



# Classic patriarchal values and their effects on working Japanese women



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## Abstract

This paper examines how patriarchal values affect working women in Japanese society, specifically women in business and politics. This paper draws from the works of previous authors who focus on the role of working women in modern Japan in order to establish the “end point” of this investigation. The present paper also includes the historical context from which traditional patriarchal norms originated. Additionally, the development and influence of these values is examined in the following stages of women’s lives: marriage, motherhood, and workforce participation. To conclude, this paper provides an insight on how marriage and motherhood often act as deterrents and obstacles for women’s participation in business and politics.

## Keywords

Japan, working women, patriarchy, gender inequality, cultural values, androcentrism

## Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo los valores patriarcales afectan a las mujeres trabajadoras en la sociedad japonesa, específicamente a las mujeres en los negocios y en la política. Este documento se basa en los trabajos de autores anteriores que se centran en el papel de la mujer trabajadora en el Japón moderno para establecer el "punto final" de esta investigación. El presente documento también incluye el contexto histórico a partir del cual se originaron las normas patriarcales tradicionales. Además, examina el desarrollo y la influencia de estos valores en las siguientes etapas de la vida de las mujeres: el matrimonio, la maternidad y la participación en la fuerza laboral. Para concluir, este documento proporciona una idea de cómo el matrimonio y la maternidad a menudo actúan como elementos disuasivos y obstáculos para la participación de las mujeres en los negocios y la política.

## Palabras clave

Japón, mujeres trabajadoras, patriarcado, desigualdad de género, valores culturales, androcentrismo

## Introduction

While many countries around the world have patriarchal societies, Japan is often cited as a primary example. Japan's conservative patriarchal culture is highly influenced by the Buddhist and Confucian values on which the country was built. These values have been present throughout Japan's long history and have contributed to a traditional mindset regarding the "proper" roles of men and women. This mindset became especially prominent during Japan's rapid modernization, which resulted in a state system that promoted a gendered division of labor as a key factor for the country's success. This system enforced the notion of women as housewives and men as the breadwinners.

The resulting androcentrism<sup>1</sup> has created a myriad of difficulties for working women, such as limited self-determination due to cultural pressures and a lack of significant opportunities for participation in business and politics.

This paper focuses on the effects that patriarchal values have on working women in modern Japan. Its main objective is to answer how these values have shaped the cultural perceptions of marriage, motherhood, and work and how these concepts contribute to the limited visibility of women in higher management and politics.

Gender inequality in Japan has been the subject of research by several authors (Smith, 1987; North, 2009; Estévez-Abe, 2013). However, when referencing the causes, most explanations are vague and cite "traditional patriarchal cultural values". This contributes to negative generalizations of Japanese culture and society. The author's intention by providing the historical context and significance of these values to Japanese society, is that readers will have a more nuanced understanding of the mindset towards women and their role in Japan.

The following paper is divided into several parts. The first is a brief histori-

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<sup>1</sup> Androcentrism can be defined as the assumption that the male experience is the norm of humanity, while the female experience is a negative deviation from that alleged neutral standard (Luera, 2004; Hegarty & Buechel, 2006).

cal overview of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism and their contributions to androcentric values in Japan. The second part focuses on how these values have shaped the perception of women's roles in marriage, motherhood, and work. The third and final portion of the paper will explain how the concepts covered in parts one and two specifically contribute to the lack of women in management positions in business and low visibility in politics.

## Part I: Establishing A Patriarchy

Patriarchal societies are most often a result of cultural and religious factors. Japan, in particular, has been greatly influenced by Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism and the majority of society's cultural values and attitudes can be traced back to their teachings. This section explores how each of these religions has contributed to different perceptions of women throughout Japanese history.

### Shinto

Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion and it is shrouded in mystery; its true age and founder are unknown and it lacks any sacred scriptures. The first records of Shinto practices appear in the oldest chronicles of Japanese history, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, both dating back to the beginning of the eighth century (Aston, 1910). These chronicles also represent the first documented attitudes towards women in the country and they indicate that ancient Japan was a matrilineal society (Silva-Grondin, 2010). The *Nihon Shoki* sheds light on the birth of Shinto through the story of the sun goddess, Amaterasu Omikmai. According to these chronicles, the first Emperor of Japan, Jimmu (660-585 BCE), is a direct descendant of Amaterasu. It should be noted that this belief was instrumental in allowing subsequent emperors to exercise absolute authority by claiming divine ancestry (Cartwright, 2012).

