

Gaps Between Systems and Reality in the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force: What the Leadership Should Learn for Gender Integration

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Abstract. Since 1985, under national efforts to activate a women's workforce, the Japanese military has been grappling with the empowerment of female members. Up to today, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force has opened all branches including combat units to women, set the "right people in the right place" as a basic principle, and hammered out measures for a right life-work balance to retain and support women as wives or mothers. Through these efforts for three decades, the JGSDF systems for gender integration seem to be almost completed. On the other hand, substantial challenges still remain in managing women. Thus there are gaps between systems and reality to be addressed by the leadership. For that, what should they learn?

Keywords. Leadership, gender integration

1. Introduction

Japan has conducted two campaigns for the empowerment of women, one launched in 1985 and a second in 2014.

In 1985, Japan established the *Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women*. Its aim was to bring gender equality to workplaces where women had been working with fewer opportunities for promotion, status, and wages in comparison with men [1]. This epoch-marking law succeeded to some extent. For example, companies were prohibited from specifying men when recruiting, and the law opened a path to managerial positions for women. Unfortunately, the achievements were not satisfactory. A workaholic culture at that time was too tough for women who wanted to balance work and their own life. A high career, which meant committing to heavy burdens of time and labour, was avoided by some women.

A second women's empowerment campaign started in 2014 and was led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He recognized women as a potential human resource which had not been managed effectively. Encouraging women to join the workforce to utilize their power to the greatest potential was an important strategy advocated by his administration

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to maintain and improve the national security of Japan, which was experiencing a declining birth rate and an aging population [2].

Based on lessons learned from the *Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women*, the *Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace* was enacted in 2015. It has three principles: to actively provide and exploit opportunities to hire women; to promote women to improve an environment where women and men can balance work and family life; and to respect women's choices with regard to their balance between work and family life [3]. The government has been vigorously addressing remediation of a workaholic culture of Japanese worksites and has required agencies and companies to have female executives, while enhancing child care support for working mothers. As a result, in the five years between 2012 and 2017, a new female workforce of 2 million was added to workplaces. Of working women 25–44 years old, 75% are mothers [4]. But again, these achievements were not satisfactory because there are still apparent gender gaps in positions and wages [5]. The government's evaluation in March 2018 was that "Japan attained a certain level of achievements in female activation. But challenges around women still remain undefeated in this male-dominant society." [6]

Under these governmental efforts since 1985, the Japanese military also has twice endeavoured to empower female members. In 1985, when Japan adopted the *Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women*, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) drastically changed its personnel system for female members. Women's role was transformed from ancillary to essential in maintaining the strength of the JGSDF. A principle of "The right people in the right place" was applied to women for the first time. After 2015, under the strategy of the Abe administration, this system was strongly intensified. Now the JGSDF is hiring more women, opening all service branches to women [7], and improving the work–life balance to integrate gender.

Through these engagements, the JGSDF today has a good system to activate women. Nevertheless, we cannot say that gender integration is completed at this point. The current situation needs to be evaluated with the aim of answering two questions: Is it gratifying enough to have gained a foothold toward the future improvement of a female workforce? If not, how can the leadership address the remaining needs?

2. Past JGSDF Efforts

In the 1950s, there were 144 female nurses in the JGSDF, representing only 0.1% of the forces [8]. In 1967, some "feminine" jobs like secretarial, administrative, or financial positions were opened to women. In the decades since then, the JGSDF has increased the number of female members, as Fig. 1 shows, but their opportunities are still limited.

As mentioned above, the first step to activate military women was conducted after the 1980s, when the *Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women* was enforced. The JGSDF opened more jobs to women except those in the domains of combat and combat support and applied "the right people in the right place" principle. Female members were able to get access to a wider variety of positions, functions, and promotions. On the other hand, there were still visible and invisible restrictions and barriers for women.

