

Workplace Gender Disparity in Japan from Marxist Feminism: Long Working Hours and Female Workers' Oppression

Zhimei Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*Faculty of Commerce and Management, Hitotsubashi University, 2-1 Naka, Kunitachi, Tokyo 186-8601, Japan*

a. wangzhimei26773651@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Japan is consecutively regarded as a country with low gender equality and low women participation in the workplace. Even though the Japanese government has strived to tackle this issue for over three decades, Japan has still not been able to shake off the unequal treatment of gender. Gender inequality is often attributed to Japan's entrenched and outdated cultural beliefs. Are there any other reasons that can account for this phenomenon? In the study, the theory of Marxist Feminism, a multi-angle theory addressing gender inequality, will be applied to investigate the reasons behind women's discrimination. In addition, real examples and data in Japan's finance industry will be introduced to exemplify. The study aims to offer the conclusion that the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy is one primary reason for Japan's gender disparity. The combined influence of capitalism and patriarchy resulted in occupational segregation among men and women, with fewer women in managerial positions and more women being employed as part-time workers. It also incurred a significant wage gap by gender in the same industry. The findings in this study can help provide references for companies and the government when implementing effective countermeasures. The study shows that it is an imperative necessity for policymakers and leaders in companies to change the long-lasting overwork culture in Japan's workplace and reduce gender occupational segregation and wage gap, creating a genderless and harmonious workplace.

Keywords: Japan, Marxist Feminism, Gender disparity, long working hours, Finance Industry

1. Introduction

In 1985, the Japanese government enacted the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in Japan, in an attempt to prohibit gender discrimination against women concerning employment [1]. However, according to the latest report released by the World Economic Forum in 2023, which annually tracks each country's gender disparities through four dimensions – economy, health, education, and politics, Japan ranked 125th out of 146 countries. It recorded Japan's lowest position, far lagging behind other OECD countries [2]. The persistent gender gap in Japanese workplaces has not been closed even though since 2013, former Prime Minister Abe has implemented a 'womenomics' strategy to encourage more women into the workforce and get promoted [3]. This cruel reality leads to the question of why it is so arduous for Japan to overcome its significant gender disparity. This paper

sets out to test the hypothesis that Japanese company's long working time culture impeded women's participation in the labor market and resulted in gender inequality. This paper will examine the hypothesis through the approach of Marxist Feminism theory, with the example of gender disparity in the finance industry.

According to previous research, some scholars ascribe Japan's huge gender gap in workplaces to institutional characteristics, arguing that the stereotyped Japanese employment system prioritizing male employees and Japanese-style corporate governance are blameful [4]. Kong [5] states that patriarchal and authoritarian gender beliefs held by old generations of Japanese leaders who are currently dominant at the top of Japanese companies can explain this gender discrimination. Yet most of the research about Japan's gender inequality solely highlighted cultural factors beneath men's oppression of women. Few studies shed light on capitalistic factors, which intersect with cultural causes such as patriarchy, in the explanation of the unfair treatment of women in Japanese workplaces. This leaves us with gaps in the existing literature for analyses of combined causes of Japan's intractable gender discrimination.

In light of the above reasoning, this study aimed to investigate the plural influence of capitalism and patriarchy in the analysis of Japan's gender oppression, by employing the theory of Marxist feminism, a multi-faced theory addressing gender inequality within the context of not only capitalism but also social reasons. This paper mainly focuses on the impact of Japanese companies' long working culture, a form of exploitation by capitalism, on female workers' unequal treatment in Japan's companies through the lens of Marxist feminism. By theorizing and highlighting the examples of gender inequality in Japan's finance industry, we can attain a better understanding of how long working culture led to the entrenched gender disparity. This study's findings could be useful for governments and Japanese companies in implementing effective workplace reforms and empowering Japanese women in the workplace.

The paper will be divided into three parts: It starts with an overview of Marxism and Marxist feminism theories, for a clearer understanding of the subsequent explanation of Japan's gender inequality. The second part narrows down to analyze how long working culture influences women's participation in Japan's workplaces. The third section explains the real discriminatory cases female workers in the finance sector are facing.

2. Understanding the exploitation of women from Marxist feminism

As long as capitalism is the fundamental mode of production in society, the goal of fully comprehending the forces that place women under discriminative circumstances would be hard to realize unless delving into Marx's work [6]. The following section focuses on the main perspectives in Marxism and Marxist feminism theories concerning the exploitation of women.

