



# The Attitudes of Japanese University Students toward Domestic Labor and their Implications for Gender Parity

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## Abstract

In the annual Global Gender Gap Report, which tracks gender parity in education, health, politics, and economic participation, Japanese women consistently rank far below those in other Asian countries such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand in spite of governmental policies such as former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's "Womenomics" initiative to encourage Japanese women to enter the workplace. Although the number of working women has increased, most are not engaged in career-track jobs; the number of women in executive or managerial positions, as well as high level government jobs, lags far behind that of other industrialized nations. Similarly, compared to their counterparts in other developed countries, Japanese men participate far less in household labor. Research suggests that the less than stellar labor market outcome for Japanese women may be in part because they are choosing part-time or lower-level jobs in order to balance employment with non-work obligations. Japanese working women who are married with children still bear the brunt of childcare, housekeeping, and caring for elderly relatives. Furthermore, they are left with little time for career development activities which might lead to advancement. In this study, we conducted a survey to investigate the attitudes of current Japanese university students toward domestic tasks and determine whether there has been a generational shift in attitude toward who is responsible for domestic work.

**Keywords:** domestic labor, Japan, gender, housework, survey

## 1. Introduction

In the Global Gender Gap 2021 Report, which tracks gender parity in education, health, politics, and economic participation, Japan ranked 120th out of 156 countries (World Economic Forum, 2021), lagging far behind other Asian countries such as the Philippines, which came in at 17, Singapore, which ranked 54th, and Thailand in 79th place. Furthermore, Japan is ranked even lower – 147th – in the field of women's political empowerment in spite of the 2018 Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field; under the Kishida administration, only 3 of 20 ministerial posts are occupied by women. Since former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced his "Womenomics" initiative to encourage Japanese women to enter the workplace, the percentage of working women aged 25-54 has increased from 55% in 2017 to 72% in 2020 (Shambaugh, et. al. 2017). However, although the number of working women has increased, most are not engaged in career-track jobs; the number of women in executive or managerial positions, as well as high level government jobs, lags far behind that of other industrialized nations (Shim, 2018).



A recent poll conducted by the Nippon Foundation suggests that gender biases are at least part of the cause for this gap:

In response to a question concerning “reasons why women are not going into politics,” most respondents pointed to these five factors: 1) difficulty in balancing Diet member activities and family life; 2) attitude that politics is for men; 3) underdeveloped environment for fostering female politicians; 4) attitude that men should work, while women do housework and raise children; 5) discrimination and harassment against women politicians. (Akimoto, 2021)

Longstanding gender biases have affected Japanese women's progress in other spheres, such as the medical field, as well. In 2018, Tokyo Medical University admitted to lowering test scores of female applicants in order to limit their numbers allegedly because administrators believed that women would be more likely to abandon the medical profession after marriage and childbirth (Ramzy & Ueno, 2018; Wheeler, 2018).

The attitudes of women themselves may also impede gender parity in Japan. Shambaugh et al. (2017) suggest that the less than stellar labor market outcome for Japanese women may be due to the possibility “that work other than full-time and regular employment is a better fit for the circumstances and preferences of some working women” and that they choose jobs which enable them to “balance employment with non-work obligations” (2017). In other words, they may be choosing part-time or lower-level jobs because Japanese working women who are married with children still bear the brunt of childcare, housekeeping, and caring for elderly relatives. Furthermore, they are left with little time for career development activities which might lead to advancement.

Women in other countries, such as Singapore and the United States, which ranks 30th on the Global Gender Gap 2021 Report, often hire workers to help with domestic tasks. This is not the case in Japan. A previous study (Kamata & Kita, 2021) found that although more than a third of respondents surveyed were willing to consider hiring household help, only 12% of women surveyed had done so. The most prevalent reason for not hiring someone was the ability to do it oneself, which suggests a sense of personal responsibility regarding domestic labor. Nevertheless, prioritizing domestic tasks may impede women from advancing in the workplace although having women in leadership positions would add perspective to decision and policy-making which affect women.

