

Women's participation in employment in Asia: a comparative analysis of China, India, Japan and South Korea

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This study compares the patterns of women's employment in four major Asian economies: China, India, Japan and South Korea. It illuminates how the heterogeneous characteristics of political regimes, institutional arrangements and societal values are manifested in the employment system and human resources of each country. It also reveals the varying cultural, social and institutional forces that prevail, despite similar outcomes of women's employment. The contribution adds to existing knowledge of women's employment through the comparison of four major Asian countries which remains under-explored. It also contributes to the theoretical debates of gender and employment by adopting an interdisciplinary analytical framework that incorporates socio-cultural, politico-economic and institutional perspectives.

Keywords: China; gender equality; India; Japan; Korea; trade union; women's employment

Introduction

There have been a growing number of cross-national comparative studies on women's employment since the 1990s (e.g., Pfau-Effinger 1993; O'Reilly and Fagan 1998; Rubery, Smith and Fagan 1998). Most of them have focused on European and developed countries, in part encouraged by the European Union's gender mainstreaming strategy and the perceived need for countries to share good practices of welfare policy (Pfau-Effinger 2005; O'Reilly 2006). By contrast, there are only a few studies that compared Asian countries (e.g., Wakisaka and Bae 1998) or Asian and Western countries (e.g., Stockman, Bonney and Sheng 1995; Houseman and Osawa 1998; Kucera 1998). O'Reilly (2006) identified four main approaches to cross-national comparative studies of work and welfare. These are: the holistic approach that emphasizes 'the *distinctive societal features* of a particular employment system'; the '*ideal types*' that compares and contrasts different employment models; the '*two main axes of variation*' approach that 'generates four distinct categories for analysis'; and the '*clusters attributes and statistical scores*' approach that 'generates compatible and comparable groups' (O'Reilly 2006, p. 732, original emphasis). While each model has its own strengths and limitations, scholars in this field point to the important role that distinctive societal features play in shaping women's employment. For example, Rubery et al. (1998) argue that women's employment outcome of a given society is contextualized and needs to be understood through the analysis of its economic context, labour market conditions, social institutions and dominant values. Similarly, Pfau-Effinger argues that cross-national differences in the characteristics of women's labour market participation are explained not only by 'the specific profiles of welfare state institutions

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and the specific constellations of social actors' (2005, p. 3), but also by societal cultural conditions that are fundamental factors in 'influencing the development and effects of other factors' (1993, p. 404) that shape women's employment decisions and aspirations. O'Reilly and Fagan (1998, p.11) further argue that 'cultural domination or hegemonic power is at least partly embodied in social and economic institutions' and their human resource management (HRM) and that 'these institutions create different material and ideological constraints and resources for social action'.

However, there have been few studies that 'place the interrelations of welfare state policies and culture systematically in a theoretical framework' (Pfau-Effinger 2005, p. 3) for the comparative analysis of women's employment. Equally, the crucial role played by employers, trade unions and governments in the determination of wage structure and policy may not have been fully recognized and consequently the potential negative impact of this on women may yet have to be fully appreciated, given the fact that women tend to be significantly under-represented in these influential bodies (Rubery et al. 1998). Rubery and Fagan (1995) identified a set of institutional structures that are pertinent in the cross-national comparative analysis of women's employment. These include: the organization and industrial structure of the production system, labour market conditions and regulations, the training and education system, and dominant social attitudes and values (O'Reilly and Fagan 1998). In addition, 'patriarchal values, international division of labour, and the effects of export-led industrialization' (Brinton, Lee and Parish 1995, p. 1099) have a role to play. As Brinton et al. (1995, p. 1099) stated, 'regardless of women's qualifications or the nature of labour demand, a myriad of cultural practices channel women into behaviours that either discourage labour force participation or encourage participation in only those jobs with the lowest income and prestige rewards'. Moreover, international division of labour as a result of heightened global competition has led to the growth of a large informal sector in many countries and the shift from the core to the peripheral employment system (Brinton et al. 1995).

