Why has the Abe Administration Promoted Policies for the Advancement of Women? The Gender Turn of the Party Politics in Contemporary Japan.

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Abstract
This paper investigates the reasons why the current Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and his cabinet have vigorously promoted policies for women’s advancement since the launch of his second administration in 2012. Prime Minister Abe, who is also the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, has been considered one of the hawkish politicians in such issues as the amendment of the Constitution, national security, and gender equality. However, contrary to the prediction and skepticism by some feminists, his cabinet loudly announced policies for the advancement of women in society, and has actually been committed to the promotion of those policies. This paper tries to answer the following questions. (1) Where does the idea of women’s advancement policies come from? (2) What are the political motivations behind the “gender turn” of his cabinet? (3) What does the change mean to the Japan’s gendered political economic regime? To answer these questions, it focuses on the impact of the intra- and inter-competition of political parties in contemporary Japan.

The paper is comprised of three parts. In the first section, it puts the Japanese case in a comparative perspective. Referring to Fleckenstein’s works, this paper emphasizes the role of conservative parties in gender/family policy changes in “latecomer” countries. In the second section, it describes the origin of policy idea for women’s advancement, the development of new ideas inside the LDP, and the selective adoption of them by Abe administration. In the third section, it analyzes policy changes in terms of intra- and inter-party competition.

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1. Gender Turn of the Conservative Parties in Comparison

Gender model in a society is partly constructed by gender-related social policies, especially labour market policy which has an influence on women’s employment as well as family policy which affects division of care work for children and the elderly within households. In combination with tax and social insurance schemes, these policies promote in some cases the separate gender roles model by which men and women divide responsibility for maintaining livelihood and providing care with family members, or in other cases the gender equality model by which adult members of family share responsibility for both tasks.

Gender politics is defined as the politics struggled over development and revision of gender models. In developed welfare states, different social economic conditions and political contexts produced different patterns of gender politics. In the Nordic countries, changes not only in social structure but also of political parties in the 1970s were causes of the beginning of transformation from male-breadwinner model to universal care provider model (Sainsbury et al. 1999). More and more women started entering into the labour market as the post-industrialized economy emerged, and trade unions and women’s movements promoted political organization of these women. Trying to adapting these structural changes, social democratic parties recruited female politicians and renovated gender/family policies.

However, in countries like Japan, a shift of gender model started much later. Countries which started to change gender/family policies after the 1980s have been situated under difficult conditions surrounding welfare regimes, such as the progress of globalization, demographic changes, and financial austerity (Fleckenstein and Lee 2014). To see the Japanese case from a comparative perspective, we should refer to a series of studies by Fleckenstein which cast a spotlight on initiatives of leaders of the conservative parties as a
motivating factor in changing gender/family policies (Fleckenstein 2010; Fleckenstein 2011; Fleckenstein and Lee 2014). In Germany, the CDU/CSU, which had supported male breadwinner model for a long time, started to adopt a new type of family policy programs such as new parental leave benefit and the expansion of childcare facilities for children under the age of three. It was prompted by the grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD from 2005 to 2007. Fleckenstein explains the shift of gender/family policy in Germany in terms of the inter-party competition and the leadership of conservative parties. After the defeat in the national election in 1998 to the SPD, Angela Merkel, the then secretary general of the CDU, led the modernization of gender/family policy corresponding to the diversification of family structure, life styles, and social values and norms, in recognizing that her party was losing support among young women (Fleckenstein 2011). After Merkel became the Prime Minister, she and Ursula von der Leyen, who was appointed to the Federal Minister of Family Affairs, Seniors Citizens, Women and Youth by Merkel, pursued policy changes. While they sometimes faced opposition from a group of member within the CDU/CSU and made a concession to the traditional gender model these member supported, Merkel and der Leyen could succeeded in transforming a gender model assumed in family policy. One reason behind their success, according to Fleckenstein, was a support from employers who worried about shortage of a skilled labour force accompanying the demographic shift (Fleckenstein 2011, 564).

