

## **Female Employees in Japan: Case Study of a Japanese Software Company**

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**Abstract:** *Under-representation of female employees and the absence of women in key positions in Japanese Software Companies reflect the existence of employer paternalism. Patriarchal power relations mainly dot a gender-linked allocation of social roles which are the product of everyday interactions and practices. Patriarchal norms and associated subordination are internalized in by the female employees in the present day society and it operates in professional, personal as well as social life. The paper attempts to unveil the different dimensions of traditionally established gender power relations still alive in our present day society, by dotting on a set of theoretical framework on patriarchy and empirical findings in Japanese software companies through understanding how 'patriarchy' as a system affects the life of highly educated women in Japan. The findings reflect that the female employees have been challenging and improvising the patriarchal norms.*

**Key words:** Patriarchy, Female employees, Japanese companies

### **Introduction**

Japan has the world's third-largest economy. However the economic status of Japanese women is much lower compared to the women in other advanced nations (OECD, 2012). Among 144 countries considered in a study, Japan's Gender-gap ranking is 11, which is much subordinate to the position of other developed nations (Global Gender Gap Index Report, 2016). The women in Japan are negligibly present in the workforce, further lower are their presence in the significant positions of organizations. Patriarchy in Japanese society and the industries has often been cited as a major reason behind it.

### **Theorizing Patriarchy in Sociology**

Patriarchy refers to the male domination both in public and private spheres. Patriarchal norms are maintained through a variety of ways which includes *upbringing* (reflecting the social expectations), *discrimination* (in hiring, promotions, giving credit, giving opportunities, etc.), *social arrangements* (family, competitive hierarchical occupations, gender division of labor), *force* (sexual harassment), *lack of facilities*

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( for training, child care) and *laws and policies* (which lead to exclusion from occupations, unequal pay, age discrimination etc.). In this way, the term 'patriarchy' describes the power relationship between men and women as well as addresses the root cause of women's subordination (Sultana, 2011).

In analyzing gender inequality, the perspectives held by feminist theory are important, although they contrast markedly with one another. While liberal feminists look for explanation of gender inequalities in social and cultural attitude, they are charged of not acknowledging the systematic nature of women's oppression in society. Radical feminists, who accuse them of encouraging women to accept an unequal society and its competitive character, believe that men are responsible for and benefit from the exploitation of women. Marxist feminism has a different view: as Engels argues, that under capitalism, material and economic factor underlay women's subservience to men, because patriarchy has its roots in private property. Seeking to defeat both patriarchy and capitalism, socialist feminism calls for the restructuring of family as a means to end domestic slavery and the introduction of some collective means to carry out child rearing, caring and household maintenance. Different from all the above theoretical perspectives, post modern feminism challenges the epistemological idea that there is a unitary basis of identity and experience shared by all women. It encourages the acceptance of many different standpoints as equally valid, acknowledging the existence of many different individual and groups, all of whom have very different experiences such as heterosexuals, lesbians, black women, working-class women, etc. (Giddens, 2006).

### ***Gender and Employment***

Walby (1990:20) has distinguished two distinct forms of patriarchy: private and public. 'Private patriarchy' is the domination of women occurring within the household whereas 'Public patriarchy', is more collective in form. Women are involved in public realms, such as politics and the labor market, but remain segregated from wealth, power and status. Walby (1990) defines Patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". This definition underlines the importance of viewing patriarchy as a structural phenomenon rather than one perpetuated by the individual exploitative man. Walby is concerned with the depth and inter-connectedness of gender inequality when he puts forward the six structures composing patriarchy that independent as well as interacting with one another as follows:

1. ***Production relations in the household: women's unpaid domestic labor such as housework and child care is expropriated by her husband.***
2. ***Paid work: Women in the labor market are excluded from certain types of work, receive lower pay and are segregated in less skilled jobs.***
3. ***The patriarchal state: In its policies and priorities, the state has a systematic bias towards patriarchal interests.***

4. **Male violence:** Women routinely experience and are affected by male violence which is patterned and systematic.
5. **Patriarchal relations in sexuality:** This is manifested in 'compulsory heterosexuality' and in the sexual double standard between men and women where different rules apply for sexual behavior.
6. **Patriarchal cultural institutions:** A variety of institutions including media, religion and education produce representations of women within a patriarchal gaze. These representations influence women's identities and prescribe acceptable standards of behavior and action (Giddens, 2006).

