

Investigating restrictions in the workplace that keep women from top positions in Japan and South Korea

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In recent decades, women in Japan and South Korea have been catching up in terms of educational achievements and economic activity. Yet the

number of women in leadership positions is still lagging behind. Ph.D. candidate Yorum Beekman investigated why this is.

Large companies in South Korea and Japan have tried to use [policy change](#) to get more women into top positions. "But the numbers remain disappointing, even after more than two decades," Beekman says. "There is nothing wrong with the policy itself: in terms of content it meets international standards."

Impact on women

If policy is not to blame, the question then turns to what restrictions women face in the workplace. "With that in mind, for my research, I spoke with women who have been working in large companies for a long time. Together we examined the [life course](#) and career of the women in question."

This included not only looking at [career development](#) from start to finish. "I also asked how the women grew up, what their relationships with their parents were like and how their schooling went. These are all experiences that may have influenced the way women now look at the world and arrive at important choices that have long-lasting consequences."

Not a simple issue

It is often thought that starting a family, or having caring responsibilities are the main obstacles for women to pursue long-term careers. "In many cases the woman in a relationship is expected to take care of the children," says Beekman. "Men who are in favor of women's economic empowerment and are happy to have their partner working to help with the [family income](#) still expect them to handle all the care and parenting."

That can bring additional pressure."

Still, Beekman found other factors. "I found that the dynamics within the immediate workplace team often have a significant impact on the decision for women to give up their own careers or not," she explains. "The arrival of a child or other events in the personal sphere do play a role but are not necessarily decisive. As long as the overall work experience is fulfilling, women tend to continue working hard despite being overworked at work and at home."

Not just formal policies

Often a listening ear from a supervisor or colleague helps a woman through difficult periods of physical exhaustion. "Only when interactions with co-workers and immediate supervisors are perceived as negative, or the work itself is no longer stimulating enough, do women begin to question whether pursuing a career at the expense of other aspects of life is worth it." A competitive or polarizing work atmosphere is disastrous, as are the assumptions of authority figures about one's suitability for leadership and the lack of diverse female role models at the top of an organization.

All these factors limit the freedom of choice for a woman to pursue a different path. "So, to improve the situation of younger generations of employees with different work norms and values, not only are formal policies needed, but serious attention also has to be paid to more subtle barriers."

Provided by Leiden University

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