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Lost in Translation: Exploring Gender Mainstreaming in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how discourses of gender equality workers in Japan contribute to the construction of gendered subjectivities and how these discourses intersect with the hegemonic neoliberal discourse of gender equality. By employing a thematic and critical discourse analysis, our study revealed the presence of three distinct discursive regimes: a locally adapted neoliberal regime that positions women as resources for development; a critical approach that problematizes a binary view of gender and emphasizes gender equality as a systemic issue; and an essentialist regime that perceives gender equality as incorporating a female perspective and advocates for a more conservative subject position for women in Japan. Expanding on Butler's work, we conclude that discursive displacement can arise within the interaction of various discourse levels, all of which are influenced by the cultural, historical, political, and economic context in which they unfold. We further argue that embracing and recognizing the localized nuances and meanings of gender equality holds the potential to significantly enhance the formulation of both central and local policy decisions. This perspective also opens avenues to effectively counter the effects of neoliberal feminism.

1 | Introduction

The power of the States to bestow or deny recognition has been the subject of feminist critique and activism since its foundation (Durbin et al. 2017; Budgeon 2019). More recently, however, feminism has entered the halls of power to change institutions and their operations from within (Marcondes et al. 2024; McBride and Mazur 2012; Johnson Ross 2019). The so-called 'gender mainstreaming' was first introduced during the 20th anniversary of the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Carney 2002; Kantola and Squires 2012). It is a concept that emphasizes the integration of a gender perspective into all government policies and programs. Whether this latest metamorphosis of feminism is an opportunity or a threat to the advancement of gender equality has been the subject of heated debates (Prügl 2011; Gago 2019; Kantola 2006; Rottenberg 2018; Swan and Fox 2010).

A notable limitation of this ongoing debate is that existing studies have rarely investigated the views and experiences of those workers who are called to transform feminism into institutional practice (Eisenstein 1995; Charles 2004; Johnson Ross 2019; Scala and Paterson 2017). In particular, we know little about how these workers constitute and deal with the discursive ambiguity of gender equality, which appears among the reasons for gender mainstreaming's multiple failures (Caglar 2013).

Building on Butler's work (2020, 2005, 1997, 1996, 1993, 1999/1990), our analysis explores the localized construction of gender identity vis-à-vis the state discourse shaped by neoliberal feminism (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Kantola 2006), particularly by individuals who actively advocate for, design, and/or implement gender equality initiatives (Johnson Ross 2019; Scala and Paterson 2017). In contrast to other theories, such as institu-

tional theory and Acker's theory ([1990](#)), which focuses on the gendered and gendering of organizational structures and practices, Butler's work allows us to explore how the relationship between gender identity and discourse unfolds in the context of gender mainstreaming initiatives in Japan.

Building upon Butler's conceptualization of identity as "an *effect* of discursive practices" (Butler, [1999/1990](#), 24), our paper addresses two research questions: (i) What gendered subjectivities are constructed by the discourses of these gender equality workers? (ii) In what ways do these discourses intersect with the overarching hegemonic neoliberal discourse of gender equality?

We explore these questions through the analysis of 29 semi-structured interviews with Japanese gender equality workers. Initiatives of gender mainstreaming have followed diverse trajectories in different countries (Daly [2005](#); Polzer et al. [2023](#)). For instance, reform efforts in the East and North Africa regions began in the 2010s, whereas high-income economies in the OECD started working on gender mainstreaming as early as the 1990s (World Bank [2023](#)). However, most of the existing studies have focused either on emerging economies, such as India or South Africa, or on high-income European countries, such as Austria or Spain (Kataeva et al. [2024](#); Polzer et al. [2023](#)). Moreover, the growing body of publications on gender mainstreaming disproportionately represents contributions from researchers affiliated with institutions in the United Kingdom, United States of America, and Canada, underscoring a troubling lack of diversity in global knowledge production (Caywood and Darmstadt [2024](#); Kataeva et al. [2024](#)).

In this diversified landscape, Japan offers the most interesting case of an advanced industrial economy with high gender differentiation and stratification in the labor market (Brinton [1993](#)). Japan ranks the lowest in gender equality in terms of economic participation and opportunity among OECD countries.[1] The reforms adopted by the Japanese government in the last decades (see Table [1](#)) "have not yielded concrete results" (Miura [2015](#), 66, our translation), and gender inequality has remained persistent. This is partly due to a sexual division of labor[2] rooted in the Confucian-influenced "good wife, wise mother" ideal (Lebra [2007](#)) and an enduring male-dominated corporate culture characterized by "long hours, limited flexibility, status and hierarchy, long-term loyalty to the firm, and career progression based on continuous employment" (Macnaughtan [2015](#), 13; Goldstein-Gidoni [2012](#); Nemoto [2013](#), [2016](#)).

The concept of the "good wife and wise mother" has been deeply intertwined with Japan's modernization since the Meiji era (1868–1912)[3] and has promoted Confucian ideals of womanhood, characterized by virtues such as obedience, patience, modesty, frugality, diligence, chastity, filial piety, and loyalty. Furthermore, the Confucian notion of male superiority likely served as an ideological foundation for confining women to the domestic sphere. Over time, this deeply ingrained belief that a woman's primary role is to manage the household has reinforced rigid gender roles, thereby perpetuating the country's substantial gender gaps. In contemporary Japan, the cultural ideal of the "good wife and wise mother" intersects with the neoliberal discourse shaping gender roles and norms. Although this Confucian-influenced ideal still retains support among those who value traditional family structures, growing awareness of gender equality has led many to view it as outdated and oppressive.

With a view to understanding Japan's cultural, political, and socioeconomic characteristics, the analysis will show how different discursive regimes of gender equality intersect at times, reproducing and/or displacing the government's neoliberal discourse to shape contemporary gender roles and norms. These intersections open avenues to effectively counter the effects of neoliberal feminism by embracing more context-specific and nuanced meanings of gender equality. In so doing, the contribution of our findings is threefold. First, we contribute to the literature on gender equality workers (Bereni and Revillard [2018](#); Caglar [2013](#); Lombardo and Meier [2006](#); Mazur [2002](#); Johnson Ross [2019](#); Sawer [2016](#); Scala and Paterson [2017](#); Utoft [2021](#)), which has largely overlooked the discursive power of these workers in the enactment and translation of gender equality policies. Second, we build upon prior critiques of

TABLE 1 | Most important laws on work and gender equality in Japan.

1945	Japanese Constitution	It established gender equality as a basic principle.
1985	Equal Employment Opportunity Law	It prohibits discrimination between men and women in employment, including in recruitment, hiring, and promotion.
1995	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action	Japan ratified the declaration at the Fourth World Conference on Women.
1999	Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society	The law requires the state and local governments to formulate plans to realize gender equality.
2001	Guidelines for eliminating sexual harassment from workers in the workplace	This guideline stipulates that employers should clarify and disseminate their policies for the prevention of sexual harassment and establish a consultation service, etc.
2015	Law for the promotion of women's success	It requires 'companies and government institutions to implement voluntary and systematic initiatives and to publicly announce the status of such initiatives.
2018	Law on the Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Sector	It requires that an equal proportion of men and women participate in the political sector as a duty of effort.

neoliberal feminism in Japan (Fu 2016; Allison 2015; Gagné 2020; Nemoto 2013, 2016; Miura 2015) by shedding light on the coexistence and tension among discourses at different governmental levels and their potential for expanding the subject positions accessible to Japanese women. Third, we contribute to Butler's theory that gendered subjects are constituted through the repetition of discursive practices and how these practices can be undone through discursive displacement (Butler 1993, 1999/1990, 2004). Specifically, we offer a deeper insight into how dominant gender discourses at the macro level intersect with and are locally translated in culturally and historically specific ways (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Fairclough 1995; Fu 2016; Kondo 1990). In doing so, we expand on Butler's invitation to understand gender as a "historical category" and how, "as one way of culturally configuring a body, [it] is open to a continual remaking" (Butler 2004, 9–10).

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 offers a literature review on gender mainstreaming with a focus on its discursive ambiguity, the role of gender equality workers in political settings, and the diffusion of neoliberal feminism with a view to adopting gender mainstreaming in and through Japanese governmental policies. Section 3 explores Butler's ideas, suggesting how they helped frame our analysis. Following a detailed description of the methods (Section 4), Section 5, therefore, draws and expands on Butler's work by critically analyzing the three discursive regimes identified in our research and how they discursively displace the dominant neoliberal discourse of gender equality. The final section comprises a discussion of the findings with concluding remarks.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | The Discursive Ambiguity of Gender Mainstreaming

There is a shared understanding in the literature that the aspirations of gender mainstreaming have not been fully realized (Scala and Paterson 2017; Johnson Ross 2019). Existing studies highlight that one of the reasons for this is the discursive ambiguity surrounding gender equality (Caglar 2013; Lombardo and Meier 2006). None of the definitions of gender mainstreaming explicitly outline the precise nature of gender equality or the specific type of equality to strive for. As Lombardo and Meier (2006) note, gender mainstreaming is "an open signifier that can be filled with both feminist and non-feminist meanings" (p. 161).