As she distinguishes, all these six structures composing patriarchy are operating in the private and the public spheres of social life, dominating the lives of women. Along with patriarchy operating in the private sphere, oppression which exists in the public sphere is also intense. In a patriarchal society women's pinnacle of achievement is relished as marriage and motherhood and they are left with the responsibility with the child care. This explains why women's exclusion and marginalization continues unceasingly in the public sphere. Women's role as mother structure their whole lives due to which many of them opt for part-time working, which is followed by low pay. There might not be any reason why women should care for children and perform the bulk of house work. However, in the world of privatized reproduction, of rigid sexual division of labor followed by unequal pay, there might not be any alternative for most families; thereby making it more rational for the 'women' to stay at home and thereby the vicious circle continues. With regard to oppression in public sphere, Martin (1990) views patriarchy as a set of social relationship which provide for the collective domination of men over women. It is manifested in unequal salaries for similar work, in discrimination, in legal inequality, in unequal expectations, in patterns of inter-personal dominance and submission and other direct violence.

Most key positions in dominant social structures like government, state bureaucracy etc. are controlled by men in patriarchy. Particularly important are the gender-typing of particular task, work styles and occupations and the association of top positions with masculine values of competition, individualism, emotional aloofness and instrumental rationality. The power, prestige and privileges enjoyed by top bureaucrats thus depend on the subordinate position of women in both private and public realm. In order to maintain the status quo and inbuilt power structure, the top bureaucrats use their power in the bureaucracy to contain women in their subordinate roles in several ways:

- Formal exclusion of women from top position
- Discrimination against women in hiring and promotion

- Promoting conformity to the bureaucratic values of emotional aloofness and technical rationality as a means of deterring or restraining women who operate best in an environment providing emotional support and opportunities for cooperative work.
  - Creation and maintenance of general linked job categories which tie women into lower level positions;
  - Maintenance of male career patterns which require mobility, full time work and no interruption (for example – child rearing);
  - Maintenance of on-the-job work organization which excludes integration of child rearing and work and opposition to alternatives such as independent work at home or neighborhood based decentralized office arrangements;
  - Supporting other elite groups of similar practices, such as when trade union elites do not protest against corporate sexism; and
  - Lobbying and applying political pressure to maintain policies that keep women in subordinate positions.
- In these or other ways the power that men have as top bureaucrats is used to keep men collectively in a dominate position over women.
- Gender relations are the product of everyday interactions and practices (Connell, 1987, 2001, 2005). The actions and behaviors of people in their personal lives are directly linked to collective social arrangements in society which are continuously reproduced over life time and generations; but they are also subject to change. Connell identifies three aspects of society- labor, power and cathexis. Labor refers to the sexual division of labor, both at home and in labor market. Power operates through social relations, such as violence, authority etc. Cathexis includes dynamics within intimate personal relationships. Through these three areas of society, gender relations are structured on a societal level in a particular gender order. ‘Gender Regime’ is the play of gender relations in specific institutional settings (Giddens, 2006).
  - These theories reflect how patriarchy operates in the private and public sphere and how they both affect each other. Although this system is a part of historically enforced traditional ideology, it might not be regarded as wrong to say that it makes no sense to continue such discrimination, in the age of modernization and technological advancement.
  - Bourdieu (1997) explained the relationships between habitus field and practice in order to explain how patriarchy and the associated disciplinarily regime of femininity is socialized and internalized by the society and to work out the possibility of transformation in the norms. Habitus is the mental or cognitive structure through which people deal with the social world. It is the series of internalized schemes through which they perceive, understand, appreciate and evaluate the social world. Habitus produces as well as it is produced by the social world. Field denotes the network of relations that exists apart from individual consciousness and will. There are different kinds of fields in the social world like

economic, domestic etc. The position of various agents in the field is determined by the amount and relative weight of the capital they possess. According to Bourdieu's theory of practice individuals are guided in their practice by habitus, allowing them to accommodate to new situations and innovative practices. Therefore, individuals are neither totally free agents nor passive products of social structures. Social life is neither exclusively subjective nor exclusively objective.