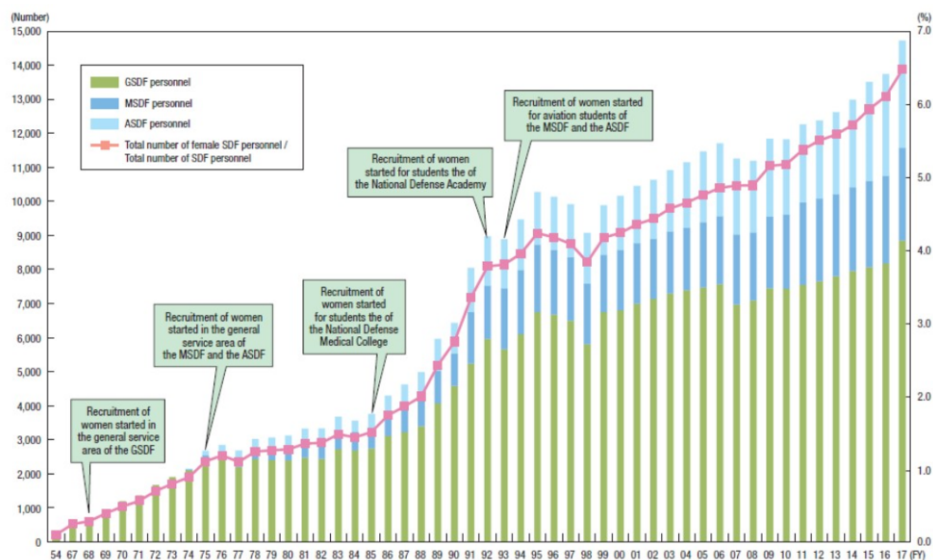


Figure 1. Increased number of female JGSDF personnel [9].

I myself joined the JGSDF in 1989, only four years after the *Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women* was established. Therefore it can be said that I belonged to the first generation to which this female activation was applied. From my current view, looking back on the 1980s and 1990s, the JGSDF units seemed to be embarrassed by the new way to manage women. Perhaps this was because no one could imagine how women were integrated in their units or, most of all, how women's careers were built up from enlistment to retirement. As a woman in the first generation, I had both positive and negative experiences in such circumstances.

When I was in the Officer Candidate School, the leadership there conducted most of programs including field combat training on the basis of mixed genders. This might have seemed remarkable 30 years ago in Japan. But when I was about to select a branch to join before graduation, I was rejected for both my first and second choices—anti-air artillery and attack helicopter—because they were close combat branches that excluded women. Eventually I was assigned to the utility helicopter unit as a signal officer, the very first female officer there. I still remember the embarrassment of the men around me. They hesitated to bring me to a muddy field exercise maybe because they wanted a lady to be neat. Young male privates were bewildered as to whether they should salute to me. Some told me the JGSDF didn't need any women because women would harm its strength. Some said women should not be superior to men. Those reactions were not hostility to women rooted in the military's institutional culture and characteristics, which feminists like Morris have tended to find out [10]. Instead, they were considered as a surfaced phenomenon of awareness in which women were "inferiors" or in "subordinate status", or "second class-citizenship in the military," as Titunik describes in her dissertation on the U.S. armed forces in the 1990s [11].

On the other hand, since my time as a young lieutenant, I have had progressive bosses who tried to catch up to new management of female members. They treated me as a "pioneer" to pave a way for myself and junior female members, or a commander in

the coming future. At that time women were often kept away from important but tough jobs or were spoiled; this was not discrimination but inadequate consideration, which could hamper the career development of women. I was given many opportunities. I have experienced many assignments as “the first female member” to do missions in Japan and overseas.

I was a blessed woman to have such progressive bosses. Without them, I possibly wouldn’t have continued working or wouldn’t have been promoted to colonel. Although this is only my individual experience, it may be enough to show how the leadership’s thoughts and actions are critical for gender integration.

Since 1985, our military including the JGSDF has continued to reform the personnel system for female members. The National Defense Academy accepted the first female student in 1992. The first female pilot appeared in 1994. In 1997, all branches except for their internal combat units were opened to women. A female officer in the maritime force was promoted to the first general in 2001. In the same year, the Ministry of Defense established the Headquarters for promotion of Gender Equality to produce regular base plans to promote equality. In the JGSDF, we had the first female company commander in 2008.

These achievements were expanded after 2014 under the *Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace* [12].