Undoubtedly, the above authors have made important contributions to the study of gender and employment issues by broadening the analytical framework. However, these studies have not explicitly adopted an interdisciplinary analytical framework that incorporates socio-cultural, institutional and global political economic perspectives to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the wide range of factors that shape women's employment opportunities and outcomes. A combined disciplinary approach is particularly informative in explaining the interactions of social actors/forces and outcomes of women's employment in Asian countries where globalization has had profound impact on their economic and employment structure, where conventional gender norm affords the husband more conjugal power, and therefore career priority, in the patriarchal family system even though he does not necessarily bring in more valued resources, and where labour may be less organized and less protected by legislation compared to the West and the state intervention may be inadequate owing to competing pressure of changing economic conditions. This analytical approach is also called for by human resource management (HRM) scholars in conducting cross-national comparative studies (e.g., Clark and Mallory 1996; Schuler and Jackson 1999; Budhwar and Sparrow 2002).

Given the paucity of comparative studies of women's employment in Asian countries, this study selected four major Asian economies for analysis: China, India, Japan and South Korea (hereafter called 'Korea' for brevity). These four countries are chosen for comparison because few, if any, of such studies have been conducted, despite the fact that they are among the politically and economically most important Asian countries in the world. The fact that conventional gender norms still prevail in these four countries makes

it even more interesting and necessary to investigate the role of women workers in their economic development. While all four countries share considerable similarities in social cultural values, the differences in the stages of economic development, comparative strengths of industries, political power, the role of the trade unions, and socio-cultural influences also mean that the structural and institutional conditions for women's employment differ across the four countries. A comparative study is therefore necessary to address two questions. First, how are the heterogeneous characteristics of political regimes, institutional arrangements and societal values manifested in the employment system of each compared country? Second, what economic, socio-cultural, institutional and political forces prevail in the interactive process among the social actors that shape the structure of women's employment and reward in a given time in each country, despite broadly similar outcomes of women's employment?

This study consists of four main sections. The first provides a brief background summary of all four countries. This is followed by a comparison of employment patterns of women workers. The third section investigates the financial reward of women in employment, namely the gender pay gaps. The fourth section analyses the major reasons that account for the gender inequality revealed in the previous sections. Drawing on the analytical frameworks developed by scholars on comparative employment and HRM studies (e.g., Brinton et al. 1995; Clark and Mallory 1996; O'Reilly and Fagan 1998; Rubery et al. 1998; Schuler and Jackson 1999; Budhwar and Sparrow 2002), an interdisciplinary approach is adopted throughout the study to explain the various forces at play that shape the education, employment and financial outcomes of women in these four societies (see Figure 1). The study concludes that the elimination of gender discrimination requires a continuing dominant role of the state in shaping these countries' employment relations through effective legislative and policy intervention.

Sources of data

This contribution draws primarily from secondary data from academic journal studies and statistical reports from national government and international bodies. This is quite a common approach for cross-country comparative studies. However, it must be noted that cross-country comparative studies are challenging tasks in part because of the absence of comparable statistical data owing to country-specific criteria and methods of data collection adopted by individual countries when they collect data for their own use (Nakata and Takehiro 2002). Accessibility to these bodies of data to individual researchers remains another challenge, in part because of the logistical and language barriers. A third challenge is the inevitable knowledge gap of the researchers in trying to grasp the complex reality of the countries in the comparative study. Some social scientists also argue that the complexity of societal difference, such as that of the structuring of gender relations, makes valid comparison difficult, if not impossible, to achieve (Crompton and Lyonette 2006). Space constraints here make it an impossible task to present a fuller comparative picture. It is therefore not the intention of this study to judge which country has a better system for women's employment. Rather, the intention is to highlight some of the pertinent factors at play that influence women's employment choice and outcome in the four selected countries.