- Bourdieu's theoretical framework with the concepts of *habitus* can explain patriarchy and the adherence of men and women towards its norms. The conception of habitus can be applied to patriarchy where it should be perceived as a guideline, directing social norms. In a patriarchy of society, men internalized their relative hierarchy of positions and established solidarity in their behavior pattern, enabling themselves to dominate women. Women on the other hand confirmed naturally and voluntarily to their subordinate status and as a result of their long term exposure, occupation and socialization in such a social setting. Even though patriarchy is deeply rooted in the society, it operates only as a set of loose guidelines as habitus, leaving room for improvisation and innovation on the basis of the capital and associated power acquired by women. Hence, it is not only constraining but also enabling. When Bourdieu states that social life is neither exclusively subjective nor exclusively objective, it implies that women are neither free agents nor passive products of patriarchy of social structure. Scope for improvisation and innovation unravels the possibility of modifications in the patriarchy of social structures.

### **Patriarchy in Japanese Society: A brief history**

The major causes of the humble status of the women in Japanese companies, lies in the Japanese society's attitude towards its women, since olden times. In Edo era (1600-1867), women were not involved in activities outside the home, and thereby kept ignorant. In the Bushi-do society, women were kept inside the home and were not involved in academia and literature. In the Meiji period (1868-1915), the government's policy focused on militarism. Since then, the Japanese society became formally patriarchal. This was followed by capitalism and the start of a new "male-centered society" (Koshal et al., 2004). In every society, patriarchy assigns 'gender' a particular socio-cultural meaning. Martin (1990) mentioned that masculinity is naturally seen to have dominance, confidence, strength, competition and rationality as its differentiating features; in contrast, femininity is linked to submission, caring, nurturing, sensitivity and emotionality. Masculine values are the ones valued most highly for positions of power. Ironically, such constructed patterns of masculine and feminine behavior are used to justify men holding higher positions and most women being in sub-ordinate positions.

The paper attempts to understand the life of educated women employees in Japanese companies by interpreting how patriarchal norms and associated subordination is internalized by these women and how it operates their social life.

**Methods:**

These theoretical finding is applied on a group of working female employees in a Japanese software company, who are expected to have acquired the economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital necessary for bringing about improvisations in the patriarchal social order. The female employees working for systems and software development have been selected, as they are reasonably educated, have enough financial independence and skills and also good social ties. Japanese society has been traditionally patriarchal and it still rules. Hence this study might help to understand how patriarchy works on women empowered with cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital. Most of the young female employees have same class positions because of their job status, which produces a common habitus. However women are often employed in the position of *ippan soku* (support staff) in Japan, but in the particular software company all the young professionals is recruited as *sogo soku* (permanent staff). This common habitus structures their social practices- by setting the guidelines and limits- although it allows for individual innovation. Thus this empirical study might help to understand the zones in their life where patriarchy still exists and how they handle this situation.

After obtaining informed consent from the participants, open ended semi-structured interviews, and observation method – both participant and non-participant methods – were used for collection of appropriate information. All the female employees in the software company took part in the study. Personal communication between the male and female employees of the software company and direct interaction of the researcher with the male employees were also analyzed. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and content analysis of the interviews was done using Nvivo qualitative software. The themes that emerged from the analysis are discussed below.

**Findings and Discussion:**

Nowadays, the particular software company recruits people, irrespective of their gender, with the necessary qualification in engineering and computer skills. Often people without expertise are recruited if they have the potential, and are trained by the company later, which is a typical feature of Japanese companies (see, on-the-job training- OJT). The competitive nature of work in software companies has facilitated the reproduction of the existing environmental gender relations. Although no immediate gender difference in relation to technology or team-work practices could be detected (except for language/ communication patterns), women are least likely to perceive skill development and promotion opportunities with their work place, if compared with men. Some clear differences exist, in the area of working flexibility and working under pressure. The interviews revealed that the female employees were allowed to leave office before 9:00p.m., for security reasons and they were also allowed to work for lesser number of hours per day, when their children were young, if they were ready to compensate that with their salary. For women, meeting the