3. Current Situation and Challenges

3.1. Current Situation

Under the *Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace*, our Ministry of Defense launched the *JSDF Female Personnel Empowerment Initiative* in 2017 [13]. The initiative mentions that the needs for women were higher than ever because the military had to be flexible enough to deal with complexity of an international security environment, the domestic severity caused by the reduced birth rate and aging population, and because it is indispensable for the military to have diverse human resources. It has two policies. The first is a further promotion of opportunity equality. The military must not take away soldiers’ challenging opportunities only on grounds of gender. The second is “the right people in the right place” again [14]. The military must assign soldiers based on willingness, capability, and aptitude, not on gender. To realize these policies, the initiative set up three measures. Firstly, any restrictions of assignment for women would be lifted. Until 2017 all branches had been opened to women, with the exception of combat and combat support units. The initiative now opens all units to women. Secondly, the number of recruited women will be increased. Not only will more new recruits be accepted, but there also will be a reemployment of ex-soldiers who have resigned due to marriage or childbirth. Thirdly, an environment will be created where all of the military members can exercise their abilities by a good work–life balance; care for birthing and mothering will be especially indispensable [15].

Through all of these efforts since 1985, the JGSDF today seems to have an almost perfect system for gender integration, which is illustrated by many positive figures. Thirty years ago, the number of female members was 4,500 [16]. Ten years ago, it was 7,000 [17], while it is currently a little less than 9,000 [18]. Around 5% of them are

assigned to combat units and 30% to combat support units [19]. These things could not have happened when I was young. The work–life balance has also improved. Before the 2000s, it was extremely difficult to pursue a career while raising children. Usually, female members tended to quit their service when they got married or when they had a baby. Today, working-mother members are well supported. We have military childcare centres across Japan. Recently additional centres were established within camps to look after kids while parents in the military are mobilized to sudden and unexpected operations like disaster relief. Flex time was introduced for both mothers and fathers. There are also maternity and childcare leaves for parents. Some 400 women, including officers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and privates, are currently on childcare leave [20].

3.2. *Challenges*

On the other hand, we can see two negative issues among these successes.

First is the high rate of female member's resignation. Those who leave the military are decreasing year by year, but a certain percentage of women still quit their service before getting promotion or reaching mandatory age. While the resignation rate of male members in 2015 was 0.6%, the rate for women was 1.5%. The number of female officers who left the JGSDF was five times more than that of male officers who left, and the number of female NCOs who left was three times more than that of men [21]. Although these numbers are much lower than those in civilian companies, they are a big loss of valuable assets for the Japanese military. According to recent data, about 40% of women who resigned did so because of marriage or some family reason. This large proportion is one reason why the military must enhance the work–life balance. But what attracts our attention here is other reasons for resignation, e.g. educational opportunities or changing jobs. These two reasons total 45% of resignation [22]. In any case, female members are quitting their service despite the childcare support and gender-neutral opportunities promised by the JGSDF. Why can the JGSDF not retain them?

Second is women's shortage of a career. The JGSDF recognizes that even hopeful women, both officers and sergeants, often leave their branches and relinquish opportunities to be promoted to responsible positions. The JGSDF understands that one of the reasons why they do so is again marriage or family issues. For example, the Command and General Staff College is the gateway to senior officer and young officers having their entrance examination around the end of their twenties. Generally this is a childbearing age for women. If a female lieutenant wants to concentrate on childcare and fully secure family life, she tends not to take advantage of this chance. As a result, she can continue to work, but her possibilities are constrained. This case shows that enhancement of work–life balance might not be enough for advancement of women. How can the JGSDF boost them? Or what stands in the way of their awareness of opportunity?

Additionally, this women's shortage of a career is accompanied by other issues. Firstly, the JGSDF still has few high-rank female members like colonels or chief of master sergeants. Currently about thirty women are assigned to unit commanders, army HQ staff, or chief of sections in various military organizations. There are only twelve colonels among them [23]. Across all JGSDF units, we can find three female chief of master sergeants. Additionally, even in branches that have been opened to women for long time (since the 1960s), like signal or quartermaster positions, there are only a handful of women in commanding or leading positions. We can see only five female commanders

in these branches at this point [24]. With regard to NCOs, thirty female warrant officers belong to such branches, but they are just 1% of all female NCOs there [25]. Secondly, due to a lack of appropriate rank or experiences, normally only a very limited number of women can participate in a decision-making process. We have many kinds of conference and meetings, and usually it is difficult to find a dozen women there. It seems to be difficult to reflect women's view to operations and plans.