Consequently, the individuals involved in designing and implementing gender equality projects at various levels of government, referred to as "gender equality experts," "femocrats," "professional feminists," or "diversity workers," face the challenging task of operationalizing this multifaceted concept (Utoft 2021; Mazur 2002; Sawer 2016). Various studies have explored the strategies of co-optation and resistance adopted by these workers (Swan and Fox 2010), showing how they navigate potentially conflicting ethical expectations associated with professional organizing in politics and business administration while also addressing feminist demands (Bereni and

Revillard 2018; Johnson Ross 2019; Scala and Paterson 2017). In some cases, these workers act as both insiders (bureaucrats) and outsiders (feminist activists) within their institutions (Johnson Ross 2019) and engage in micropolitical practices of resistance in their daily work (Swan and Fox 2010). The space available to them for maneuvering may lead to small victories, moderate feminism, and tempered radicalism (Utoft 2021), highlighting the limitations of the polarized debate (Swan and Fox 2010) between those who view gender mainstreaming as a deradicalization of feminism (Marx 2019; McRobbie 2009) and those who see it as an opportunity for state redemption (McBride and Mazur 2012).

Overall, these existing studies have mainly focused on how gender equality workers make sense of their work vis-à-vis the multiple expectations and accountability demands (Swan and Fox 2010; Johnson Ross 2019). Our analysis adds to this body of research by exploring how these workers deal with the (discursive) ambiguity of gender equality and how their discourses intersect with the overarching hegemonic neoliberal discourse of gender equality. Critical scholars have indeed argued that the discursive ambiguity of gender equality has also led to the worldwide diffusion of a feminist discourse variably called "corporate feminism," "market feminism," or "neoliberal feminism" (McRobbie 2009; Rottenberg 2018; Arruzza et al. 2019). This discourse is grounded in an individualist ethos (Butler 2022) that focuses on individual achievement, choice, and empowerment, thereby shifting attention away from structural conditions of gender (in)equality toward individual responsibility (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020; Colley and White 2019; Grosser and McCarthy 2019; McRobbie 2009; Marx 2019). This neoliberal discourse of gender equality also results in a "technocratization" that focuses excessively on methods and procedures at the expense of critically examining gender inequality (Eveline et al. 2009; Swan and Fox 2010; McRobbie 2009; Marx 2019; Daly 2005). Moreover, as a result, gender mainstreaming has been mostly adopted for purposes other than gender equality, leading to fragmentation and confinement to specific areas (Daly 2005). Therefore, it is of interest to understand how gender equality workers navigate the discursive ambiguity surrounding gender equality and to what extent, in doing so, they displace (Butler 1993, 1999/1990, 2004) the neoliberal discourse associated with it. To delve into this matter, we first analyze in the following section how neoliberalism and the neoliberal feminist discourse shape and are shaped by the Japanese context and then focus our attention on the interplay of different discourse levels (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011), such as that adopted by the central government, and the discourses formulated at the local government level by gender equality workers.

2.2 | Neoliberal Feminism in Japan

In Japan, the discourse of gender mainstreaming, initially proposed by Matsui et al. (1999), acquired importance under the second Abe administration (2012–2020), which placed women's empowerment as the third pillar of its economic policy called "Abenomics" (Macnaughtan 2015). In October 2014, the government also established the headquarters at the Prime

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Minister's office for "Creating a Society in Which All Women Shine." The headquarters is chaired by the prime minister, comprises all ministers, and is responsible for overseeing the initiative regarding important guidelines to accelerate women's empowerment. Following the 1999 Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (see Table 1), the National Basic Plan for Gender Equality was launched in 2000 and subsequently reviewed every 5 years.[4]

Abenomics calls for gender equality to sustain the growth of the country, its international recognition, competitiveness, and access to international funding (Macnaughtan 2015). The central government's discourse echoes and draws upon an international neoliberal discourse linking women's participation in the labor force with economic growth (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). Therefore, the central government's effort has been directed to facilitate women's "shining" in the labor market.

The governmental discourse serves as a "regulatory and normative means by which subjects are formed" (Butler 1993, 22). This discourse constitutes a gendered subject by defining the ideal traits that women are expected to exhibit, with an emphasis on the importance of being independent and entrepreneurial (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). This approach reflects and reproduces the neoliberal logic that reduces all social value to that of the market (Allison 2015). The ideal of the neoliberal individual is indeed that of an independent and autonomous "market-oriented person with marketable skills" (Fu 2016, 558; Allison 2015; Gagné 2020). Neoliberalism in Japan is thus leading to the emergence of a "relationless society" (Allison 2015, 664; Miura 2015) where, following World War II, nationalism has been significantly undermined[5] and the value of a group of individuals is defined by their contribution to economic growth (Fu 2016). Furthermore, far from promoting more freedom and equality, flexible working, as advocated by neoliberal reforms, has exacerbated gender and economic inequalities (Gagné 2020).

Individualism, socioeconomic precarity, and competition galvanized by neoliberalism are thus radically changing Japanese society (Fu 2016; Gagné 2020; Osawa 2013). The crisis regarding men's role is mainly due to the precarity of their work, which prevents them from playing the traditional role of the primary breadwinner with long-term and secure employment (Gagné 2020). On the other hand, women have to deal with the double bind of participating in a labor market still characterized by a masculine corporate culture (Nemoto 2013) while keeping their domestic and reproductive role (Miura 2015). This challenge is compounded by the enduring influence of the Confucian-inspired "good wife, wise mother" ideal, which remains powerful in traditionalist Japanese society.

As noted by Rottenberg (2018) in her book "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism", neoliberalism does not call into question the role of women as caregivers but rather needs this particular version of feminism to survive. The ideal of work–life balance (field 2 in the basic plans) precisely expects women to be "professionally successful mothers" (Sørensen 2017, 305; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020) by balancing productive and reproductive work. More importantly, this balancing is framed as a matter of individual choice, underplaying the role of mesostructure and

macrostructure in women's lives (Gregory and Milner 2009). In particular, this view underplays how the culture of overwork makes it impossible for women to balance family and work responsibilities (Nemoto 2013, 2016).

The government's discourse on gender equality describes motherhood as compatible with professional careers insofar as it represents the key to the production of the future labor force and hence is strategic for sustainable growth (Miura 2015; see also Marcondes et al. 2024). The empowerment of women is discursively framed within a broader biopolitical discourse (Foucault 2004 [1978]) that sees gender equality as a solution to the crisis of social reproduction that Japan is currently facing, with a specific view to addressing the problems of low birth rate and an aging population (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Miura 2015). Accordingly, the Gender Equality Basic Plan aimed to increase the number of specialized infertility consultation centers and launched a certification process called *Kurumin* that is awarded by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare to companies that adopt measures to support "raising children of the next generation." As observed by Goldstein-Gidoni (2012), the Japanese policies for gender equality have been "in fact pro-natal policies more than a product of a genuine attempt to produce a gender-equal society" (p. 197).

At the same time, motherhood and the associated care work represent an obstacle to the fulfillment of neoliberal ideals (Sørensen 2017). In the White Paper 2020, the government explains that "Of women not in the labor force but who wish to work (2.31 million), "childbirth and childrearing" (31.1%) was the No. 1 reason for not seeking jobs" (Gender Equality Bureau 2020, 12). Governmental action has therefore focused on increasing the number of childcare facilities. Over the years, most of the funding has been allocated to the program *Consolidation of the social systems based on the perspective of gender equality*. The target of this program is to reduce the number of children on waiting lists for childcare services and to increase the number of children registered with after-school children's clubs. The objective is thus to allow women to spend more time at work by shifting the "burden" of caring to the States. These initiatives do not challenge but rather reinforce the understanding that making a career requires working for long hours and sacrificing family time (Gregory and Milner 2009; Nemoto 2013). This double strategy of pursuing both economic growth and increasing the birth rate makes the gender equality policies promoted by the government "at best schizophrenic, if not contradictory with each other" (Miura 2015, 55, our translation). These policies have largely focused on advancing the economy and have generally overlooked the need for systemic change and reform to support these initiatives. This has led to challenges in achieving gender equality goals. Therefore, these policies are deemed to fail unless the normative model that urges women to work as male workers do is called into question (Macnaughtan 2015).

Based on our analysis thus far, it is evident that a governmental discourse on gender equality has emerged in Japan (Miura 2015; Macnaughtan 2015). It defines the neoliberal subject position (Fu 2016) as the primary role available to Japanese women. Its ultimate goal is to encourage women to enter the job market while at the same time encouraging them to reproduce

(Miura 2015). Whether and how this neoliberal discourse has been reappropriated by those workers who are expected to design and carry out gender equality projects locally will be analyzed in Section 5, drawing on Butler's work on gender and discourse outlined in the following section.

3 | Gender Equality Discourse Between Citationality and Displacement

This paper draws on Butler's work to investigate how gender equality workers engage with broader discourses of gender equality and position others and their work within these discourses. Butler's work centers on the idea that gender identities are constituted by social discourses that ultimately define who counts as a subject of society and who does not (Butler 1993). From Butler's perspective, gender identity is far from being a fixed, bonded, and natural identity. Embracing the work of Foucault and the ideas of Althusser (1971), Butler explains how language does not simply describe and reflect reality but rather *produces* it (Butler 1999/1990). The statement "she is female", for instance, far from truthfully representing an objective reality, rather "creates" it, with relevant consequences for the subject thus formed. Language, Butler explains, is therefore performative; it performs an action by bringing a certain subject into being. Sedimented discursive practices create the illusion of a natural gender identity, despite it being a social, cultural, and historical construct (Butler 1996, 1999/1990).

