

Structural Barriers to Women's Labor Force Participation in East Asia: Gender Norms, Economic Pressures, and the Confucian Legacy

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Abstract. This paper investigates the structural barriers to women's labor force participation (LFP) in East Asia, focusing on China, Japan, and South Korea. While each of these countries has achieved remarkable economic development, traditional gender norms rooted in Confucianism and high-pressure economic systems continue to hinder women's full participation in the workforce. Using gender role socialization theory and structural inequality theory as the analytical framework, the study draws on labor statistics, national policy documents, and prior academic research to conduct a comparative analysis of female LFP. The findings reveal three key challenges: the persistence of gendered family roles ("widowed parenting" and the M-shaped employment curve), workplace discrimination (wage gaps, career interruptions, and low representation in senior management), and inadequate family support policies. Although all three countries have introduced reforms, many remain symbolic and insufficient. Notably, the study finds variation in how these issues manifest: China's urban-rural divide, Japan's entrenched non-regular employment for women, and South Korea's severe wage gap and rigid family-first ideology. The paper concludes that effective policy must move beyond token measures and address deep-rooted cultural and institutional structures to ensure gender equality. Only by dismantling these systemic barriers can East Asian societies fully realize women's economic potential..

Keywords: East Asia, Women's Labor Force Participation, Structural Barriers, Confucian Legacy, Gender Equality

1. Introduction

East Asia (China, Japan, Korea) is the site of the miracle, and transmissions and women's LFP continue to be held back by structural path dependence. The office-led march to gender equality has made progress in other parts of the West, but nowhere has it backfired so spectacularly as in East Asia, with its "Confucian gender norms" (emphasis on women's role in the family) and its "high-pressure economic models" (which demand long work hours) producing paradoxes of working women.

Most of the previous studies have focused on single countries' patterns (e.g., the national pattern M for Japan, the urban-rural gender gap for China, and so on), and very few comparative analyses

have been conducted, and then systematically. This study contributes to this burgeoning area of research by narrowing the research gap with an attention to women and to answer three questions: 1) What are the common and different structural barriers for women in LFP between the three countries, China, Japan, and South Korea? 2) Are the waves of LFP for married women in the three different countries? and 3) to what extent and how have the current policies influenced the strength of the women's LFP rates? How are traditional gender ideology and organizational routines helping (re)produce such barriers? What do we do to ensure we support women to juggle family and work in the policy domain?

The study is guided by two theories of gender: gender role socialization theory (which holds that social norms influence the behavior of men and women in the family and workplace) and structural inequality theory (which focuses on how institutional structures produce gender inequality). We also refer to secondary sources: labor force participation statistics from national bureaus of statistics (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China; Statistics Bureau of Japan; Statistics Korea in South Korea), policy documents (e.g., CNN"China enacts new three-child policy as reports emerge of sterilization of women in Xinjiang," 2021; Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of South Korea "The government's first master plan for strengthening the economic power of women_gallery,") and previous academic studies on gender in East Asia.

2. Review of working women in East Asian societies

2.1. Overall labor force participation rates

Throughout China, Japan, and South Korea, that is, below the world average, and also lower, extreme age variability was observed. Based on 2023 labor force participation data compiled from the China National Bureau of Statistics, the Japan Statistics Bureau, and Statistics Korea (as presented in Table 1), notable cross-national differences in women's participation rates can be observed, along with considerable age-based variations across all three countries.

China: Women have a 61.2% LFP rate - higher than Japan (53.8%) and South Korea (50.1%), but is 8.5 percentage points lower than for men (69.7%). In rural areas, the gap is even larger, 11.2 percentage points larger, than in cities (6.8 points).

Japan: 48.3% in 2013 (and the policy of "Womenomics"), 53.8% in 2023, but the "M-curve is still there" (it drops off very fast for women aged 25-34 year olds, from 78.1 for 20-24 year olds to 62. 5%) but to increase among individuals 45 years and older (70.3% for aged 45-54). This is summarized in Table 2

South Korea: However it's still the lowest out of the three, and there is a "double gap"— that is, it's low not just for men (72.3% in 2023) but also falling for women aged 30-39 (down from 68.2% for 25-29-year-olds to 5.7% for 30-39-year-olds), and it's pretty clear that the recent fall is due to major career interruption when having a child and bringing up a child.

Table 1. Women's labor force participation rates by age group in China, Japan, and Korea(2023)

Age Group	China (%)	Japan (%)	South Korea (%)
20–24	76.3	78.1	69.5
25–34	72.1	62.5	58.3
35–44	68.5	65.2	55.7
45–54	65.8	70.3	62.4
55–64	45.2	58.7	8.9

2.2. Key dilemmas in participation

All three countries have those same issues, and they keep creating what I've called elsewhere diswelfare to women's labour force participation:

“Widowed parenting”: The imbalance of who does the most parenting and housework among those who are married. In China, by the article said that in their country 2% of women stayed at home to take care the kids, the children being under 6 years old” [1]. “From the couples interviews in marriage where women have children less than 6 years old the main caretaker are women” (country-based survey in the 2022 by each related national agency)” “83.5% in Japan (Statistics from The Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office in Japan 2023)” [2].

“M-shaped employment curve”: Most extreme in Japan and South Korea, and increasing in China's first-tier cities. LFP rate for women rises pre-marriage/childbirth (age 20–24), falls significantly while rearing children (25–34), and partially recovers as children become independent—a “M.” Recent slowdown in China, diabetes has a less sharp prevalence curve compared with Japan and South Korea but the increase has been more obvious in the 2010s, especially among urban women.