Background of the four countries

Japan and Korea are developed countries whereas China and India are two fast-developing countries. Japan and Korea are small countries in terms of geographical and population size and have different industrial structures compared with China and India. China is a

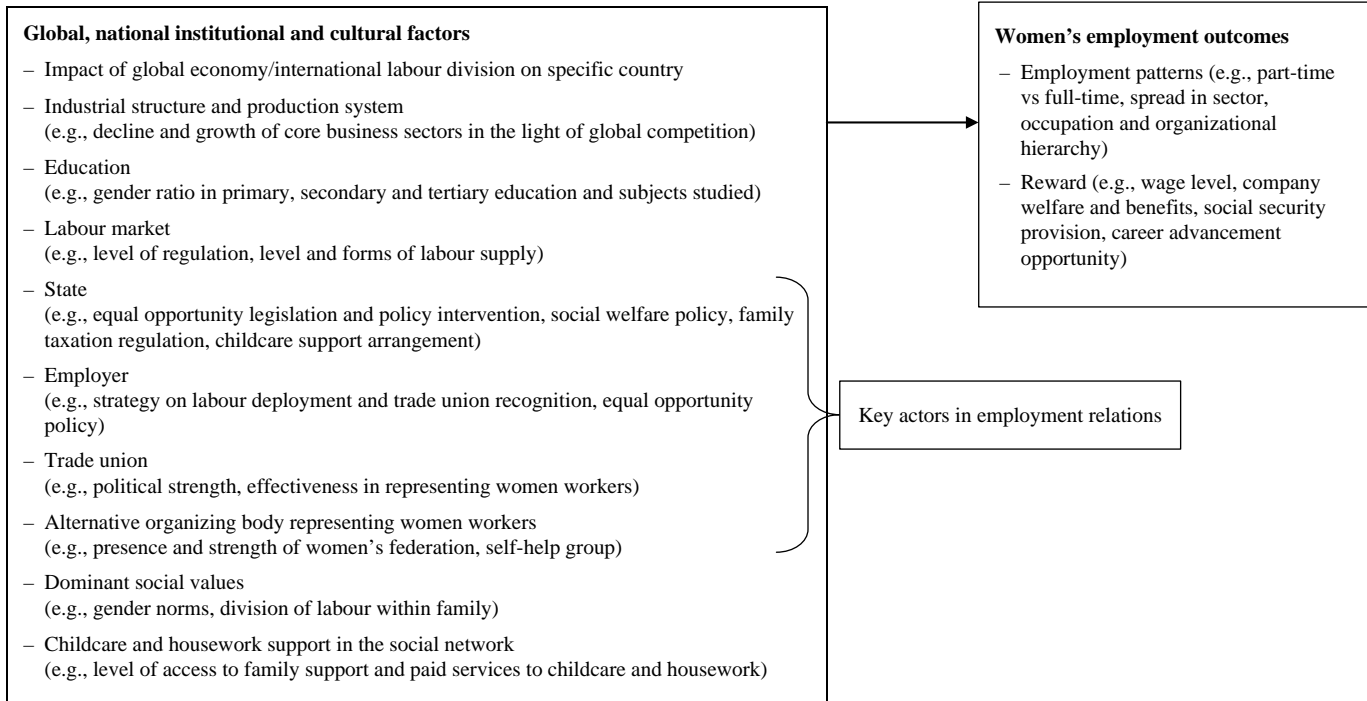


Figure 1. Global, national institutional and cultural factors that shape women's employment outcomes.

socialist country that has been under the control of the Communist Party since 1949. It began its economic transformation in the late 1970s, whereas India, having gained its independence in 1947, began its reform in the early 1990s. Japan is a modernizing imperial country with Western influences, whereas the modern Republic of Korea, established in 1948, has been under the control of authoritarian governments with emerging democracy since the 1980s, largely as a result of mass public demonstrations. Japan and Korea were two major driving forces of the Asian economy in the 1970s and 1980s but were both heavily hit by the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (e.g., Lee and Lee 2003; Magoshi and Chang 2009). Meanwhile, China and India have emerged as two major power houses in the development of the Asian economy since the 1990s (Khanna 2007). Put together, China and India make up over one-third of the world's population. The majority of them live in the rural areas where a large proportion of the poor are concentrated (Roy and Chai 1999). With their unique comparative advantages, China and India are also beginning to emerge in the global economy with growing competitiveness and impact. In certain sectors, they are major players: for example, India's IT industry and related growth of offshore business process outsourcing and China's low cost manufacturing. The governments of Japan, Korea and China have pursued an export-oriented economic growth whereas India's economic development in the last two decades has relied mainly on the increase of domestic demand.