Now the JGSDF is going to do more activation of female members with rigid goals. The current female ratio of 6.3% will be 9% in 2027 and 14% in 2050 [26]. Frontline units like rifle or armour companies that were traditionally comprised of just men will include women, who will account for 5%–10% of personnel [27]. This seems not to be an ambitious target, but now an achievable goal is more important than ambitious. There is no doubt that these measures are critical to seek further gender integration. But without addressing current issues, that integration will be in danger of being titular, and gaps between systems and reality will bring a setback to the JGSDF efforts to improve its power into the future.

4. What the Leadership Should Learn for Gender Integration in the JGSDF

Based on these gaps between systems and reality, there are three things that the leadership should learn to fill them.

Firstly, the leadership has to understand that gender integration, which means opportunity equality and “the right people in the right place” regardless of gender, is the goal. Any numerical targets in ratio per branch or in expansion of a work–life balance are undoubtedly vital to strengthen women as a part of the JGSDF force, but they are not goals—just measures or steps to attain gender integration.

“The right people in the right place” is the indispensable base and means for gender integration. Especially in combat units where female soldiers are in the small minority, a quota system may work well in some cases to change the male-dominant tradition. In other cases, however, affirmative action would bring the opposite effect. If a soldier is assigned to some position only because she is woman, and if she is not fully capable of carrying out her responsibility, men will be suspicious about having and employing women in their units. When one is assigned to a position firstly as a female member, her capability, especially physical capability, needs to be beyond a specific standard. In this way, her membership in the unit wouldn't be controversial. Additionally, when a unit has never accepted female members, more than one woman should be assigned there. Just one example may cause a negative influence for the future. Gender integration is currently only at a halfway point. Since we are still in the stage of creating models who pave the new way for female soldiers, such measures that are not necessary for men should be taken.

Secondly, the leadership has to know how to establish appropriate personnel management for females, especially for female NCOs. With regard to female officers, measurements for career improvement have already been taken, and something like the number of female colonels or women's promotion to battalion commander can be indicators of success. But at least at this point, for female NCOs, who amount to 55% of all women in the JGSDF [28], there is no indicator showing an overall improvement for them. Indeed, we can see increasing numbers of female master sergeants but cannot see a career

path from junior to senior sergeants. How are they supervised through their military life while moving from unit to unit? Since they are technical professionals or small-unit leaders in each branch of service, the leadership, especially senior officers in each branch, must lead these activities. For example, the commandant of the military school can give a directive to its research section to design different models of career path for female sergeants. One option could be that the leadership assigns an excellent female warrant officer to the chief of all female sergeants in the branch so that she can support the leadership on controlling female NCOs' management.

Thirdly, what the leadership has to learn is an approach for both men and women. In order to improve gender integration, commitment to either is enough. We tend to think that a glass ceiling is created by men who have been dominant in the society. We have to recognize that women also create such a ceiling to avoid responsibilities or toughness in their jobs. In case of the Japanese military, women are relatively passive. When I worked at the U.S. Army's institute from 2011 to 2014, I saw that female members in the U.S. forces exerted bottom-up power with support from affiliated organizations to win the right to join all units. Of course the culture and systems between Japan and the United States are different, but such action-oriented mentality is not seen among women in the Japanese military. Therefore, the leadership has to "leverage" female members at every appropriate time for career improvement. If the JGSDF wants to have women as its strength, it should seek not only quantity but also quality. In an approach to male members, treating female members as not women but soldiers would be effective. Then a natural competition between men and women would occur and result in gender neutrality. With regard to work-life balance, encouraging men to take childcare leave would also be critical to activating women and reforming the male-dominant cultural climate. I have had the experience of recommending that young officers who are fathers take childcare leave, but all of them rejected this. This was almost 10 years ago, and they might have been ashamed about commitment to childcare. The leadership has to change such a perception. One of our regional armies has set a goal of increasing childcare leave by men. This kind of practical boost might be necessary for a while.

5. Conclusion

Since 1985, the JGSDF has been conducting various measures to activate female members. "The right people in the right place"—getting beyond gender, as suggested in 1985—still remains an objective. Close career management for every female member is necessary to break through this barrier, and top-down leadership accompanied by women's self-motivated advancement may be able to break this barrier.

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