regular civil servants (described below) under MIAC's jurisdiction.

Gender-Related Policymaking

Around 1990, the falling birthrate alarmed even conservative politicians into shifting their stance on workplace gender equality. Whereas they had previously encouraged women to devote themselves to families and accept lower-status jobs after raising children, official policy shifted toward encouraging women to remain in the workforce and even to seek professional advancement. However, Japan's economic practices had long relied on extensive unpaid women's labor, notably to supplement and extend the capabilities of the education system (Schoppa 2006). Some efforts were made to enhance women's and non-regular workers' rights, but Japanese governments, nearly always conservative-controlled, lacked a fundamental commitment to worker or gender equality (Miura 2012, 65-92). Accordingly, there was little impetus to improve the wages and work conditions of women and public service workers (Weathers 2005).

Further undermining efforts to improve working women's conditions, conservatives stepped up assaults on the civil service and the public sector. Bashing civil servants has often proven to be good politics (Nakano 2009; Miura 2012, 118-19). Furthermore, the recurrent recessions of the 1990s spurred widespread fears of loss of jobs and livelihoods, aggravating the country's latent resentments against supposedly cosseted public employees and smoothing the path for neoliberal reform. Prime Minister Koizumi (in office 2001-2006) encouraged the privatization of services and reduced social spending, and his government's Trinity Reforms, enacted in 2004, sharply reduced transfers of funds from the central to local governments, while giving the latter greater discretion in using the remaining funds. With budgets slashed, local governments tended to reduce spending on social infrastructure such as childcare support. At present, the Ministry of Finance and the Economic and Fiscal Advisory Council (an advisory council to the prime minister) are pushing for further reduction of transfer payments to local governments whose reserve funds have grown to high levels; local government officials argue that reserves

accumulated because social spending was held down while they coped with difficult fiscal conditions and that social investment needs to be resumed (Nihon keizai shinbun 2017c).

While touting the benefits of his Womenomics agenda for women, Abe has not pressed measures that would mandate business compliance. The original centerpiece of Womenomics was the target of increasing the ratio of women in managerial and other leadership positions to 30 percent by 2020 (Gender Equality Bureau 2012). Included in the program was the most assertive Womenomics measure, pressing national agencies to speed the hiring and promotion of women (to the anger of many conservatives). However, the overall 30 percent target, always wildly realistic, was subdivided and scaled back (e.g., to 15 percent of director positions in private corporations) (Gender Equality Bureau 2017; Dalton 2017a, 96), and then effectively forgotten. In 2015, Abe elevated working women's concerns to high priority with his "Dynamic Society of One Hundred Million" (Ichi oku sōkatsuyaku shakai) and "Creating a Society in Which All Women Can Shine" (Subete no josei ga kagayaku shakai) initiatives (MHLW 2015a; MHLW 2016). The three major objectives, most clearly elaborated in the Dynamic Society policy package, were: 1) expanding the economy by 20 percent by 2021 (from five to six hundred trillion yen), 2) greatly expanding childcare and elder care services, and 3) raising the birthrate from the present 1.45 to 1.8 (in order to maintain the population at the 100 million level) (MHLW 2016). The latter two objectives indicated that national leaders viewed stronger economic participation by women as essential to unleashing high growth.

In mid-2016, the government introduced another high-profile initiative, Work Style Reform (Hatakakikata kaikaku), which made Equal Work for Equal Pay the priority employment-related policy, alongside work hour reduction (Nakamura K. 2017; Kojima et al. 2017). The priorities are certainly correct, since dangerously long work hours and severe inequalities are the most glaring problems in the nation's employment system. However, most activists view the equal work for equal pay scheme as fundamentally flawed, partly because it leaves authority to conduct personnel evaluations to managers. Tellingly, the scheme would not apply to the government's own non-regular employees.