As one of the central *kami*<sup>2</sup> of Shinto, Amaterasu is portrayed as the epitome of perfection, possessing intelligence, beauty, fertility, and purity (Silva-Grondin, 2010). Amaterasu's femininity was not seen as a weakness, but was instead admired and influenced the positive, almost reverent, attitude towards ancient Japanese women. Given the numerous historical accounts of female Japanese rulers, as well as the many positive depictions of female deities in Shinto myths, it is likely that women in this epoch had a similar status to that of men.

### Buddhism

Buddhism was introduced in Japan as part of a diplomatic mission from Korea in 552 CE (Henshall, 2004). The religion provided a unifying ideology for the nation and its endorsement by the imperial family "meant that the spread of Buddhism helped spread acceptance of imperial authority" (Henshall, 2004, p. 17). However, as Mallery Silva-Grondin (2010) writes, Buddhism regressed many of the existing positive attitudes towards women that had been established by Shinto. According to her article "Women in Ancient Japan: From Matriarchal Antiquity to Acquiescent Confinement", the Buddhism that was adapted into Japanese society was "immensely anti-feminine", promoting the belief that women were of an evil nature. The type of Buddhism that was popular during the Heian era (794–1185 CE), promulgated the concept of the five obstacles and three obediences. The five obstacles stated that wom-

<sup>2</sup> Kami: divine beings, spirits or forces worshipped in Shintoism. Can also refer to the essence beings possess.

en were unable to attain the five highest spiritual states, including the highest, that of a Buddha (Deal, 2005). The latter, a code of conduct derived from Confucian teachings, asserted that women should obey their fathers when young, their husbands after marriage, and their sons when old (Allen, 1958).

Amidism (Pure Land Buddhism) is considered to be one of the most prominent forms of Buddhism in modern Japan, having gained widespread popularity throughout the eleventh century (Gastineau, 2015). This faction of Buddhism is also known for its androcentric character, exemplified by its exclusion of women from salvation, as specified in the Amida Buddha's 35th vow. The vow states that "any woman determined to reach enlightenment must first receive a male body and only then be able to enter the Pure Land of Amida Buddha" (Aiko, 1993). As Ōgoshi Aiko indicates in "Women and Sexism in Japanese Buddhism", this evokes a strong sense of sexism, as the teaching implies that a woman's body is impure and sinful and thus hinders her ability to reach enlightenment, or in other words, that "being a woman is the worst and unhappiest state in this world," (Aiko, 1993, p. 20). This period of Amidism was marked by the severe discrimination against women, many of whom were indoctrinated into actively supporting these misogynist teachings.

## Confucianism

Confucianism was introduced into Japan by way of the Korean kingdom of Paekche in the mid-6th century (Levi, 2013). Confucianism, unlike Shinto and Buddhism is not a religion but is best described as an ethical system built on hierarchies of human relationships known as the "three bonds" and "five relations". The three bonds refer to primary pairings: ruler and minister, father and son, and husband and wife. The five relations encompass a broader scope of relationships: loyalty between ruler and subject, filiality between father and son, harmony between husband and wife, precedence between elder and younger sibling, and trust between friends (Sekiguchi, 2003). In each relationship, the former is superior and the latter subordinate. Prince Shōtoku Taishi, recognized as the first patron of Confucianism in Japan, established the Seventeen Article Constitution of 604, which defined a code of moral principles based on Confucian ideals and Buddhist ethics (Levi, 2013). Although Confucianism's popularity wavered in subsequent years, it was revived and promoted by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603 – 1867 CE) who admired the Confucian values of knowing one's place, honoring relationships, respecting order, and doing one's duty (Henshall, 2004).

