The effects of workplace norms on women’s work behaviour in Japan

A t present, and in recent years, women’s labour participation rates have been low in Japan. Over a quarter of a century has passed since the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1986 was put in place. Although there has been a tendency to continue working after childbirth since 2010, many aspects of the gendered employment structure hasn’t changed.

In her recent research at Meikai University, Professor Teramura seeks to assess how use of the childcare leave system has changed between 2002 and 2011, and what insight it can give into workplace cultures and their effect on female labour statistics. The research carried out by Professor Teramura and her collaborators finds that the social norms that Japanese culture is familiar with may still be influencing women’s work behaviour and family formation. Although measures may be in place to aid the continuation or work for women, “business norms” in a company can still be influencing women’s work choices and birth behaviours.

The Challenge of a Globally Unequalled Declining Birthrate

Women’s labour participation rates have been low in Japan for many years, which has put pressure on the economy. Japan has an ageing population with a smaller economic class than most of the world which adds strain to their economy. Although measures may be in place to aid the reemployment of women in Japan, they are not promoting any significant change in gender equality (wage gap, promotion and so on). The reason for this, Professor Teramura speculates is that workplace norms and atmospheres are affecting their employment. Analysis was carried out that looked into a company’s “compatibility support system” and “atmosphere of using (system) use (work code)” to look at whether these had an effect on women’s work habits. Business norms proved very important when considering the labour participation rates, and her research proved that positive norms encouraged women to return to work.

A quick note on what Professor Teramura means by business norms: her work cites Akerlof and Kranton (2002: 2013) who believe that the norms of how people act depends on their position in the social context. Psychologists say that people can internalise social norms because they become their own and then guide their behaviour. Norms can be taught by parents, teachers, priests, etc, as well as workplace culture, colleagues and managers.

Business norms specifically refer to the ways in which people are expected to conduct themselves in business based on projected ideals that influence behaviour. Professor Teramura uses the example of people in the workplace thinking that “women should quit their job following marriage and childbirth.” This then promotes the idea that it is desirable for a woman to act on these business norms, which can influence behaviour.

Using research from Fortin (2005), Teramura’s research looks at the causal relationship between gender division of labour and female employment, specifically focusing on the business norm in Japan that dictates that women should stay at home and men should be the main earners. Her work also cites Bertrand, Pan and Kamenica (2013), looking at the role of male earners and the social norms that suggest that women shouldn’t earn more than men. All of the above are examples of norms that affect the way in which woman perceive work, and their position in the working world.

Although measures may be in place to aid the continuation of work for women, “business norms” in a company may influence women’s work choices and birth behaviours.

Figure 1: Employment rate of women when first child is one year old

In Japan, women’s labour participation rates are low.
**Figure 2: Atmosphere of using the compatibility support system (by year, %)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Child Care Leave System</th>
<th>Care Leave System</th>
<th>Short-Time Work System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20% (N=1,660)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20% (N=1,720)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20% (N=1,916)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22% (N=1,657)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20% (N=1,872)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20% (N=2,288)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20% (N=2,813)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20% (N=1,931)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21% (N=2,600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22% (N=1,788)</td>
<td>22% (N=3,166)</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between workplace norms and workplace atmosphere and women's employment and birth behaviour through empirical analysis. Her research found that having a “compatibility support system” and “atmosphere of using the system” impacted women's willingness to work.

As a result of the analysis, it became apparent that the childcare leave system alone is not enough to have an effect on women's work. Although the childcare leave system is easy to use, it depends on the attitude and norms of the employer as to whether it is a success. Her research found that when the norm such as a “friendly atmosphere” is encouraged alongside the government initiative, it had a positive effect on motivation.

In fact, the research showed that business norms have a huge effect on female birth behaviour in general. The atmosphere of the system existence and its practical use in the workplace had a positive effect on birth behaviour. Although it was proven true that the influence of a “system-friendly atmosphere” is small when it comes to the improvement in women's work in Japan, the research suggests that the "system-friendly atmosphere" may have further influence on female birth behaviour in the medium and long term.

**Professor Teramura’s work suggests that “social norms” in Japanese society may still influence women’s work behaviour and family formation informally.**

**Research Objectives**

Professor Eriko Teramura’s research focuses on human resource management and gender theory.

**Detail**

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**Bio**

Eriko Teramura is a Professor of Meikai University, Faculty of Economics in Japan. A Japanese social scientist she specialises in human resource management and gender theory. She studies women’s labour issues, and is particularly interested in the influence that normative awareness in the workplace has on women’s work behaviour. Prof Teramura is also interested in women’s turnover and reemployment behaviour.

**References**


**Personal Response**

**What is next for your research?**

This “atmosphere” variable requires an interdisciplinary approach, so I would like to pay attention not only to economics but also to management and sociology. In particular, from the viewpoint of organisational theory, I would like to elucidate why such behaviour of female workers occurs in Japanese corporate organisations.