Finally, the Abe government has largely ignored the problem of underfunding in public services, choosing instead to reward corporations with large tax reductions. Applying classic neoliberal/conservative logic, the government argues that businesses will use the added capital to step up investment and raise wages, triggering a virtuous circle of job creation and economic growth. However, Japanese corporations already hold record high cash reserves, and any benefits of corporate tax cuts can be expected to accrue predominantly to large firms and their employees, who are already Japan's best compensated (Tomioka 2015). Moreover, the consequent decline in tax revenues means fewer (or no) funds remain to improve wages for public service workers. The

Abe government has twice postponed raising the hated consumption tax, each time after promising that much of the anticipated additional revenues would fund pay raises for childcare and other workers. Abe, who regularly manipulates tax issues for political advantage (Brasor 2017), is again promising that much of the anticipated revenue increase from the consumption tax increase planned for October 2019 will be used to improve public services and wages; this pledge is in large part a response to the public's rising awareness that low wages jeopardize the availability and quality of services.

Part Two: Public Sector and Public Service Employment Issues

The second part of this article presents conditions in four major public service sectors, including health care, civil service, education, and childcare. For the most part, the Abe government has maintained ongoing policies rather than undertake the difficult task of improving employment conditions, which would require increased funding and confrontations with conservative politicians and activists. The government has at times responded to growing social pressures by undertaking modest measures (e.g., “emergency measures” [*kinkyū taisaku*] to improve teachers’ work conditions and raise pay slightly for elder care and childcare workers), but it has also proposed new policies that risk making employment conditions even worse (including a new personnel system for non-regular civil servants). In addition, the government has not objected to the downgrading of public service employment conditions in Osaka, whose conservative politicians are among Abe’s most important political allies.

Health Care Workers

Despite its pledges to support working women, the Abe government has mostly ignored the serious labor problems in nursing and elder care, two occupations performed predominantly by women.⁴ Many—although not all—nurses regard themselves as adequately compensated, but stress can be tremendous because of staffing shortages and constant night shifts. These problems are further aggravated by severe shortages of doctors⁵ and ensuing pressure to shift more high-responsibility tasks onto nurses, sometimes even onto those lacking proper training (Kobayashi 2016). According to a large-scale survey conducted in 2016 by the Japanese Nursing Association, 34 percent of nurses work more than the recommended limit of 72 nightshift hours a month (up from 32 percent of nurses in the association’s 2012 survey). Unsurprisingly, facilities with the longest night shift hours experience the highest quit rates and, the association believes, suffer higher accident rates (Nihon kango kyōkai kōhōbu 2017; Nihon keizai shinbun 2017b, 14).

Although nurses still receive relatively little attention from the media or the Abe government, the poor employment conditions of elder care workers are generating

considerable concern, largely because of the fast-rising demand for elder care. Around 100,000 persons (75 to 80 percent of them women) leave jobs every year to nurse sick or elderly family members, leading Abe to proclaim the goal of “zero nursing care quits” (*kaigo rishoku zero*) in 2015 (Asahi shinbun 2018b, 7; Sōmushō 2018). One pillar of the government’s Dynamic Society agenda is expanding nursing care to serve an additional 500,000 patients by the early 2020s (MHLW 2015b). Unfortunately, shortages of elder care workers seem likely to worsen, mainly because of poor pay, along with problems like bullying by superiors. Individuals usually cover their own training costs, and the average pay—around 220,000 yen per month—is well below the national average; not surprisingly, the quit rate is high (16.7 percent in the year from October 2015, for example) (Kaigo rōdō antei sentaa 2017).

For some workers, effective unions can resolve problems by empowering employees to stand up to (or even force out) abusive superiors (Harada 2009). However, few of the nation’s roughly 1.8 million elder care employees (three-fourths of them women; MHLW 2015c) are unionized, and the reliance on government subsidies renders effective collective bargaining difficult (Takenobu 2002, 86-88). Meanwhile, weak regulation and the government’s fondness for the private sector have encouraged unscrupulous operators to enter the industry. In 2005, Watami, possibly Japan’s most notorious “black company” (*burakku kigyō*, a company with abusive or even dangerous personnel practices),⁶ stormed into the elder care industry, where its hardcore management methods have allegedly caused several *karōshi* (death caused by overwork) fatalities (Nakamura A. 2013, 166-178).

