

# *Unequal Opportunity Issues Faced by Asian Women in the Workplace: Literature Review*

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**Abstract:** The paper explores how women from south Korea, Japan, and China face sexual harassment in their workplace. Women face sexual harassment, job insecurity, low wages, the glass ceiling, and the bamboo ceiling effect. Research from various Asian countries shows that women risk gender discrimination while recruiting. In addition, they suffer sexual harassment from their colleagues and employers. According to several researchers, women face sexual harassment occurs due to two conditions; a hostile working environment and when a job benefit is in place, such as promotion. Stereotypes of women have led to such gender discrimination, which otherwise affects their mental health, overall health, and future success. Research from various Asian countries shows that women have a higher risk of sexual harassment than men. In addition, women face sexual harassment from their co-workers and supervisors. Sexual harassment may be verbal or physical; either way, it has a negative impact on the victim. The paper also describes effective ways to mitigate sexual harassment in workplaces.

**Keywords:** feminism, sexual harassment

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in women in the paid labor force [1]. Women's participation in the labor force is crucial for the economic sustainability of a country. Without women's participation, a country's economic and social progress will stagnate. However, women, in general, are not taken seriously by their employees and society. Kumari reports that traditionally, women in Asia had been homemakers and child bearers, which were their only responsibilities [2]. However, recently, women have broken out of these stereotypes, chosen careers, and joined a paid workforce due to increased cost of living, better awareness, and education. Unfortunately, some men still view women as sex objects and childbearing humans, and consciously or unconsciously, they sexually harass them at their workplaces. The most common forms of discrimination in the workplace include sexual harassment, lower wages compared to male colleagues, job insecurity, the glass ceiling, and the bamboo ceiling issue. In addition, male colleagues and supervisors verbally or physically harass women in their workplace.

As Nagasaila describes, sexual harassment occurs because of two conditions; job benefits such as pay raises or promotions and hostile working environments [3]. According to Pradhan-Malla, as women's participation in the labor force continues to increase, they are forced to deal with harassment

and unwanted attention because of their gender [4]. For instance, in South Korea, male peers and society refuse to accept that women deserve equal opportunities. This country's glass ceiling issue occurs because most women are not promoted to higher ranks or accepted into male-dominated careers unless they offer sexual benefits to the supervisors. Furthermore, women that have risen to higher ranks are considered according to their beauty, and people will always perceive that they had to sleep with someone to become successful. It is quite sad that such perceptions still exist despite the constant effort women have put in to show their exquisite skills and knowledge. This review paper will discuss the sexual harassment faced by Asian women in their workplace. The paper aims to increase consciousness about physical or verbal sexual harassment against Asian women so that suitable and effective actions can be adopted.

### 1.1. Gender Inequality in the Workplace

BOBBITT-ZEHER emphasizes that gender stereotypes contribute to gender discrimination. Society has various stereotypes of women [1]. Women are seen as homemakers, sex objects with low IQs, incapable of complicated jobs, complicated especially during menstruation, and childbearing objects. These stereotypes limit women from being hired. Kumari [2] describes that gender discrimination starts right from the stage of recruitment. Employers view women as incapable of doing their job due to limitations such as childbearing and menstruation. Employers prefer men to women since they do not seek work leaves due to such conditions. In addition, in sectors such as engineering or construction, women may be viewed as incapable due to limited masculine strength compared to men. This cuts them off from being hired into such a profession. Kuhn & Shen reports that in China, men are seen to have higher IQ and skills than women [5]. Such stereotypes are evident in advertisements. For instance, Ads for available female jobs are strongly related to the interested worker's height, beauty, and age rather than focusing on their skills. Therefore, women are forced to get into less demanding jobs despite being highly qualified.

According to Kim et al., in 2006, the Korean government developed a 5-year plan that encouraged people to marry and have children [6]. However, working women cannot achieve this government plan due to discrimination at their workplace. Women fear losing their job when they go on maternity leaves or are occupied with household chores after marriage. Kim et al. report on the case of Japan and Korea, where women are reluctant to marry, and some postpone childbearing due to gender discrimination [6]. In Korea, employers discriminate against pregnant women, and 38% of women report losing their job after parental leave [6]. Despite the fear of losing their jobs, women are also faced with the glass ceiling effect in their workplace.

