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The Impact of Religion on Gender Equality - Case Study: Japan

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Abstract

The theoretical framework of this paper is the influence of religion on gender equality in the contemporary world. More precisely, in contemporary Japan. This paper aims to analyze the position of women in Japan, a country that has shaped its cultural and social structure through syncretic religions and partly through Christianity. To analyze this phenomenon, we will explore and compare teachings on the position of women in the religions present in this country, and thus examine the correlation between religion and gender equality. In addition to the descriptive analysis, official statistical data from several relevant sources will be shown. This paper does not seek to present religion as the most significant or only factor shaping the position of women but rather aims to highlight this issue from a perspective that has, to some extent, been neglected.

Keywords: Japan, gender equality, syncretic religions, women, religion

Theoretical Framework

The traditional role of women in Japan is defined by the concept of the "three submissions": young women obey their fathers, married women obey their husbands, and older women obey their sons (Kitamura, 1982). Inglehart and Norris argue that gender inequality is one of the most pervasive forms of social inequality and exists throughout the world, with varying degrees of intensity in different regions. These differences are primarily due to cultural heritage, historical development, geographical location, and, last but not least, the religious norms prevailing in society (Inglehart, 2003). Religion has a profound and complex influence on the position of women. This influence varies from one religion to another, as do their teachings on gender differences and equality. Similarly, Peach argues that for a full study of this topic, the influence of religion may now be a more important variable than race or ethnicity (Peach, 2006). To this, Peach's view, we add the observation that the status of women in religion reflects the status of women in society as a whole, considering cultural, political, and geographical factors (King, 1995). This interpretation portrays religion as the most influential factor determining the position of women.

Each religion consists of different norms, creates different institutions, and is built on different cultural and historical foundations. The influence of individual world religions on the position of women is very diverse, so we should ask ourselves: To what extent do religions determine the status of women and the level of gender inequality (Klingorova & Havlicek, 2015)? Different religious teachings result in significant variations in rights and the status of women, which is manifested in the general position of women in the legal regulations of countries. For example, Buddhism, which allows women to be members of monastic orders, differs significantly from Roman Catholicism, which still has a problem when it comes to accepting female clergy. On the other hand, Islamic societies represent a specific case that has been thoroughly researched by Stephen Fish, who emphasizes the subordination of women as one of the key causes of authoritarianism that occurs in some Islamic countries. He indicates that religious ideas have a strong influence on the question of the position of women in society as one of the indicators of democratization (Fish, 2002).

A more concrete metric is provided by the Global Gender Gap Index, which offers a quantitative basis for comparing the position of women in different countries. When considering the religions present in Japan, it is observed that of the 32 worst-ranked countries, four are Christian and one is Buddhist (Bhutan). On the

other hand, at the top of this index are countries such as Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, all Protestant countries in Northern Europe (Global Gender Gap Report, 2020).

Only two countries have a larger gender gap between men and women than Japan in the East Asian region, namely Papua New Guinea and the island nation of Vanuatu (The population of this country is slightly more than 300,000 inhabitants). The smallest gap is in New Zealand.

Table 1: Gender Gap Rankings in East Asia and the Pacific (2020)

East Asia and the Pacific			
Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
New Zealand	1	6	0.799
Philippines	2	16	0.781
LAO PDR	3	43	0.731
Australia	4	44	0.731
Singapore	5	54	0.724
Thailand	6	75	0.708
Mongolia	7	79	0.706
Indonesia	8	85	0.700
Vietnam	9	87	0.700
Cambodia	10	89	0.694
Brunei Darussalam	11	95	0.686
Fiji	12	103	0.678
Malaysia	13	104	0.677
China	14	106	0.676
Korea Rep.	15	108	0.672
Myanmar	16	114	0.665
Timor-leste	17	117	0.662
Japan	18	121	0.652
Vanuatu*	19	126	0.638
Papua New Guinea	20	127	0.635

Source: The Global Gender Gap Index 2020; East Asia and Pacific (Global Gender Gap Report, 2020)

This suggests a link between religious affiliation and gender equality, but the results also imply consideration of other necessary factors that may influence gender equality, such as economic development, political institutions, and social contexts. Such a comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, which will focus exclusively on religious factors.

Japan is dominated by syncretic religions such as Shintoism and Buddhism, which have specific attitudes toward gender roles. It is therefore important to consider how these religious traditions of Japan influence the country's gender equality.