Along these lines, in the social ritual of the interview, participants produce certain subjects (Benozzo et al. 2015), such as the normative ideal of the Japanese women they wish to promote through gender equality initiatives. These accounts are performative as they produce what they name (Butler 1993); that is, they constitute gender identity and the meaning of gender equality. This discursive performance occurs within predefined categories and "regimes of truth" that define the conditions of intelligibility and recognition (Butler 1996, 1999/1990). Butler argues that it is not a choice to repeat hegemonic discourses of gender. In their struggle for (self-)recognition, individuals are driven by the need to be recognized and remain intelligible to others (Butler 1997, 2005, 2022), and this becomes possible only to the extent that they repeat and enact sedimented gender norms and discourses. Those who fail to conform to these norms become subhuman and abject beings (Butler 1993, 2004). At the same time, individuals can challenge and subvert dominant gendered discourses by "undoing gender" (Butler 2004). Butler (1999/1990) uses the concept of citationality to describe the dynamic of sameness and difference through which a subject is brought into existence through discursive practices (Sørensen 2017). Each citation is a repetition while altering something from its original form (Derrida 1978). Similarly, the subject exists only in the repetition of preexisting norms, and its agency lies in the space of this repetition. The act of giving an account is thus a repetition of predefined scripts (Butler 2005) while opening up a space for the "creative exercise" of a conditioned agency (Butler 1997), an exercise that Butler (1999/1990) calls discursive "displacement" (E. K. Kelan 2010). Discursive displacement is a process of reappropriation of gendered discursive practices with the aim of redefining the

meaning of these practices and thus broadening the subject positions available to individuals and broadening their possibilities to be recognized as valuable subjects.

In adopting this perspective, the paper engages with an extensive organization literature that has drawn on Butler's ideas of performativity, citationality, and displacement to unveil and challenge the performativity of gendered hegemonic discourses (Hodgson 2005; E. K. Kelan 2010; Sørensen 2017; Tyler 2019). Hodgson (2005), for instance, explained how the professionalization discourse was mobilized to transform project staff into project management "professionals" and how the latter subverted this discourse. Similarly, E. Kelan (2009) draws from Butler's work to investigate information and communication technology (ICT) professionals' narratives as a form of a "doing gender."

Butler's work and the organization studies it has inspired often overlook the intricate construction of discourses across different levels, as well as the culturally, historically, and politically specific interplay shaping these dynamics within a given context. As noted by Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), the term "discourse" is often vaguely used, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between different levels of discourse, such as macro-level discourses and micro-level discourse enactments. Similarly, Fu (2016) distinguishes between the "discourse from above" of elites and institutions (Colley and White 2019) and the "discourse from below," emphasizing the need for further investigation into their interplay. We suggest that discursive displacement can emerge within this interplay, itself influenced by the historical, political, and economic context in which it unfolds. In this regard, we echo Kondo (1990) in suggesting that gender identity is not simply the result of "a free play of signifiers" but rather of "a play of historically and culturally specific power relations" (pp. 22–23).

Embracing the invitation by Marcondes et al. (2024) to further explore how multiple discursive feminist frames shape institutional solutions for gender equality, this study investigates the gendered subject positions constituted in the accounts of gender equality workers and which specific historical and politicoeconomic regimes of intelligibility (Kondo 1990) are reinforced or rather challenged in this process. We are thus interested in understanding whether, how, and to what extent gender equality workers displace the dominant neoliberal discourse of gender equality.

4 | Method

4.1 | Data Collection

We collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews with participants from 21 local governments, 2 prefectural government authorities, and the Cabinet Office of the central government's Gender Equality Bureau. The latter was selected because it is the highest authority responsible for gender equality policy in Japan. Two local authorities were selected initially because these were the only authorities that, at that time, focused on receiving and raising income to conduct gender

equality activities and events. We then included a further 19 local governments and 2 prefectural governments that also engage with gender equality (see Table 2 for details). These participants were recruited utilizing a snowball sampling approach. This involved requesting the initial participants to provide contacts of other local authorities who might be interested in participating in the study. Personal and professional contacts were also used to get access to these participants.

Overall, we conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with gender equality officers, city councilors, gender equality consultants, and managers of gender equality centers that work in collaboration with the local government (see Table 3 for details). Interviewees were selected because their local governments have both a gender budgeting initiative in place and use a corporate version of hometown tax payments to raise funds. On the one hand, companies can choose to donate money to a suitable local authority project and, in exchange, will receive a corporate tax reduction benefit. On the other hand, local authorities can secure financial resources and implement policies for gender equality.

Participants' reception varied by affiliation. Local government officials were hesitant, citing a lack of progress in their municipalities. NGO staff were keen to share initiatives. Politicians, facing challenges in promoting gender mainstreaming, sought insights from the research. All participants showed interest in international perspectives on similar challenges.

All the in-person interviews were carried out in the workplace of the participants, and each of them included at least one person with managerial responsibility for gender equality projects. The interview guide was shared with all the participants before the meeting. Informed consent was also obtained from every interviewee. The questions of the semi-structured interviews revolved around participants' personal and professional experience working on gender equality projects, the challenges faced, and their perspectives on the gender mainstreaming initiative in Japan (see Table 1).

4.2 | Data Analysis

All the interviews conducted were transcribed and translated into English. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted using the software NVivo, which is the most suitable method for an initial exploration of the data (Gioia et al. 2012). While reading the transcriptions, we selected paragraphs and chunks of text, attributing codes to them. This analysis returned 429 codes later aggregated into 44 second-order codes indicating recurrent narratives (see Table 4). We noticed that some of the latter revolved around different discourses of gender equality and the gendered subject of gender mainstreaming. In a subsequent phase, we thus revisited the data and thoroughly reviewed each interview. In doing this, we followed the methodological precepts of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) focusing on (a) the choice of words, (b) the assumptions in the text, and (c) the macro narrative that the text reinforces or challenges (Fairclough 1995). In line with Butler's work, we paid particular attention to discursive variations

concerning the concept of gender equality and the production of subject positions, with a view to understanding the interpretative repertoires, that is, the taken-for-granted understandings around gender equality, mobilized by the participants (Sørensen 2017). Additionally, we investigated whether and how the norms and subjects were sustaining or challenging the hegemonic neoliberal discourse of gender equality. We engaged in discussions and reached a consensus regarding the types of discourses employed throughout the interviews (see Table 5). Section 5 present a selection of quotes from our interviews that we found more significant in explaining the different ways in which gender equality workers were discursively displacing the hegemonic gender equality discourse. Pseudonyms are used throughout the analysis to conceal the identity of all the cities, names, and surnames of our participants.

5 | The Discursive Ambiguity of Gender Equality

Following analysis of the data, our findings indicated that gender mainstreaming in Japan appears to be characterized by a top-down approach, which was emphasized by all the participants. They point out that there is a lack of pressure from civil society on this matter and identify raising awareness about the concept of gender equality among citizens as the key challenge. The gender equality department is often placed within broader divisions responsible for civic engagement, and raising awareness of gender equality among citizens appears among the most adopted initiatives of gender equality policy (see Table 2). This task is, however, complicated by the discursive ambiguity of gender equality resulting from the use of English terminology chosen by the central government.[6]

Commenting on the use of a foreign term, an interviewee explains that change in Japan is more likely to occur if it is introduced from abroad: "in Japan, external influences are more likely to bring about change and transformation" (Mr. Yutaka Kondo, city hall officer, n.16). The use of a foreign word gives validity to the idea and simplifies it. At the same time, this ambiguity also leads to a variety of localized understandings of this concept. A participant from a prefectural government noticed that "while few people outright reject gender equality, there exists a diversity of interpretations and approaches to realizing it in one's own life". Our participants therefore often framed their work in terms of managing the ambiguity of gender equality: "We constantly face the challenge of aligning the goals of the prefectural government with the understanding and perspectives of local groups, and this task proves to be difficult" (Ms. Naomi Sato, prefectural government officer, n. 1). This reflection was also shared by the officer of a city hall who explained that "gender-related issues often stem from individual subjectivity and diverse perspectives" and that disagreement around what should be the focus of gender equality initiatives often occurs.

We propose that this discursive ambiguity helps our participants to engage in discursive displacement (Butler 1993, 1999/1990) as it allows our participants to redefine the meanings of gender equality, thus opening up a space for the exercise of a conditioned agency. In our analysis, we identified three distinct

TABLE 2 | GE initiatives.

