

## Article

# Gender Segregation at Work in Japanese Companies: Focusing on Gender Disparities in Desire for Promotion

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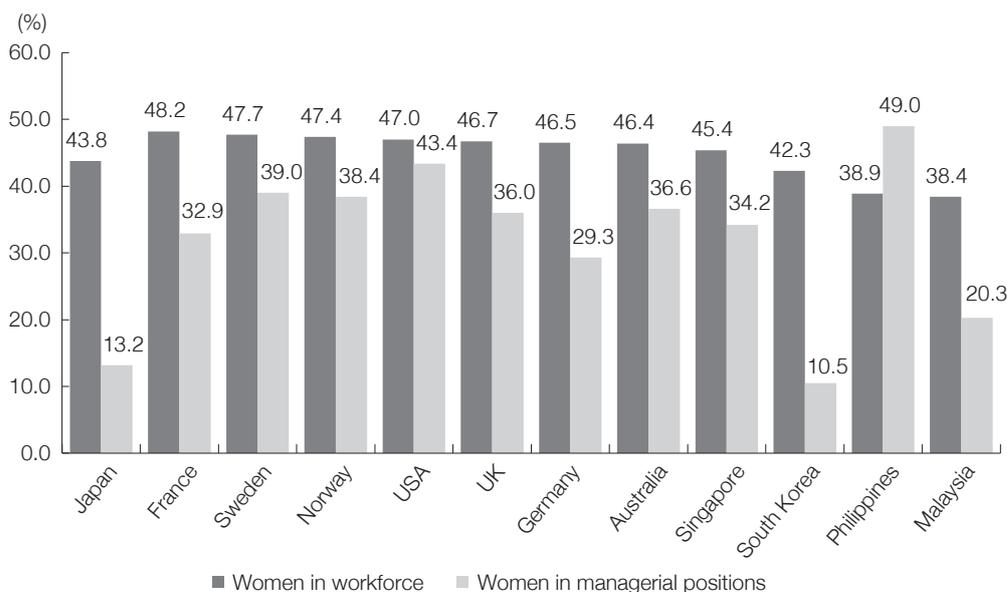
### I. Why don't more Japanese women aim for managerial positions?

Women make up 43.8% of the workforce in Japan, a figure nearly equivalent to those of Western countries (Figure 1). However, the occupation rate of women in managerial position in Japan is 13.2%, which is still low compared with other countries, even though it has been on an upward trend in recent years.

Various factors have been cited as contributing to the low rate of women in management in Japan, and one of the key reasons is said to be the management strategy in large companies based on the career-track system.

Today, equal employment opportunities for men and women are mandated by law in Japan, so there is no overt gender discrimination in companies. In practice, however, there are several “career courses” assigned

to employees with different placement, training policies, and treatment as a management method in large companies. This career course system operates in such a way that employees may choose differently by gender on their own initiative. An example of this is course-based employment management, which is considered to be a feature of Japanese employment



Source: Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, *White Paper on Gender Equality*, 2018

Figure 1. Percentage of workforce, and of managerial positions, occupied by women (international comparison)

management, as explained below.

There are usually two main career paths in large companies. One is known as the “career track” (*sogoshoku*). Companies assign core duties to career-track employees and offer opportunities for promotion. The other career path is the “clerical track” (*ippanshoku*). Employees on this support-staff track perform routine tasks and play a less important role in workplaces. Workers can choose their track when they enter a company as a new graduate.

In this context, almost all male workers choose the career track, whereas many female workers choose the clerical track on their own initiative. In the background of this self-selection, it is said that female workers are reluctant to choose the career track because of its highly demanding job quality. Companies usually require career-track employees to have a strong commitment to the company both physically and mentally, which includes potential transfers to other branches throughout the country and readiness to undertake overtime work for sudden needs. Female workers tend to avoid these burdens in consideration of their life events such as pregnancy and childbirth. This is a factor in how differences in tracks by gender have arisen in Japanese companies.