Fleckenstein and Lee (2014) call Britain, Germany and the Republic of Korea “latecomer countries,” since these countries began modernization of gender/family policy recently. They identify the inter-party competition as a political factor behind policy shift. In these latecomer countries, key players in expanding programs for helping women (and men) to balance work and family life are either the Christian democratic parties or non-religious conservative parties. In most cases initially social democratic or center-left parties commenced renovation of gender/family policies, but it is the Christian
democratic/conservative parties which expanded radically the programs for supporting dual-earner households after they returned to power. Shift of conservative parties came from inter-party competition for voters’ support. In addition to that, the biggest policy change was observed in the country where employers agreed to share the financial cost of expanding programs helping working parents. In other words, the establishment of agreement between employers and female workers was an enhancing factor in gender model shift.

In Japan, the role of conservative parties is expected to be larger than the above latecomer countries, because the Liberal Democratic Party had dominated the government position for a long time. The LDP, in cooperation with bureaucrats and industry organizations, developed so-called Japanese-style welfare regime, which had assumed the separate gender model as one of core principles (Estévez-Abe 2008).

This paper explains policy change of the LDP and Abe Shinzo’s government in terms of the intra- and inter-competition of political parties, by describing the process of policy development for women’s advancement. Questions this paper tries to answer are as follows. (1) Where does the idea of women’s advancement policies come from? (2) What are the political motivations behind the “gender turn” of Abe administration? (3) What does the change mean to the Japan’s gendered political economic regime? To answer these questions, it focuses on the impact of the intra- and inter-competition of political parties in contemporary Japan.

2. Abe Administration and Policies for the Advancement of Women

2-1. Origin of the Idea

The idea of women’s advancement policy was originated in the Koizumi administration.
Koizumi Jun’ichiro, who led the LDP from 2001 to 2006, was considered the most successful “populist” prime minister in Japanese political history and pursued flamboyant neo-liberal reforms of Japan’s political economic regime. He pushed through so-called “structural reforms”, and in that process did overcome intra-party opposition by mobilizing a wide public support outside his party. Although Koizumi administration is remembered for Koizumi’s maverick personality and its neo-liberal policies, including the privatization of postal services, his administration should also be marked by the commitment to an idea of gender equality and policy for the advancement of women.

In January 2002, Koizumi ordered the Council for Gender Equality to deliberate on policy for advancement of women in various areas of society, defining the issue as a part of “structural reforms of life”. June 2003, the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender Equality approved the recommended support programs for women taking on new challenges. It decided to adopt a positive action approach with the aim of “increasing the share of women in leadership positions to at least 30% by 2020 in all fields in society.” In the Second Basic Plan for Gender Equality approved by the Koizumi cabinet in December 2005, the same numerical goal, called “the target of 30% by 2020” was incorporated for the first time, though with a weaker expression that the government would “expect” but not promise to achieve the goal.

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2 The Council is one corner of the tripod of the national machinery for promotion of the gender equal society in Japan. Its tasks are to study and deliberate on basic policies and measures and important matters, monitor the implementation status of government measures, and survey the effect of government measures. The Council consists of 12 cabinet ministers and 12 experts, and the Chief Cabinet Secretary serves the Council’s chair. Under the Council, several Specialist Committees are set up (See the website of the Gender Equality Bureau of Cabinet Office. http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/prom/national_machinery.html).

3 The Headquarters is established in the Cabinet with the aim of promoting smooth and effective implementation of policy measures and consists of the Prime Minister, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, the Minister of State for Gender Equality, and all other cabinet ministers.
During the Koizumi administration, the basic policy measures regarding gender equality were already set. The core principle of them is the re-commodification of female labour. On the one hand, promoting re-entry of women into the labour market was considered a part of “structural reform” of Japanese-style welfare regime, which had relied heavily on family welfare based on the male-breadwinner model (Estévez-Abe 2008; Miura 2012; Tsuji 2012). On the other hand, it was expected that creating a women-friendly workplace would contribute to stopping the declining trend of Japan’s birth rate.

2-2. Women’s Policy for the Reconstruction of the Liberal Democratic Party

After Koizumi government, Japan underwent a shift of government party in 2009 and in 2012. The Liberal Democratic Party returned to power in December 2012 following the landslide victory in the Diet election, after more than 3 years of experience as an opposition party (Table 1, next page). The leader of the LDP, Abe Shinzo has taken office as prime minister, for his second time. Women’s advancement policy announced by Prime Minister Abe in time have two characteristics. First, Abe government defined the issue as an economic policy, rather than a social policy or human rights issue. Second, Prime Minister Abe himself repeatedly pledged his commitment to pursuing these policy goals. It surprised some feminists because Abe was (and is) considered one of the most conservative politicians with regard to gender issues. In the early 2000s, he had supported the so-called “gender-free backlash” movement in the Diet initiated by several LDP politicians. Where does the idea of pushing women’s advancement policy as a core of the growth strategy in Abenomics come from?