No.	City/ prefecture	Position of gender equality department	Examples of GE initiatives
1	A city	Secretarial and public affairs section	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services
2	B city	Department for children and families	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services • Distribution of sanitary products • Publication of a gender equality information magazine
3	C city	Department of citizenship, life, culture, and sports	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services • Distribution of sanitary products • Publication of a gender equality information magazine
4	D prefecture	General planning department	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services • Publication of a gender equality information magazine • Managing regional committee for municipal gender coordination
5	E city	Civic and cultural affairs department	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services • Sanitary products distribution • Gender equality information magazine publication • Implementing the corporate version of hometown tax payments to support women's entrepreneurship courses
6	F city	Citizens' exchange section	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services • Utilizing the corporate version of hometown tax payments to establish facilities for baby care
7	G city	General affairs department	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services • Distribution of sanitary products • Publication of a gender equality information magazine
8	H ward	Human rights and gender equality section	• Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

No.	City/ prefecture	Position of gender equality department	Examples of GE initiatives
			• Distribution of sanitary products
			• Publication of a gender equality information magazine
9	I city	Division for children and families	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services
10	J ward	Department of life and cultural policy	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services
			• Distribution of sanitary products
			• Publication of a gender equality information magazine
11	K city	Civic activities section	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services
			• Distribution of sanitary products
			• Publication of a gender equality information magazine
12	L prefecture	Living environment department	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Planning and research of policies
			• General coordination and related tasks
13	M city	Life and culture department	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services
			• Distribution of sanitary products
			• Publication of a gender equality information magazine
14	N city	Department of civic life	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services
			• Distribution of sanitary products
			• Publication of a gender equality information magazine
15	O city	General planning department	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services
16	P city	Civic cooperation section	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services
			• Distribution of sanitary products
			• Publication of a gender equality information magazine
17	Q city	Citizens' affairs department	• Development of a gender equality plan
			• Gender equality awareness courses
			• Provision of domestic violence counseling services

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

No.	City/ prefecture	Position of gender equality department	Examples of GE initiatives
18	R city	Citizen participation promotion section	• Distribution of sanitary products • Publication of a gender equality information magazine • Development of a gender equality plan • Gender equality awareness courses • Provision of domestic violence counseling services • Distribution of sanitary products • Publication of a gender equality information magazine

discourses that also delineate the available subject positions for Japanese women and, consequently, the roles they can assume. We analyze these three discursive regimes in the following subsections.

5.1 | The Neoliberal Discourse: Producing the Shining Woman

In seven of our interviews, participants "cite" (Butler 1993) the central government's mainstreaming discourse, with a few variations. These participants adopt predominantly an instrumental view of gender equality that is seen as a useful means to achieve other goals (Marx 2019). These other goals depend on the local government's needs. For instance, the interviewees working in a small and peripheral council are especially concerned with the problem of population outflow. Young women leave the smaller cities to go and work in the big cities that offer more work opportunities for them. Our interviewees explain that this represents one of the main challenges for small cities. Regional development is, therefore, indicated by the local authorities as the most important driver of gender equality initiatives. A gender equality worker at a city hall explained to us:

> Population decline is becoming an issue, so it would be great if we could initiate projects to address the decline in population and labor. We can accomplish this by utilizing the Law for the Promotion of Women's Activities and Work-Life Balance, as well as promoting gender equality. This is what we are currently considering.
>
> (Mr. Taro Yamada, city hall officer, n. 5)

Although some gender equality workers approach gender equality as a possible solution to address the population outflow, other participants also explicitly present gender equality as a solution to the problem of an aging population. For instance, when asked why it is important to promote gender equality, Mr. Kenta Goto (city hall officer, n. 13) explained to us:

> I believe that society is currently experiencing substantial transformations due to the rapid decline in birth rates and the aging population, which are accompanied by a decrease in overall population. In

light of these circumstances, promoting gender equality becomes crucial in both the economy and society.

> (Mr. Kenta Goto, city hall officer, n. 13)

This instrumental view of gender equality constitutes a specific subject of feminism (Butler 1999/1990), that is, women as representatives of a social group with a common sociodemographic trait. The interviewees who see gender equality as an instrumental value are indeed mostly concerned with increasing the number of women in a variety of social spheres, especially in the companies' boardrooms. Appropriating the mainstreaming discourse, these participants have "faith" in numbers and metrics of gender equality. For instance, an indicator used in city halls concerned with regional development is the number of outflows or the number of people who arrive in the city. In other words, the fact that cities can retain their citizens supposedly through policies of gender equality is constructed as an indicator of gender equality. Gender equality that can be communicated simply through the use of numbers and targets serves the purpose of communicating a change in the city, consequently attracting more workers.

This discourse of gender equality also privileges the use of neoliberal words, such as "individuality," "empowerment," and "entrepreneurship" (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020; Allison 2015; Gagné 2020). Individuality is one of the key values that emerges in the narratives of most of our participants, who equate gender equality with the free expression of individuality, in line with the neoliberal ideal worker (Fu 2016). Mr. Satoshi Fujita, for instance, explained that the city has developed several projects as part of its third action plan for gender equality that aim at training women to cultivate their individuality:

> The Women's Activity Promotion Project aims to encourage women to express their individuality and abilities fully. It seeks to promote women's involvement in professional activities and support their professional growth.
>
> (Mr. Satoshi Fujita, city hall officer, n. 12)

Similarly, a participant from one of the prefectural governments explained that women "should be able to make the most of their individualities and demonstrate their abilities" (Mr. Taro Yamada, city hall officer, n. 5). Interestingly, none of these

TABLE 3 | List of interviewees.

No.	Interview date	Interview duration	Interviewee	Method of interview	Position	Name of the city
1	11/05/2021	2:03:20	Ms. Naomi Sato Mr. Ichiro Suzuki	By Zoom	Managerial–strategic position Prefectural government Gender equality officer Corporate hometown taxation officer	L prefecture
2	13/05/2021	1:15:02	Ms. Yumiko Tanaka	By Zoom	Politician (city councilor)	B city
3	14/05/2021	1:50:48	Ms. Tomoko Watanabe	By Zoom	Politician (city councilor)	C city
4	20/05/2021	1:55:35	Ms. Saori Ito	By Zoom	Politician (city councilor)	Q city
5	26/05/2021	1:59:19	Ms. Emi Nakamura Ms. Junko Kobayashi Mr. Minoru Kato Mr. Naoki Yoshida Mr. Taro Yamada Ms. Michiko Sasaki	By Zoom	Operational role City hall officer	F city
6	07/06/2021	1:55:15	Ms. Miki Yamaguchi	By Zoom	Managerial–strategic position Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office	Central government
7	10/06/2021	1:58:01	Ms. Asami Saito Ms. Yuka Matsumoto	By Zoom	Operational role Director of the gender equality center	L prefecture
8	15/06/2021	1:05:37	Mr. Susumu Ando	By Zoom	Politician (city councilor)	M city
9	16/06/2021	1:22:28	Ms. Mai Kimura Ms. Yoko Hayashi	By Zoom	Politician (city councilor)	H ward
10	17/06/2021	1:54:37	Ms. Mika Yamazaki Mr. Makoto Mori Mr. Daisuke Ikeda Mr. Takuya Hashimoto Mr. Hideki Yamashita	By Zoom	Managerial–strategic position Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office	Central government
11	23/06/2021	1:18:36	Mr. Yusuke Ishikawa	By Zoom	Politician (city councilor)	H ward
12	29/06/2021	1:12:12	Mr. Ryo Maeda Mr. Satoshi Fujita Ms. Yui Ogawa	By Zoom	Managerial–strategic position Fujieda city hall	E city
13	30/06/2021	1:08:30	Mr. Kenta Goto Ms. Misaki Okada	By Zoom	Operational role City hall officer	Q city
14	27/07/2021	1:28:44	Ms. Hitomi Hasegawa	By Zoom	Gender equality consultant Expert member of the joint council for the promotion of gender equality, cabinet office	—
15	30/07/2021	2:00:47	Ms. Aya Murakami	By Zoom	Operational role City hall officer/director of the gender equality center	M city
16	05/11/2021	1:01:17	Mr. Yutaka Kondo Mr. Tsuyoshi Sakamoto	In person	Operational role City hall officer	K city
17	10/11/2022	0:44:36	Ms. Chika Endo	By phone	Managerial–strategic position City hall officer	O city
18	18/11/2021	2:21:22	Ms. Haruka Aoki	In person	Operational role City hall officer	K city
19	22/11/2021	1:12:34	Ms. Yukari Nishimura	By Zoom	Operational role City hall officer	P city
20	24/11/2021	1:07:04	Ms. Aiko Fukuda	In person	Member of Prefectural Assembly	D prefecture

(Continues)

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

No.	Interview date	Interview duration	Interviewee	Method of interview	Position	Name of the city
21	13/12/2021	1:25:10	Mr. Kazuo Ota	In person	Operational role City hall officer	N city
22	11/01/2022	1:08:23	Ms. Sachiko Miura	By Zoom	Operational role Representative of an NPO	P city
23	24/03/2022	2:00:04	Mr. Manabu Okamoto Ms. Kaori Nakagawa	In person	Operational role City hall officer	R city
24	28/03/2022	2:03:12	Ms. Noriko Harada Ms. Eriko Ono	In person	Operational role City hall officer	G city
25	06/04/2022	1:32:40	Mr. Yuta Tamura Ms. Shiori Kaneko	By Zoom	Managerial–strategic position City hall officer	A city
26	13/04/2022	Response in writing	Ms. Eriko Ichikawa	By document	Operational role City hall officer	I city
27	09/05/2022	1:06:17	Mr. Shoichi Komatsu	By Zoom	Operational role City hall officer	C city
28	07/10/2022	0:42:13	Ms. Hiromi Ueda	In person	Politician (city councilor)	J ward
29	17/10/2022	1:06:34	Ms. Rei Shimada	In person	Consultant	—

interviewees challenged the idea that prioritizing individualism over interdependence might impede gender equality (Butler 2020), aligning with the Japanese traditional notion of personhood, which prioritizes social roles over individual self (Fu 2016). Women are, on the contrary, expected to cultivate their abilities and express them in the labor market, becoming the masters of their own lives, in line with the neoliberal ideal of the free individual (Butler 2020; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Gagné 2020). These normative ideals go hand in hand with the promotion of the image of the "woman entrepreneur." In the view of these participants, municipal development requires putting women to work. To solve the problem of women struggling to join the workforce after giving birth, these city halls propose several programs aimed at transforming women into entrepreneurs. For instance, the gender equality officer of a city hall told us that they are launching training courses and specific projects in collaboration with companies to encourage women to start their own businesses: "we are trying to find places where women can be active and where they can make use of their hobbies and qualifications" (Ms. Yui Ogawa, city hall officer, n. 12).