An obvious solution would be for Japanese men to take on more domestic labor. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020), Japanese men spend an average of 41 hours per week on unpaid work, which includes childcare, shopping for the household, and household chores, whereas men in Australia, for example, spend 172 hours per week on such tasks. Additionally, Rich (2019) reports that Japanese women who work more than 49 hours a week typically engage in close to 25 hours of housework per week, while their spouses put in an average of less than five.

There are, however, indications that attitudes regarding gender and domestic labor may be changing. Although Japan has a generous policy for paternity leave, few men have taken advantage of it due to fears of retribution. In September of 2019, two men who had taken paternity leave filed lawsuits against their employers because they were demoted and suffered pay cuts after returning to work (Rich, 2019). Additionally, in 2019, Shinjiro Koizumi, the charismatic Minister of the Environment and son of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, announced that he would take 12 days of paternity leave to care for his newborn son. Also,



during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Japanese men were forced to work at home, which gave them the opportunity to spend more time with their families. Some men began to pitch in more with domestic tasks (Rich, 2020). Furthermore, young activists have taken to social media to protest sexist and misogynistic business practices. For example, Yumi Ishikawa began the #KuToo campaign on Twitter to protest company requirements for women to wear high heels to work. In addition, the New York Times recently reported on young women in technology who had developed apps to divide household chores and locate childcare providers (Foster, 2020). Also, depictions of men in popular entertainment, such as the gangster homemaker in the manga and anime *The Way of the Househusband*, and the bento-making single father in the Netflix film “461 O-bentos,” may help to change gender-based perceptions of domestic labor.

While these developments are encouraging, research is necessary in order to obtain a better grasp of changes in attitudes among members of the younger generation. In this paper, we will examine the results of a survey on the attitudes of Japanese university students toward domestic labor and their implications for gender parity in Japan.

## 2. Methodology

We used a qualitative approach in our study. The participants were a sample of university students who conducted the survey during the first researcher's class, and also students reached through a university inter-office email system. Since both researchers teach at universities, we also asked professors in our professional networks and students at other universities to cooperate with the survey. We fundamentally targeted Japanese university students; however, a few respondents are international students living and studying in Japan. All respondents are university students.

The survey questions were in both English and Japanese, in the form of a Google document. Participants received a link or a QR code linking to the questions, which enabled participants to reply anonymously. Initially, we asked questions about age, gender, nationality, home prefecture, university name, and their current living situation. We also provided participants with questions consisting of four parts on household chores. The first section questioned about daily household chores under the current living conditions; the second one asked about daily domestic tasks and responsibilities in each household. The third section investigated participants' mindsets regarding gender roles and household chores; the last part inquired of participants' attitudes and opinions regarding gender roles and household chores for future partners. The last section invited participants to suggest how better gender parity regarding domestic labor can be achieved in Japan.

We gathered the responses to our survey in December 2021. Four hundred university students responded to the survey.

## 3. Demographics

Four hundred university students responded to the survey. 98.4% of the participants were between 18 and 22 (See Table 1 below). The majority of the participants were Japanese, accounting for 97.3 %. The survey was conducted at six universities across Japan, including one women's university. The four hundred students from six universities who participated in the survey have a variety of backgrounds and are from 37 prefectures.



Table 1

*What is your age?*

Age	N	%
18	46	11.5
19	177	44.3
20	111	27.8
21	40	10.0
22	20	5.0
23	4	1.0
26	1	0.3
30~	1	0.3

n=400

Out of four hundred participants, two hundred six were females, accounting for 51.5%. One hundred ninety were males, accounting for 47.8%. Three students identified as neither male nor female. (See Figure 1 below.)