Woo describes the 'glass ceiling' as an invisible barrier that keeps qualified women from ascending to a higher position in their workplace because of their gender [7]. Despite being qualified, women are unable to partake in some professions. Some employers promote men even when a female peer is qualified. This is influenced by stereotypes of women and social constraints such as family raising on other household chores. Even though women could get into any profession, they were discriminated against in these professions. They are not promoted to higher ranks in these professions since their employers may see them as incapable.

Asian women working in America face the bamboo ceiling effect. According to Woo, the bamboo ceiling effect refers to the factors that hinder Asian Americans' success in their workplace [7]. The term is similar to the glass ceiling effect, only that it affects Asians working in America. Woo, emphasizes that most people stereotype Asian Americans as belonging to a monothiol group [7]. However, despite a large number of Asian Americans on campuses and colleges, only 4.8% have high company ranks. The bamboo ceiling is evident in US law firms where Asian Americans cannot advance to partner while whites can.

Murphy & Graff reports that Asian women still earn less than their male peers [8]. BOBBITT-ZEHER [1] reports that in most companies in India, a great wage gap affects women's sustainability. According to Murphy & Graff, the wage gap may not be evident to discrimination due to various companies' policies [8]. For instance, some companies prohibit their employees from discussing their salaries. Therefore, it is difficult to know that the company has a wage gap. However, in some of the researched cases, women report earning less than their male colleagues since some employers claim that men do more work than females. According to Woo, Asian American women are protected against wage discrimination by the Equal Pay Act [7]. However, in Korea, this discrimination is still persistent in some companies.

According to Pradhan-Malla, 53.48% of Asian women reported having faced sexual harassment in their workplace [4]. However, most women do not report such cases due to the fear of losing their jobs, and in some countries, such as Nepal, it is taboo. Many researchers, such as Pradhan-Malla, and Kumari, the legislative laws that protect against sexual harassment are not effective enough in workplaces [2,4]. For instance, Kumari reports that women in India are afraid to speak up against sexual harassment since they may be termed, loose women [2]. Pradhan-Malla, has the same claim on sexual harassment according to his study in Japanese workplaces [4]. In Japan, sexual harassment is often misinterpreted as harmless flirting. However, this is not the case since it affects the success as well as the mental health of women. Sexual harassment may be verbal or in action; either way, women's health is affected.

## 1.2. Useful Suggestions to Deal with Unequal Opportunities for Asian Women

There are various approaches to dealing with gender discrimination in workplaces. Firstly, organizations and other social groups should educate women and men about gender bias and how to overcome it. Awareness should be made about all forms of discrimination that exist in the workplace so that they are not misinterpreted and overruled. In addition, companies promote women not just for public attention or companies' image but because the women are qualified and skilled. Furthermore, according to BOBBITT-ZEHER, companies could also make salaries transparent and conduct audits to ensure transparency in every operation [1]. Woo emphasizes that Asian Americans should also be given a chance to serve higher ranks in companies since they have proven to be intelligent, according to college records [7]. Furthermore, the government should adopt laws that prevent sexual harassment, as established by Pradhan-Malla [4]. He suggests that employees should be allowed to report cases of sexual harassment without judgment, and strict actions should be taken against the harassers.

## 1.3. Physical Sexual Harassment

Kumari describes that gender discrimination starts right from the stage of recruitment [2]. Some employers will seek sexual benefits from women despite their evident skills and knowledge in the work field. According to Nagasaila, physical and sexual harassment includes offensive touching, close proximity, and physical violence [3]. Women are mostly affected by this form of harassment from their male colleagues and employers. According to a research study by Nagasaila, 25% of workers in China reported they were sexually harassed at their workplace; one-third of the group were men, and the majority were females [3]. In addition, the report analyzed that an additional 6.6% of women refused to report sexual harassment due to the fear of being ridiculed. BOBBITT-ZEHER emphasizes that gender stereotypes contribute to gender discrimination [1]. Society has various stereotypes of women. Some communities in rural Japan still view women as sex objects. These stereotypes lead to physical and sexual harassment in the workplace. Furthermore, research by Patterson & Walcutt shows that 16% of women in Korea face sexual harassment due to a hostile working environment, while 40% of women report sexual harassment when applying for promotions

or during recruitment [9]. A hostile working environment fosters physical and sexual harassment since the company does not have laws to counter such acts. Professional women also face verbal sexual harassment.