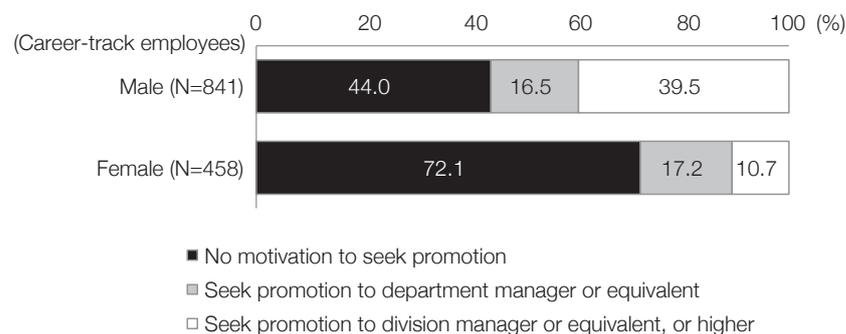
Furthermore, there can be cases where male and female career-track employees are ostensibly on the same track but are treated differently, and

these practices discourage women’s motivation through their careers. Existing studies indicate that women’s desire for promotion diminishes over the course of their careers. This paper examines the background of women’s loss of motivation focusing on gender disparities of core duties delegated within companies.

## II. Gender disparities in desire for promotion

This issue is examined below based on a survey of white-collar workers at large companies. The data used are from the employee survey from the “Survey on Corporate Human Resource Management and Work Styles of Male and Female Regular Employees” conducted in 2016 by the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training (JILPT). This section analyzes data on male and female career-track regular employees who are not in managerial positions.<sup>1</sup>

We begin by comparing men’s and women’s motivation to seek promotion to managerial positions. Figure 2 shows how far employees hope to be promoted at their current company, by gender. Compared to women, a much higher percentage of men seek promotion to a managerial position, especially to division manager or an equivalent position or higher, whereas the majority of women have no motivation to seek promotion. Even among



Source: “Survey on Human Resource Management and Work Styles of Male and Female Regular Employees” (JILPT 2016)

Note: Questionnaire administered to six male and six female university-graduate employees aged 30 to 54 in white-collar (professional or technical, administrative, clerical, or sales) positions at 10,000 companies with 100 or more employees nationwide. Each respondent was asked about their responsibilities, work styles, experience with personnel transfers, and professional mentality.

Figure 2. Desire for promotion to managerial position, by gender (career-track employees)

1. This article introduces the content of Takami 2017.

the same career-track employees, it is clear that women's desire for promotion is much lower than that of men.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Significant disparities in duties delegated to male and female employees

There is an undeniable possibility that gender differences in desire for promotion are shaped in the course of working at a company, rather than being intrinsic to gender. In other words, motivation may be lowered by inadequate opportunities for women to experience important tasks.

The fact of gender disparities in duties to which employees are assigned has been discussed using the term "gender segregation." Specifically, companies often give men opportunities to take on jobs (duties) that constitute the core of the company's business, but offer women fewer of these opportunities. It is said that the reasons for this relate to concerns over women's continued employment, such as the likelihood of resigning due to marriage or childbirth, and to consideration of the burdens of tasks for women with family responsibilities and so on. In any

case, if there are such disparities in duties, it is only natural that women neither master the related skills nor harbor the desire for advancement to managerial positions. It is no surprise that there are few women in these positions.

This phenomenon is, of course, not limited to Japanese companies. However, gender-based division of duties could be highly connected to the Japanese employment system. This system, which has been typically in place at large companies, is characterized by cultivation of a wide range of general skills and career development through diverse work experiences in the context of long-term employment. Whether or not an employee experiences being assigned core duties is important for career development, and herein lies the potential for gender disparities to arise.

To gain a picture of gender segregation at Japanese companies, it is necessary to focus on gender disparities in job experience. Here we will examine the survey results. For non-managerial employees, there are gender disparities in the rate of experience with core duties that pave the way for

Table 1. Percentage of employees with experience handling core duties, by gender (career-track employees)

	External negotiations	Duties involving visiting customers	Building the company's business plans	Managing staff	Launching projects with own planning or proposal	Project leader
Male	76.2	56.4	28.9	46.3	38.4	19.6
Female	67.1	43.6	22.2	40.5	39.8	17.0

Source: JILPT Survey, 2016.