In China, Japan and Korea, these developments have been accompanied by a substantial fertility decline since the 1980s. While the low birth rate in China is a result of the government's 'one child' policy enacted in the 1980s, the low birth rate in Japan and Korea is largely an outcome of women's choice (the Korean government is providing incentives to encourage women to have more children). China, Japan and Korea are culturally fairly homogeneous countries where Confucian values still prevail (e.g., Magoshi and Chang 2009; Warner 2009), whereas India is far more diverse in its religious and racial spread and influence. All four countries, however, share a fundamentally similar cultural value of male dominance and son preference that determines the position of daughters in the family and the nature of marriage (Gupta and Li 1999), which further influences the nature and outcome of women's employment.

Employment structure and job (in)security

China, Japan and Korea have witnessed an increasing or steady proportion of women in employment in the last 25 years with women making up around 40% of the total workforce (see Table 1). Women are also making inroads into public services and management posts and positions in political leadership (see Table 1). However, women are still under-represented in managerial and professional positions and are over-represented in firms of certain ownership forms (China) and in irregular employment (Japan, Korea and India) marked by lower levels of pay and job security.

China has an above world-average record of women's labour force participation. The vast majority of them are in full-time employment as part-time work is uncommon and those who work part-time often need to do more than one job to make up a living wage (Cooke 2006). Compared with the other three countries, gender segregation is perhaps the least pronounced in China. While women tend to be over-represented in certain industrial sectors such as education, health care and services, they are present in all sectors and occupations in a relatively even pattern (Cooke 2006). However, it must be noted that women tend to be under-represented in certain industrial sectors and organizations, for example, mining and construction, because of the physically demanding nature of the jobs,

Table 1. A summary of gender profile of China, India, Japan and South Korea.

Items	China				India				Japan				South Korea			
	1980	1990	2000	2004	1980	1990	2000	2004	1980	1990	2000	2004	1980	1990	2000	2004
GNP per capita (US\$)	220	320	930	1,500	270	390	450	620	10,430	26,960	35,140	37,050	1,810	6,000	9,800	14,000
<i>Population</i>																
Total (millions)	981.2	1,135.2	1,262.6	1,296.2	687.3	849.5	1,015.9	1,079.7	116.8	123.5	126.9	127.8	38.1	42.9	47.0	48.1
Female (% of total)	48.5	48.4	48.6	48.6	48.2	48.4	48.6	48.7	50.8	50.9	51.1	51.1	49.5	49.7	49.7	49.8
<i>Participation in education</i>																
Female pupils (% of total)																
Primary	–	–	48	47	–	–	44	47	–	–	49	49	–	–	47	47
Secondary	–	–	47	47	–	–	40	43	–	–	49	49	–	–	48	47
Gross enrollment rate in tertiary (% of age group)																
Male	–	4	–	17	–	8	12	14	–	36	51	55	–	51	92	109
Female	–	2	–	14	–	4	8	9	–	23	44	49	–	25	53	67
<i>Labour force participation</i>																
Total labour force (millions)	503	650	739	768	280	335	396	427	56	64	68	67	15	19	23	24
Labour force female (% of total labour force)	43	45	45	45	33	30	28	28	39	41	41	41	37	39	40	41
Unemployment																
Total (% of total labour force)	4.9	2.5	3.1	4	–	–	4.3	–	2.0	2.1	4.8	4.7	5.2	2.5	4.1	3.5
Female (% of female labour force)	–	–	–	–	–	–	4.1	–	2.0	2.2	4.5	4.4	3.5	1.8	3.3	3.1
<i>Employment</i>																
Share of women in total employment	43	44	44	44	33	30	28	28	39	41	41	41	37	39	40	41
Share of women in agricultural employment	–	49	–	–	–	–	45	48	13	9	6	5	39	20	12	10
Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector	–	38	39	40	–	13	17	18	–	38	40	41	–	38	40	41
<i>Participation in the labour force (Access to economic and productive resources dimension)</i>																
Ratio of female to male labour force participation	85	89	87	87	54	47	42	43	62	69	70	71	59	66	69	69
<i>Gender equality in political participation (Status and protection under the law dimension)</i>																
% of parliamentary seats occupied by women	–	21	22	20	–	5	9	9	–	1	5	7	–	2	4	6
% of women in ministerial position	–	–	–	6	–	–	–	3	–	–	0	13	–	–	–	6