job expectation was often harder than men, as they were burdened with traditional expectations for performing certain roles in family and in society. Therefore, while the initial basic pay rates were relatively similar (and salaries were higher compared to women working in other sectors) appraisal systems can still have a tendency to create divergence between the economic benefits of female and male employees. Although both male and female employees often find their jobs to be very stressful, but only female employees were found to take time off from their work for child care, or care of the sick and the aged. Three male employees in the company were found to be diagnosed with high level of stress, however they did not took time off, and became window-side sitters in the company. Many women in the particular company discontinued their work after giving birth. On the course of the interview, most of the female employees revealed their dissatisfaction and challenges of their present job requirements. They also stressed on their worries about long term income security, because of the declining birthrate and economy and the emergence of western management styles in Japan.

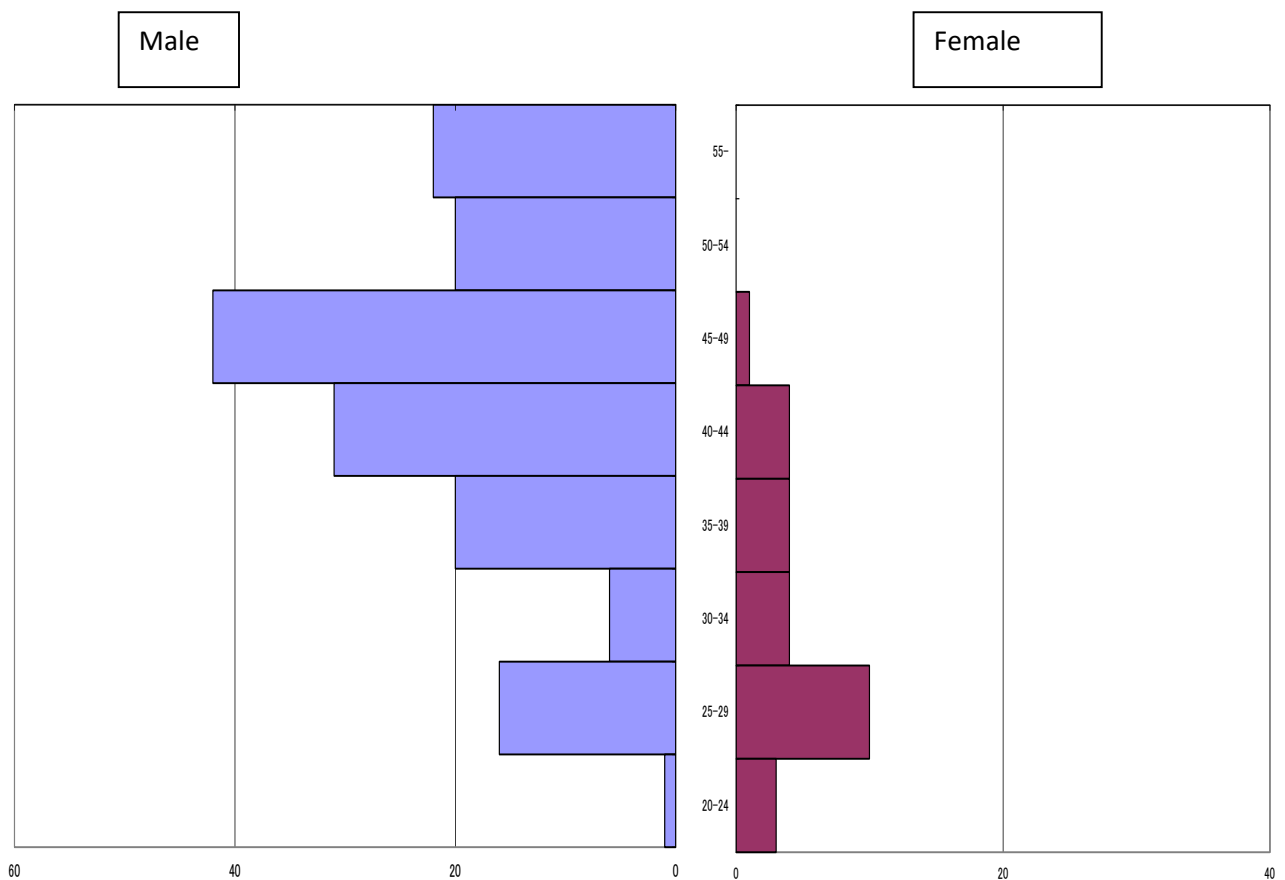
Although at the recruitment phase, both male and female applicants were believed to have equal technical skills, however it becomes almost impossible for women to get promoted. The following chart shows the disparity between the total number of male and female employees in all designations in the software company.