3. Women's employment in a changing economy: a national longitudinal study of the 1970s

3.1. Gender norms: the oppression of “family-first”

Cultural causes of barriers are also significant in the three countries, for example, the Confucian culture focuses on information that “men should make money and women should govern the smaller area inside the home”.

China: Patriarchal family systems (like a “son preference” that causes women to drop out of the work force to help sons get ahead educationally); cities have seen “modernized traditionalism” — educated women are expected to be both “career women” and “ideal mothers,” necessitating the carrying of dual burdens [3].

Japan: In Japan, where the “House (ie, in Japanese) System” has nominally been abolished since 1947 but remains surprisingly strong, the role of women as “housewives” (ie, no ne in Japanese) is attached to the family and the house. Among working women, 68.3% of regular female workers still work in “non-regular positions” (part-time and temp) and afford many with flexibility concerning family care.

South Korea: “Patrilineal family culture” (More restrictive culture among Korea, China, and Japan). In a 2023 public opinion survey by the South Korea Institute for Gender Equality Development, 72.1 percent of employers agreed with the statement [4]. Women should put family ahead of work, so we consider women's family situation in human resource management.”

3.2. On-the-job discrimination: you're not the boss of me: disagreeable workers as victims of wrongful termination

Wage, promotion, and work discrimination are also high, but do differ by country:

China: In sectors including technology and finance, “gendered recruitment borders” are experienced. More than 28.3% of female job seekers said they had been asked about “marriage and childbirth plans” in interviews (Compiled by the 2022 “Women's Employment Security” survey of Renmin University). Women are also promoted at a slower pace: Only 15.7% of directors in public companies are women(2023 China Listed Companies Gender Diversity Report.)

Japan: Increasing tension between women's family obligations and work ("long working hour culture" — overtime work per year average 1,800 hours among full-time workers). In 2023(Japan Business Federation), the percentage of female executives in corporate activities was only 11.2%, and the wage disparity between men and women was 22.1%. In 2021, it was the widest gap among OECD countries.

South Korea: The biggest gender pay gap (31.5% in 2023, OECD data, among OECD countries) and "glass ceiling"; women in South Korea account for just 5.8% of senior management positions in major companies. The so-called "contractor culture" (temporary "B-side" positions) similarly discriminates against women, who account for 62. 4% female casuals and nothing in sight, no security, no progression [5].

3.3. Policy restrictions: the "work-family policy gap"

Although in all three countries, some attempt is made to increase women's LFP, the complementary systems are absent:

China: This year's policy promoting a third child offers incentives — like extended maternity leave (royal mothers in some provinces get 188 days) and tax breaks for child care costs, but not a guaranteed system — resulting in only 4.1% of children under 3 attending public nurseries (well below the average, 35. 8%).

Japan: Women's Employment, the Japanese Government has been making efforts to increase women's LFP rate and the ratio of women in executive ranks (such as Womenomics, since 2013); the "nursery school shortage" remains serious, with 320,000 households waiting for a public nursery in 2023. Pregnancy leave is long (67 per cent of the pre-leave wage), but, on return, a substantial fraction incurs career costs (e.g., being possibly displaced in lower-responsibility nodes) [6].

South Korea: The 2022 "Women's Economic Empowerment Plan" includes subsidies for child care with paid parental leave (fathers can take as much as 90 days of leave). But only 12. 3% take-up of parental leave, and the take-up is restricted to new mothers (due to workplace pressure to attend to work imperatives, and not family care). Childcare is so expensive today (it costs the equivalent of 25% of a family's income) that women can't even go to work [7].

4. Policy implications and conclusion

4.1. Policy implications

For East Asia countries to tackle structural problems, it will force them to also move away from "symbolic policies" and build an inclusive safety net:

1. Challenging to gender symbolic image for 'Gender stereotype' Republic of Korea has operated a few 'Gender-neutral education experiments', and Japan has applied 'Paternal leave quota' to large corporations for taking care of the family for equal parental duty, while men shall have a test of being with the family [8, 9].

2. Fairness in the workplace: Enrich the anti-discrimination policy (such as the revision of China's "Employment Promotion Law," which prevented discrimination in hiring on the grounds of sex) and put good practices into practice , in particular, promote working at home (eg, incubation centers set up for mothers in the US) or flexible scheduling to accommodate family responsibilities [10].

3. Ideal add-on service: Promote public service (30% penetration in kids under 3 in between China and Japan); Low-cost reduction model (cost of child 80%)

5. Conclusion

This study has confirmed that one of the barriers to women's labour market participation in some Asian countries — China, Japan, the Republic of Korea — is the closely related factor at structural level with respect to the traditional gender norm related to women's roles at home and within the family context and working place discrimination in terms of career path and policy support with respect to the family work reconciliation. Of course, there are national differences (China's urban-rural disparity, Japan's "M-shaped curve," South Korea's wage gap crisis), but the underlying contradiction is the same — the "economic development model" and "gender norm system" of East Asia have not evolved to meet women's far more varied needs at work and at home.

More attention should be given to 'structure' and future programs to aim for this, than in the past when individual adaptation has been emphasized (e.g., how mothers have taken on a new role and at the same time had to organize family arrangements to accommodate that role). Only by shattering the magnified power of customary values and institutional barriers will it be possible to attain true gender equality in business in East Asian countries, in which women are able to realize their potential for economic and even social contributions.

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