Women are given the opportunity to attend a basic course where they learn the fundamentals of business and a more advanced course where they learn "to write a business plan, handle financial institutions, and other related aspects [...] ultimately, this knowledge enables them to embark on their own entrepreneurial journey and start their own business" (Ms. Yui Ogawa, city hall officer, n. 12). These programs aim to address one of the main criticalities of the female labor market in Japan. Only a few women can rejoin an organization after giving birth to their child (Macnaughtan 2015). Therefore, acquiring entrepreneurial skills is perceived as key to facilitating women's access to the job market at a later age. In the words of a participant:

Many women have faced challenges in returning to work after marriage or childbirth [...] As a result, they express a desire to start their own businesses, leveraging their skills and interests instead of seeking traditional employment opportunities. Consequently, we are actively promoting women's entrepreneurship and business startups to empower and support these women.

(Mr. Ryo Maeda, city hall officer, n. 12)

Within this discourse, the problem of gender inequality is individualized (Colley and White 2019). Women are increasingly responsible for their own well-being and receive pressure to become "successful entrepreneurs." In the above quote, the participant attributes to women the choice of not seeking traditional employment opportunities, hence opting for entrepreneurship. This perspective overlooks the issue that often this choice is not voluntary and that it is impossible for women to "do" gender as expected, repeating these predefined scripts (Butler 2005). Even women who desire other forms of employment may find themselves unable to participate due to the prevailing masculine culture in such contexts (Nemoto 2013, 2016). In essence, the concept of choice (Sørensen 2017) is employed to diminish the significance of organizational practices and structures. Women are increasingly asked to measure themselves against role models and stories of "exceptional" women who have become successful in drawing on their *own* abilities and capacities, as explained by this participant:

I think it's important to introduce role models, especially since there are few female section chiefs. This scarcity makes it difficult for young female staff members to imagine themselves reaching higher positions such as section managers or heads of departments. To address this, we have taken the time to engage in conversations with these role models,

TABLE 4 | Second-order codes.

	Second-order codes	No. of occurrences
1	Use and importance of numerical targets	20
2	Stakeholder engagement	14
3	Limited budget for gender equality	15
4	Diversity and LGBTQ + issues are gaining importance	13
5	Gender department has limited power	14
6	Gender equality as a human right	10
7	Challenging gender roles	7
8	Precarity of work is the main issue	6
9	Changing work culture	7
10	Economic motive for gender equality	9
11	Gender equality as a solution to population decline	9
12	Women should speak up	9
13	Individualism as a value to pursue	8
14	Transforming women into leaders	7
15	International driver for gender equality commitment	8
16	Transforming women into entrepreneurs	6
17	Transforming women into efficient workers	6
18	Valuing women's differences	8
19	Including the women's perspective	4
20	Engaging companies is key	9
21	Need for qualitative assessment	10
22	No agreement about gender equality (projects)	8
23	Poverty and violence are new focuses after COVID	6
24	Traditional stereotypes are an issue	6
25	Creating the condition for economic independence	4
26	Empathy as a driver of gender equality workers' commitment	5
27	Following central government direction	5
28	Generation gap is an obstacle.	10
29	Lack of impact of gender equality initiatives	7
30	Promoting companies active on gender equality	6
31	Doing without money	4
32	Interdepartmental effort is key.	6
33	Men should change.	5
34	Paternity leave is key	3
35	Transparency	3
36	Assessment of success is difficult	2
37	Competition to incentivize change	2
38	Management commitment	4
39	Producing energetic citizens	2
40	Scrap-and-build approach to budgeting	2
41	Women are gaining awareness	2
42	Overreliance on voluntary work	4
43	Importance of raising awareness	15
44	Sustainability of gender equality projects is a challenge	10

TABLE 5 | The three discursive regimes.

Discursive regime	Characteristics	Key words	Examples of quotes
Critical discourse	Focuses on women's empowerment, skills development, and market participation.	Gender equality as a human right	"Gender equality as the right of everyone to live happily as a human being."
		Challenging gender roles	"We are challenging gender roles through lectures with female firefighters."
		Precarity of work is the main issue	"The main issue is to ensure work continuity to women."
		Changing work culture	"Women do not aspire to work because of work culture in Japan of long hours."
		Creating the condition for economic independence	"Women are at high risk of becoming socially vulnerable in terms of income."
		Traditional stereotypes are an issue	"Tendency to categorize women as vulnerable and protected is an issue."
Neoliberal discourse	Grounds gender equality in human rights, transcends the gender binary, and emphasizes the social construction of gender.	Economic motive for gender equality	"If women choose to work, economic level in Japan will rise as well."
		Gender equality as a solution to population decline	"Gender equality is linked to the problem of aging and declining birthrate."
		Women should speak up	"We are training women to speak up."
		Individualism as a value to pursue	"Japan is still not a society where people can feel their individuality."
		Transforming women into leaders	"Number of women in leadership positions and reducing gender gap are the objectives."
		International driver for gender equality commitment	"The risk is that Japan will be left behind by the international community."
		Transforming women into entrepreneurs	"We are collaborating with companies in projects that encourage female entrepreneurship."
		Transforming women into efficient workers	"We have specialized projects to help women to work more effectively."
Essentialist discourse	Underlines the essential differences between men and women, emphasizing the importance of women's perspectives and roles.	Valuing women's differences	"Women have a high awareness of the importance of life as well as the safety and life of the community—this is why they should participate."
		Including the women's perspective	"The problem is that disaster prevention plans are mainly made by men; hence, it is difficult to include a female perspective."

discussing their experiences and how they achieved their current positions. In this way, other women understand the steps they can take to progress in their careers and attain similar positions.

(Mr. Manabu Okamoto, city hall officer, n. 23)

The same interviewee explained: "we can also look at how we can improve gender equality and how [men] can get a little more time for housework so that women could work more" (n. 23)[7]. This new "Japanese woman" is not only called to become a successful entrepreneur but also to become a leader.

Additionally, in this case, women are subject to intensive training programs aimed at cultivating a leadership ability that they are said to be lacking, thus partially shifting the focus from the structural conditions of inequality to the work identity ideal women should aspire to meet (Nemoto 2016; see also Colley and White 2019). They are encouraged to strive toward achieving these ideals in order to be recognized as "subjects that matter" and remain intelligible to others (Butler 1993, 2005). These discourses echo the mantra of neoliberal feminism (Rotten-berg 2018) without addressing the specific cultural and socio-political conditions that render these ideals unattainable for Japanese women, thereby becoming detached from their lives.

These conditions are instead problematized in a second discourse identified in our analysis.

5.2 | The Critical Discourse: "To Be Seen as a Person"

While partially citing elements of the aforementioned neoliberal discourse, another group of 12 participants also voiced critiques, thus displacing (Butler 1993, 1999/1990) the dominant neoliberal discourse of gender equality. They put forth alternative perspectives and subject positions within their discourses. This second discourse, which we refer to as the "critical discourse," contextualizes gender equality as a comprehensive and systematic matter that necessitates addressing it as such in order for gender mainstreaming activities to yield effectiveness.

First and foremost, gender equality is depicted as transcending a binary understanding of gender, thereby suggesting that gender is something individuals *do*, a "repeated stylization of the body" (Butler, 1999/1990, 43), rather than an inherent natural truth (Butler 1999/1990, 2004). This view emerged clearly in the words of Ms. Mamiya (Ms. Sachiko Miura, representative of a NPO, n. 22) who explained to us: "I want to live a rich life as a human being before being a man or a woman. I think that is what gender equality means to me. It is important to abolish the concept of male or female. I hope that the concept of what is a woman will be eliminated".

This displacement of dominant gender binarism also implies a new understanding of the success of gender equality initiatives that these participants suggest assessing not only in terms of representativeness but also with a view to understanding the extent to which individuals are freed from stereotypical ideas of gender binarism. Mr. Yusuke Ishikawa explains how, in his view, the final goal of such initiatives should be framed in the following terms:

> I think the point is that people who feel suffocated or have a hard time in the midst of being a man or a woman will disappear. It′s not just LGBTQ+ people, but also the majority of people who feel that they have to be masculine or feminine, and it′s hard or painful for them.
>
> (Mr. Yusuke Ishikawa, city councilor, n. 11)

This participant explains how nonrecognition and misrecognition, resulting from individuals′ resistance to dominant gender norms, can cause serious harm (Butler 1993, 2005). As Butler (2004) explains, those who do not fall within the binary system become abject beings, less-than-human, and are denied a livable and grievable life. In defining an ideal subject, gender norms also define who counts as a human being and who does not. By invoking the possibility of being recognized as human beings, both Ms. Mamiya and Mr. Yusuke Ishikawa emphasize the necessity of recognizing individuals in a way that makes their lives possible (Butler 1993, 2004).