Confucianism also had a major influence on gender perceptions. During the feudal system of the Tokugawa period, women were taught Confucian ethics through manuals called *jokunsho*. These moral guides instructed women to live according to the *kafucho* (patriarch) system, which was based on the five constant virtues of Confucianism: benevolence, justice, politeness, wisdom, and fidelity (Sugano, 2007). Furthermore, the role of submissive wife and mother to the warrior was designated as "the most honorable place of women in the home" (Allen, 1958, p. 39). One of the most famous instructional manuals, the *Onna daigaku* (Great Learning for Women) of 1716, spoke of "five infirmities" that afflict women—indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness—and relegated women to a position inferior to men (Ekken, 2005). Furthermore, as Kenneth Henshall writes, "according to the sometimes-followed Chinese philosophy of yin and yang, too much association with the female yin could seriously weaken the male yang" (Henshall, 2004, p. 61).

Confucian ethics also had a large impact on the code of law implemented in Japan, known as *ritsuryō*. Besides emphasizing the importance of filial piety, Japanese penal law also enforced the Tang dynasty adage that "the wife considers her husband to be heaven" (Sekiguchi, 2003). "The General Principles

of Penal Law” further illustrates the imbalance between husband and wife relationships: offenses by a wife against her husband’s parents were judged more harshly than similar transgressions by the husband against his wife’s parents (Sekiguchi, 2003). The Japanese “patriarchal family paradigm”, as described by Hiroko Sekiguchi, was actively promoted by the rulers and lawmakers of the time through *ritsuryō* law, matrilineal erasure in family census registers, and state policy that publicly commended virtuous behavior in families (obedient grandchildren, righteous husbands, and virtuous wives). With regard to the sexual freedom of women, prior to the ninth century, women were free to terminate marriages and even reject unwanted advances. However, between the ninth and twelfth centuries, a wife’s sexuality became the exclusive property of her husband and a noble woman’s choice to initiate or terminate a marital union was transferred to her father.

## Part II: Androcentrism’s Lasting Effects

Although ideas about women’s rights and gender roles have changed and evolved in the past few centuries, Japan is a country that continues to hold firmly onto many of its traditional patriarchal values and attitudes. Up until the late nineteenth century, men’s contributions to society were measured in productive capacity and military service, while women were recognized for their domestic support of their husbands’ activities and raising the next generation (Araújo, 2012). The promulgation of the *ie*<sup>3</sup> (family) system further enforced the gendered roles of men and women. The following section analyzes how Japan’s androcentric culture has promoted specific perceptions of women’s roles in marriage, motherhood, and work.



## Marriage

Throughout Japan’s history, marriage has been used as a tool to ensure the continuation of blood lines, form political alliances, and increase a family’s wealth. Arranged marriages were mainly used by the upper classes of society, like warriors and aristocrats (Sørensen, 2016). During the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, it

<sup>3</sup> *Ie* refers to a family’s lineage, this includes family property, family business, and family name. Maintaining the *ie* through generations is usually accomplished through the succession of a single son (Sakane, 2017).

was common practice for daughters to be married into other warrior families as a way to guarantee agreements between warrior clans (Deal, 2005). Women from rural areas had slightly more personal choice in selecting husbands than their urban counterparts.

As per Confucian thought, women were encouraged to occupy the role of subservient wife but history suggests that, under certain circumstances, women were allowed a greater degree of power in relationships. Specifically, when a family had no male heir, a woman's husband would be adopted into the family and he would take the wife's family name. Evidence shows that this type of marital arrangement allowed women somewhat more control over the household than women who married outside of their own family (Deal, 2005). Education for women in early Japan also focused on preparing them for marriage, as evidenced by the use of the *Onna daigaku* and similar texts in schools.

Historically, families have had significant control over marital arrangements, however, the 1947 Japanese Constitution made it possible for people to marry without their parents' consent. Nevertheless, arranged marriages continued to be the norm and until the late 1960s they exceeded the number of love marriages (Sørensen, 2016). The modernization of Japan helped introduce the concepts of mutual consent, romance, and love between partners in marriages. In spite of this, as stated by Johanne Sørensen (2016), marriage in Japan continues to be a rigid institution that is strongly influenced by traditional elements such as gender role division and the vertical generational ties from the *ie* family system.