Source: World Bank Group (2006).

and in government organizations, where power and control continues to be dominated by men (Cooke 2003).

Women's employment in Japan takes M shape by age and marital status (Steinhoff and Tanaka 1993; Houseman and Osawa 1998; Gelb 2000). It has a high employment participation rate from young women until they get married and pregnant. Women who have access to family support for child care are more likely to have full-time jobs than those without support. Similarly, those who have elderly care commitment are less likely to work full-time or work at all (Ogawa and Ermisch 1996). Married women who return to the labour force after an employment break usually find themselves in lower-status positions than they had prior to their break (Steinhoff and Tanaka 1993). They are generally classified as part-time workers, not because of the slightly reduced number of hours they work compared with full-time workers but because of the absence of job security, career progression opportunities and other benefits that are enjoyed by their full-time counterparts (Steinhoff and Tanaka 1993; Wakisaka and Bae 1998). In the mid 1980s, at least a quarter of the part-timers in Japan actually worked full-time (Kucera 1998). Japanese employers have strong incentives to employ part-time female employees because they 'receive only 60 to 70 percent of a regular female employee's wages, as well as fewer benefits' (Kucera 1998, p. 27, also see Houseman and Osawa 1998; Wakisaka and Bae 1998).

In Korea, women's economic status in the labour market has been significantly improved throughout Korea's economic development process since the early 1960s. Women's labour force participation rate increased from 37.0% to 49.7% during the period 1963 and 2002, 'raising women's share in the total labour force from 34.4% to 41.3%' (Jung and Choi 2004, p. 562). 'The share of college graduates in the women's labour force soared from 2.6% to 20.7% between 1980 and 2002, reducing the disparity with the men's ratio, which tripled from 9.2% to 29.5% during the same period' (Jung and Choi 2004, p. 562). According to Monk-Turner and Turner (1994, pp. 436–437), in Korea 'almost half (47%) of all women who work are agricultural workers and the majority (87%) of women work in one of three industrial sectors: agricultural, manufacturing, or commercial'. Since the 1980s, the Korean tertiary sector has been absorbing large numbers of women workers as the sector expanded significantly (Yoon 2003).

In India, the labour market is divided into two sectors: the organized and unorganized. The proportion of employment in the organized sector is low compared with that in the unorganized sector. The majority of workers in the latter are women 'where wages and working conditions are inferior, largely unsecured and mostly devoid of social security benefits' (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002, p. 279). Women also outnumber men in the agricultural sector, 'both in relative and absolute terms' (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002, p. 280). Unlike China, Japan and Korea, the percentage of women in the total labour force in India has been in decline since the 1970s 'in both the organized and unorganized sectors' (Ghosh and Roy 1997, p. 911). This is 'despite national efforts to increase the participation rate of women in the workforce' (Ghosh and Roy 1997, p. 909). It should be noted, however, that this does not mean that those women who are not formally listed as actively employed are not working. Rather, their work may be unrecognized and inadequately remunerated. The continuing educational gap between Indian girls and boys, particularly in tertiary education, means that women will continue to be employed in the lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs compared with men. In 2004, 9% of women, compared with 14% of men, were enrolled in tertiary education (see Table 1). The low availability of agricultural jobs has forced many women to become short-distance migrant workers for casual employment during the non-agricultural seasons. Furthermore, technological