Mr. Yusuke Ishikawa expresses the desire for "a new 'role-free' social structure" (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012, 50) by broadening the

subject positions available to individuals. This framing of gender equality also problematizes the adoption of hard data to measure gender equality. Several of our participants are deeply aware of the limitations of numerical indicators and have a critical approach toward their use to assess the success of projects. For instance, the above participant argued that gender equality should be about the environment rather than statistics, and that the success of the project depends on citizens understanding that they should support each other. An excessive emphasis on numerical representation can indeed lead to unforeseen and negative consequences, as Ms. Haruka Aoki (city hall officer, n. 18) explains while criticizing the adoption of gender ratios in management positions with the following statement:

> They [women] are forced into management positions because of the Women′s Activism Act, the ratio of women in management positions and so on [...] there are a lot of people who are having a hard time [...] there are people who say, "Because you are a woman, you are able to do that". I think it would be good if that kind of thing could be avoided. In the end, I think the final objective should be to be seen as a person.

These participants′ critiques also concern the instrumentality of some gender equality initiatives and the need to embrace an understanding of gender equality as a human right rather than exclusively focusing on its economic impact. Ms. Hitomi Hasegawa (gender equality consultant, n. 14), for instance, told us that, because of her business background, her initial position in relation to gender equality was neoliberal and instrumental. She used to think, "let′s utilize women, let′s employ women, because it′s economically necessary", but then she realized that a human right perspective was needed instead and that several initiatives have not been effective because they "have not taken into consideration the right to live and the happiness of each person in his or her own way". This quote implies that current initiatives have failed to present an alternative model to the dominant paradigm characterizing core male employment (Macnaughtan 2015), as if there were only one way of doing gender and a prescribed path to achieve recognition, fulfillment, and happiness (Butler 2004). Another key aspect that sets this critical discourse apart from the neoliberal one is its emphasis on systemic factors that contribute to gender inequality. This broader perspective expands the scope of intervention for gender equality initiatives. The objective is to drive comprehensive societal change, specifically focusing on transforming the gendered dynamics within the labor market and organizational environment.

Instead of framing the ideal gendered subject, the critical discourse questions the gendered nature of work and public policy, that is, the existing norms of recognition (Butler 1993, 1999/1990). Its aim is to expand the range of opportunities available to individuals, moving beyond the constraints imposed by gender (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). For instance, Ms. Haruka Aoki (city hall officer, n. 18), a gender equality worker, explained that the real problem is the precarity of work that makes marriage again a good option for women (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Additionally, she explains how taxation plays an

important role in influencing women's work "choice." In Japan, the spouse with the higher income can claim a spousal exemption, but only if the lower-earning spouse makes less than ¥1.03 million per year (Macnaughtan 2015). In her view, this law disincentivizes women from seeking higher-paid jobs and raising their income. Reporting the experience of a friend, a participant explained:

> I believe she was working from home, taking on small jobs that allowed her to work within the limits of her husband's income and not surpass the support limit. Despite this, she always had a desire to engage in meaningful work, even if the salary was relatively low.
> (Ms. Haruka Aoki, city hall officer, n. 18)

Similarly, Ms. Aya Murakami (city hall officer/director of the gender equality center, n. 15) explained that "many women transition to nonregular employment after having children. When they switch to part-time work, they often make adjustments to their income to ensure it does not exceed one million yen due to the spousal exemption". This participant also raises concerns about gender segregation within the labor market, which often results in the devaluation of sectors predominantly employing women: "workplaces with a large number of female employees, such as nursery and care workers, are generally poorly paid".

Thus, these gender equality workers explain gender inequality in terms of how labor is valued and accounted for. In doing this, Ms. Haruka Aoki draws from her own personal and professional experience that she shared with us:

> I entered the workforce in 1995, and the data reveals that 85% of women who obtained career-track jobs in that year left the workforce. Therefore, I consider myself part of the 15% who survived. However, we were a generation that had to achieve results within the confines of a predominantly male-oriented society. As a woman and as an individual, reaching decision-making positions did not necessarily equate to happiness. Thus, I believe the ongoing debate centers around defining what it truly means to work happily.
> (Ms. Haruka Aoki, city hall officer, n. 18)

Along similar lines, another participant suggested that women's resistance to "doing gender" (Butler 2004) following the normative ideal of the leader is also linked to how leadership has been traditionally framed in masculine terms (Nemoto 2016). In a masculine work culture, "climbing the ladder" means acquiring masculine traits that have been traditionally associated with leaders (Kenny and Bell 2011), as it was explained to us: "The image of a leader is very macho, and women think that they cannot be like that. They cannot, and they do not need to be like that" (Ms. Hitomi Hasegawa, gender equality consultant, n. 14). Thus, the lack of female leaders should not be understood exclusively in terms of a lack of skills, but rather as a result of "a long tradition of women's roles as passive members of society" (Ms. Mai Kimura, city councilor, n. 9).

Similarly, Mr. Shoichi Komatsu (city hall officer, n. 27) explains that one of the main criticalities is the Japanese culture of long working hours and limited rest time (Nemoto 2013). It is traditionally believed that women with care responsibilities could not be entrusted with certain managerial roles because of the limited time they can devote to work (Nemoto 2013). In this respect, allowing women to have more time to spend in the office is only one possible solution. Mr. Seiji Yamashita has instead actively challenged the notion that equates the value of work solely with working hours, thus simultaneously *undoing* (Butler 2004) those norms that associate masculinity, productivity, and long working hours, which characterize Japanese culture. As a result of this critical perspective on gender equality, the administration has transitioned from having only two patterns of working hours to six patterns, thereby providing workers with increased flexibility and rest. Consequently, they have also increased the amount of annual leave for those with caring responsibilities.

5.3 | The Essentialist Discourse: Including the Female Perspective

A third discourse, prominently observed in the narratives of six participants, "essentializes" women (Kondo 1990) and gender equality (Butler 1993). This discourse challenges the idea underpinning the central government's approach that men and women should work and contribute in the same way. An essentialist discourse on gender equality positions women as a sociodemographic group with characteristics that are distinctive and should be valued as such. Within this perspective, gender is something people *are* or *have*, not only *do*, as instead argued by Butler (1999/1990). This view reinforces, rather than challenges, a conservative view of women as the "angel of the hearth" and inherently compassionate and caring. For instance, a participant explained that women should participate in decision-making because they have a different awareness of life, which derives from their role in the family:

> Women have a high awareness of the importance of life. In this context, it is important to promote politics that emphasize the importance of life and health. In this context, women are also important. They protect the family. The idea of protecting the family itself is old-fashioned, but in terms of protecting the safety and life of the family as well as the safety and life of the community, I feel that [...] is very important in terms of women's participation and decision-making.
> (Ms. Tomoko Watanabe, city councilor, n. 3)

The above quote constitutes women as a homogeneous group with characteristics that make them different from men. These characteristics are, therefore, naturalized rather than seen as a sociohistorical product (Butler 1993; Kondo 1990). The implications of this subject position are twofold. First, these participants emphasize the need to increase women's participation in decision-making. Whereas the neoliberal discourse frames women's participation instrumentally as a means of demonstrating the achievement of gender equality within

organizations, from this perspective, representation serves different purposes. The idea expressed by some participants is that, by virtue of their essential difference, women will inevitably contribute a different perspective on issues, which, in turn, will improve decision-making. Importantly, this discourse also echoes that of the central government, articulated by a member of the Gender Equality Bureau in the following terms:

> By promoting gender equality, we can bring diverse perspectives to various fields, such as the economy, agriculture, and industry. I believe that by incorporating diverse viewpoints in various fields, we will be able to achieve growth in those fields, which will lead to economic growth and benefit the people and the country.
>
> (Ms. Yumiko Tanaka, city councilor, n. 2)

Gender equality work is thus constituted in terms of adding a "female perspective" in the context of a variety of policies. One such example is disaster management. As in previous cases, gender equality workers discursively constitute gender equality drawing from the specific needs that they are called upon to address locally. Disaster management is indeed a key priority of many cities and an issue that citizens perceive as important. The participants explained that the Great East Japan Earthquake not only raised several challenges in terms of disaster management, but also in terms of gender equality. Thus, specific guidelines have been adopted to increase the number of women in the committees that devise prevention plans or to increase the ratio of women in disaster prevention departments. For instance, Ms. Aiko Fukuda (Prefectural Assembly, n. 20) explained:

> I believe it is essential to incorporate women's perspectives in various ways and reflect them in the policies. For instance, in parliamentary discussions, I often raise concerns such as whether there is an adequate stockpile of sanitary products or if the focus is solely on powdered milk for children. Thus, I believe there is an ongoing need for women's perspectives that men may not fully comprehend. As disasters directly impact the lives of women, I strongly advocate for increased inclusion of women in decision-making bodies in these specific areas.