Sørensen (2016) also points out that for women especially, marriage comes along with a package of implicit obligations—childbearing, childrearing and caring for the elderly—that they are expected to commit themselves to. After a couple marries, there is a strong obligation to have children (influenced by cultural factors such as *ie* and perceived gender roles). Children born out of wedlock, in particular, are disapproved of and stigmatized in society, this is strongly exemplified by the growing number of pregnant brides where the couple's first child is born shortly after they marry (Sørensen, 2016).

Although increased educational attainment, economic independence, and Western liberal influences have made marriage less of a necessity for women, studies show that the main reasons for marrying today are a combination of conforming to cultural practices and practical considerations. In one study, when asked what the primary reason was for deciding to get married, 48.3% of wives from first-marriage couples said that they felt it was the appropriate age to get married and 23.9% answered that it was because they wanted to live with their partner as soon as possible. For respondents younger than 25 years old, 50% stated that pregnancy was the reason for marrying (Sørensen, 2016).

Age is another important factor when it comes to marriage. One study found that the average marriage age by educational background was 25.4 for university graduates, 24.2 for senior high school graduates, and 23.7 for junior high school graduates (Shirahase, 2000). Women, in particular, feel pressure to be married by their thirties since the acceptable social (and medical) cut-off for having children is cited as 40. Expectations to marry early are further exacerbated by cultural attitudes; in the 1980s, the saying "Christmas cake" became a popular way to refer to unmarried women older than 25 (Grant, 2016); the saying refers to Christmas cakes that are "no longer wanted past Christmas". Women face the challenge of dealing with persistent social stigma when they choose to prioritize their education and careers over marriage.

## Motherhood

Japan's Meiji era (1868-1912 CE) is characterized by the major political, economic, and social changes that resulted in the modernization of the country. The period is also noted for popularizing one of the most defining ideologies for Japanese women: *ryōsai-kenbo*, or “good wife and wise mother”. In 1899, an educational policy based on the principle of *ryōsai-kenbo* was introduced into the curriculum of higher-level schools attended by daughters of the elite. In 1911, it became part of the official curriculum of elementary schools (Araújo, 2012). As the name suggests, the policy promoted a certain role for women in Imperial Japan; specifically, to be married, raise children, and look after the household.

Most notably, this policy was heavily backed by the Empire, that deemed it crucial for the national development of Japan. Women were encouraged to view the country as family and therefore, do what was best for the family (Kiguchi, 2017; Shizuko, 1994). As Ana Micaela Araújo writes in the article “The ‘good wife and wise mother’ pattern: gender differences in today’s Japanese society”, “the rearing, educating and spousal role was seen as a builder of nationality and citizenry” (Araújo, 2012, p. 160).

This ideology is still prevalent in modern Japan, which has resulted in a social stigma that is attached to working women. As per *ryōsai-kenbo*, the role deemed appropriate for women is that of mother and caretaker and women who go against this norm are judged harshly. Older single women who prioritize careers over marriage have even been used as a basis for the country’s falling fertility rates (Grant, 2016).

The role of motherhood in Japanese society is one of complete devotion to your child. Society conditions mothers to believe that whether or not her child can build successful relationships with others is dependent solely on her and how she prepares her child for socialization in the first three years (Steury, 1993). As Jill Steury (1993) writes, “this reinforces the notion [...] that a child will not develop normally without a mother that dedicates herself to her child.” This can make mothers feel guilty about wanting to work and it pressures women into having to choose between motherhood and having a career.

Another constraint mothers face is the inadequate day care system in Japan. High costs, capacity constraints, inflexible schedules, and judgement towards working mothers from teachers are some of the obstacles working mothers face when searching for a daycare (Steury, 1993). When children are not accepted into a daycare center, parents, usually mothers, are left to do childcare work themselves.