With a strong elder care industry central to plans to raise national productivity, the Abe government attempted to improve retention by raising subsidies for elder care worker wages by 12,000 yen effective April 2015. But because it had postponed the consumption tax increase, the government also reduced subsidies to elder care businesses (opposition from LDP backbenchers forestalled an even bigger reduction) (Nihon keizai shinbun 2015; Murakami 2015). As a result, some care businesses reduced bonuses, meaning little if any net wage gain for workers, and a few businesses went bankrupt despite high demand for care services. In the past two years, many large elder care providers have been pushed by fierce competition for workers to raise wages and to begin offering benefits such as onsite childcare and support for training (Nihon keizai shinbun 2018b, 5; 2018e, 1). However, improvements by large firms may shift the labor shortage problem downward toward smaller and weaker firms.

Civil Service

As noted above, Abe has pressed government agencies to hire and promote women,

marking one of the few truly serious initiatives of his government's gender-related policymaking. This effort helped to raise the ratio of women in the national bureaucracy, as they have accounted for over thirty percent of new hires for four straight years beginning in 2015 (Japan Times 2018). However, Abe clearly has no intention of addressing the understaffing brought about by years of LDP policymaking. The ratio of salaried workers in government service in 2015 was 5.9 percent, down from 6.1 percent in 2009, and easily the lowest level in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD 2017). Moreover, Abe has ignored the poor employment conditions of several hundred thousand non-regular civil servants.

Although Japan's civil service had long been viewed as understaffed, LDP governments drastically reduced the number of local civil servants after 2000. There were 285,000 national civil servants in 2014, while the number of local civil servants—which peaked in 1994 at 3.28 million—fell to 2.74 million in 2014 (despite increases in the numbers of police and firemen) (Matsuo 2017, 16-19). The largest reductions in local civil servant ranks occurred from 2005 to 2008, largely as a result of Prime Minister Koizumi's Trinity reforms, but Abe was also a major political actor at that time, serving as LDP Secretary-General (2003-2005), Chief Cabinet Secretary (2005-2006), and as prime minister (in his first stint, 2006-2007). Along with reducing positions, some local governments have substantially reduced local civil servant wages (Hiroba union 2017, 4-9). Meanwhile, the aging population, the rising child poverty rate, and other social problems are generating greater demand for public services. Hence, as the number of regular civil servants has fallen, local governments have plugged gaps by hiring more non-regular civil servants. Consequently, the number of non-regular civil servants soared from 456,000 in 2005 to 643,000 in 2016 (Sōmushō 2017).

Non-regular civil servants work primarily as teachers, childcare workers, and local government staff. The latter perform jobs ranging from reception and general office work (receptionists and other people that ordinary citizens actually talk to at city halls or ward offices are likely to be non-regular) to more pressurized tasks like counseling children in broken families or victims of domestic violence. 75 percent of non-regular civil servants are women (non-regular teachers account for most of the male non-regular civil servants). These figures do not include tens of thousands of non-regular workers in equivalent jobs in the private sector, including teachers and childcare workers employed by private or quasi-private firms. Some tasks, notably library work and school food preparation, have been largely outsourced to private operators (Kanbayashi 2012, 32-34).

Differentials in wages and treatment are even greater in the public than in the private sector. While non-regular workers in general earn about 56 percent of what regular workers earn, the ratio is closer to one-third in the public sector (Kanbayashi