This would suggest, according to the revised guidelines, that facilities in the evacuation sites should be designed with attention to the "specific and distinctive" needs of women. Secondly, within this discourse, the real challenge is how to promote women's activities that consider their distinctive characteristics. This requires, for instance, valuing domestic work, a perspective echoing the Confucian-influenced "good wife, wise mother" ideal developed since the 1960s, which suggests that women should take pride in this work, viewing it as a reflection of their status (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). The perspective described reinforces the notion of a causal link between sex and gender, suggesting that an individual's assigned sex at birth directly determines the social roles they are expected to fulfill (Butler 1993, 1999/1990, 2004). For instance, Mr. Ichiro Suzuki explained:

> From a man's perspective, men come home tired after work. It is natural for men to feel that they don't want to do housework, but their wives stay at home and do housework all the time. She does the work at home, so from the standpoint of equality, would you call her hours as 'working hours'? They have to take care of their children early in the morning. In this respect, I feel that we have to do our best together.
>
> (Mr. Ichiro Suzuki, prefectural government officer, n. 1)

This participant frames housework as "work" (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012), emphasizing the number of working hours that women have to do daily without recognition. Similarly, one of our participants suggested that the new normative ideals proposed by the central government fail to account for the contribution women make to society regardless of their active participation in the formal job market. He commented:

> I feel very uncomfortable with the word "active" [...] paying taxes or earning an income is not the only way to contribute to society. Of course, with the declining birthrate in Japan, raising children at home can also be considered a form of economic activity in its own right.
>
> (Ms. Tomoko Watanabe, city councilor, n. 3)

In this participant's view, the promoted notion of gender equality devalues women's work and role in society rather than expanding opportunities for them. Framing women who raise children as "inactive" and promoting an ideal that equates "being active" with receiving an income fails to consider raising children as a key economic activity for the country. Despite its differences from neoliberal discourse, this discourse reproduces dominant gender norms and roles (Butler 1999/1990) that equate being a woman with doing housework, reinforcing and naturalizing the sexual division of labor rooted in Confucianism. It also carries the risk of promoting an instrumental perspective of gender equality, similar to that found in the neoliberal discourse. This appears clearly in the question raised by one of the participants: "what about national power from a biological point of view?" (Ms. Hiromi Ueda, city councilor, n. 28).

This participant also feels that the idea itself of gender equality has been adopted without taking into consideration the distinctive characteristics of Japanese society. Thus, this gender equality worker criticizes a "one size fits all" approach that proposes a universalistic understanding of gender equality. Rather than seeing the foreign term "gender equality" as a useful term to bring positive change, this participant perceives it as a way to bring a non-Japanese way of thinking. The use of a foreign term brings much more than a linguistic change. It denotes the appropriation of a new discourse that is foreign to the Japanese culture. In the words of our participant:

> In the end, adopting a foreign, non-Japanese way of thinking takes away our existing concept. In a sense,

we may be relying on the fact that it originates from abroad. Maybe we are spoiled. We are. It's like we are trying to bring a foreign consciousness to us and create a new wind.

(Ms. Tomoko Watanabe, city councilor, n. 3)

This quote suggests that an understanding of gender equality that denies differences between men and women is foreign to Japanese culture. A further comment made by another participant provided valuable insights that helped us gain a better understanding, as the participant expressed it in the following manner:

I appreciate the Chinese characters expressing the concept of gender equality. It is not about equating men and women directly, but rather about fostering a collaborative effort where individuals can participate together. While discussing gender equality, it is crucial to recognize that there are inherent differences between men and women, such as physical dissimilarities. Hence, when I emphasize the significance of participation from the planning stage, it fosters a deeper understanding in a distinct manner.

(Ms. Asami Saito, director of the gender equality center, n. 7)

Gender equality, as expressed by this participant, is framed in terms of collaborative participation rather than transcending gender differences. Other participants were also critical of the central government's attempt to prescribe a uniform approach to gender equality, disregarding local differences. Finally, some participants constitute gender equality not so much as a matter of empowerment or equal opportunities but rather as a natural "responsibility to take care of each other." This is particularly evident in the following quote:

When you think of a family, women are supposed to be able to conceive and give birth, so their awareness in this area is totally different from men's [...] [however] it would be good if both parties came to think that it is their responsibility to take care of each other, to say "thank you" to each other.

(Ms. Haruka Aoki, city hall officer, n. 18)

This quote again naturalizes differences between men and women. However, unlike previous quotes that associate being a woman with housework—thus naturalizing and reinforcing a causal link among sex, gender, and labor—this case rejects gender determinism as a justification for a sexualized division of labor. Ms. Haruka Aoki explained to us that housework can also be a part of men's lives, due to an ethical imperative of reciprocal care. In saying this, the participant reproduces a conservative essentialist view ("women are supposed to be able to conceive and give birth, so their awareness in this area is totally different from men's"), while simultaneously challenging a conservative view that sees housework and care work as solely feminine tasks (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012).

6 | Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis investigated whether, how, and to what extent workers variably involved in designing and implementing gender mainstreaming initiatives displace the broader hegemonic neoliberal discourse of gender equality (McRobbie 2009; Rottenberg 2018). We identified three discourses of gender equality in the accounts of our participants, namely, neoliberal discourse, critical discourse, and essentialist discourse. We argue that these discourses are performative in producing the subject they name; that is, they define a normative and regulative ideal defining who counts as a valuable subject and who does not (Butler 1993, 1997).

Firstly, we identified a neoliberal discourse among gender equality workers that emphasizes individual skill development and empowerment, encouraging women's active participation in the market. Within this discursive regime, the subject of the "shining woman" occupies a prominent role. In repeating the neoliberal ideals of self-realization and empowerment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Colley and White 2019; McRobbie 2009; Rottenberg 2018), the "shining woman" is portrayed as a desirable subject position that Japanese women should aspire to achieve. The desirability of this position is due to the fact that it is seen as a solution to the crisis of social (re)production that Japan is currently facing. The "shining woman" is indeed framed as the "exceptional career mother" (Sørensen 2017) able to juggle and balance personal life and professional life, thus responding to the national need for economic growth, and with the potential to address the hurdles of an aging society (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Local variations of the broader neoliberal discourse thus reproduce an instrumental perspective on gender equality (Daly 2005) while adjusting it to local and national needs (Macnaughtan 2015). This neoliberal discourse, in citing the Western discourse (Rottenberg 2018), is particularly detrimental. The pursuit of this ideal becomes even more unattainable due to the specific socioeconomic characteristics of the Japanese context. Here, the masculine corporate culture of long working hours serves as a barrier for women seeking to enter the job market without sacrificing everything (Nemoto 2013, 2016). The neoliberal discourse operates by disregarding these structural conditions.

A second critical discourse emerged in the narratives of our participants, challenging an instrumental view of gender equality and shifting attention from the gendered subject to the broader context. Within this discourse, gender equality is framed as a human right and encompasses the overcoming of a binary understanding of gender in favor of an understanding of gender as a social construct (Butler 1993). In line with the work of Durbin et al. (2017) and Grosser and McCarthy (2019), we illustrate that feminism has not been fully incorporated into neoliberalism. Instead, a multiplicity of feminist discourses (Marcondes et al. 2024) coexist, constituting a form of resistance to the neoliberalization of feminism in various ways.

The third discursive regime, we identified as essentialist. This essentialist discourse has in common with the neoliberal discourse the promotion of women's participation in society.

Although the latter tends to link women's participation in society with national interests such as economic growth and addressing the challenges of an aging population, the essentialist discourse regards women's participation in society as a means to ensure diverse perspectives in policymaking and improve the quality of policies. It underscores the intrinsic differences between men and women and emphasizes the importance of women's viewpoints and roles. As in the "difference" perspective analyzed by Marcondes et al. (2024), women here are constituted as subjects endowed with naturalized characteristics (Utoft 2021), aligning with Confucian virtues such as obedience, patience, modesty, frugality, diligence, chastity, filial piety, and loyalty, which collectively define the "good wife and wise mother" ideal. Their societal recognition within this discursive regime of gender equality is contingent on their ability to offer a different perspective on policies. In Butler's words, within this discourse, women "matter" (Butler 1993) to the extent that their "doing gender" conforms to the conservative and stereotypical view of femininity as being caring and empathetic. We have also demonstrated how the essential nature of women's status is culturally and historically specific (Kondo 1990). Consequently, this group of participants suggests a local terminology and concept to articulate gender equality, which is not fully encapsulated by the English term.

Although the three discursive regimes offer distinct perspectives on gender equality, it is important to acknowledge the areas of overlap between them. For instance, both neoliberal and essentialist regimes emphasize women's participation in society, but with different goals. The neoliberal regime views women's participation as instrumental in promoting economic growth and emphasizes women's economic independence. In contrast, the essentialist regime sees women's participation as a way to reflect women's unique perspectives and abilities in policy and emphasizes women's traditional roles. Similarly, both critical and essentialist regimes are critical of existing social structures and gender norms, but their critical perspectives differ. The critical regime critiques the gender binary and the division of gender roles and aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination and inequality based on sex. Conversely, the essentialist regime critiques male-dominated social structures and misogyny and aims to reflect women's perspectives and experiences in society. Finally, both neoliberal and critical regimes emphasize women's "empowerment," but they have different understandings of empowerment. The neoliberal regime emphasizes empowerment through economic independence, whereas the critical regime emphasizes empowerment through the establishment of self-determination and social participation.