In the first place, the government of the Democratic Party of Japan (the rival party of the LDP) adopted in June 2012 an idea of re-vitalizing Japanese economy by promoting women’s career development in the labour market. Noda Yoshihiko cabinet (2011-2012)
determined on a course of action, which included plans to change the way of thinking among men, to take radical positive actions, and to take the initiative in the public sector first.

Table 1: Number of Seats won by Political Parties in National Elections for the Lower House of the Diet in Japan. (2003 – 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>month-year</th>
<th>LDP</th>
<th>KOMEITO</th>
<th>DPJ</th>
<th>SDP</th>
<th>Communist</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov-2003</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-2005</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug-2009</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-2012</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-2014</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In parallel with the above trend under the DPJ government, intra-party discussion on women’s policy developed inside the LDP while the party was in opposition. The key person behind a change of women’s policy in the LDP was a female MP Koike Yuriko. The political career of Koike is full of turns and twists. After serving a TV newscaster, Koike Yuriko won a seat in the House of Councilors in 1992 for her first time. She ran for office from Japan New Party, the newly created party only two months before the election. At this particular moment, Japan’s party system had entered into a tumultuous time after the collapse of a long-lived one-party dominant system called “1955 system.” Japan New Party, which triggered the political realignment, recruited Koike as its candidate. Koike then won the seat in the House of Representatives in the next year. Since a lot of new parties was established and disbanded in a short period of time in the 1990s and the 2000s, Koike joined New Frontier Party (1996), and switched to New Conservative Party (2000).

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4 The LDP occupied a status of the government party from 1955 to 1993.
She finally become a member of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2002 when Koizumi was a leader of the party.

In 2011, Koike and other concerned member of the LDP established a special mission committee within the LDP to deliberate on policy ideas for promoting women’s advancement in society. Koike served a chairperson of the committee, which was nicknamed the “1192 committee” (1192 is pronounced as “I-I-KUNI,” meaning “a good country”), stating that “a country where women can spend comfortable lives is a better country to live for everyone.”

After hearing opinions from experts and stakeholders, and engaging discussion in 15 meetings from April 2012 to August 2012, the committee compiled seven policy proposals to the party. The proposals included measures to (1) achieve the “target of 30% by 2020”, (2) legislate an incorporation of the index of diversity into the public procurement system, (3) create a society of “zero after-hours work,” (4) revise laws to increase the number of female political candidates and member of parliaments, (5) support female physicians coming back to work after childbirth and child-rearing, (6) improve the situation of academic world where only a few women occupy leadership positions, and (7) establish the regional system to create communities where both childbirth and employment could be compatible.

Koike distributed the paper summarizing these proposals to the candidates who run for the LDP’s presidential election and asked them to incorporate them into their election pledges. Three of five candidates including Abe Shinzo referred to women’s policy in their pledges as Koike requested. Abe won the election and became the new LDP president in September 2012.
Three points in the committee’s new policy idea distinguishes it from the previous ones. First, Koike defined women’s policy as economic policy, rather than social policy. She insisted that “women’s power” was like a “geothermal energy” or “underground resources,” and that “as a strategy for growth rather than gender equality policy, Japan must first and foremost fully utilize women who are motivated, who would like to work or who must work while raising their children” (Koike ed. 2013).

Second, Koike proposed to persuade top executives of business world and major corporations to promote women. She said that because Japanese society is full of “follow-the-leader” or “do-what-others-do” mentality, it should be effective to persuade top executives first in order to change Japanese firms’ behaviour. Koike’s proposal reflected the LDP’s long-standing specialty, i.e., approaching business elites to obtain cooperation for policy implementation. It also showed a contrast with the DPJ, whose relationship with business circles became worse after its decision to shut down nuclear power plants.