#### **1.4. Verbal Sexual Harassment**

This type of sexual harassment may be unfamiliar to some women, and as Pradhan-Malla, reports, it may not be considered an offensive act [4]. However, just like physical and sexual harassment, verbal harassment is an offensive act against women, and it causes negative effects on the victim, company, and the harasser. Nagasaila describes verbal sexual harassment as an offensive act that involves actions such as offensive comments, inappropriate phone calls, and questions about appearance [3]. For instance, when a male colleague comments about a woman's breast poking on a shirt, this is verbal harassment. According to a survey published in China in 2013 by Patterson & Walcutt, about 53.2% of women in top management have faced verbal sexual harassment [9]. Some of these women reported it as a case of flirting, but to some, it was more than that; it offended them and mentally disturbed them. Pradhan-Malla, has researched several Japanese workplaces, and according to the result, men accused of verbal sexual harassment called it a case of 'harmless' flirting. Some people are unable to understand why verbal comments are offensive [4]. It is just a comment, right? But no, it's not just a comment; it is an offensive act against women, and offenders should be punished. Workplaces should be professional, and only the skills and hard work of colleagues should be commended.

Kuhn & Shen reports that in China, stereotypes are evident in advertisements, and they are evidence of sexual harassment going on in workplaces [5]. For instance, Ads for available female jobs are strongly related to the interested worker's height, beauty, and age rather than focusing on their skills. Therefore, women are forced to get into less demanding jobs despite being highly qualified. Kuhn & Shen report a case on Boss Zhilin, a company in China that faced gender discrimination lawsuits due to their advertisements [5]. The company required that women interested in the job opportunity attain vast requirements such as beauty, body weight, and height, while the males had only one requirement, to have the skills required for the work field. This particular case may not be specified on sexual harassment, but its due to such policies that sexual harassment still occurs in workplaces. These requirements are not only demeaning to professional women, but they also promote sexual harassment.

#### **1.5. The Costs of Sexual Harassment**

Nagasaila analyzes the impact of sexual harassment on the victim, employer, and society [3]. She reports that the victim may face psychological suffering, which leads to mental illness and resignation from a job. For instance, when a professional woman is sexually abused, they suffer emotionally, which could promote isolation, substance abuse, or committing suicide. Nagasaila also reports that an employer may suffer from a ruined company's reputation [3]; they may also lose employees and have poor productivity, which causes low profits. According to Nagasaila, when a society has cases of sexual harassment against women, they lose skilled and professional women who would improve the economic state of the society[3]. In addition, if society fails to counter gender discrimination, it is dragged back to realities centuries ago when women had no voice [3]. For the sexual offender, laws are very strict, and take legal actions against them.

#### **1.6. Laws in Korea, China, and Japan on Sexual Harassment**

Most Asian countries have developed legal frameworks to deal with the vast cases of sexual harassment. In South Korea, Act No. 10261 protects women against sexual harassment in their

workplace. The act details that the punishment for verbal or physical harassment is ten years plus in prison or \$ 10 million. Japan introduced a new law requiring a company's management to take action in case of harassment in the workplace [10]. In addition, in China, the act of sexual harassment is detailed in article 1010, which includes laws on safer working conditions and laws of equality among employees. Unfortunately, the laws described above are only effective in dealing with reported cases of sexual harassment. According to Pradhan-Malla, the number of reported cases of sexual harassment is only the tip of the iceberg [4]. What about the other cases which could lead to women resigning and an unstable economy? These are the cases we need to deal with before they accelerate to become rape cases.