Religious and Social Image of Japan

Japan is an ethnically homogeneous country, with a predominantly Japanese population that makes up almost 98% of the total. However, religiously, the situation is much more complex. Japan, like many East Asian countries, is characterized by syncretism, that is, the phenomenon in which religions intertwine and influence each other. In Japan, this phenomenon is particularly present, as people practice multiple religions at the same time, creating a dynamic and sometimes confusing religious landscape. Such an approach to religion is less common in countries with dominant monotheistic traditions, where religious affiliation typically involves strict doctrinal adherence. In Japan, religion is practiced in a more flexible manner, without the rigid rules of affiliation found in the three largest monotheistic religions.

Table 2: Religious Affiliation in Japan (2025)

Shinto	70,5%
Buddhism	67,2%
Christianity	1,5%
Other	5,9%

Source: Religious image of Japan (The World Factbook, 2025)

According to research, about 39% of Japanese people now believe that religiosity is a prerequisite for morality and a good value system, a significant increase from 29% in 2002 (PEW, 2020). However, it is important to note that religions in Japan are not understood as strictly defined belief systems, but rather as philosophies of life that are generally integrated into everyday life and social customs. For example, Shintoism does not have a defined rite of initiation, which makes it closer

to cultural and social customs than to a religion with a clear act of accession. This raises the question of whether surveys that measure religiosity in Japan are truly accurate, considering that there is a lack of clear boundaries between religious practices. Therefore, it may not be possible to measure it as precisely as in other religions.

These demographic and religious characteristics of Japan form critical foundationsfor understanding the impact of religion on gender equality. Sometimes the influence of religion on women's social roles and gender equality in Japan is less visible, but it isn't less important for understanding its impact.

Women in Japanese Society – A Historical Overview

Article 14. All of the people are equal under the law, and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status, or family origin (The Constitution of Japan, 1946).

Women globally make up less than 40 percent of the workforce and only 25 percent of all managerial positions. On the other hand, they do 75 percent of the unpaid care work. Is it correct to say that the main challenge in the nineteenth century was the fight against slavery, in the twentieth century the fight against totalitarianism, and in the twenty-first century the fight for gender equality (Eweye & Nagano, 2021)? The Japanese constitution guarantees women's rights in marriage, in the workplace, and in education, and they gained the right to vote after World War II. However, although the constitution guarantees their rights, the inequalities that exist deep in society are not easily overcome.

World War II had a big impact on Japan. One of the symbolic moments of the impact of the Western wave on the East was the public radio speech of Emperor Hirohito, who "lost his divine status" when the people heard him for the first time (Vekovic, 2022). At that time, the Allies, especially the USA, used the opportunity to impose their influence and soft power on Japan, including on the issue of women's rights. Japan was a strictly patriarchal society, but American officers encouraged Japanese women to organize and form women's groups that would fight for the improvement of the status of women. After the withdrawal of American forces, these groups split into smaller factions. The myth of the "full-time housewife" had a great influence on the women's movements of the 1950s and 1960s. One group of women wanted economic independence, while the other advocated the protection of motherhood instead of financial independence. The media actively promoted

images of happy women in households, who were secure and happy mothers. According to a 1981 survey, approximately 69% of women believed that women's happiness was linked to marriage, and 68% believed that their role was to take care of the family, while men were the ones who should work outside the home. This high identification of Japanese women with their families has created one such movement, which has been called "full-time housewives" (Kobayashi, 2012). Asian values highly value loyalty to the family, where even the state should be built on family and moral foundations (Park, 2006). If we recall that Mircea Eliade said that the Japanese live like Confucians, it is clear that Asian values that were born from the philosophy of Confucianism are the foundations of this attitude.

Polarization in Japan on this issue continues to grow since not everyone agrees that women should live according to the patriarchal model. Most women's groups, who wanted economic independence, focused their activities on promoting female workers in unions that were closely linked to left-wing political parties. A feminist movement was created and called "housewife feminism".

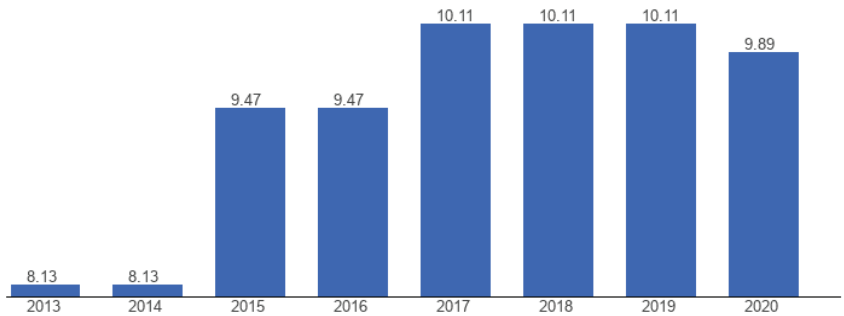
Feminism in Japan was not entirely a counterpart to the feminism that dominated the planet and established religious dogmas. In Japan, centuries-old cultural heritage created a specific model of feminism. This new feminist group preferred to focus its activities on solving the problems of everyday life, mainly issues of education, living environment, and from the perspective of "mother" and "housewife", rather than "woman". They were less interested in the big global political issues that shook the world during the Cold War (Kobayashi, 2012).