advancement has resulted in fewer job opportunities for women, especially those with little education (Ghosh and Roy 1997). While the rapid expansion of the information technology industry of India has led to more women in professional jobs (e.g., Budhwar, Saini and Bhatnagar 2005), this has not led to the breakdown of traditional gender roles because 'women's participation is based on a continuation of traditional gender roles, which places women on the periphery of an employing organization' (Patel and Parmentier 2005, p. 29). Women made up only 20.5% of the professional and technical workforce in 2000. The unemployment rate for women with engineering degrees was five times higher than that of men because they were given less opportunities for internship during their study and for participation in recruitment events (Patel and Parmentier 2005). Nevertheless, the rapid development in the offshore business process outsourcing (BPO) sector since the mid 2000s has led to a large proportion of women working in this sector as a result of the amendment of the Factories Act to allow women to work on night shifts in order to tap into women's talent.

It is clear that all four countries have some form of gender segregation in both industrial and occupational categories, some more marked than others. It is true that women in all four countries are making inroads into public management posts and political leadership positions (e.g., Budhwar et al. 2005; Cooke 2005; Kang and Rowley 2005; Yuasa 2005). However, women are still under-represented in managerial and professional positions and are over-represented in firms of certain ownership forms (China) and in irregular employment (Japan, Korea and India) marked by lower levels of pay and job security. The growth of non-standard employment (broadly defined) has been a key feature in employment relations in many countries in part as a result of the intensifying global competition (e.g., Rubery et al. 1998; O'Reilly and Fagan 1998; Felstead and Jewson 1999). Non-standard employment, e.g., part-time employment in Japan, 'irregular' employment in Korea and 'unorganized' employment in India, is often characterised by a high level of job insecurity, inferior working conditions and poor financial reward. It has been argued that non-standard employment affects women more than men because of the relatively large proportion of women in this form of employment (e.g., Rubery et al. 1998; O'Reilly and Fagan 1998). This is notably the case in South Korea where irregular employment is the main mode of employment (Chun 2006) and in Japan where married women workers often hold 'part-time' employment status with reduced financial reward. In manufacturing and export-oriented industries, e.g., textile and garment, global competition based on price competitiveness has a direct impact on the labour condition, wage level and casualization of employment in many countries. This is clearly the case in Korea, Japan, China and India. For example, in Japan, the 'most significant changes took place at large manufacturing firms, where low-wage part-time women filled formerly high-wage full-time positions' (Kucera 1998, p. 29). As Lee (1993, p. 525) noted, 'women workers have been mobilized to form a cheap, tractable and politically inert labour pool for the textile and other industries. They provide an ideal group for short-term intense exploitation.'

Table 2 summarizes women's employment patterns across the four countries and the key factors influencing these patterns, which will be further discussed later.

Financial reward

Perhaps not surprisingly then, given the employment patterns, gender wage gaps are found in all four countries. Gender wage differential is an outcome of a combination of factors that are universal as well as country-specific. One factor is the impact of career breaks, such is the case in Japan (Nakata and Takehiro 2002). Another is the segregated career

Table 2. Factors influencing women's employment patterns in China, India, Japan and Korea.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Women's employment pattern</i>	<i>Influential factors</i>
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High participation rate for five decades • Continuous employment with only short maternity break • Relatively low level of gender segregation in industries and occupations with the exception of a couple of industries • Low proportion of women in management and political positions • Gender pay gap least significant compared with other three countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive state intervention in promoting gender equality through full employment and child care provision • Necessity of dual-wage to support a family • Accessibility of child care arrangement from extended family and market • Male-dominant cultural value that views women as inferior to men • Employers continue to exercise discriminative practices • Representation by trade union or women's association takes welfare and supportive form instead of bargaining
India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of participation • Women concentrated in unorganized sector and informal employment • High level of unemployment for women with low skill and literacy • Low proportion of women in management and political positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caste, religion, and educational level • Male-dominant cultural value that views women as inferior to men • Employers continue to exercise discriminative practices • Powerful media to expose gender inequality • Women given reserved seats • Trade unions disinterested in the informal sector where large numbers of women are employed
Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's employment participation takes M shape • Low career prospect for women due to perceived low level of career commitment in order to accommodate child care responsibilities • Women often 'encouraged' to resign upon marriage so that men remain in the 'core' workforce • Unattractive job prospects for mothers returning to employment after the peak of child care responsibility • Married women work 'part-time' as a status rather than hours worked • Low proportion of women in management and political positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to family support for child care • Male-dominant cultural value that views women as inferior to men • Employers continue to exercise discriminative practices • Seniority-based earnings and promotion practices • Limited union representation
Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively low level of participation after marriage • Husband's social position determines the need for wife to participate in employment • Women concentrating in irregular employment to make way for men in regular employment • Low proportion of women in management and political positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage bar • Employers' discrimination • Male-dominant cultural value that views women as inferior to men • Employers continue to exercise discriminative practices • Trade unions disinterested in those in irregular employment where large numbers of women workers are found