#### 4. Findings

Our initial questions inquired about the division of household labor in the students' families as they were growing up. Although in many households domestic tasks were completed by various family members including parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and the respondents themselves, mothers were overwhelmingly involved in domestic labor at least some of the time. Results showed that mothers cooked in 375 households (93.75%), while 84 (21%) of fathers cooked; mothers did the laundry in 359 households (89.8%), compared to fathers in 85 (21.3%) households. Mothers in 335 households (83.8%) vacuumed or mopped the floors, while 118 (29.5%) fathers did. Washing the dishes was done by 340 (85%) mothers and 145 (36.3%) fathers, and shopping for groceries was done by mothers in 374 (93.5%) households and by fathers in 156 (39%) households. Additionally, 46.3% of fathers took out the garbage, and 44.3% of fathers bathed their children. Clearly, in many families, domestic tasks are shared, although mothers may tend to carry a heavier load.

Figure 2 indicates the current living situation and cooking responsibilities (See Figure 2. below). Out of four hundred respondents, one hundred seventy-seven students live either alone in an apartment, in a dormitory, or with friends in a shared house, accounting for 44.3%. Out of one hundred seventy-seven respondents, one hundred sixty-six students cook for themselves. If we include students living with their families but cooking their meals, the total number of students is two hundred four. On the other hand, two hundred twenty-three respondents live with their families, accounting for 55.8% of all respondents. Out of the two hundred twenty-three respondents, one hundred eighty-five do not cook their meals, or one hundred ninety-six including students living alone or in dormitories, accounting for 49.0% of all respondents.

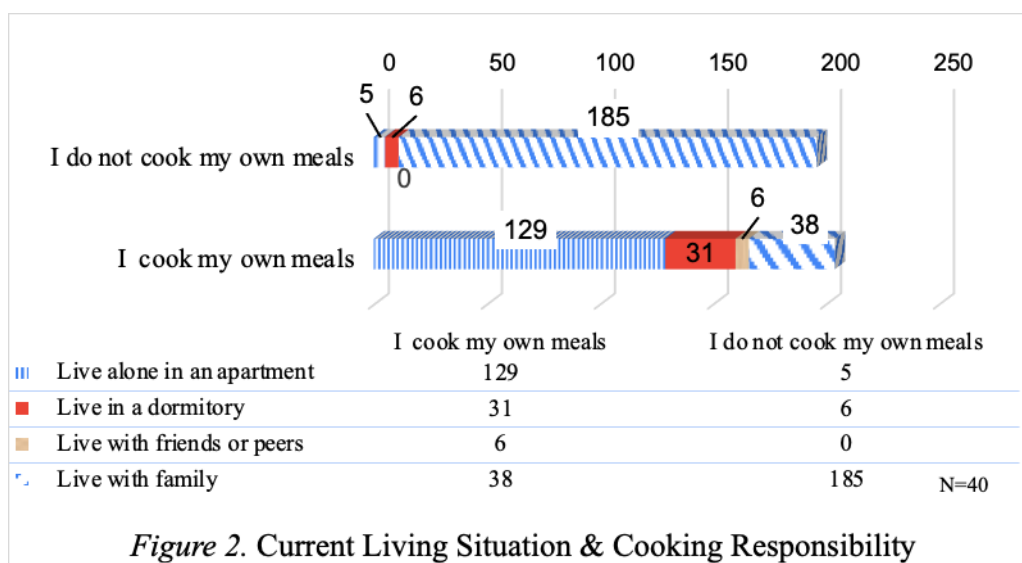


Figure 2. Current Living Situation & Cooking Responsibility

We surveyed students' attitudes regarding gender roles on household chores. We listed 13 household tasks and asked respondents to assign a gender to each one. Respondents were allowed to choose “male,” “female,” or “neutral.” The list of household chores included the following items: cooking, shopping for groceries, washing windows, giving children a bath, vacuuming/mopping, washing dishes, dusting, ironing, taking out the garbage, meeting children’s teachers, cleaning toilets, putting children to bed, and making children’s bentos (lunch boxes).

