



# Analysis of the Causes of Gender Discrimination in the Japanese Labor Market

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**Abstract:** With the rise of feminist movements around the world since the last century, the gap between women and men in terms of labor participation and education has gradually narrowed. However, gender gaps and discrimination still exist and cannot be ignored. According to Zahidi and Eda (2020), the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 published by the World Economic Forum shows that Japan has the largest gender gap among developed economies. In the Japanese labor market, gender discrimination is reflected in the wage gap between men and women, the glass ceiling for women in the workplace, the low percentage of women in management, and so forth. Yuasa (2005) noted that women parliamentarians, senior officials, and managers in Japan account for only 9% of the total, and women workers in Japan earned only 66.5% of male workers in 2002. Women are still underrepresented in Japanese management and there is a significant pay gap between men and women. This essay will discuss the main reasons for gender discrimination against women in the Japanese labor market.

**Keywords:** Japanese labor market, gender discrimination, causes

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of gender discrimination in the Japanese labor market is related to the deep-rooted social norms in Japan. According to Barrett (2004), the idea that women need to learn to be good wives and mothers in Confucianism is very important in traditional Japanese social norms. This concept became popular from the late 19th century, the Meiji period when Japan opened up to the West. The popularity of this concept helped the government to encourage the development of loyal female citizens and to suppress the growing popularity of modern female workers.

## 2. The current state of the social division of labor among women in Japan

As seen in the Japanese government's attitude toward women, the government wanted women's primary role to be that of mothers and educators in the home. This traditional gender division of labor makes it difficult for women to become regular employees of a company, while women far outnumber men in the number of non-regular employees. In addition, Barrett (2004) noted that women's participation in the labor market in Japan peaks between the ages of 20 and 24 when they enter the workforce, and again between the ages of 30 and 50 when they become non-regular employees. This "low-cost welfare system" protects the permanent position of men in the labor market, but excludes women from the core of the Japanese labor force. Japanese society is still deeply patriarchal, and women have no voice within the family and no initiative to participate in the workforce. When women get married and have children, they are usually asked to stay at home and take care of their children instead of going out to work. In addition to the husband's demands on his wife, some women themselves have long subscribed to this gender division of labor under the traditional gender division of labor.

## 3. The dilemma of Japanese women in the workplace

Japan's neoliberal reformed labor system has exacerbated gender discrimination in the Japanese labor market. According to Ueno (2021), neoliberal reforms were implemented in Japan beginning in the 1980s. 1985 saw the enactment of Japan's first labor dispatch law, which made it possible for labor dispatch to be profitable and invited private companies to join the business. Workers registered with dispatching companies are called dispatchers and work on a zero-percentage basis. When a dispatch worker's contract with a company ends, the company cannot guarantee that the departing dispatch worker will find the next job. The labor dispatch law requires employers to provide permanent employment to dispatchers for a period of time after the contract ends. In practice, however, the law allows employers to replace employees every three years. This undermines the job security of dispatch workers and their job accumulation and career planning, especially for female employees. In addition to dispatchers, part-time, odd-hour and contract workers are all considered non-regular employees. The majority of employees in such low-paying informal jobs are women. Japanese companies also try to secure employment

for men at the cost of low wages for women. And women are heavily involved in the informal labor market. As non-regular employees, not only are they paid low wages but also have no job security. The prevalence of informal employment has caused the class gap to widen and has contributed to female poverty. Male-dominated unions were also complicit in exacerbating gender discrimination in the process of neoliberal reform. Male union members insisted on Japanese-style management in which women were excluded from the workplace in this model of system and structure (Ueno, 2021). It is difficult for women to become regular employees and to become management of the company.

#### **4. Institutional barriers to women's employment in Japan**

Long-term employment in the Japanese employment system and the seniority-based system also pose obstacles to gender equality in the labor market. According to Nagamatsu (2021), the main feature of the Japanese employment system is permanent employment and is based on seniority. Long-term employment means ensuring that employees are employed for a long time and developing their skills. In most cases, high school, college and graduate students participate in recruitment before they graduate and join the workforce immediately after graduation. Under this employment system, Japanese companies rarely fire their regular employees. Seniority means that employees' salaries and promotions are determined based on age and performance. In addition, this employment system in Japan is one of the reasons for the gender disparity in the Japanese labor market. Nagamatsu (2021) describes that Japan is similar to other industrial countries in that women's preferences for choosing careers are different from men's. In addition to industry-based gender segregation, gender-induced wage gaps exist even within the same industry. Even when women are hired as regular workers, unlike men, women are often asked to perform routine and support jobs with low promotion prospects. One reason for this is that workforce stability is particularly important in a permanent employment system. This leads to gender differences in the distribution of jobs. In the Japanese labor market, companies need to promote employees to management positions through long-term selection. A large number of personnel transfers and relocations as well as long working hours are characteristic of the permanent employment system. Women are often considered unable to meet these requirements because they often quit for family reasons. Therefore, they are usually placed in positions with fewer opportunities for promotion. In addition, Japanese companies are often biased toward specifying their own valued abilities and skills to require of their employees. Instead, they tend to evaluate employees' qualifications based on heavy workloads, long hours of overtime and frequent transfers. Under such criteria, only physically and mentally healthy men are suitable for major positions, while women are only suitable for lower status jobs. Kawaguchi (2015) noted that since many women are non-regular employees, the seniority system does not include them. Some female regular employees working for companies with multiple career tracking systems are usually not career-oriented, so their salaries are not largely based on seniority.

#### **5. Barriers to the tax system for women in Japan**

Japan's tax system also adversely affects the position of women in the labor market. According to Ueno (2021), Japan's tax system strongly supports the traditional gender division of labor, which means that men dominate and women dominate. This gender division of labor model allows employers to exploit women. Most employers in Japanese households are male and dependents are exempt from tax as long as their spouse's income is less than 10,000 euros. Therefore, in order to maintain their legal status as dependents, 26% of married informal female workers choose to control their working hours to keep their income within this limit. While ostensibly this tax system benefits married women, in reality it is not they but their husbands and employers who benefit. Since they are covered by insurance as dependents in the same household as their husbands, their husbands no longer have to pay for their insurance. Their employers also do not have to pay for their social security costs. Employers can make good use of this tax system to pay them very low salaries. The tax system makes it difficult for married women to work long hours and thus become dependent on their husbands for their livelihood. The system also discourages women from divorcing, and if they choose to divorce then they lose all the security of dependency status. The Japanese tax system maintains the traditional gender division of labor. It may lead to women themselves being reluctant to work longer hours and to employers being more likely to exploit female labor than men.

#### **6. Conclusion**

In terms of people's gender perceptions, gender equality in the Japanese labor market is strongly influenced by traditional Japanese social norms. In addition, in terms of the country's institutions, the labor system, employment system, and tax system after the neoliberal reform have all adversely affected the elimination of gender discrimination. Japan still has a long way to go on the road to gender equality. Employers and members of the family, including women themselves, should break the traditional gender division of labor ideology. In the future, the government needs to continue institutional

reforms to guarantee gender equality in the labor market-related systems. Provide more opportunities for women to become regular workers in employment, achieve gender equality in pay, and further reduce gender discrimination in the labor market.

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