

Discussion on the Comparison of the Career Development of Women between Japan and China

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1. Introduction

Recently, the issue of improving gender equality has been attracting the attention of various nations. Both the governments of Japan and China have implemented positive measures intending to ameliorate the current status of women in the workforce. In Japan, efforts are being made to promote women's engagement and establish a more conducive environment for their professional pursuits. Meanwhile, in China, full-time dual-earner families prevail in society, and the government is contemplating the socialization of child support. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, the labor-force participation rate for Japanese women stands at 53.30%, while in China, it is 61.61%[1]. However, striking a balance between work and childcare remains challenging, leading to gender disparities within the workplace, coupled with various issues concerning women's employment. This study aims to identify the obstacles that women encounter in their careers in both Japan and China, and compare the similarities and differences between them. Furthermore, the study will make recommendations for strengthening work-life balance support policies and eliminating unconscious bias in the workplace, which may promote gender equality in both countries.

2. Related Work

2.1 Women's Employment

To address the labor force shortage, the Japanese government has implemented a range of measures to encourage women's active participation in the workforce. This has led to a gradual increase in the number of dual-earner families, transitioning from a society dominated by housewives to one where both spouses are employed[2]. In China, the gender gap in labor force participation is relatively small, and it has become a societal norm for both men and women to work. According to Figure 1, the labor force participation rate in 2022 is 71.03% for Japanese males compared to 53.03% for females, while for Chinese males it stands at 74.29% compared to 61.61% for females. However, the recent transition from the "one-child policy" to the "three-child policy" has further exacerbated discrimination against women in the

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workplace.

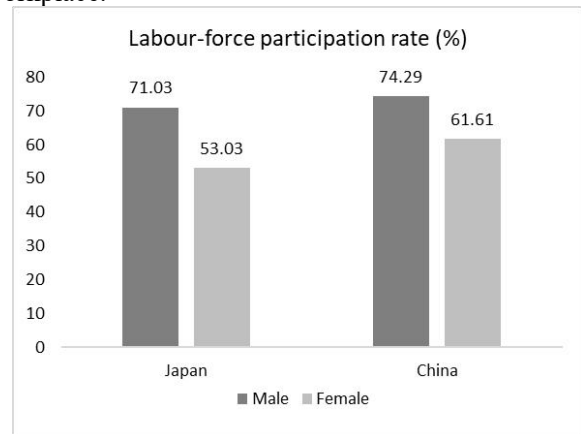


Fig.1 Labour-force participation rate in Japan and China (based on data from references[1])

2.2 Previous Female Career Surveys

Japan Institute for Women's Empowerment & Diversity Management conducted a comprehensive survey of 13,000 companies that had 100 or more employees, to investigate the situation and perception of female workers. As depicted in Figure 2, the survey findings revealed that the primary reason for work interruptions was marriage, accounting for the highest percentage at 63.3%. Pregnancy and childcare were identified as the third and fourth reasons, with percentages of 44.0% and 26.2% respectively[3]. These findings highlight the significant challenges faced by women in the workplace, with factors related to marriage and childcare emerging as major obstacles, as observed in previous surveys.

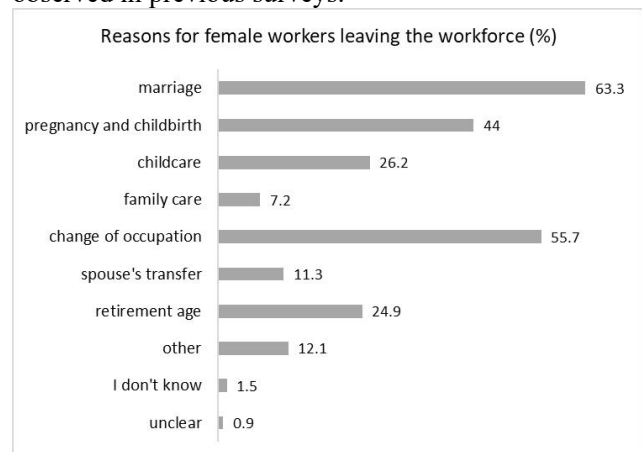


Fig.2 Reasons for female workers leaving the workforce in Japan (based on data from references[3])

3. Proposal method

3.1 Hypothesis Background

Through a comparative analysis of women's career development and the obstacles they face in Japan and China, this study puts forth a hypothesis based on the distinctive characteristics of each country.

3.1.1 The Current State of Work-Life Balance

As mentioned above, the responsibilities of housework and childcare can significantly consume a woman's time and energy. Thus, maintaining a harmonious work-life balance becomes imperative for facilitating a woman's professional development. The data given by National Bureau of Statistics of China shows that women who are employed dedicate approximately 154 minutes to household-related activities on workdays in China, including housework, childcare, nursing care, and shopping, which is nearly twice the amount spent by men[4]. Meanwhile, a survey by Cabinet Office of Japan shows that Japanese women devote 283 minutes to household-related tasks when preschool-aged children are present, representing 2.35 times the duration for men. This figure reduces to 205 minutes when children reach middle school, still 3.01 times higher than the corresponding time for men[5]. Figure 3 describes that Japanese women bear a heavier burden of household responsibilities in comparison to other developed nations.