When women do become pregnant, they might be confronted with maternity harassment (Grant, 2016), or *matahara*. Although illegal, women being fired because of a pregnancy is not an uncommon phenomenon in Japan. There have been a number of popularized cases involving women experiencing maternity harassment. One of the most publicized involves Sayaka Osakabe, who experienced a miscarriage while working as an editor for a newspaper due to work overload and her boss’ reluctance to give her time off. When Osakabe became pregnant again, her boss tried to convince her to quit as she was “causing trouble for the company,” (Hernon, 2018). Maternity harassment can even occur before pregnancy. In 2017, a female employee at a cosmetics company reported that childbirth schedules had been circulating via e-mail among 22 colleagues and that employees were warned that “selfish behavior would be punished” (Hernon, 2018). This is not unheard of, according to Osakabe, who says that employees in some establishments are expected to comply with these pregnancy orders, lest they want to risk losing their jobs.

## Role of Men

Although this paper focuses on the effects of patriarchal values on women, men must also be discussed as they have internalized many of the traditional values associated to their role in society.

As mentioned previously, one of the five main relationships of Confucianism is that of loyalty between ruler and subject. Updated for modernity, this could be applied to the relationship between employer and employee. Japanese employment practices are based on the traditional image of the male worker married to a full-time housewife. In light of this, male employees are expected to demonstrate a “flexible” working style that involves long working hours, unscheduled overtime, and holiday work in return for lifelong employment and seniority-based salaries (Zhou, 2015).

Given this, many men sacrifice spending time with family in order to maintain a job or for the welfare of the firm (Grant, 2016). Many men also hesitate to take work leaves for childcare or family-related situations for fear of being criticized by coworkers for not being more self-sacrificing or due to the existing notion that women should take care of all housework and childcare duties (Zhou, 2015). Not only does this contribute to reinforcing traditional gender roles but it also hinders working mothers.



## General Workforce Participation

The gendered social hierarchy in Japan has produced a number of limitations for women in business. Gender-based division of labor has been prevalent since the Meiji era, with women traditionally being assigned the household and family related tasks. While this “affective labor” has historically been used to expand the national economy, it has mostly been unpaid (Schiefer, 2014). The lack of legitimacy given to this type of labor has resulted in the continued expectance of women to take up household chores, whether they have jobs or not. As Yanfei Zhou explains, the current situation in Japan is that women’s household duties do not diminish significantly when they are employed. As such, they cannot provide firms with the same type of schedule flexibility as men and consequently, tend to be excluded from core operations and management candidacy (Zhou, 2015).



Working women must not only navigate the cultural expectations to give up their careers to be stay-at-home mothers, but they must also deal with widespread sexist mindsets and a general lack of challenging work. Women in lower ranking jobs are commonly referred to as “office ladies” or “office flowers” and they are assigned menial tasks like serving tea or doing secretarial work (Grant, 2016). Additionally, some companies tend to fall into the “overly female-friendly” trap and end up assigning high-potential women as *ippan shoku*<sup>4</sup> to perform assistant-level or low specialty jobs. This has the unintended consequence of ill-equipping women with the necessary skills needed for managerial or leadership positions (Matsui et al., 2014; Zhou, 2015).

Workforce participation in Japan has often been depicted as an M-Curve, where the peak years of participation are between the ages of 20-24 and then again at 35-50 as part time workers. The dip in the graph represents marriage and child-bearing years (Grant, 2016; Araújo, 2012). A 2010 study by Goldman Sachs supports this, as it found that approximately 70% of Japanese women leave the workforce after their first child (Matsui et al., 2010). It is for this reason that many women are hired into low-paying part time jobs where they can be easily replaced if they decide to leave. Women who withdraw from the labor market face a significant loss of wages and a limited opportunity for regular employment when they re-enter the work force (Sørensen, 2016).

Historically, Japanese state policy has performed a balancing act of promoting women’s domestic roles while also making them into a reserve of part-time workers that can be accessed in times of crisis (Schieder, 2014). While it might seem that women readily leave their jobs after having children, a 2012 study by the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training found that 60% of childrearing women surveyed stated that they “Agree” or “Kind of agree” with “women continuing to work even after having children” (Zhou, 2015).

The phenomenon of female part-time workers should also be discussed in further detail as it is directly related to the practice of lifelong-employment. Given that Japanese firms do not usually fire employees, seniority-based salaries can quickly add up, forcing companies to cut costs in other areas. The prioritization of men in the workplace means that women are often regulated to part-time jobs with low salaries.