**Table 1: Gender and Hierarchy in Office**

Designation	Gender Category	No. of Persons Belonging to the Specified Category
Group Leader	Male	24
	Female	0
Line Manager	Male	11
	Female	1
Junior staff	Male	158
	Female	26

The table shows the age distribution of the employees of the particular company, along with showing the unparalelity between the two genders. The left hand column provides us the data for the male employees and the right hand column provides us the data for the female employees. All the employees were categorized under the following age groups: 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49, 50-54, 55 and above.

Fig.1 shows the age distribution of male (left hand side) and female employees (right hand side). There exists a huge difference between the total number of male and female employees within the organization and this difference remains persistent among all the age groups, except in the age group of 20 – 24. The Japan's Office of Gender Equity (2006) attempted to provide greater opportunity and protection to women and due to this the female employees in the age group 20-24 are more as compared to their male counterparts. The figure reveals that the maximum number of female employees falls in the age group of 25 to 29 and the number of female employee's declines rapidly beyond that age. Probably this may be the average age of marriage and child birth in Japan whereas the maximum number of male employees is in the age group of 45-49. The lowest number of women employees belongs to the 45-48 age groups whereas the women above the age of the 49 are rare in the organization.

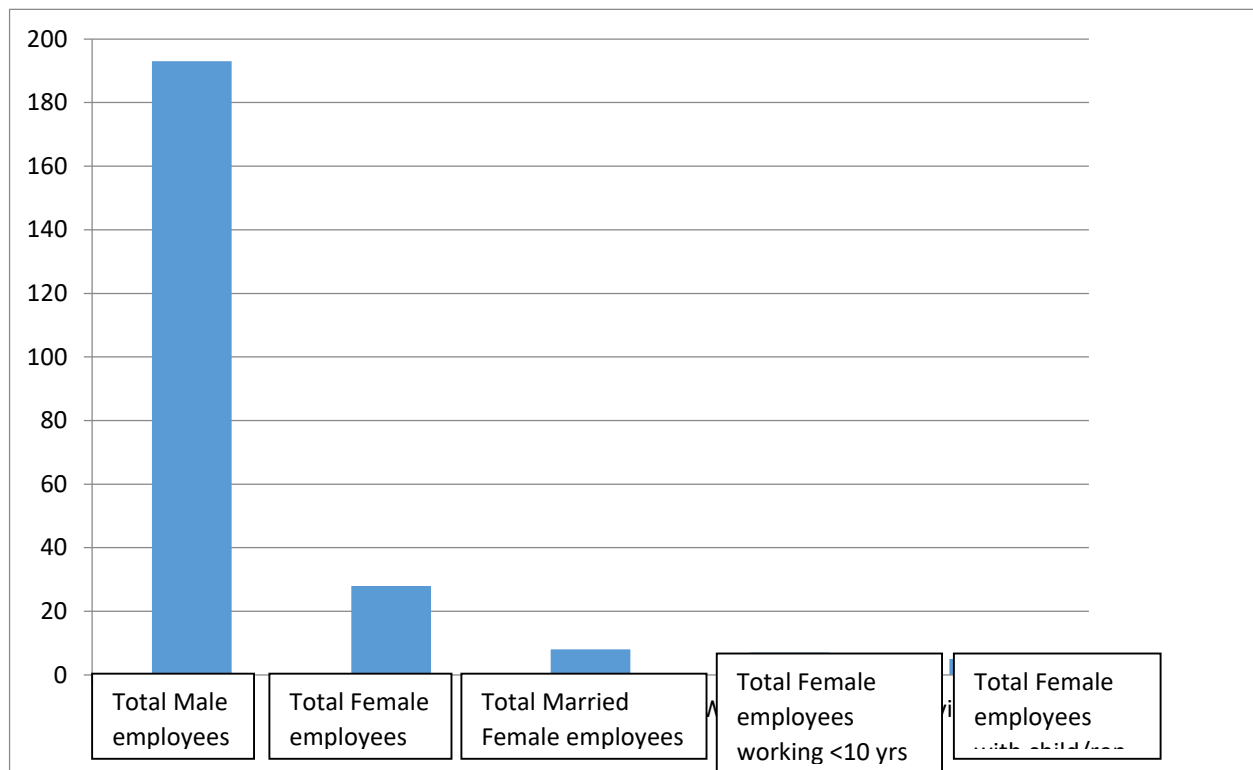


**Figure 1: Gender and Age distribution**



Figure 2 shows that a total of 193 male and 28 female employees were working in the organization. Only 8 female employees were married. Only 5 female employees working in the organization were having kids. Married women professionals who felt empowered as software professionals and continued to work after marriage and child birth regarded their responsibilities to their families as important and consistently give their families higher priority than work. Interestingly all these women were belonging to families with dual income. As men know that women prioritize their family and culturally feel that's the right thing to do, they seldom criticize their female colleagues.

From the inception of the organization in 2003, no women employee has been promoted to the senior manager position showing less trust in the women leadership or due to the high attrition rate of the female employees because of the tendency of leaving the organization after the marriage. No female junior managers were working in the organization during the period 2003 – 2005, whereas from 2006 to 2015 only 3.4% of the employees were working as the female junior managers.



**Figure 2: Total number of employees in the software company**

Nowadays the company tries to provide young female employees with the sense of empowerment by providing a sense of felt equality existing within the company. With this empowerment they claimed that they enjoy greater respect and freedom in the society. Although most of the young female employees were