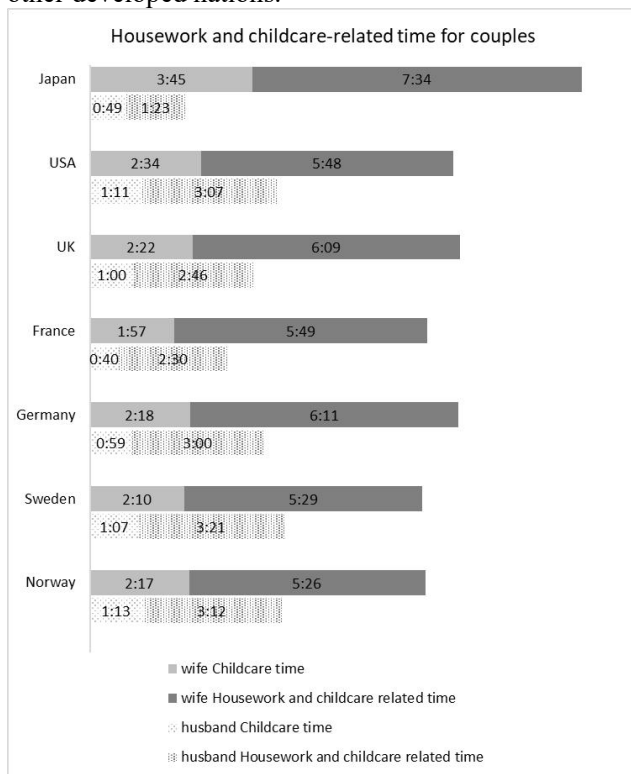


Fig.3 Housework and childcare-related time for couples with children under 6 years old (per day, international comparison) (based on data from references[6])

Furthermore, 35.1% of individuals with children under the age of 3 require childcare services in China, but the utilization of childcare institutions for these children is a mere 2.7%, while 63.7% are taken care of by their mothers[4]. In comparison, Japan has made better progress in this area, with a substantially higher figure of 43.4% of all children under the age of 3 benefiting from daycare centers and similar establishments, and approximately 85.5% of municipalities nationwide reported no waiting lists for childcare services in 2022[7]. Although a significant number of grandparents in China are willing to assume the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren, it is crucial to prioritize the improvement of legal frameworks and service systems in China to foster the comprehensive development of children within their familial environment.

3.1.2 Gender Role Awareness

At the cognitive level, traditional gender role beliefs that prescribe men as breadwinners and women as homemakers persist in East Asia. However, as shown in Figure 4, there are more than half of the population holds a contrary perspective in China, and it is a similar situation in Japan[8]. This shift in societal attitudes signifies the prevailing viewpoint.

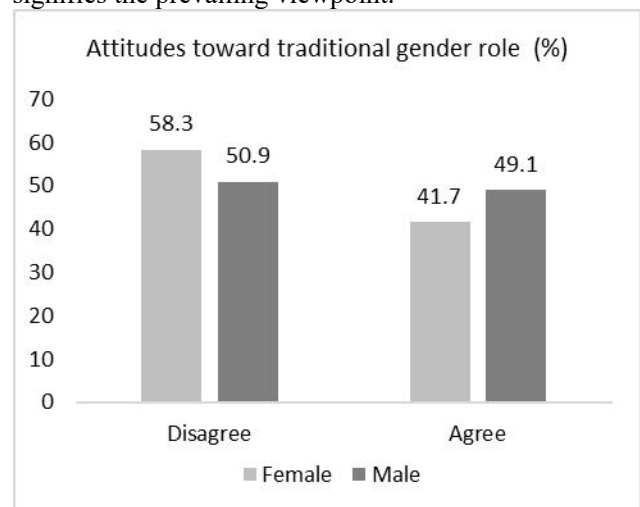


Fig.4 Attitudes toward traditional gender role in China (based on data from references[4])

Furthermore, regarding the question of whether women should engage in employment, Figure 5 indicates that nearly 60% of Japanese individuals advocate for women to sustain their careers even after childbirth. In China, an overwhelming 95.4% of respondents acknowledge the significance of women having a job and earning income[4]. Chinese women demonstrate a high level of willingness to work, and the notion that women should be employed is firmly established as a social consensus that remains unquestioned.



Fig.5 Attitudes toward women having a profession in Japan (based on data from references[8])

3.1.3 Employment Factors on Preventing Women from Working Active

Although Japan's "lifetime commitment" employment model collapsed after the bubble economy, elements such as "long-term employment" and "seniority-based wages" continued to have an impact on performance evaluations, leading to career limitations for women. Furthermore, due to the increasing diversification of employment patterns, non-regular positions such as temporary and part-time jobs primarily occupied by women, further exacerbates the absence of clear career paths and hinders promotional opportunities[9]. The data show that female employees constitute 53.6% of the non-regular workforce, in contrast to 21.8% for male employees[10].