The lack of active participation by women in the workforce has become a pressing issue in recent decades given Japan’s rapidly aging and dwindling working population. Part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s “Abenomics” policy focuses on increasing female participation in the workforce and creating more opportunities for women to break through to higher ranks in management (specifically referred to as “womenomics”). Abe’s policy has succeeded in recruiting 1.5 million more women into the labor force over the past five years, but with the caveat that the majority of the work is part-time (Larmer, 2018).

Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party have also been the subject of criticism regarding their true stance on gender issues. Abe’s intentions have been called into question, given his conservative views and tumultuous history regarding women’s issues. During Abe’s first term (2006–7), he declared gender equality a threat to Japanese culture and family values (Schieder, 2014) and attacked state-sponsored and grassroots initiatives for gender equality and sex education (Kano, 2018). Scholars have also been quick to point out that Abe avoids using words such as “gender”, “equality” or “feminism” in his speeches, employing instead neutral terms like *katsuyō* (utilization) or *katsuyaku* (lively contribution) (Kano, 2018).

Meanwhile, the LDP is accused of only endorsing gender policies when they have positive economic outcomes for growth and birthrates. A 2014 Goldman Sachs report estimated that closing the gender employment gap could

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<sup>4</sup> “Employees on the clerical track.” (Sato & Sano, 2005)

potentially boost Japan's GDP by nearly 13% (Matsui et al., 2014), and since then the government has doubled down on promoting related policies. This has been a particularly contentious point for many Japanese feminist critics. As Ayako Kano (2018) explains, women are desperately needed in the workforce to boost the flagging economy, but they are also needed to give birth to more children in order to deal with the current demographic crisis. As such, "womonomics" seems to exist in a dichotomy, and women are somehow supposed to accomplish both tasks. Associate professor at Hosei University, Kaori Katada, summarizes the criticism as follows: "Womonomics was never aimed at women's well-being, it targets economic growth only. For that purpose, it intends to fully 'utilize' women and consume them as human capital" (Larmer, 2018).

### **Part III: Female Participation In Higher Management And Politics**

Thus far, this paper has focused on providing an overview of the challenges working women face by analyzing the traditional patriarchal culture that has shaped Japanese society. The following section explores two areas where women's visibility continues to be significantly limited: higher management and politics.

#### **Women In Higher Management**

The organizational culture in Japanese firms is often described as "a man's world", and society's understanding of a leader is based on this idea (Brandenburg, 2016). The limited participation of women in management and leadership roles, especially in wealthy and democratic countries, like Japan, has been more publicly criticized in the last few decades. Despite the high levels of education attained by its female population, Japan has very low rates of women in leadership positions. According to the Japan Institute of Labor Policy and Training, the proportion of women in managerial positions (section manager or above) increased from 1.4% in 1985 to 8.3% in 2014 (JILPT, 2016). A more recent study by The Boston Consulting Group found that only 11% of all managerial positions (section manager or above) are occupied by women (Tsusaka, Kimura, & Agawa, 2017). Available data makes the disproportionate participation between men and women all the more obvious.

This is not a new phenomenon for the country; in 2003, then-prime minister Junichiro Koizumi proposed the goal of having 30% women in leadership roles by 2020 (The Economist, 2014), which Shinzo Abe adopted into his "Abenomics" policy. However, as of 2015, this target has been adjusted to a more modest 7% for national public servants and 15% for local government officials and private companies (Grant, 2016).

One of the major reasons for the lack of women in senior positions is due to the existing management structure in Japanese firms. Under the current system, employees must usually stay with a company for several years in order to receive a promotion to a management position, and for most, this does not occur until they are in their late thirties (Nemoto, 2016). As mentioned previously, the organizational culture in Japan also demands an employees' full commitment to the company, including working long hours and generally prioritizing the firm's needs over their personal and family lives. This system makes it difficult for women who want to become mothers and cultivate a family life, as they are burdened with the choice of either waiting a decade for a promotion, or having children and end up leaving the company. Given the societal pressures and expectations placed on mothers, it is no wonder that many women end up choosing the caretaker path over that of career advancement.