Third, Koike tried to justify policy changes inside the party by linking women’s point of view to the reconstruction of the LDP after its defeat to the DPJ in 2009. She stated that “the LDP must gather grassroots voices and women’s voices more than ever, and reflect them into our party policies,” and that “developing policies from people’s viewpoints could lead to the reform of the party.” As a women’s point of view, Koike and the 1192 committee seemed put an emphasis on leading women in the business world. The 1192 committee invited female CEOs and entrepreneurs for the hearings. Koike and the committee seemed consciously chose this type of women, who are different from those in trade unions and women’s advocacy groups connected to leftist parties, such as the Japan Socialist Party (later, the Social Democratic Party of Japan), the Japanese Communist Party,

and recently the DPJ.

2-3. Selective Adoption of Policy Ideas by Abe Administration

Prime Minister Abe released the outline of the government’s growth strategy, so-called the “third arrow” of Abenomics in April 2013. Abe addressed women’s active participation as a core of the growth strategy, and announced measures for achieving the “target 30% by 2020,” speeding up the reduction of children waiting for getting in nursery schools, supporting women coming back to work after taking time-off for child raising, and helping women to find jobs or start business after child-raising. Prime Minister Abe also made the same pledge in the international society, for example in the UN General Assembly and the World Economic Forum in Davos. This has become an international commitment in a manner.

Women’s advancement policy pursued by Abe administration focuses on the re-commodification and full utilization of the female labour. Core component are the expansion of childcare services, support programs for women’s outplacement, promotion of work-life balance policy and encouraging private firms to appoint women to the higher positions.

Abe follows the basic course of recommendation by Koike and the 1192 committee. He defined women’s policy as an economic policy, and persuaded top executives in the economic world to cooperate with the government in achieving its policy goals. Abe himself met with the leaders of the three biggest business associations in the prime minister’s office and requested their cooperation by asking that “please appoint women to board members and management positions in all of the listed companies. To start, I would ask those companies to appoint at least one woman to the board member.” Business leaders accepted Prime Minister’s request.
Under the leadership of the Prime Minister and his cabinet, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare devised a new bill, named the Law for Promotion of Active Participation of Women. The bill was submitted to the Diet by the Abe cabinet in 2014 and is currently under deliberation. It requires the big private firms to set numerical targets and make action plans to improve women’s status in their own firms. In the process of drafting the bill, representatives of business associations resisted to accept the legal obligation the Law would impose on them to set numerical targets about improvement of women’s status, because such a quantified goals and plans would constrain discretion of top executives on human resource management. However, following a demand from the prime minister office, the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare consulted with business leaders and they finally accepted the legalization of their obligation of setting numerical targets, with a condition that the target level and schedule may depend on the present status of each firm.

It should be noted, though, that Prime Minister Abe and his cabinet did not adopt all of policy ideas proposed by Koike and the 1192 committee. There is strong opposition inside the LDP to the introduction of quota system to increase women’s representatives, and to the stronger regulation of working hours, and Abe does not seem to have an intention to propel them into action. On the contrary, Abe government has attempted to revise the Worker Dispatch Act to the employers’ advantage, against the opposition by trade unions and female workers. In sum, we observe selective adoption of ideas of women’s policy by Abe administration. A gender model proposed by this idea is the adult-worker model in which both men and women earn their livelihood by juggling work and family, with the help of public and private care services outside households. On the other hand, Abe administration does not intend to change the family law which has normalized the traditional family system, either. Abe expressed reservations about allowing choice of separate surnames for married couples and legalizing same-sex marriages in Japan.
Since the launch of Abe administration, various forums have emerged inside as well as outside the LDP, in which ideas for women’s advancement policy are discussed. To name a few, Council for Industrial Competitiveness (placed under the Cabinet Office), Forum for Advancement of Women and Youth (held in the Prime Minister Office), Meeting for Boosting up Shining Women (held in the Prime Minister Office) were set up to collect various ideas and opinions not only from women in the business world but also from those active in the other areas of society. The LDP and its coalition partner KOMEITO also created the policy committees inside their own parties where party members discuss the issue. In sum, we observe the competition of policy ideas for women’s advancement around the government and the governing parties. Out of these ideas, Abe cabinet can choose ones suitable for its purpose and interests.