2015, 34-35, 65-66). Sōmushō (2017) has calculated average hourly pay at 845, 919, and 1,080 yen, respectively, for the three non-regular civil servant classifications (*rinji* (short-term), *hijōkin* (non-regular), and *tokubetsu hijōkin* (special non-regular), wages that leave the workers well under poverty levels. (In principle, classifications should correspond to qualifications or responsibilities—e.g., trained childcare workers should be classified as *tokubetsu hijōkin*—but in practice classifications are often haphazard across local governments.) Moreover, many non-regular civil servants have their hours capped in order to prevent them from drawing full social insurance benefits. The introduction several years ago of the Designated Administrator System (*shitei kanri seido*), which presses public facilities to bid against private operators, puts added downward pressure on wages (Kansei waakingu pua kenkyūkai 2010, 111-116). Meanwhile, fiscal pressures have steadily led local governments to assign an increasing range of job responsibilities to non-regulars, especially in rural areas. Several years ago, fiscally distressed local governments in Hokkaido began shifting full responsibilities onto non-regular childcare workers, but neither raised pay nor covered training costs (Kawamura 2015).

Although pay is poor, job insecurity is an even greater concern for many non-regular civil servants (Kansei waakingu pua kenkyūkai 2010, 3-82). (Many, more passively, simply do not expect to be rehired indefinitely.) Japan's private sector workers, non-regular workers included, have strong rights (in principle) to job security, and regular civil servants possess near-total job security, but non-regular civil servants are specifically denied this right. (However, many have considerable *de facto* security, either because they are protected by effective union locals, or, as with some childcare workers in low-population areas, because they cannot be readily replaced.) Activists and disgruntled women regularly file lawsuits to demand job rights, but courts have consistently ruled that public sector non-regular workers have no right to job protection (Kanbayashi 2012). This situation does not figure to improve anytime soon because the government excludes non-regular civil servants from two of its most potentially important employment reform initiatives, equal work for equal pay and measures encouraging companies to convert non-regular workers to regular status.

Many of the activist members of Jichirō, the largest local civil service union (800,000 members), are frustrated with what they see as the passivity of the national headquarters. The smaller—and avowedly left-wing—local civil servant union Jichi Rōren (149,000 members) usually supports non-regular workers with greater esprit. Still, Jichirō has its successes. One veteran official related that over some thirty years her union branch, which represents Ashiya City non-regular elementary school daycare workers (*gakudō hoikushi*), had gained a steady stream of new benefits, such as transportation allowances for its members. It also saved her job after she gave birth (prior to the union

gaining childcare leave rights).⁷ Jichirō's Arakawa Ward local, in Tokyo, is well-regarded for protecting all non-regular union members, and for winning the establishment of a new wage system that made it possible for non-regular civil servants to get pay raises.⁸ Still, many local officials are reluctant to take up the difficult, and sometimes expensive, cases of non-regular workers.

These legal and fiscal problems reflect the poor financial conditions of local governments. Those in the worst fiscal condition tend, unsurprisingly, to have the highest ratios of non-regular civil servants. In 2015, members of NPO Kansei waakingu pua kenkyūkai (Government-Made Working Poor Study Group), an umbrella group of people campaigning to strengthen rights of non-regular civil servants, surveyed employment conditions for non-regular civil servants. The survey, which drew responses from about 70 percent of local governments, found that benefits varied considerably, although they were almost always much lower than those of regular civil servants (Kansei waakingu pua kenkyūkai 2016). One of the most important findings was that many non-regular civil servants lack the right to paid maternity leave, notwithstanding the Abe government's campaign to advance working women's interests.

MIAC currently plans to introduce a new personnel system supposedly intended to standardize job classification and improve treatment of non-regular civil servants. In December 2016, the agency began to set forth its scheme, the *kaikei nendo ninyō shokuin seido* (fiscal year hired staff system), which would apply to most non-regular civil servants effective April 2020. On the surface, the new scheme promises to alleviate some major problems, especially by allowing managers to exercise greater flexibility in extending contracts and paying fringe benefits to non-regular civil servants. However, activists immediately sensed trouble. Above all, the revisions do not take into account the dire fiscal situation of local governments, which probably will not be able to afford to implement the reforms that would actually benefit workers. For example, fiscal year hired staff, unlike current non-regular civil servants, would be able to receive year-end bonuses, but most local governments, especially in low-population rural areas, do not have the cash.⁹

