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Learn from Southeast Asia's Push for women's advancement! Japan's Path Forward After Electing Its First Woman Prime Minister

-The Shared Future of Asia and Japan-

The 28th ASEAN - Japan Summit during the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur. (c) AFP=JIJI

A Glass Ceiling.

"Congratulations to you for assuming the office of Prime Minister… you were able to defeat some outstanding men… My wife and my daughters are fully supportive of you."

On October 26 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, whose country holds the ASEAN chair this year, greeted Japan's new leader with these words and a broad smile during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi beamed back: "Thank you. It's an honor to meet with world leaders as Japan's prime minister."

Takaichi shattered the glass ceiling to become Japan's first woman prime minister. Just six days into the job, she made her diplomatic debut at the ASEAN summit, fielding questions at times in English and commanding attention.

Thailand's Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow said Takaichi struck him as energetic and effective, noting that she showed genuine commitment in her meetings with ASEAN members from the moment she took office. Malaysia's Minister of Women, Family and Community Development Nancy Shukri, also welcomed her rise, telling Japanese media that many people -especially women- had long been waiting for this moment. She added that expectations are growing for progress in how the Japanese government addresses gender representation.

The Long Road to Equality

From the end of World War II through Japan's high-growth years in the 1970s, women in rural areas played a central role in the workforce, but in cities, the idea that "men work and women stay home" remained deeply rooted. For many young women, the typical path looked like this: finish high school, take a job as an *office lady* handling photocopying and tea service, then leave once they married or had a baby. After their children were older, they might return to work part-time. This was widely seen as the "normal" life course for women. It was common for young women to say that they hoped to marry by "Christmas"—age 24 or 25—and that reaching "New Year's Eve," or age 31, without marrying would be a disaster. Women who wanted to stay in their jobs frequently faced pressure to resign once they married or gave birth.

Yet as women became more aware of their rights and dual-income households became the norm, more women began entering the workforce. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act took effect in 1986, banning dismissals based on marriage or childbirth and making men-only job postings illegal. The Childcare Leave Act followed in 1992, allowing parents to take leave until their child turned one. In 1999, the Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society

required government agencies and companies to promote gender equality, and in 2016, the Act on the Promotion of Women's Active Engagement in Professional Life encouraged companies to place more women in leadership roles. Gender-based job assignments have fallen sharply, and the term "office lady" has now almost disappeared.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Japan's employment rate for women aged 15 to 64 reached 74.2% in 2024 - the highest among the Group of Seven (G7) nations and slightly ahead of Germany's 74.1%. This rise reflects more than higher education levels and stronger legal protections. It also draws on qualities often seen as distinctly Japanese: safe streets where women feel comfortable walking alone at night, reliable and punctual public transportation that makes commuting easy, and a universal health insurance system that supports public health.

Japan's Gender Gap Paradox

Yet in the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Index—an assessment of gender disparities worldwide—Japan ranked 118th out of 148 countries. Despite posting one of the highest female employment rates in the G7, Japan still lags far behind on gender equality. The contrast with Southeast Asia is striking. The Philippines ranked 20th, Singapore 47th, Thailand 66th, Vietnam 74th, Laos 96th, Indonesia 97th, Cambodia 106th, Brunei 107th, and Malaysia 108th—all ahead of Japan.

The index measures gender gaps across four areas: economy, education, health, and politics. Wealthier countries tend to make greater progress in closing these gaps. Japan ranks 66th in education and 50th in health, but drops to 112th in economic participation and 125th in political empowerment. These weak scores in politics and economics pull down the country's overall ranking.

In politics, the numbers are especially low. Women make up just 15.7% of the House of Representatives, leaving Japan near the bottom internationally. Only three of the country's 47 prefectural governors are women. The rise of Prime Minister Takaichi—Japan's first woman to lead the government—could mark an important turning point.

Women Breaking Through

In the economic sphere, Japan continues to face criticism for the limited number of

women in corporate leadership and a persistent gender wage gap. Even at major companies, all-male executive meetings are still a familiar sight.

Yet some women in business have managed to break through. One of the most notable is Tomoko Namba, 63. Born in Niigata Prefecture, far from Tokyo, she grew up with a strict father who believed women did not need an education. With her mother's support, she went on to attend a women's university in Tokyo. After graduating, she worked as a consultant at McKinsey & Company and later earned an MBA from Harvard Business School. In 1999, at age 36, she founded DeNA Co., a mobile portal company. She built it into a major IT firm and, in 2015, became the first woman to own a club in Japan's 12 -team professional baseball league. In 2021, she became the first woman to serve as a vice chair of the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren), Japan's leading business organization. Despite the many "firsts" associated with her name, Namba says she has never felt held back at work because she is a woman. Her easy, down-to-earth manner has made her a role model for many women.