3. Intra and Inter-competition of Political Parties

Why has Prime Minister Abe decided to promote women’s advancement policy? This paper examines the reasons from two angles; intra-party competition and inter-party competition.

3-1. Intra-party competition

To become a prime minister, Abe had to win the presidential election in the LDP. Abe and his supporters in the LDP were not optimistic about winning the intra-party competition because of Abe’s past\(^6\). Economic policy and national security policy were points of debates among candidates for the LDP’s presidential election in September 2012. Abe promised that he was going to demand a bold monetary relaxation from the Japan’s central bank in order to overcome deflation. He also proposed to invest national resources into fields of innovation such as the development of new technology, business idea and creative actions.

\(^6\) Abe resigned as the prime minister suddenly after the LDP’s defeat of 2007 national election in the House of Councilors, because of his health problem.
He also mentioned creating employment for youth, women and the elderly in his pledge in a modest way.

Although Abe won the presidential election, he recognized that he stood on a weak support base within the party. In the first round of voting participated by both the LDP Diet members and rank-and-file party members, Abe ranked second among five candidates. Moreover, Abe did not collect the largest votes among the Diet members nor among rank-and-file party members at that time. Although Abe won the second round of voting participated only by the LDP Diet members, he obtained 108 votes against MP Ishiba Shigeru who collected 89 votes. Since the gap between the two candidates was not big enough, it is imperative for Abe to strengthen his fragile foundation within the party. One way to preserve his position as the LDP president was to keep the high rates of approval by the general public, since the selection of party president in the LDP become more and more relied on the party members’ judgement of the president’s popularity among voters, especially after the change of election rule to the majoritarian system in 1994.

3-2. Inter-party competition
What kind of returns the Abe cabinet expect to obtain by promoting women’s policy? In addition to the favorable responses from the international market and from working women, this paper argues that Abe cabinet uses women’s policy as risk hedge against a fall of popularity among voters due to its pursuance of controversial national security policy.

In the first year of Abe administration, the government focused on achieving remarkable success in the area of economic policy. It succeeded in making the central bank implement monetary relaxation and induce inflation, which was expected to push up the performance of export-oriented sectors. Women’s active participation in the labour market was considered a way to improve credibility of Japanese economy in the international market.
This policy could also contribute to increasing popularity among relatively young female voters in employment while raising children, because of their will or of the financial situation of their households.

Furthermore, Abe cabinet seems to have employed an idea of women’s advancement as risk hedge against a fall of popularity among voters. Women’s advancement is an issue which could contribute to maintaining support among voters who do not favor Abe’s primary policy agenda, i.e. the revision of the Japanese Constitution and national security scheme.

As Figure 1 shows, Abe cabinet has been proud of relatively high approval rates among voters since its launch in December 2012. However, it has experienced several times of plunges in its approval rates. Most of these plunges can be attributed to political decisions Abe cabinet made for changing Japan’s national security scheme. Abe’s long-cherished wish is to revise the Constitution of Japan in order to allow the exercise of right to collective self-defense. The Japanese Constitution clearly prohibits the government from exercising armed force in order to resolve international conflicts. The successive Japanese administrations have interpreted the 2nd clause of article 9 of the Constitution as the declaration that Japan would never engage in war, but it is allowed that the government keeps Self Defense Forces to protect the nation in case it is directly attacked by other countries. Since the threshold for revising the Constitutional Law is high, Abe cabinet decided to change the governmental interpretation of the Article 9 in the Constitution to allow the exercise of the right to collective self-defense with certain conditions.