Education

Teaching presents a stark case of declining union strength leading to deterioration of work conditions. In the 1950s, the major teachers' union, Nikkyōso, represented 86 percent of the nation's teachers in primary and secondary education (Asahi shinbun 2017c, 16). That powerful base sustained the union over decades of constant confrontations with conservative politicians and national bureaucrats regarding ideological issues and employment conditions. The union also staunchly defended privileges such as summer

vacation time, and campaigned for family-related benefits such as childcare leave rights. However, Nikkyōso's organization rate began sliding in the 1970s, falling to just 23.6 percent in 2016. Some teachers belong to more militant rivals, but the overall union organization rate fell to 34.1 percent, and only 24.3 percent of the new hires in 2015 and 2016 joined unions (Asahi shinbun 2017b; Monkashō 2017b).

Not only had the once militant Nikkyōso turned moderate by the 1990s, but activists believe that its will and ability to resist government pressure were badly sapped.¹⁰ Further, as noted above, many citizens had become resentful of public employees, increasing pressure on the union to be more conciliatory. In 1995, the moderated Nikkyōso forged a peace settlement with Monkashō (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology hereafter the Education Ministry), and was finally allowed to place representatives in the ministry's education policy deliberation councils. Nonetheless, neoliberal politicians such as Abe and Osaka's Hashimoto Tōru—whether out of unconscious bias or conscious political opportunism—resumed bashing Nikkyōso some years ago, and Abe has further revived past anti-union practice by once again shutting the union out of education-related policy deliberation councils (Yomiuri shinbun Osaka honsha shakaibu henchō 2009, 295-296; Asahi shinbun 2017b, 18; , 2017c, 16). One of Abe's major projects is bolstering patriotic education for youth, while Hashimoto and other hard-line conservatives have pressed aggressive campaigns to revere the national flag and anthem in schools, stoking stressful ideological battles between teachers and school administrations (Kikuchi 2017).

Nikkyōso's shift to moderation has hardly brought positive results for teachers. Summer vacation times were sharply cut back and work hours soared. Many teachers today work dangerously long hours. The Education Ministry's 2016 survey indicates that 34 percent of elementary school teachers and 58 percent of junior high school teachers approach or exceed the *karōshi* threshold of 80 overtime hours a month (cited in Asahi shinbun 2018a, 3). Around 5,000 teachers reportedly take sick leave each year due to mental stress, usually caused by overwork. One problem is that teachers are paid flat 4,000 yen "education adjustment" allowances instead of overtime premiums based on actual hours worked. That practice renders overtime virtually free so schools, with budgets stretched thin, have a perverse incentive to demand more work from teachers regardless of the impact on turnover or quality of instruction. Education Ministry surveys indicate that average work time has increased more than 30 minutes a day over the past decade, even as public awareness and concern about the excess work time problem have risen sharply (Asahi shinbun 2017c, 16).

Like other public service occupations, education was strongly affected by the 2004 fiscal reforms, which encouraged a rapid expansion of non-regular teachers in public

schools. MIAC statistics indicate that in 2016, 92,671 persons worked as non-regular civil servant teachers, double the number from 2005 (cited in *Asahi shinbun* 2017a, 22). A survey by Nikkyōso found that many non-regulars perform core activities such as supervising home rooms and after-school club activities, but that wages for many are at poverty level (*Asahi shinbun* 2017a, 22). Demeaning personnel practices are widespread as well (Kanbayashi 2016). Many school districts do not notify non-regular teachers about whether their contracts will be renewed until early March—barely a month before the start of classes in April—and then wait another two weeks to notify the rehired teachers about where and what they will teach. These practices, apart from inducing anxiety among already economically insecure teachers, are hardly conducive to proper skill or curriculum development. Meanwhile, social burdens on teachers continue to increase as they face greater pressure to respond to family and social problems.