2.1. Marxism

According to Karl Marx, every economic phenomenon is accompanied by a social phenomenon, and social relationships are formed while carrying out economic activities. Marx argues that in non-communist societies with modes of production based on classes, material goods are always produced via the exploitation of labor, with the dominant economic class oppressing the subordinate. For a capitalistic society, the proletariat, as the powerless class, would inevitably be exploited by the dominant class called the bourgeoisie, who owns the means of production and strives to realize profit maximization in a cost-efficient way. Considering this exploitative nature of capitalism, Marx proposed the concept of alienation to criticize capitalism, identifying the potential risks of dehumanization of the workforce [7].

Nevertheless, one limitation of traditional Marxism often accused by feminists is that Marxist theory is gender blind. Since Marxist scholars tried to reveal the exploitative relationship between the bourgeois and the working class, they reduced gender oppression to class oppression, neglecting the types of labor performed by women under the capitalist system [8]. Therefore, to cover the shortage of Marxism in the analysis of women's predicament, Marxist feminism incorporated feminist perspectives into Marxist theories.

2.2. Marxist feminism

As an extension of Marxism theories to the realm of gender discrimination, Marxist feminism argues that gender-based oppression partially originated from the class struggle in the Capitalist system. Marxist feminism theories highlight how the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy resulted in gender inequalities and women's marginalization.

3. Obstacles faced by working women due to capitalism and patriarchy

3.1. Long working hours

Japan is notorious for its intense work culture, characterized by extraordinarily long hours. The term 'karoshi', which means 'death from overwork' in English, has been used to describe Japanese workers' deaths caused by work-related stresses and arduously long working hours [9]. Although the Japanese government initiated the Work Style Reform Legislation in 2018 to cope with this issue, the culture of working long hours has still not been overhauled. As shown in Figure 1, according to the research on people's weekly working hours in 2021, the length of Japanese laborers' working hours ranked in second place, just behind South Korea.

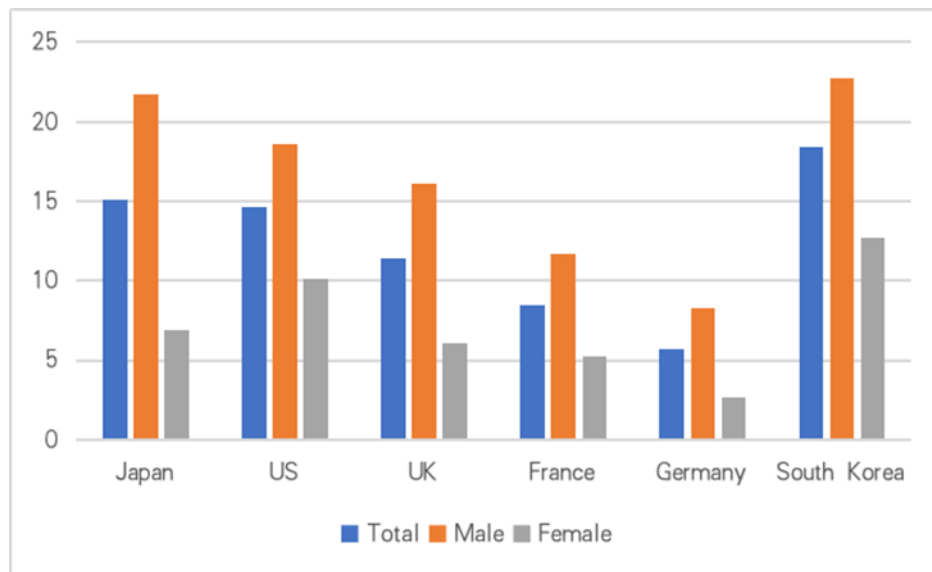


Figure 1: Percentage of 'people who work more than 49 hours per week' (2021) [10].

Based on Marx's theory, labor forces are exploited by the dominant class for the sake of surplus value. Under this mode of exploitation, forcing laborers to overwork and achieve excessive productivity of capital is inevitable [11]. In Japanese companies, for the sake of profit maximization, requiring employees to work long hours is a crucial labor cost-saving strategy. Many managers and employees regarded their daily overwork as a way to promotion, a duty to their employer, and a necessary sacrifice [12]. This culture is a manifestation of exploitation of capitalism and a form of

alienated labor. Under this long-hours work environment, if employees want to pursue career success as men, they have to follow this masculine way of management, prioritizing work and the company in the sacrifice of families and homes [13]. However, this intense style of work is incompatible with Japanese women's roles.