path in which women are channelled into jobs that have lower employment status and little career progression opportunities. A large proportion of women, particularly married women, in Japan and Korea have inferior employment status largely because of their marital status (Nakata and Takehiro 2002; Kang and Rowley 2005; Yuasa 2005; Chun 2006). In Japan, the *Nenko* system that rewards employees based on the long service and hard work principle further assumes that this principle only applies to regular male workers but not women even if they are in regular status jobs (Nakata and Takehiro 2002; Yuasa 2005). A third factor is the weaker bargaining power of women workers in the labour market and their limited resistance to poor working conditions (Seguino 2000a). Therefore, while a gender wage gap is observed in all four countries, certain factors appear to play a more significant role in a specific country than in others. For example, while the wife's wage is important to support the family in China owing to its socialist ideology of low wage and full employment (Stockman et al. 1995), a wife's wage is only seen as supplementary at the most to her family budget in Japan (Nakata and Takehiro 2002) and there is tax incentive for the wife's earning not to exceed a certain threshold (Wakisaka and Bae 1998). Employers in Japan have the incentive and tradition to suppress women's wages and provide men with relatively high wages in order for them to support their family.

In Japan, a widening gender wage gap was observed. A major reason for this is 'the system of seniority-based earnings and promotion, from which part-time, temporary, and non-union employees are typically excluded' (Kucera 1998, p. 28). Although over 50% of married women were in employment by 1982 (Nakata and Takehiro 2002), a significant gender wage gap remained throughout the next two decades – the gender wage gap was at 61.6% for full-time and 50.9% when part-time women were included in the statistics in the late 1990s (Gelb 2000). Career breaks and the 'part-time' status of women are two of the major reasons attributed to the gender wage gap. Another reason is the significant discrimination encountered by Japanese women in recruitment, compensation and promotion. Despite employers' positive attitude towards educational attainments, women remain clustered in low-paying clerical work (Gelb 2000).

Similarly, Van der Meulen Rodgers' study (1998) revealed that despite rapid economic growth, Korea's gender pay gaps for all education groups had actually widened during the 1970s and early 1980s. This points to the possibility of increasing levels of gender discrimination in Korea. Monk-Turner and Turner (1994) revealed that during the mid 1980s, women only earned 44% of what men earned. Monk-Turner and Turner's (2001) study of gender differences in earnings across 88 occupational categories in Korea in 1988 further revealed that men earned from 33.6% to 46.9% more than women with comparable skills, all else being equal, suggesting that women in Korea face significant wage discrimination in the labour market. More recently, Jung and Choi's (2004) analysis of the 1997 and 2001 earnings data for full-time, year-round workers employed in manufacturing and service industries in Korea 'confirms the existence of substantial gender wage discrimination, especially in non-knowledge-intensive industries and occupations' (p. 577). It was not until the late 1980s that the Korean Government issued regulations that were aimed to eliminate gender discrimination in employment, although the effectiveness of these regulations remains questionable (Monk-Turner and Turner 2001). Women's wages were still only 63.3% and 63.2% of that of men's in 1999 and in 2002 respectively (Yoon 2003). Furthermore, persistent gender wage gaps across different employment status make it far more profitable (almost 60% reduction of wage costs) for employers to hire female irregular workers instead of male regular workers (Chun 2006).