In Japan, in the 1970s, the "Women Who Fight" movement also emerged, fighting against sexism in Japanese society, previously provoked by potential changes in abortion laws (Mackie, 2003).

Women in Japanese Society - Today

How are women represented in the most important positions in Japan today? In 2021, women held only 45 seats in parliament, while men held 420 seats. This is a very low percentage, which shows that Japan still has a long way to go towards true gender equality. Japan ranks 164th in terms of representation of women in Parliament (Japan: Women in Parliament, 2025).

Table 3: The Percentage of Women in the Japanese Parliament



Source: Percentage of women in the Japanese parliament between 2013 and 2020 (Japan: Women in Parliament, 2025)

It seems that today the Japanese are aware of the advantages and benefits of improving gender equality as they see the economic, social, and political gains that arise from the inclusion of women, but this level should be higher. For this reason, the economy and the government are under pressure to find a permanent solution (Eweje & Nagano, 2021). After World War II, feminist movements have become increasingly frequent, and the following part of the text analyzes how much religious and cultural heritage has made the position of women in Japanese society more difficult or easier. Although the constitution is quite democratic and liberal, without analyzing the norms and rules that are much older than the constitution, we can not understand the position of women in this or any country. It refers to the culture and the key religious practices that are present in Japan, which will be analyzed below.

Christianity in Japan

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (The Bible, 2018).

These words from the Bible point to the patriarchal character of Christianity in its beginnings. The great world religions were created at a time when men were far more privileged than women, which is not surprising when interpreting their teachings and regulations. Mircea Eliade said that the Japanese are born

as Buddhists, live as Confucianists, and die as Shintoists (Vekovic, 2022). Where is Christianity in this? Christianity makes up only 1.5% of the population, so no more than 2,000,000 people (The World Factbook, 2025). It seems quite insignificant compared to the total population of 124,000,000. Although the number of Japanese who declare themselves Christians is minor compared to the aforementioned religious traditions, the globalism that has swept Japan comes from the Christian USA. Christianity is not deeply rooted in Japan, yet globalization and the rapid entry of Western cultural and religious influences have led to changes in Japanese society. Japanese intellectuals, especially in the period between the world wars, were influenced by Western ideas. However, there were also opponents of these currents who warned of the dangers of Western consumerism and culture. One of the most prominent representatives of this opposition was Takasu Yoshijiro, leader of the ultranationalist New Oriental Society, who in 1928 argued that Japanese consumerism imitated Europe and America. This view was present long before today's global society, but it highlighted the profound influence that Western culture had on Japan. There were no limits to American power, "influencing lifestyle, religion, language, and the entire culture" (Sato, 2003).

It is precisely because of the multivocality of all religions that Christianity has the potential to support a whole range of ideologies, and this can be seen through historical review. Multivocality refers to the phenomenon that religion can support both democracy and authoritarianism in different circumstances. However, this does not necessarily apply to democracy itself, but also to its components, such as gender equality. Thus, already in the middle of the 20th century, it changed the dynamics completely differently from previous religious practices and had a positive impact on gender equality. Globalization has made this change visible in Japan as well, which is reflected in the slight improvement in the position of women and the emergence of feminist movements.

Shintoism in Japan

Shintoism is based on four pillars: family and tradition, love of nature, physical purity, and service to the gods. The importance of the Japanese woman's role as a mother has already been mentioned, and the gods in this polytheistic religion are often represented in pairs as male and female gods, such as Izanami and Izanagi, who, according to mythology, created Japan (Dickinson, 2020). However, Shintoism does not allow women to visit certain sacred sites. Although laws have

prohibited such a practice since 1872, it has not been fully respected. During World War II, when almost the entire male population was mobilized to fight against the United States in the Pacific, women and daughters of men were charged with performing priestly duties. Most women proved to be very capable in these tasks. After the end of the conflict in 1945, the "Shinto Shrine Association" was formed, which recognized and allowed women to serve in the Shinto religion, but also welcomed their participation in this role. This tradition in the priesthood continues today (Hartz, 2009).

This religion never spread far from the Japanese coast. It originated in small fishing villages and can be considered inclusive. Unlike Islam or Christianity, it never had an organized missionary movement. There is no formal way to access this religion; the Japanese merge into it, just as they would become part of a family or some other group (Hartz, 2009). Its closed nature did not allow globalization to significantly change it regarding the role of women, but even without that, it has shown the ability to be favorable to women. It can be concluded that Shintoism has the potential for the wider inclusion of women in everyday life. Historical and geopolitical circumstances are the catalysts for such changes when it comes to gender equality.