The majority of the respondents chose “neutral” regarding nine out of thirteen house chores, thus indicating no apparent bias toward either gender. However, we found relatively definite gender roles perceived toward five household chores. Although the figures are considerably smaller than those for “neutral”, the numbers imply bias toward either gender on selected domestic tasks. Therefore, we extracted five chores, particularly worth attention. The following table shows the survey results on participants’ attitudes toward substantial gender roles on house chores. In response to the general questions, “In your opinion, what gender is most appropriate to each chore? Please choose male, female, and neutral,” followed the item of identified house chore (See Tables 2-6 below).

In response to the question “What gender do you think to be the most appropriate for Cooking?”, “fifty (12.5%) answered “Female”, three (0.8%) replied “Male” (See Table 2 below). Again, although figures shown were significantly smaller than those for “neutral”, the numbers imply a bias toward females regarding cooking.

Table 2.  
Cooking

Gender	N	%
Male	3	0.8
<b>Female</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>12.5</b>
Neutral	336	84.0
Male, or Female	5	1.3
Female, or Neutral	5	1.3
Male, Female, or Neutral	1	0.3

n=400



In response to the question “What gender do you think to be the most appropriate for shopping for groceries?”, out of all four hundred respondents, thirty-seven (9.3%) answered, “Male”; fifteen (3.8%) replied, “Female” (See Table 3 below).

Table 3  
*Shopping for Groceries*

Gender	N	%
<b>Male</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>9.3</b>
Female	15	3.8
Neutral	341	85.3
Male, or Female	6	1.5
Female, or Neutral	0	0.0
Male, Female, or Neutral	0	0.0
Male, or Neutral	1	0.3

n=400

Although Japanese fathers frequently bathe young children, 36 (9%) respondents replied that it is a “female” task, while only 16 (4%) considered it a “male” task (See Table 4).

Table 4  
*Giving Children a Bath*

Gender	N	%
Male	9	2.3
<b>Female</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>7.0</b>
Neutral	354	88.5
Male, or Female	6	1.5
Female, or Neutral	2	0.5
Male, Female, or Neutral	0	0.0
Male, or Neutral	1	0.3

n=400

As for “What gender do you think to be the most appropriate for taking out the garbage?”, out of all four hundred respondents, forty-four (11.0%) answered, “Male”; two (0.5%) replied, “Female” (See Table 5 below).

Table 5  
*Taking out the Garbage*

Gender	N	%
<b>Male</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>11.0</b>
Female	2	0.5
Neutral	347	86.8
Male, or Female	6	1.5
Female, or Neutral	0	0.0
Male, Female, or Neutral	0	0.0
Male, or Neutral	1	0.3

n=400



In response to the question “What gender do you think to be the most appropriate for making children’s bentos?”, out of all four hundred respondents, three hundred twenty-seven (81.8%) answered, “Female or Neutral” (See Table 6 below).

Table 6  
*Making Children’s Bentos*

Gender	N	%
Neutral	1	0.3
Male, or Female	67	16.8
<b>Female, or Neutral</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>81.8</b>
Male, Female, or Neutral	4	1.0
Male, or Neutral	1	0.3

n=400

Overall, the university students surveyed appear to have an egalitarian view of domestic tasks.

We also asked students to anticipate how they might divide domestic tasks while cohabitating in the future: “Imagine that you live with a partner. Who do you expect to do household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare?” In response to the question, we provided the following seven choices: the female partner, the male partner, whoever has the most free time, whoever makes the lowest salary, whoever likes the tasks the most, the chores will be divided equally, hired help. Assuming that students might want to choose more than one option, multiple responses were allowed.

The data shows the number of responses selected as multiple choices. The most significant number of students - three hundred thirty- chose this answer by multiple-choice: “Whoever has the most free time.” The subsequent most frequent responses were, “The chores will be divided equally, and “Whoever likes the tasks the most.” The number of responses for each was one hundred thirty-seven and one hundred thirty, respectively (See Table 7 below).