In the Chinese context, there exists a tendency among companies to preferentially hire cost-effective male employees over their female counterparts, or alternatively, to hire women specifically as non-regular employees. This practice arises from the fact that companies are required to provide full wages during maternity leave, making women potentially more costly in terms of workforce management[11].

Both in Japan and China, the corporate management mindset still perpetuates the belief that women should prioritize their professional commitments over familial responsibilities. Moreover, there persists a discriminatory notion that men are better suited for fulfilling significant societal roles compared to women.

3.2 Formulation of Hypotheses

Based on the three areas of work-life balance, perception and employment system, the following three hypotheses are proposed.

In terms of work-life balance, women may work less intensively or even give up work if their families and society give them too little support. This leads to hypothesis 1 and 2.

Hypothesis 1: Japanese women's family responsibilities affect their enthusiasm for work in the long term, significantly less than before marriage.

Hypothesis 2: Chinese women's excessive childcare burden during their children's 0-3 years of age affects their work enthusiasm in the short term, but their work enthusiasm returns to near pre-marital levels after their children enter kindergarten.

In Japan and China, the percentage of people who oppose gender role awareness is similar. However, the recognition of women's work is overwhelmingly higher in China. This leads to hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 3: Chinese women are much more willing to work and advance than in Japan.

Conservative hiring systems and direct or indirect workplace discrimination hinder women's career advancement. This leads to hypothesis 4 and 5.

Hypothesis 4: Japan's lifetime commitment model, in which male and female employees have the same capabilities, is detrimental to women who carry the burden of childbirth.

Hypothesis 5: In the workplace in Japan and China, women have fewer opportunities to get quality jobs than men with the same abilities, and this discrimination reduces women's enthusiasm for work and hinders their career development.

Hypotheses 1-3 examine the hindrances to female career formation in terms of women's feelings and awareness, while Hypotheses 4-5 examine the rules of the workplace and management's decisions.

3.3 questionnaire survey

A questionnaire was designed to investigate the disincentives for promoting women's activities based on the above five hypotheses. It is administered to Japanese and Chinese women over the age of 30.

3.3.1 Survey Content

The questionnaire is divided into 5 parts. Part I is about the age of the respondent, Parts II-IV are dedicated to hypotheses corresponding to three different aspects, and Part V is designed for free narration.

In Parts II-IV, respondents are asked to rate their agreement level using a 5-point Likert scale, which includes the following options: "agree," "somewhat agree," "undecided," "not so much agree," and "not at all agree."

The following eight questions in Part II address Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Q1. Do you think it is difficult to balance work and life after marriage and before you have children compared to before marriage?

Q2. Do you think it is difficult to balance work and life when you have children between 0 and 3 years old compared to before marriage?

Q3. Do you think it is difficult to balance work and life when all children are 6 years old or older compared to before marriage?

Q4. Do you think that after marriage, women take on too much housework, resulting in less enthusiasm for work?

Q5. Do you think women are less enthusiastic about work because they take on more childcare responsibilities after marriage?

Q6. Do you think husbands should take more responsibility for housework and childcare?

Q7. Do you think your parents and your husband's parents will help with childcare and help women to be active in the workplace?

Q8. Do you think society needs to provide more childcare support?

The following seven questions in Part III address Hypotheses 3.

Q9. Do you think you have a strong desire to have a job?

Q10. When work and family responsibilities conflict, would you change your job to a less demanding position or quit?

Q11. When work and family responsibilities conflict, do you try to keep your job, negotiate with your husband to share family responsibilities or hire a nanny or cleaning lady?

Q12. Do you think women are significantly less willing to be promoted than men?

Q13. Do you think women have the same long-term career plans as men?

Q14. Do you think women are less capable of working than men?

Q15. Do you think you will focus more on taking care of your family after you have children, and you are less concerned about getting a promotion as long as you have a job?

The following six questions in Part IV address Hypotheses 4 and 5.

Q16. Do you ever feel that companies prefer to hire men with the same ability?

Q17. Have you ever felt that men are more likely to be promoted when they have the same ability?

Q18. Have you ever felt that women are more likely to be called non-regular employees with the same ability?

Q19. Do you think that leaving the workplace temporarily due to childbirth will have a long-term impact on women's working life?

Q20. Are you worried about finding a new job?

Q21. Do you think that the personnel evaluation system in the workplace is more favorable to men who are able to work for a long time?

4. Conclusion

In this study, in order to understand the differences in the dilemmas faced by Japanese and Chinese women in the workplace, we analyzed the causes in three aspects: work-life balance, gender role awareness and employment system, and developed hypotheses around the characteristics of the two countries, based on which we designed the survey questionnaire. Collecting the questionnaire data and analyzing it to verify the hypothesis will be a future topic.

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