ready to resign from their job, in order to spend time with their children, many of them said that they would prefer to have husbands who would allow them to continue their job, after marriage. However, direct interaction with the male employees of the company revealed that they would not prefer to have working partners.

Concentrating on the problems faced by working women as a result of their dual responsibilities of housework and work, the study found that they were concerned mainly with household work and childcare. They felt that their chances of promotion and growth declines because of their inability to travel long distances regularly, for purposes of work. They felt that this hinders their chances for establishing and maintaining their position and gaining specialized training. Japanese women being socialized in patriarchal society are tuned to be more nurturing, caring and supporting of relationships than men. However the opinions of the younger female employees were slightly different than those of their elders. They seemed to be more ambitious and have plans for their careers. The female employees also mentioned that their chances of obtaining senior and more influential administrative positions are also affected by their gendered socialization and the consequent social restrictions laced upon their mobility and behavior.

Married women professionals, who regard their responsibility towards family as more important than their career, are those who have been socialized and internalized patriarchal values. Therefore they find it difficult to meet job expectations and are less likely to perceive career development opportunities. Male employees by not criticizing the attitude of their female colleagues assigning priority to family, indirectly reinforce the patriarchal norms. Men working in the systems and software industry have high income and therefore they might not require their wife's income. This might be the reason why most of the male employees responded that they would prefer not to have working partners.

The study also revealed that the working women invariably need the support of the family members and the society. Women were also found to resign for child care and care of the aged and they found re-employment to be quite difficult because of age based restrictions. This also brings out the patriarchal ideology which associates women with private sphere, thereby expecting her to subordinate her personal career for the interest of the family. This entire system shows how male as well as female internalize and reinforce the patriarchal norms, as being normal. However it might not be disagreed that this is gradually changing in some areas, like absence of gender difference with respect to technology or teamwork practices. In spite of the restrictions placed by mobility, they try to overcome it with the help of technology.

## **Conclusion**

Female employees in Japanese software companies are still under clutches of patriarchal priorities and therefore it is difficult for the female employees to get promoted, although they have excelled themselves and equaled men with handling technology and team work. However, being educationally, financially, socially as well as professionally competent, female employees have been challenging patriarchal norms

to some extent, without violating the patriarchal norms. This might be regarded as a stepping stone in the creation of a world free from gender based hierarchy.

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