Teachers' work conditions have deteriorated to the point that they now receive regular media attention, since many parents fear that their children's quality of education is under threat. The Education Ministry and the Abe cabinet have responded to the negative publicity by announcing a stream of new programs to alleviate education-related problems, including the usual call for "emergency measures" to improve work conditions, this time in the form of the "major policy plan" (*honebuto no hōshin*) approved June 9, 2017. However, the measures advocated as of the end of 2017 include many typical bureaucratic fixes, such as introducing time cards and raising consciousness (*ishiki kaikaku*), along with more useful measures like relieving teachers of some non-teaching duties (Monkashō 2017a), but they do not fundamentally tackle the under-staffing problem. Rather, the central government, which funds one-third of officially approved education personnel costs, has used its budgeting powers to pressure local governments into reducing teacher numbers for several years. As a result, basic workloads have remained heavy, despite a falling youth population, even as responsibilities—such as handling handicapped or non-native speaking students—have increased. The Abe government is currently planning funding increases (partly in response to public unease), but the new money will go primarily to new priority areas like language teaching and special education. An *Asahi shinbun* (2018a, 22) survey found that most Education Boards judge the amounts as substantially inadequate (as does the Education Ministry), leading a growing number of local governments to hire more public school teachers than are reimbursed by the central government.

Teachers' employment conditions have been deteriorating in Osaka for years. The slide began in the early 2000s because of the prefecture's poor fiscal and social conditions but worsened after 2008 when Hashimoto Tōru emerged as Osaka's dominant political figure, first as governor of Osaka Prefecture (2008-2011), then as mayor of Osaka City

(2011-2015). While continuing to reduce teachers' wages and severance pay, Governor Hashimoto's administration cut back or eliminated several fringe benefits, including childcare leave and meal allowances for field trips.¹¹ Officials even filed suit to prevent Education Workers and Amalgamated Union Osaka, a well-respected Osaka-based teachers union (300 members), from representing both regular and non-regular employees, arguing that a union should not represent workers in different employment statuses. EWA, which prides itself on defending all teachers equally, won the case.

Childcare

Childcare, like elder care, represents an area that is important to the Abe government's ambitions for bolstering women's economic participation, but whose workers' problems are slighted. As prime minister, Abe has overseen the creation of hundreds of thousands of childcare slots since 2012, but, like Koizumi and other past prime ministers, he emphasizes cost over quality. The Abe government has not only continued to encourage private operators to open centers but has pushed local governments to lower standards, hoping to squeeze more children into existing facilities to relieve criticism from disgruntled childrearing voters. Most local governments are refusing central government pressure to reduce standards because of safety concerns (Nihon keizai shinbun 2018a, 5).

Japan has a strong need for comprehensive childcare since many employers expect women to put in the same long hours as men (Brinton and Mun 2016), and because longer (especially over 6-month) childcare leaves are frowned upon. This leads to tremendous demand for childcare slots for infants, who require more expensive caregiving (Maeda 2017). In addition, there is fierce competition to place children in public licensed centers, which are much less expensive than private providers yet provide considerably better quality and safety.

From the 1950s through the early 1970s, pressure from unions and women's groups—along with a strong social commitment to early child development—led the national government and (especially) local governments to expand the childcare system and uphold quality. Childcare workers, especially those in the civil service, held high social and professional status. However, quality was undermined by the downward pressure on public services beginning in the late 1970s. Funding was revived somewhat in the 1990s, but the Koizumi government's Trinity Policies and the civil service reductions of the 2000s hit childcare services hard as large numbers of well-paid, secure civil service positions for those with experienced careers were eliminated.

Despite the downsizing of public childcare, the childcare sector as a whole has continued to grow as legal revisions enacted in 2000 have encouraged private firms to enter the industry. Unfortunately, many private operators routinely pressure veteran

childcare workers to quit early since they earn the highest wages. This is a socially costly practice. Experience is regarded as vital to quality childcare, and veterans are expected to impart knowledge and insights to younger caregivers. Moreover, observers agree that quality childcare has become ever more important because parents today often lack basic childrearing skills. Yet the loss of veteran childcare workers—combined with the rapid expansion of profit-oriented corporations—has forced down the quality of care along with wages (Kobayashi 2015; Zenkoku hoiku dantai renrakukai/hoiku kenkyūjo 2017, 139).