Being influenced by Shintoism and Confucianism, a patriarchal norm has been deep-rooted in Japanese society, resulting in a clear gender stereotype in which husbands work long hours in the workplace while wives ought to assume child-rearing and housework tasks [14]. The intense work from the workplace, exploitation by the capitalistic system, and the housework responsibilities, exploitation by males, will be a dual burden for women, impeding female workers' careers.

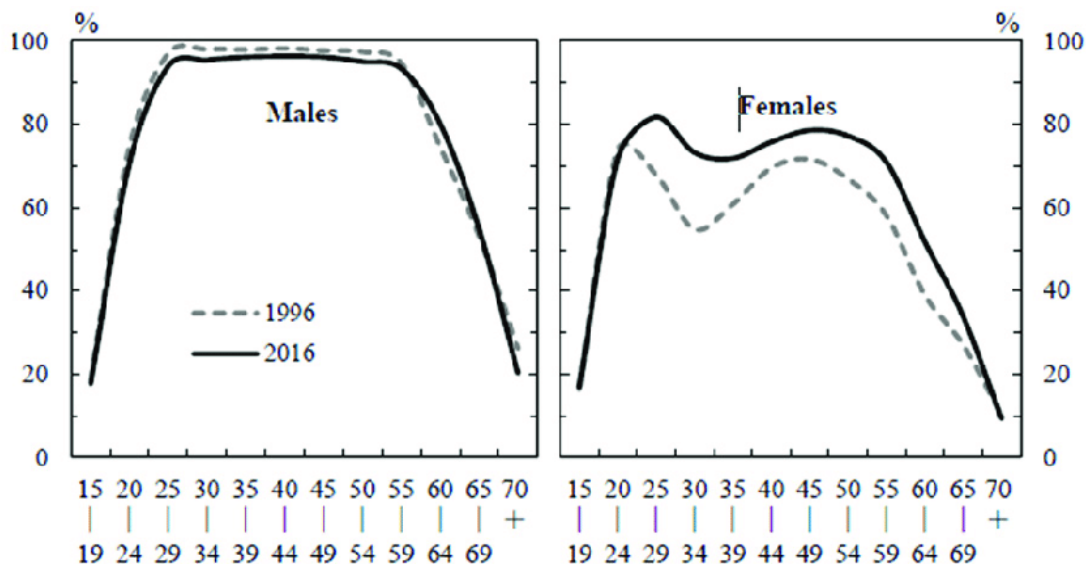


Figure 2: Labour Participation by Gender (2016) — Japan's 'M-curve' [15].

It can be learned from Figure 2 that different from males, females in Japan follow a 'M-curve' work pattern. In the late 20s or early 30s, Japanese women tend to leave their jobs for marriage or childbirth. After their children grow up, during their late 30s or early 40s, the majority of them would go back to the workplace again. The unequal division of labor and the difficulty of balancing between work and family make most women in Japan choose this 'M-curve'.

3.2. Occupational Segregation

Working long hours is considered a 'boundary-heightening' behavior in Japan [13]. Under the exploitation of capitalism, workers need to commit themselves to work. Otherwise, their promotion would be jeopardized. Therefore, women, who would also like to play the role of caretakers, would be less likely to become leaders in the workplace.