Table 2. Timing of first experiences with types of duties, by gender (career-track employees)

(Number of years after being hired, in average)

	External negotiations	Duties involving visiting customers	Building the company's business plans	Managing staff	Launching projects with own planning or proposal	Project leader
Male	3.17	2.87	6.06	5.79	5.24	4.71
Female	3.43	3.77	7.10	7.35	5.56	4.98

Source: JILPT Survey, 2016.

2. In a similar indicator, the percentage of women who seek a higher post or position than their current one is also lower than that of their male counterparts.

promotion to managerial positions. Table 1 shows that the percentage of women experiencing duties such as “external negotiations,” “duties involving visiting customers,” “building the company’s business plans,” and “managing staff” is lower than for their male counterparts. Even among people experiencing each category of duties, there are gender disparities with regard to when they were first offered these opportunities (Table 2). Women are consistently presented with these opportunities later in their careers than is the case for men.

It is evident that women are given relatively less experience with core duties that can lead to managerial positions.

#### IV. Job experience motivating female workers through acquiring self-confidence

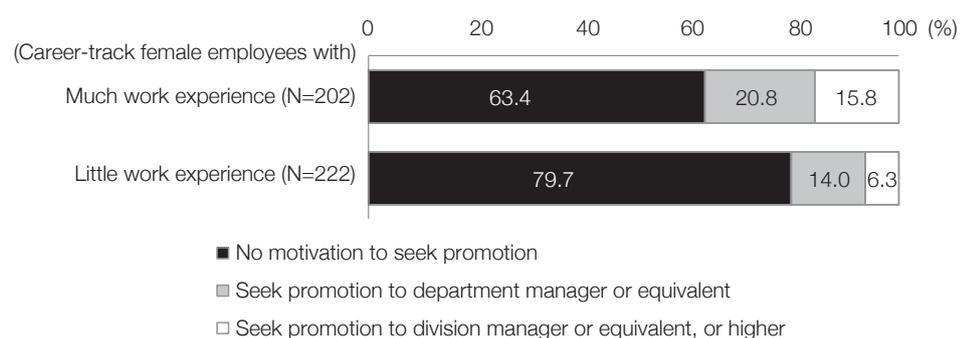
Do women who experience many core corporate duties have a stronger desire for promotion than women who have little experience? Here we will look at desire for promotion to managerial positions by degree of experience of core tasks (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> While approximately 80% of women lacking experience with core tasks have “no motivation to seek promotion,” the corresponding figure is lower among women with significant experience of performing core duties. This indicates a degree of

correlation between experience and motivation to seek promotion to managerial positions.

Why does building work experience contribute to ambition for advancement? A higher skill level is certainly one reason, but there are others as well. A crucial factor is self-confidence. Being responsible for important tasks and accomplishing them enhances the confidence of employees, both male and female, and it is likely that this lays the groundwork for aspiration to positions with more responsibility.<sup>4</sup> The survey data bear out the idea that women who have experienced many core duties have a relatively high degree of confidence in their own skills. The more they experience core tasks, the higher their confidence in their ability to fulfill these tasks, and the greater their confidence, the stronger their motivation to seek promotion to managerial positions. Thus, we can infer that career-track women who have more extensive experience with core duties gain confidence, and, as a result, develop the desire for promotion.

#### V. Gender disparities in overtime work

As we have seen, there are gender disparities in degree of experience with core duties, and it is possible that a lack of such experience lessens women’s desire for promotion. For women to be



Source: JILPT Survey, 2016.

Figure 3. Desire for promotion to management position, by degree of core work experience

3. Principal component analysis was conducted to create indices of the extent of experience with core duties as seen in Table 1, with the categories of “much work experience” and “little work experience.”

4. In addition to employee confidence, company expectations may also be an important factor. If the company has high expectations of an employee, it will delegate important duties to that employee, and the perception of the company’s high expectations will give the employee stronger motivation. The survey results also showed that women who perceive the company as having higher expectations of them tend to have more desire for promotion.

more active in the workforce, various areas that give rise to gender disparities need to be addressed, including job placement, delegation of duties, and training. However, this is not easy to accomplish, as delegation of duties in the workplace is inextricably tied to companies' day-to-day operation and working styles.