The availability of licensed childcare has become a high-profile political issue, partly because successive governments have sought voter support by pledging to eliminate *taiki jidō* (waiting lists for slots into licensed facilities), first raising expectations and then triggering parental frustration and anger when those expectations are not met (Inokuma 2014; Weathers 2017). The Abe government initially made even bigger promises, especially in pledging in 2013 to eliminate childcare waiting lists in five years (by April 2018) by creating 90,000 new childcare positions and increasing capacity by 500,000. (Abe more or less reiterated the promise with his Dynamic Society proposal in 2015.) However, the major obstacle to increasing capacity is not so much facilities as low wages that have made it hard to hire adequate staff (even with relaxed standards), especially in areas of greatest need, such as Tokyo. The average wage, around 229,900 yen per month (MHLW 2015d), is about the same as that of elder care workers, and work conditions are not much better (Kobayashi 2015; also interviews by author). Close to 35,000 persons a year quit the profession, so new hiring has barely kept ahead of quits (Zenkoku hoiku dantai renrakukai/hoiku kenkyūjo 2017, 138-139).

To alleviate childcare labor shortages, the Cabinet has taken several measures. One has been to increase wage subsidies, but the effect has been patchwork and some workers reportedly failed to receive raises (Maeda 2017, 104-106; Asahi shinbun 2017d, 7). In addition, the Cabinet passed a set of “emergency measures” in December 2015. One such measure was the offer of bonuses and other inducements to lure back so-called *senzai hoikushi* (latent childcare workers), persons who have substantial qualifications and/or experience, but are not doing childcare work. Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) figures indicate that there were recently slightly more than 400,000 active childcare workers and more than 700,000 latent workers (MHLW 2015d). The latter make a tempting target for a government looking for quick fixes, but the strategy is probably unrealistic. Apart from the low pay, many workers become frustrated with poor work conditions and management practices, or simply quit from exhaustion (Inokuma 2014, 155-171). One veteran childcare worker stated that many women, herself included, obtain professional childcare qualifications but seek employment in related occupations because childcare itself no longer commands either respect or decent pay.¹²

The rapid expansion of childcare centers owned or managed by private operators has brought a wave of abuses. Investigative journalist Kobayashi Miki (2015) reports that subsidies are commonly misused (although usually without violating any laws). Major corporations, she argues, seek to maximize profits instead of using cash flows to retain veteran caregivers or improve facilities. But smaller private operators may also violate public trust. In 2016, the director of a center run by Yume Kōbō, a mid-size childcare chain based in Ashiya City, was found to have reported phantom employees in order to enlarge the company's subsidies, and to have embezzled money and bought luxury furnishings (Sankei west 2017). One's Mother, a stand-alone facility in Ehime City, took in about seventy children but bought only enough food for forty-six (its maximum legal quota, based on size of facility) (Kobe shinbun 2017). The fraud was exposed partly because one mother became alarmed after her one-year-old failed to gain weight for several months. Such blatant problems occur in large part because government inspections are notoriously lax (Inokuma 2014, 99-106), but also because the presence of both unions and veteran caregivers has been declining for years, undermining important sources of oversight.

Once again, attacks on public service workers have been especially harsh in Osaka. In 2015, just as the Abe government was announcing its ambitious plans to advance women's work, Osaka City, under Mayor Hashimoto Tōru, began to execute plans that effectively reduced wages for childcare workers (Hagiwara 2017, 71-75). In addition, the number of persons who could achieve promotions was capped, although this contradicts the principle of rewarding higher skill and productivity, which the Abe government is, in principle, pressing in its Work Style Reform campaign. The city government executed the policies quickly in order to deny unions a chance to negotiate (Hagiwara 2017, 73).