### **1.7. Useful Suggestions to Deal with Sexual Harassment for Asian Women**

There are various approaches to dealing with sexual harassment in workplaces. Firstly, organizations and other social groups should educate women and men about gender bias and how to overcome it. Awareness should be made about all forms of sexual harassment that exist in the workplace so that they are not misinterpreted and overruled [10]. In addition, companies promote women not just for public attention or companies' image but because the women are qualified and skilled. Furthermore, according to BOBBITT-ZEHER, companies should develop serious policies against sexual harassment for both men and women [1]. Companies should ensure that offenders are dealt with effectively despite their status in the company, either managers or just an employee. Furthermore, the government should adopt laws that prevent sexual harassment, as established by Pradhan-Malla [4]. He suggests that employees should be allowed to report cases of sexual harassment without judgment, and strict actions should be taken against the harassers.

### **1.8. Conclusion**

In summary, women have increased in the paid labor force over the past few decades. However, they face unequal opportunities from men, as evidenced by several cases in South Korea, Japan, and Asia. For instance, women face sexual harassment, job insecurity, and the wage gap. Sexual harassment is the most common form of discrimination against women in workplaces. It occurs either verbally or physically. To mitigate sexual harassment: awareness should be raised against it, the government should develop effective laws, and companies should make their operations transparent.

## **2. Gender Segregation in Recruiting**

### **2.1. Background**

Participation in recruitment is the first step to employment, and recruitment discrimination is also the first ring of employment discrimination, so it becomes the first stumbling block that women cannot avoid on the way to employment [11]. Recruiting discrimination is also a serious form of gender discrimination in South Korea. For instance, in hiring situations, women are evaluated worse than men with the same qualifications [12]. As for Japan, Japanese women still occupy less than one percent of all management jobs, and more than one-third of working women in Japan are employed as clerks [13].

### **2.2. Definition**

Horizontal segregation refers to the difficulty women have in getting into what are seen as "men's jobs," such as pilots and drivers, etc. [11]; vertical segregation means that within an industry or sector, women are mostly in lower-level or less important positions [11].

## **2.3. Interpretation**

According to Yu, if discrimination is divided into three levels, the most serious is gender segregation and discrimination in the hiring process; the second is inequality in promotion and training [14]. Treatment, as well as women becoming pregnant and giving birth after the transfer of salary reduction; finally, there is pregnancy for women. restrictions on children and unequal pay for equal work in terms of salary Occupational gender segregation usually refers to the situation in the labor market where workers are assigned to different occupational categories and hold different jobs due to their different genders, including horizontal and vertical isolation [14]. According to the investigation by Yu, although all employers believe that gender should be required according to the position, due to the traditional gender view and the objective problems caused by female pregnancy and childbirth, most employers believe that women's work should be simpler, lower level, and less intensive than that of men [14]. Shao also believed that traditional social gender division of labor and gender role setting make women in the workplace face work-family conflicts [15]. Employers expect women to shoulder more family responsibilities and divert their work energy, and women face double discrimination in employment opportunities and wages. This actually leads to women's preference for employment in the public sector because of the fairness of the public sector. It is not that women are unwilling to choose the employment sector according to the return level of human capital, such as the non-state-owned sector, but that the lower gender discrimination in the state-owned sector provides women with a more equitable working environment, thus affecting women's decision-making in the employment sector [15].

## **3. Discriminations Women from China, Japan, and South Korea Face in Promotion**

### **3.1. Concept Definition**

The United Nations Convention on the elimination of All Forms of discrimination against women (The General Assembly,1979, entered into force in 1981) states, "Discrimination against women" refers to any distinction, exclusion, or restriction based on gender, their effects or purposes are such as to impair or negate the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field based on equality between men and women [16]. At the same time, the Convention on the elimination of All Forms of discrimination against women states that discrimination against women encompasses not only direct form but also indirect form of discrimination. Direct discrimination is the differential treatment that is manifestly based on sex or gender differences. If a law, policy, program, or measure which does not ostensibly discriminate against men and women has the effect of discriminating against women in practice, such as the requirement for a height of not less than a certain height in the recruitment of bank finance personnel, it is easy for more women to fail to meet this condition, and this unfair condition constitutes indirect discrimination if there are no reasonable reasons to support it. This is because seemingly neutral measures do not take into account the existing inequalities between men and women. In this section, promotion refers to the promotion of a worker between different levels of his or her position and title in the organization.