Buddhism in Japan

Japan is a democratic country, but one of the categories where it receives slightly lower scores according to Freedom House is the treatment of women (Freedom House, 2022). Does Buddhism have any influence on this? In some Buddhist sources, women are seen as the weaker sex, who cannot make decisions for themselves and are therefore dependent beings. This is a simplified interpretation and is specific to certain parts of India, but not in other countries.

It has already been mentioned that women can be nuns in this religion. In Buddhism, four groups of Buddhists have been established, namely monks, nuns, male laypeople and female laypeople. Completely independent of the gender of these four groups, they are all equally responsible for the development of this religion. Although this is so, in some circles there is a tendency to think "If it is bad, it is because of the nuns, if it is good, it is because of the monks". Americans were introduced to Buddhism during World War II. American Buddhists were of a different mind; they wanted to remove the strict cultural restrictions that existed and thus managed to free women in Buddhism in America from certain pressures to a significant extent. Therefore, Buddhism in the USA is specific and is marked by the

great influence of women in it, which is rare in Asia. In Asia, women have limited opportunities both in terms of authority and in terms of responsibility (Kabilsingh, 1998).

The issue of abortion rights is, as in many countries, very sensitive. Buddhism holds that abortion is murder (Kabilsingh, 1998). In any case, abortion is not allowed in Japan, except under certain conditions. These exceptions include threats to the health of the pregnant woman, pregnancy resulting from rape, and other specific circumsatnces. Despite the ban, certain exceptions to the law are quite broad, and abortion is relatively common. Interestingly, anyone who attempts to perform an abortion without the consent of the woman's husband will be prosecuted. In addition, abortifacient drugs are not legal.

If we look at the number of women in Parliaments of countries where Mahayana Buddhism has a strong influence (Japan, North Korea, South Korea, China and Vietnam), we will see that Japan has the lowest percentage. In China it is 25%, in North Korea 16%, in South Korea 17%, in Vietnam 27% and in Japan around 10% (Women in National Parliaments, 2025).

Of course, the issue of gender equality is not the only thing that makes a country a democracy or an authoritarian one, so in this case, we cannot say that a country is more democratic just because of that. Democracy in Japan is also not questionable.

Conclusion

Do women in Japan, at all, want to participate actively in public life? The fact is that equality in every sense is necessary for the progress of society, but all nations have developed under different philosophies and social circumstances. In this way, perhaps women in Japan, under the philosophy of Confucian values, considered their role in the family as the most important, and their role in public life as insignificant, compared to the family. As Alfred Stephan himself argued, democratic potential can be found in Confucianism. For example, Taiwan and South Korea have used elements of the Confucian heritage in the fight to support democracy (Stepan, 2000).

Reviewing the religions covered in this work, it became clear that each of them has the potential to be an ally, but also a fierce opponent, to feminist movements. Correlation analyses of variables representing gender inequality in countries have yielded results showing that gender inequality is greater in selected countries with

greater religiosity (Klingorova & Havlicek, 2015). If a religion does not deviate at all from its principles, this will likely result in a worse position for women. In Japan, syncretism has led to a complex situation in which, among other variables, the position of women is shaped by several religions. Each of these religions has a certain level of flexibility.

For example, Huntington also investigated the question of whether there is a strong correlation between Western Christianity and democracy. Confucianism, however, has shown that this is too narrow a view. This theory is based on a simple premise, which is that today's democracy originated in Christian countries in the West and that it can survive only there. However, the thesis that Christianity is key to the economic progress of society is not entirely correct. Huntington, in his "Third Wave," states that there is a reverse example, which is South Korea. This is one of the countries shaped by Asian and Confucian values , and which is proof that economic development helped the development of Christianity, because Korea flourished economically during the time of Buddhism, and only later did its inhabitants begin to partially convert to Christianity (Huntington, 2004).

By analyzing the religions that significantly influence the politics and life of Japan, it is possible to see that the position of women in Japan is largely shaped by Asian values. Shintoism, Christianity and Buddhism are multivocal religions, i.e. they have the potential to be allies of both democracies and authoritarian regimes. Therefore, political and social circumstances can use religion to both improve and worsen the position of women.

Japan is a democratic country, and the gender issue is significantly shaped by Confucian values, which prioritize the family. The role of the mother in the family is crucial and respected, and is more important than individual achievement. This does not mean that the general situation remains static, as women in Japan are playing a prominent role in the public sphere.

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