Thus, although the three discursive regimes share some overlapping areas, they each view gender equality from different perspectives. These discursive regimes interact with and influence each other, contributing to the formation of Japan's gender equality policy. For example, although women's economic independence is promoted under the influence of the neoliberal regime, measures to counter sexual violence and harassment are being promoted under the influence of the critical regime. The influence of the essentialist regime can also be seen in childcare support policies and policies to foster women's leadership.

Analyzing the interplay of the three discursive regimes is an important factor in understanding the diversity and complexity of Japan's gender equality policy.

In a dynamic of citationality (Butler 1999/1990), gender equality workers exercise their agency through this discursive displacement of the hegemonic neoliberal discourse of gender equality. Importantly, all three discourses are "performative" (Butler 1999/1990), as they ultimately normalize certain gender identities and gender equality practices and rule out others. They indeed define the norms of recognition that regulate Japanese women's identity and role (Butler 2005), thus shaping which activities of gender mainstreaming, such as taxation policies or quota systems, are considered appropriate in addressing gender inequality. The identities and roles available to Japanese women are thus shaped by cultural, historical, and politicoeconomic power relations (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Kondo 1990), which transform those who do not adhere to or resist dominant gendered norms into abject and subhuman beings (Butler 1993, 2004). In this regard, our analysis has contributed to problematizing Butler's perspective on the discursive construction of gender. Butler (2004) explained that the framework for understanding how gender works is "multiple and shifts through time and place" (p. 9). Our research builds on this insight by highlighting the importance of considering the various levels at which these discourses are formulated (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Fu 2016) and how they are shaped within specific localized and cultural contexts (Kondo 1990).

In particular, we propose that it is important to identify the nuanced aspects of the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism that go beyond the Western sphere, which has been the dominant focus of existing studies (Polzer et al. 2023; Caywood and Darmstadt 2024; Kataeva et al. 2024), including Butler's work. In Japan, gender mainstreaming appears to mostly follow a top-down approach driven by the existing international pressure on the country to achieve gender equality. As a result, such initiatives are perceived by some as "foreign" to the local Japanese culture (as foreign is the term used to indicate such policies). Therefore, we argue that the interplay of diverse and competing discourses contributes to an understanding of why the top-down approach to gender equality initiatives adopted by the Japanese central government has shown limited effectiveness. As noticed by Macnaughtan (2015) and Goldstein-Gidoni (2012), women refuse to conform to the traditional male-dominated expectations of work and do not see a real attempt by the government to call into question traditional gender relations shaped by the Confucian-influenced "good wife and wise mother" ideal.

Our analysis calls for embracing and recognizing the localized nuances and meanings of gender equality to inform possibilities to resist neoliberal feminism. In doing so, we align with Durbin et al.'s (2017) invitation to acknowledge alternative feminisms that challenge the neoliberal approach and are emerging worldwide. This approach will also enable meaningful changes to emerge from the bottom up. Taking a bottom-up approach entails reevaluating the government's gender policy by acknowledging the diverse perspectives on gender equality put forth by gender equality workers like those interviewed in our project. These viewpoints shed light on the inadequacies of

adopting neoliberal feminism in the Japanese context, often resulting in an impossible balancing act for Japanese women between workplace and family expectations (Nemoto 2013, 2016). Resonating with Butler's call to shift from an individualist to a recognition-based ethics grounded in interdependence and vulnerability (Butler 2022), these perspectives highlight the limitations of gender equality policies that focus solely on competitiveness and individual achievement.

Accordingly, echoing Goldstein-Gidoni (2012), we advocate for these policies to expand the range of subject positions available to Japanese women beyond those confined to the neoliberal framework (Fu 2016) and the traditional "good wife and wise mother" ideal. Thus, the discursive ambiguity of gender equality is transformed into an opportunity for change, moving beyond a "one-size-fits-all" solution (Eveline et al. 2009) by recognizing the historical and cultural nature of gender (equality).

Furthermore, our study has examined the issue of discursive ambiguity, which, in spite of being mentioned among the reasons for the failure of gender mainstreaming initiatives in Japan, has remained largely understudied in terms of the specific discourses that this "empty signifier" acquires in local settings (Caglar 2013; Lombardo and Meier 2006). In this respect, we have explained how the process of translating the English term "gender equality" in the Japanese context offers the discursive space wherein gender equality workers exercise their agency through displacing (Butler 1993, 2004) the broader neoliberal discourse of gender equality. We propose that this ambiguity reflects workers' agency and their attempts to navigate and negotiate gendered norms and expectations within the constraints of organizational power dynamics.

Our study has been based on a target population of medium-sized, local urban municipalities so that our findings could be, to some extent, generalizable, offering valuable insights for the central government when formulating legislation. However, future studies are much needed that further investigate whether and how NGOs mobilize local grassroots pressure from citizens to counter governmental policies on gender equality and how individuals who are receivers and participants of gender mainstreaming initiatives position themselves vis-à-vis the discourses and practices of gender equality workers, thus theoretically expanding the focus of our research to those "subjects" that are discursively constructed in gender equality discourses.

Ethics Statement

Ethical standards established by our institutions have been followed throughout the data collection process.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] In 2024, Japan was ranked 73rd out of 190 countries in the World Bank's gender ratings and 118th out of 146 countries in the ranking of the Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum.

[2] For instance, the Basic Survey on Gender Equality in Employment, conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) of Japan for fiscal year 2023, indicates that 84.1% of eligible women took childcare leave, compared to 30.1% of men. Despite an upward trend in the proportion of men utilizing childcare leave since 2019, a substantial disparity persists in the duration of leave taken. Only 13.9% of men took leave exceeding 3 months, whereas 76.2% of women availed themselves of childcare leave for 10 months or more.

[3] During the Meiji era, Japan embarked on a path of rapid modernization, aiming to become a powerful nation-state on par with Western powers. The government promoted policies focused on enriching the country and strengthening its military, leading to a clear division of labor, where men were expected to work outside the home and women to manage domestic affairs. This gendered division of roles was reinforced by the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), which enshrined "good wife and wise mother" as a virtuous ideal for women in line with Confucian values (Nakajima 1984).

[4] As of 2024, the fifth *Gender Equality Plan* is underway. Gender budgeting was first enshrined in the *Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality*, with each ministry expected to identify gender equality priority areas and request a budget to carry out these initiatives. In 2009, the total expenditure allocated for gender equality priority areas was 4 percent of the general account budget (Ichii and Sharp 2013).

[5] Under the occupation, the postwar educational reforms led to the exclusion of nationalist content and content that promoted nationalism from national education, media, and government reconstruction. Instead, values emphasizing democracy and pacifism emerged, and there developed a strong focus on individual freedoms. The consciousness and value systems of the new postwar generation were highly influenced by these changes in the educational system, and society witnessed a steady decline in nationalist thinking. Having overcome the postwar chaos and economic challenges, Japan experienced rapid economic growth from the 1950s onward. This economic growth was based on the principles of neoliberalism, with an emphasis on market principles and policies that prioritized corporate competitiveness. Alongside this economic growth, promotion of individual economic independence and the formation of a consumer society contributed to the strengthening of individualism. With economic success becoming a priority, individual success and self-realization began to be valued more than traditional nationalism and collectivism.

[6] Our interviewees do not use the Japanese term 'Danjo-Kyodo-Sankaku'; instead, they use the word 'gender' to assert their mission. This is why we have titled this paper 'Lost in Translation.' The direct adoption of foreign terms into the Japanese language, coupled with its unique interpretation of 'gender,' contributes to and reflects the ambiguity and complexity of the discourse.

[7] Although the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act in Japan permits employees with children under 3 years old to shorten their workday to 6 hours, this provision is disproportionately utilized by women. Data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's 2023 ″Proposal on Enhancement of Support Measures for Balancing Work and Childcare/Nursing Care″ reveals a stark disparity: 51.2% of female regular employees opt for reduced working hours, compared to a mere 7.6% of their male counterparts. This significant gender gap in utilizing shortened work schedules underscores the persistent challenges faced by women in balancing work and family responsibilities in Japan.

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Appendix A: Sample Questions

1. What does gender equality mean to you?
2. Why is it important to promote gender equality in Japan?
3. (About the Basic Plan for Gender Equality) How does the "Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality" announced in December 2020 differ from previous plans?
4. What are the differences from the previous plans?
5. Have the goals set in the previous plans been achieved?
6. What do you think of the indicators and goals set in this latest plan?
7. What are the main challenges you face in operationalizing these goals?
8. Please elaborate on the process that led to the development of this plan.
9. What stakeholders are involved in the development of this plan?
10. How and to what extent is public consultation conducted before defining objectives, indicators, and targets?
11. In your opinion, what are the most important initiatives to address gender inequality?
12. How can the evaluation of these gender initiatives be further improved?
13. How can we further improve the evaluation of these gender initiatives?
14. How do you decide which projects should be continued?
15. How are the benefits of these initiatives for the beneficiaries evaluated?
16. What is your vision for the future of gender equality in Japan?
17. What will the next basic plan be like?
18. How would you evaluate the situation of gender equality in Japan in comparison with other international experiences?