Another figure drawing attention is Mitsuko Tottori, 60, who became president of the world-class carrier Japan Airlines (JAL) last April. Born in Fukuoka Prefecture, she graduated from a junior college in Nagasaki Prefecture and joined Toa Domestic Airlines in 1985 as a flight attendant. After the company merged with JAL, she built her career primarily in cabin operations. While many JAL executives—most of them men—come from finance or corporate strategy, Tottori rose through the ranks on the strength of her frontline experience, her focus on service and safety, and her leadership. She became the first former flight attendant—and the first woman—to lead the airline. At a company where most presidents have been University of Tokyo graduates, her background as a junior college alumna also stands out. Even as she is celebrated as a trailblazer, she says she simply wants to lead in her own way, staying as grounded and natural as ever.

From an M-Shaped Curve to a Plateau

As more women move into leadership roles in business, the next challenge is raising the floor for all women. When charted, Japan's female labor force participation forms what is known as an "M-shaped curve": it rises through the 20s, dips in the 30s during childbearing and child-rearing years, then climbs again in the 40s.
Time away from work for childbirth and child care often disrupts career advancement. Many women return to part-time roles rather than to their previous positions, resulting in

lower wages. Keeping women in the workforce - and reshaping the M curve into a plateau - has become a critical marker of progress.

Japan also has much to learn from Southeast Asian countries that rank higher on the Global Gender Gap Index. In the Philippines - the region's top performer - women hold prominent roles in politics, business, law, and across the corporate sector. Coeducation and democratic institutions introduced under U.S. rule before World War II laid the early groundwork, and in 1986 Corazon Aquino became Southeast Asia's first woman head of state, helping push gender-equality policies forward. A family-centered culture also strengthens women's participation in the workforce. When women work outside the home, grandparents and siblings often step in to care for young children.

Singapore, with its small size and limited labor pool, has long encouraged women to take active roles in both the economy and politics. Many companies offer flexible working hours, allowing employees to adjust their schedules around family responsibilities.

In Thailand, women pursue higher education at high rates. According to 2024 UNESCO statistics, the country's university enrollment rate is 45% overall, but the gender split is striking: 52% for women compared with 39% for men. Women now account for about 60% of university students. As more women gain specialized skills and expertise, increasing numbers are moving into leadership and management roles. Workplaces also tend to support work–life balance, offering benefits such as 30 days of paid sick leave a year.

In Japan, where nuclear families are common, parents often have little support from extended family. When local day care centers or kindergartens are full, securing a place for a child can be difficult. Even when spots are available, child care costs may exceed what part-time wages can cover, prompting some women to stop working altogether. And when a child falls ill and a parent needs to miss work or leave early, many women still feel pressured or unsupported at their workplaces. If Japan hopes to become a true leader in women's workforce participation, there is much it can learn from the policies adopted across Southeast Asia.

A Society Where Women Shine

Sports offer one way to gauge how freely women can participate in society. Before World War II, many in Japan viewed women's athletics as "unbecoming" or "unfeminine." After the war, however, school sports clubs became a core part of

education, giving girls the same opportunities as boys. Today, those efforts to broaden participation are now reflected in the achievements of Japan's top female athletes. At the 2024 Paris Olympics, Japan won 45 medals—sixth overall—with 23 in men's events, 18 in women's events, and four in mixed competitions. About half a century earlier, at the 1972 Munich Games, Japan earned 29 medals, only two of them won by women. The dramatic rise in women's medal haul mirrors women's expanding role across society. From politics to everyday workplaces, women deserve the chance to succeed on equal terms with men. Japan needs a society where every woman can shine in her own way.

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The 28th ASEAN - Japan Summit during the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur. (c) AFP=JIJI

2.

Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi attends the 28th ASEAN - Japan Summit during the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on October 26, 2025. (c) Jiji Press.

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Tomoko Namba, owner of DeNA, a major Japanese IT firm. (c) Jiji Press.

4.

Mitsuko Tottori, president of Japan Airlines (JAL). (c) Jiji Press.

5.

Haruka Kitaguchi, gold medallist in the women's javelin throw at the Paris Olympics. (c) Jiji Press

6.

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and her cabinet ministers.(c) Jiji Press.