7 The English translation of the Article 9 in the Constitution of Japan is as follows.
“Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.
In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”
Figure 1 shows the trend of approval rates for Abe cabinets. There have been four times of sharp fall of approval rates. The first fall was July 2014 (shown as (1) of Figure 1) when the cabinet decided to change the governmental interpretation of the Constitution, by which the use of the right to collective self-defense would allowed. The rates fell under 50% for the first time since the start of Abe administration. The rates recovered after Abe appointed five female ministers to his cabinet in September. However, it dropped again next month ((2) of Figure 1) when the two of these female ministers resigned from office due to financial scandals. The third fall is February 2015 ((3) of Figure 1), during this month the LDP and its coalition partner KOMEITO discussed on revising national security legislation to expand the overseas operation of Japan Self Defense Forces. The fourth decline started in July 2015 and still continues ((4) of Figure 1). In July 2015, national security bills submitted to the Diet by the Abe cabinet were approved in the Lower House of the Diet. Currently the bills are under deliberation in the House of Councillors.
As these ups and downs clearly show, Abe’s primary agenda on the consolidation of national security scheme is not very popular among voters. Especially female voters tend to oppose taking military actions. In the opinion poll conducted by a national newspaper Mainichi Shinbun in July 2014, 63% of female respondents answered that they oppose to the exercise of the right to collective self-defense, compared to male respondents among whom 58% answered in the same way. Abe’s national security policy has a risk of pushing these voters to the opposition parties which have promised to defend the current Constitution and its war renouncing clause. Considering the competition between parties, women’s advancement policy can be a useful instrument for Abe and his administration because it could attract a group of the electorates, especially women, who are not comfortable with the idea of changing the Constitution and existing national security scheme, but favor promotion of gender equality.

Concluding Remarks
This paper argues that the intra- and inter-party competition is a cause of promotion of women’s advancement policy by Abe administration. Following is the summary of the pathway of successive administrations and their treatment of women’s issue in the 2000s.

The basic course of women’s policy, i.e. promoting re-commodification of the female labour and appointment of women to leadership and management positions in society, was set under the Koizumi administration (2001-2006) which pursued neo-liberal reforms of Japanese-style welfare regime. Neo-liberalism and women’s advancement was a logical match-up for the Koizumi administration because neo-liberalism welcomes the entry of able players into the market competition, regardless of the players’ sex (Tsuji 2011). In retrospect, gender-free backlash developed around 2003 inside as well as outside the LDP was, an unconscious (or, rather a deliberate) form of expression of antipathy to double assault to the Japanese-style regime by the Koizumi administration.
Since the last days of the Koizumi administration, widening inequality and poverty in Japanese society had become recognized as huge social problem by mass media and experts. It led to the expansion of public support for the DPJ, the competitor of the LDP. At last, the DPJ took over the government position in 2009 by taking advantage of frustration among voters toward the LDP-led governments.

The gender turn of the LDP regarding women’s policy developed inside the LDP while it was in opposition. It was initiated by a female member Koike Yuriko, who originally entered into the political arena as a challenger to the LDP, which seemed the established “old boy’s club” of Japanese party politics. Koike considered devising new women’s advancement policy in the LDP as a way to reconstruct the connection between the party and voters, and she tried to listen to the voices of working women. Abe Shinzo, who come back to power mainly due to the DPJ’s mishandling of government, selectively adopted some of the recommended ideas. A gender model proposed by Abe administration is based on the adult-worker model in which both men and women earn their livelihood by juggling work and family, with the help of public and private care services outside households.

Economic and financial policies other than women’s policy promoted by Abe administration partly inherited the traditional LDP’s policy measures, such as increasing public spending on industries in order to overcome deflation and restore economic growth. Considering the shortage of the labour force due to declining birthrates, re-commodification of the female labour is an only feasible option to achieve economic growth and to deal with increasing demand on social security spending in the aging society\(^8\). At the same time, however, we should not underestimate the political leader’s motivation to obtain support

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\(^8\) Actually, there is another option: inviting foreign workers in many areas of industries. It seems that Abe and the LDP had to choose the “lesser evil” between the two options.
from unorganized female voters by hijacking a policy agenda in which the rival parties have specialized. Estévez-Abe and Kim (2014) argue that the slowness in the expansion of childcare services in Japan is attributable to the weak power of Japan’s prime ministers, prescribed by political institutional settings. They identify the election rules and the short cycle of presidential election of the LDP as a cause of weakening prime ministers’ powers.

However, by examining Abe’s action, it is clear that the will and the strategy of prime minister matter in handling skillfully the political conditions under institutional settings. It is especially true in contemporary Japan, where the results of the LDP’s presidential elections are more and more influenced by inter-party competition. The Diet members and rank-and-file party members of the LDP tend to vote for a candidate who is expected to attract support from the general voters. This trend has become stronger since the prospect for a change of government by election has been turned into reality in the 2000s. The gender turn of party politics in Japan is in progress, with the political leadership’s conscious choice motivated by such structural and institutional transformations.

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