Table 7  
*Imagine that you live with a partner. Who do you expect will do household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare?*

Response	N
1. The female partner	11
2. The male partner	6
<b>3. Whoever has the most free time</b>	<b>333</b>
4. Whoever makes the lowest salary	6
<b>5. Whoever likes the tasks the most</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>6. The chores will be divided equally</b>	<b>147</b>
7. Hired help	27



Table 8 presents the details of the multiple responses given in Table 7; the three most frequent patterns are supplemental information on multiple responses. The numbers shown in table 8 are included in the total number of responses in Table 7. We monitored frequency tendency on respondents who chose the answer “Whoever has the most free time” choose replies “Whoever likes the tasks the most”, and “The chores will be divided equally.”

Table 8

*Who do you expect will do household chores?*

The most frequent combination of Responses	N
3. Whoever has the most free time 5. Whoever likes the tasks the most	53
3. Whoever has the most free time 6. The chores will be divided equally	41
3. Whoever has the most free time 5. Whoever likes the tasks the most	41
6. The chores will be divided equally	

Most (83.3%) replied that whoever has the most free time will perform the chores, while 36.8% expect that chores will be divided equally. Twenty-seven (6.8%) declared that they expect to hire help.

Many students recognized that gender disparity exists in Japan. One student, a 19-year-old female from Kochi, had little hope for her elders, responding, “There is nothing we can do about gender equality to my parents' generation. I'm sure they will never change their minds.” However, she added, “I think that some of the younger generations have both men and women doing housework.” A 19-year-old male from Okayama concurred, replying “Especially among the younger generation, the stereotype of men and women doing domestic work is slowly disappearing. What is important is the spirit of mutual help, and if we have that, time will solve the problem.” Many mentioned the importance of discussing the division of labor as a couple.

Other respondents suggested that gender parity might be achieved in Japan through education. For example, a 19-year-old female student from Nara wrote, “I think it would be good if schools and society show an attitude of gender equality.” Similarly, a 19-year-old female from Osaka advised, “Educate elementary school children about the relationship between gender equality and domestic work, and teach them that both men and women can do housework.” A 19-year-old male from Wakayama proposed “Appeal to the awareness of gender equality by showing text and diagrams to help people understand the reality of domestic work.”

Others pointed out the potential effect of representations in media:

The famous Japanese anime series "Sazae-san" and "Chibi Maruko-chan" depict women doing housework and men sleeping. Since gender consciousness is strong, it is necessary to change these animations and reform the public's consciousness. In other words, men and women should be able to take it for granted that they should do the same housework. (male, 21, from Tokushima)





I believe that the process of creating an ideal family image includes the entertainment we watched as children, such as anime and manga, so I think it would be good if there were more anime with various family structures, not just those like Sazae-san, where men are outside and women are at home. (female, 22, from Kangawa)

Change advertising and media that create gender bias regarding household work. (female, 21, from Hokkaido)

Still others advocated living independently: "Make sure that every person experiences living alone at least once. (They can learn how to do and what kind of domestic work it is and how hard it is)" suggested a 20-year-old from Kanagawa, while a 21-year-old female from Ehime wrote, "I think you should experience living alone at least once before you get married."

Finally, an 18-year-old male from Ishikawa replied, "Hire a professional."

## 5. Conclusion

Although Japanese men have acquired a reputation for overwork in the office and slacking off at home, creating a burden on wives and mothers and impeding the advancement of women in the workplace, our survey offers a glimmer of hope. Many Japanese university students have experience performing domestic tasks such as cooking and doing the laundry either within their families or while living alone. Furthermore, the vast majority of university student respondents expressed no gender bias toward domestic tasks. Many anticipate sharing household tasks in the future after having frank discussions with their partners about the division of labor. More concerning are the responses to our question regarding how tasks may be delegated during co-habitation, with many replying that whoever has the most free time will be expected to do the most housework. At present, in workplaces dominated by older men, men tend to work the longest hours. While younger men appear to be ready and willing to do their share of future domestic tasks, a shift in attitude in the workplace is still required.

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## 3rd Global Conference on Women's Studies

25-27 February 2022

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