Conclusion

The Abe government is making efforts to advance working women's interests, but the policies are flawed by an emphasis on productivity-raising and economic growth over equality, along with an apparent lack of concern for the workers themselves. This dynamic opposes the interests of numerous public service workers, whose best efforts can raise neither productivity nor economic growth in any measurable way in the short term. The government's measures do provide important benefits for many women—especially those seeking to pursue business careers while raising families, because they rely heavily on childcare and other social services. However, the government's policies will provide little if any relief for the caregivers, teachers, and non-regular civil servants providing the services. Rather, in many cases, ongoing and proposed government policies stand to lower standards and increase workplace stress.

The employment problems in these sectors indicate a continuing pattern in Japan's WLB- or gender-related policymaking. The occupations described in this report share characteristics of having high ratios of female workers, strong obstacles to effective union representation, and high social but low market value. Moreover, non-regular civil servants lack even legal rights to job security (and most have no strike rights), a clear violation of national and international employment norms. Energetic local unions, supportive lawyers, and various supporters have pressed hard for stronger rights, but progress has been minimal, despite the Japanese government's official shift toward supporting working women, because the neoliberal policies of the past two decades have brought an influx of private operators lacking commitment to quality in services and because government policies have weakened the major unions most committed to supporting public service workers. Furthermore, the recent massive corporate tax reduction will likely eliminate any chance of improving employment conditions significantly in the near future. The Abe government has shown greater willingness than earlier conservative-led governments to pursue somewhat progressive policies to benefit women or childrearing workers, but, as this report shows, it lacks the commitment to women workers' interests necessary to break free from conservative policymaking paradigms.

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Notes

1. The World Economic Forum, for example, consistently ranks Japan very low (114th in 2017) on its gender equality index because of weak economic and political indicators. See World Economic Forum (2017).
2. A recent survey indicates that women support the party far less than men (Nihon keizai shinbun 2017g). Abe's personal support rate among women similarly has badly lagged behind that of men throughout his second premiership.
3. A July 2017 survey conducted by employment services firm Mynavi Corporation (2017) found that 28.1 percent of firms have difficulty hiring enough new workers, and over 40 percent use WLB policies to help recruitment.
4. Nurses and doctors are divided among large public and private sectors, while virtually all non-hospital elder care workers have been privately employed, many in non-profit organizations, since the introduction of a new elder care system in 2000.
5. See Kazama (2007, 236-246). Medicine is an area where women have made steady advances, recently accounting for nearly 30 percent of new doctors' certifications. However, nearly one-fourth of female doctors work dangerously long hours (Nihon keizai shinbun 2017d).
6. Although purported black companies are numerous, Watami, as Japanese largest pub-and-restaurant chain, is notable for its scale, high profile, and callous treatment of surviving family members of *karōshi* victims. Bad publicity has recently forced founder and CEO Watanabe Miki (who is also an LDP representative in the Upper House of the Diet) to issue a true apology to at least one family, and to acknowledge serious management problems in his restaurants.
7. Yamaguchi Misae (former local Jichirō official and former city legislator), in interview with the author, July 8, 2017, in Ashiya City.
8. Nishigōchi (2011, 277-290). Several past personal communications with Shiraishi Takashi, former official for the Arakawa local and current director of NPO Kansei waakingu pua kenkūkai (Government-Made Working Poor Research Group), a liaison group campaigning to strengthen the rights of non-regular civil servants.
9. Information on the fiscal year hired staff system draws on participation in events of the NPO Kansei waakingu pua kenkyūkai, and from materials provided by and produced by the group.
10. Officials of the Osaka-based teachers' union Education Workers Amalgamated (EWA, or Kyōiku Gōdō), which represents about 300 members, in interview with the author in Osaka, July 2017. See also Kazama (2007, 250-256).
11. EWA officials, in interview with the author in Osaka, September 18, 2014.
12. Nishijima Kumiko in interview with the author in Osaka, July 6, 2017. Nishijima, a non-regular childcare worker serving also as shop steward for Fukushi Hoikurō, a caregivers' union of some ten thousand members, entered the profession by chance years after gaining her qualifications.