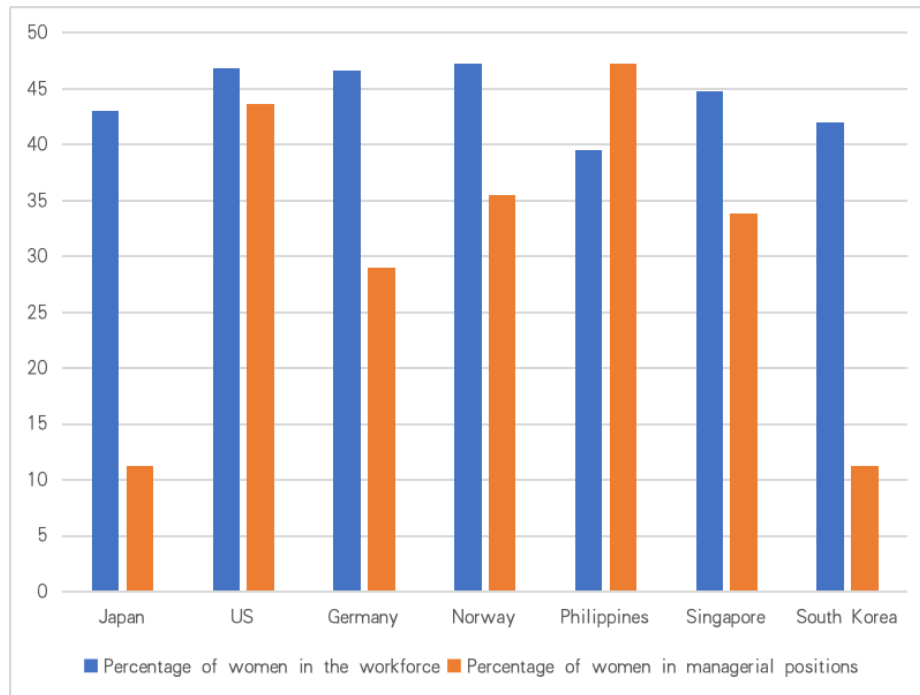


Figure 3: Percentage of women in the banking world and women in managerial positions [16].

Take the banking industry in Japan for example. As in Figure 3, Even though the general percentage of women who work in banking is over 40%, women who can get promoted to managerial positions only account for approximately 10 % of all female bankers. Male employees dominate leadership positions in banks. Most women can only play peripheral roles in clerical positions, dealing with basic office work such as processing documents and serving customers.

In addition, to strike a balance between work and family tasks, only around 50% of women are employed as full-time workers and another half are unstable part-time workers.

The culture of long working hours, with its exploitative nature against women, would cause a huge gender occupational segregation, strengthening women's discrimination and marginalization in the workplace.

3.3. Gender wage gap

Table 1: The ratio of women's wages to men's in the top 5 banks (2022) [17].

The ratio of women's wages to men's		
Japan's Five Top Financial Institutions		All workers (%)
1	Mizuho	41.8
2	Mitsubishi UFJ	49.6
3	Mitsui Sumitomo	45.4
4	Risona	51.4
5	Saitama Risona	53.8

According to Table 1, the gender pay gap in FY2022, calculated as the ratio of average female annual wages to average male annual wages, was found to be around 50% for the top five banks. The main reason for this huge gender gap lies in the low number of women in higher-level positions with relatively high salaries under the overtime corporate culture.

4. Conclusion

This essay aims to utilize the theory of Marxist Feminism to analyze the capitalistic reasons, combined with cultural reasons that caused the gender gap in Japan's workplaces. The essay's initial hypothesis is that the long working hours culture in Japanese companies, as a form of exploitation of capitalism, together with cultural factors, would exacerbate the extent of gender disparity.

Based on the analysis above and evidence in Japan's financial industry, we can conclude that long working hours, regarded as a masculine way of management, would impede women's participation in the workplace, resulting in women's peripheral roles with lower pay. The culture of working overtime is an expression of exploitation by capitalism. Being exploited by the capitalistic system, together with the exploitation of men in the household following the norm of patriarchy, women in Japan are trapped in deep gender inequality. This conclusion supports the Marxist Feminism theory, which argues that gender disparity should be ascribed to the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy.

Most previous research focuses on cultural reasons that are blameful for women's unequal treatment in the workplace, while this research filled the gap by examining the intersection of capitalistic causes and cultural causes of this phenomenon through the lens of Marxist Feminism theory.

The findings of this research can be useful for policymakers and leaders in Japanese companies to realize the multiple reasons causing gender inequality so that they can make more effective countermeasures to reduce discriminatory behavior in the workplace and provide a women-friendly working environment.

However, there remain some limitations in this study. Although the real examples of gender disparity in terms of occupational segregation and gender wage gap are explained in the analysis, the convincing evidence of gender inequality in the same position of the same companies is inadequate. Future research should be undertaken to continue to complement these limitations. In future studies, the research will be narrowed down and a gender comparison will be conducted between men and women in the same managerial position in Japanese banks, to understand the unequal treatment of working women more clearly.

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