Why are there so many companies at which women experience fewer important duties than men? One factor that has been pointed out is that women's average years of service are shorter than men's. There is another possibility: whether or not a company's standard work style requires overtime work could be linked to gender segregation. Previous studies show that it may be difficult to place women in departments handling core business areas, such as external negotiations and corporate planning, when the working hours of such departments are extremely long. Conversely, companies that have a policy of no overtime in any department may be conducive to women playing more active roles. This is because female workers tend to face time constraints with family responsibilities more than men. Thus, a company's daily overtime practice may be an index of a corporate culture of masculinity.

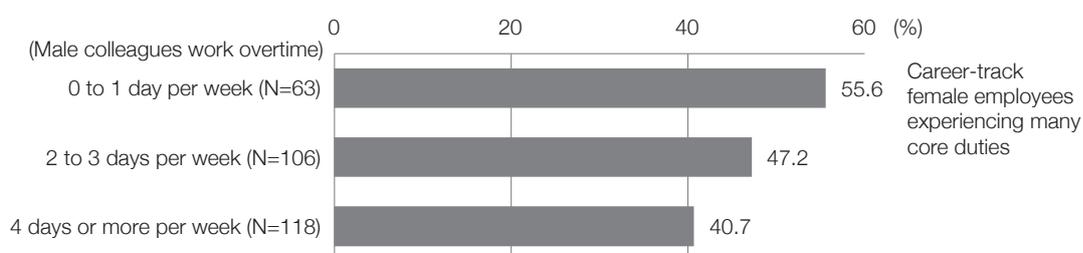
When long working hours are the standard practice or corporate culture of a workplace, gender disparities in delegation of duties are an underlying cause of women's difficulty in reaching managerial positions. The survey data on how working hours differ between men and women show that there are significant gender disparities in overtime hours and frequency of overtime work. Even within the same career-track category, women have shorter working

hours and less frequent overtime than men, and it seems that these gender disparities may form the background to the distribution of core duties. The survey also indicates that women engaged in core duties work relatively more overtime.

In a corporate culture where long working hours are the standard or norm, women often must work overtime in order to handle the company's core duties. Japan in general has just such a corporate culture, meaning it is not easy for many female employees to utilize their full potential.

## VI. "Overtime culture" is a barrier to women playing active roles

In this regard, the degree to which women are responsible for important tasks may differ depending on whether the company is one where working overtime is the norm. To verify this point, we took the frequency with which male employees in a company work overtime as an indicator of an "overtime culture" and examined gender disparities in experience with core duties in the same company as correlated with the average overtime frequency for male regular employees (Figure 4). We can see that the highest percentage of women gain experience with core duties at companies where men's average overtime frequency is "0 to 1 day per week," and the percentage is the lowest at companies where it is "4 days or more per week." In other words, there is a positive correlation between less male overtime work and more female experience of core duties (equivalent to that of male employees), whereas at companies where men constantly work overtime, women are more likely to be excluded from the



Source: JILPT Survey, 2016.

Figure 4. Percentage of women experiencing many core duties, by frequency of overtime for their male colleagues

experience of core duties.

In order to raise the percentage of women in managerial positions in Japan, human resources measures such as work-life balance improvement have been carried out. However, these have not been effective in increasing women's desire for promotion. This is because companies treat men and women differently in terms of job placement, delegation of duties, and approaches to training. This creates gender disparities in work experience that accumulate over the course of their careers, and impede women's skill cultivation and motivation.

As described in this article, if women can experience a variety of core duties, it builds their confidence and motivation, but the culture of habitually working overtime acts as a bottleneck in terms of delegating duties in the workplace. For example, at companies where people work overtime on a daily basis, men are likely to be assigned to departments with more overtime and women to those with little overtime. Also, within the same department, there are gender disparities in terms of specific work allocation, such as a tendency to allocate tasks with tight deadlines involving overtime to men. Furthermore, when tasks that lead to professional growth are always assigned in a manner that involves working overtime, it

leads to gender disparities in training and skill-building opportunities. As a result, women's desire for promotion suffers and female managers fail to emerge.

For women to play more active roles in the workforce, it is necessary to review and reform work styles, including those of men, throughout companies as a whole.

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