As was discussed briefly, women are usually given menial tasks to perform at work. Besides depriving women of the necessary skills for advancement, this also translates into a low ambition to climb the managerial ladder (Nemoto, 2016).

Despite initiatives, as of 2018, Japan ranks 110 out of 149 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report. According to the World Economic Forum, this report “benchmarks 149 countries on their progress towards gender parity across four thematic dimensions: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment,” (World Economic Forum, 2018). In the same report, Japan ranked 117 in “economic participation and opportunity”, having moved down 34 spots compared to its 2006 ranking.

A 2017 study by the OECD also found that women only occupied 3.4% of seats on boards of directors in publicly listed Japanese companies, the second lowest among OECD countries, although an increase from 1.6% in 2012 (OECD, 2017). Another important detail to highlight is that at 24.5%, Japan has the third highest gender pay gap in the OECD (OECD, 2017).

It should be noted, however, that the ever-increasing importance of gender equality is forcing companies to restructure their traditional corporate governance practices. The increasing participation of foreign investors in Japanese firms has been credited with influencing many of these changes, especially in terms of gender diversity. A study on “Female Board of Directors and Organizational Diversity in Japan” found that firms with higher foreign ownership tended to appoint female board members. Conversely, it found that older firms did not usually appoint female board members due to a stronger adherence to traditional corporate governance systems (Saito, 2017).



## Women's Participation In Politics

In the Global Gender Gap Report, Japan ranked 125 out of 149 in political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2018). This paints another troubling picture of the high levels of inequality in the country. In 2017, women only made up 10% of the members of parliament's Lower House, that is 47 out of 465 members, while only 20.7% of Upper House seats were filled up by female lawmakers (IPU, 2019).

Japan has not always experienced such low rates of female participation

in politics. During the 1947 general elections, the number of assemblywomen was 793. Since then, however, the number has decreased continuously, dropping to 21 in 1975 (Funabashi, 2004). Women's groups were especially active in postwar years due to suffrage movements. Despite past actions, in modern Japan, being a woman in politics is a path riddled with hardships.

Apart from the general gender discrimination discussed previously, women in politics are also subjected to gender-based harassment at work. This issue was brought to national attention in 2014 when female lawmakers, Ayaka Shiomura (Your Party) and Sayuri Uenishi (Japan Restoration Party), were heckled on two separate occasions by men, with remarks such as "you are the one who should get married as soon as possible" and "hurry up and have children" when they spoke on issues such as raising children and the declining population (Grant, 2016; Schieder, 2014). More recently, a 2016 survey by Kyodo News found that 59.2% of prefectural assemblywomen across the country had experienced some form of sexual harassment, either by their male colleagues or voters (The Japan Times, 2016).

Even when women manage to combine motherhood with active political participation, they continue to face adversities. Assemblywoman Yuku Ogata made headlines in 2017 when she was forced to leave an assembly chamber for bringing along her seven-month-old son. Ogata had previously petitioned the council to allow her to breast-feed during sessions but was denied. Her subsequent request to have day care provided was also rejected. Ogata describes her actions as a way to represent the struggles that working parents, particularly women, face when raising children amid a shortage of daycares (Larmer, 2018).

As previously stated, Shinzo Abe and his party have received criticism over the legitimate intentions behind "womenomics". More specifically, critics say that the real goal is the strength and prestige of Japan internationally rather than to benefit individual women. Further evidence of this was provided during the opening of the World Assembly for Women (WAW!) in September 2014, when Abe made a speech where he pointed out that his appointment of five women as Cabinet ministers "had improved Japan's international standing 'remarkably', lifting up Japan's position from 29th to 11th as measured by women in Cabinet posts" (Schieder, 2014). It should also be highlighted that the terms of these women were short-lived and Abe was criticized for appointing women that conveniently shared his conservative and nationalist views (Kano, 2018). In 2018, Abe came under fire again for only appointing one woman, Satsuki Katayama, to his new Cabinet, claiming that she had "the presence of two or three women" (Eda, 2018).