### **3.2. Background**

#### **3.2.1. China**

According to the United Nations Human Development Report, China's rank was 39th in the Gender Inequality Index Gii in 2019, the same as in 2018, down four places from 2017(the lower the ranking, the higher the gender inequality, the same below). According to the World Economic Forum's Global

Gender Gap Report 2020, China ranked 106th out of 153 countries, falling in the rankings for the 12th consecutive year, with the lowest sex ratio among newborns [17]. The People's Republic of China has enacted a number of (Several) laws to prohibit gender discrimination in employment and promotion, but China's women are still difficult to promote in the workplace. According to a 2017 All-China Women's Federation survey, 49.1 percent of employers care about candidates' gender and marital status in their recruitment [18]. More than 54.7 percent of women candidates were asked about their marriage and childbirth status during job interviews, and 67.7 percent of women employees who were surveyed considered that childbirth has reduced their chances of getting trained or promoted. At the same time, a number of surveys and studies have shown that the proportion of female leaders in Chinese public institutions is generally low, but the lowest percentage is still in the political leadership ranks -- the member of the National People's Congress and CPPCC members.

### 3.2.2. South Korea

The Korean office of Personnel Innovation released information in 2018, 23-27 for 15,515 civil servants employed in the central executive branch of the network survey. The results showed that 77.4 percent of women said they felt "Sexist when they were promoted" and 64.5 percent of men said they did not feel "Sexist when they were promoted.". Moreover, in the individual performance evaluation part, more than 60% of male civil servants think that "Do not feel the existence of gender difference". In contrast, nearly 70 percent of women said they "Feel there is a gender gap.". Therefore, the status quo of South Korean women's promotion is also worth discussing [19].

### 3.2.3. Japan

Japan, the full Senate passed the Women's Active Advancement Act in 2015, which requires companies with more than 300 employees to publish an action plan by April 2016. This includes targets for the number of hires and the proportion of women in management to increase women's chances of being hired and promoted [20-21]. From April 2022, companies with more than 100 employees will also be required to submit reports and make public their development plans for female employees. Besides this, government of Japan made some other attempts in order to promote women's employment as well [22].

## 3.3. Reasons

1. The influence of Confucian culture, China, Japan, and South Korea are all Sino sphere countries, and the impact of Confucianism is very far-reaching. Therefore, the image of women constructed by Confucian culture, which is often characterized by "Gentleness", "Weakness", "Obedience" and so on, is also widely recognized by China, Japan, and South Korea. In addition, the Confucian cultural recognition of the division of labour between men and women, namely that men work outside to earn salaries and support their family financially, and women work in the home and take care of their families in daily life, is also widely recognized by the nationals of the three countries. Such stereotypes make it difficult for women in China, Japan, and South Korea to be fairly measured and treated in the workplace [23]. As a result, not only do career leaders have personal preferences based on this bias, favoring men over women, but women themselves are more likely to be coaxed into choosing their families over their opportunities for advancement. In addition, stereotypes about women, or distrust of women's leadership, contribute to the "Glass ceiling" effect, making it difficult for women to hold high office, even if their performance and motivation are better than that of male employees of the same rank.

2. Institutions, China, Japan, and South Korea are all in the same Sino sphere, and most of their citizens see marriage and childbearing as more necessary than work, so women are more likely to

stop working because of marriage and childbearing. At the same time, when promoting employees, public institutions often focus on whether the employee can bring a more stable return to the unit, while female employees are more likely than male employees to interrupt work for a period of time due to reasons such as marriage and childbirth, such as maternity leave, marriage leave and so on, even more, because of childbirth and quit the company. Therefore, from the point of view of the institution, the risk of promoting female employees is higher than that of promoting male employees. Therefore, employers will give priority to promoting the lower risk than the female staff of male employees, in order to obtain a stable income.

### 3.4. Conclusion

Unfair promotion opportunities may result in women's generally lower self-worth, self-identity, loss of motivation, or enthusiasm for work. In the long run, it will make it difficult for women to break the status quo of unequal promotion opportunities, and form a vicious circle, which can further weaken women's social competitiveness. To address the problem that women are discriminated, governments can pass laws that are relative in order to cope with the problem, which Japan has already tried but did not take best effect. What's more, from my point of view, society organizations that are relative can try to raise people from all genders' awareness that women should not be restricted by negative stereotypes, and gender division of labor in a not desirable way.

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