Significant changes have been slow but not completely inexistent. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018 Japan's parliament, the National Diet, passed the Gender Parity Law, aimed at increasing the number of female lawmakers and assembly members. Specifically, the law states that as a basic principle, political parties should aim at parity in the number of male and female candidates in national and local elections. Though not compulsory, the law encourages political parties to implement numerical targets and quotas to ensure this parity. The Association to Promote Gender Quotas, or *Q no kai*, a Tokyo-based feminist organization led by former Education Minister Ryoko Akamatsu, was a key contributor to the process. Not only was the parliamentary group responsible for preparing the law born from this organization, but *Q no kai* used persistent lobbying tactics to demand the law's legislation, eventually resulting in success (IGS, 2018).

Professor Mari Miura, the academic advisor of the working team of the parliamentary group, explained in an interview that the group originally aimed

at legislating a compulsory quota law. However, the Legislative Bureau<sup>5</sup> found legal quotas to be unconstitutional as they violated the freedom of association and infringed upon men's freedom to run for office (IGS, 2018). While the benefits and disadvantages of a quota system have been discussed by many scholars, one thing remains certain: the lack of an institutionalized system significantly increases the obstacles women must face in order to achieve higher visibility in politics.

## Conclusions



This paper has focused on establishing a link between patriarchal values and their effects on working women in modern Japan. Through an exploration of the historical origins and continued acceptance of these values, we can conclude that they do contribute to the limited visibility of women in higher management and politics.

Despite the country's modernization and adoption of certain liberal Western ideals, Japan continues to uphold many traditional androcentric principles that contribute to the detriment of women's self-determination. Due to this, many women feel they must conform to a specific role in society—that of married housewife. In order for Japan to achieve the level of gender equality it is seeking, a number of things need to take place, starting with changing cultural attitudes.

Change must start on a small scale in order for there to be a significant improvement on a macro level. Most importantly, the idea of women's self-determination needs to be normalized in society. However, this is a long-term effect that can only be achieved through the realization of smaller, more realistic goals. Considering this paper focuses on working women, the spaces where their participation is most challenged should be the first to change.

The power of Japanese firms needs to be utilized in order to create a new social order where gender-based division of labor is discouraged. This would have the dual effect of allowing women to pursue the same opportunities as men in the business and political spheres and also encourage men to be more actively involved in household and childcare duties. Another require-

<sup>5</sup> The Legislative Bureaus of the House of Representatives and House of Councilors provide legal assistance to assist House Members in the drafting of bills and amendments to bills (HoR, n.d.).

ment is to alter the current structure of organizations. Instead of encouraging a social norm where employees are expected to dedicate the majority of their time to work, regardless of familial obligations, firms should promote a balanced lifestyle. By introducing flexible working hours, performance-based pay and promotion over age-based seniority, and programs to facilitate the return of female employees to work, firms can shape the new corporate model.

On a more immediate level, further action needs to be taken to improve Japan's daycare system. Although the current government has taken steps to remedy the situation by approving more state-funded daycare centers, nearly 20,000 toddlers are still on waiting lists (Larmer, 2018). The lack of welcoming spaces at work and support from the government places further strain on parents and forces them to revert back to occupying traditional gender roles.

As Lan Cao (2007) writes, introducing change into a culture will usually encounter resistance from those who consider it to be an assault on cultural identity, especially if that change is externally imposed or influenced. As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, Japan's patriarchal culture has shaped many aspects of women's lives. While change will not occur overnight, history has shown that ideas initially deemed foreign and threatening can become domesticated over time (Cao, 2007). In this case, Western liberal influences have already been responsible for many of the shifting attitudes towards women and their perceived role in society. Now, it is up to Japan to continue the task of promoting a social change that can benefit its female population, and subsequently, the entire nation.

### Research Limitations

The analysis and conclusions in the following paper are based on an extensive literature review of the works of authors who specialize in related topics. However, given that this is a social problem, its implicit dynamism makes it hard to find up-to-date research or data that can shed more light on any substantial developments in cultural attitudes. Therefore, this paper focuses on the general experiences of working women and does not take into account the unique experiences of the minority.

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