According to Patel and Parmentier (2005, p. 34), Indian women on average earn only '60% of what men in the same job earn and women occupy only 3% of the management

positions in the business sector'. By comparison, the gender wage gap is perhaps the least in China, although the findings of studies differ in what the precise gap is. For example, Shu and Bian's (2003) study shows that 'gender gap in earnings remains remarkably stable between 1988 and 1995. In 1988, women made 83.9% of men's earnings. In 1995, women made 83.8% of men's earnings' (p. 1117). According to Wang's (2005, p. 28) analysis of a national sample survey conducted in 1996, 'women only make about 73% of men's earnings after holding constant the effects of human capital, political capital, family structure and work unit as well as occupational characteristics'.

Factors attributed to gender inequality in employment across the four countries

A number of socio-cultural, economic, political, religious and organizational factors can be attributed to the gender inequality exhibited in the patterns of women's employment and their financial rewards across the four countries. The degree of influence of each factor may vary in each country and across time.

Education level

According to the human capital theory, education level is an important determinant of a person's employability and earning power. Lower educational attainment has often been cited as one of the reasons for women's disadvantages in the labour market. This is likely the case in India. Compared with the other three countries, India still has a relatively large gap of educational attainments between male and female mainly in the secondary and tertiary education. It has been observed that India is a country 'that suffers from a well-documented high level of gender-inequality in education. . . . even in urban India, this gap is significant' (Kingdon 2002, p. 26). Dowry payments for marriage and the loss of return on human capital investment upon marriage make parents unwilling to invest in their daughters' education and health (Kingdon 2002; Patel and Parmentier 2005). Labour market discrimination against women and against certain social groups based on caste and religion is also to some extent responsible for the relatively low level of education attainment of women in these groups (Kingdon 2002).

However, improved educational attainment of women is not necessarily translated into economic empowerment through their increased participation in the industrial labour force (Brinton et al. 1995; Lantican, Gladwin and Seale 1996). This is particularly the case in Japan and Korea. It has been noted that the continuous growth in higher education among women in Japan has not led to 'improvements in women's wages or the greater participation of educated women' (Shimada and Higuchi 1985, p. S372; also see Nakata and Takehiro 2002). This reflects to some extent 'the unique features of the Japanese society, such as strong family cohesiveness and integrity, limited promotion opportunities for female workers in employment systems' (Shimada and Higuchi 1985, p. S372). In addition, there is a sharp gender divide in the type of higher education pursued by men and women. Men tend to study engineering and science subjects, whereas women tend to diversify into humanities, arts, home economics and social sciences subjects that lead to jobs that are less well-paid (Nakata and Takehiro 2002).

Traditional societal value

As noted earlier, these four countries share a male-dominant culture. In all four countries, women's primary responsibility is home-making whereas men are seen as the pillar of the family, socially, financially and spiritually. China, Japan and Korea are influenced by

Confucian values in which women are subordinate to men socially and economically. Women are widely regarded by employers and organizational managers as being less committed to their career because of their family commitment and the necessary career break for some of them. In India, the woman's role is largely confined to the home domain although their labour market participation is now more widely accepted and women are making significant progress into senior positions in organizations and politics in part as a result of the severe talent shortage in the labour market (e.g., Budhwar et al. 2005; Saini and Budhwar 2007). In all four countries, the home-caring role falls largely upon women, regardless their employment status (e.g., Budhwar et al. 2005; Cooke 2005; Kang and Rowley 2005; Yuasa 2005). Child care support, from the extended family, state provision or other sources, therefore plays an important role in women's access to employment. However, even when women manage to stay in employment, the traditional gender norm presents persistent barriers to their career progression. As we can see from the discussion earlier, women and their marital status are crucial sources of discrimination against their employment status and pay.

Employer strategy and discrimination

Employers play an important role in mediating the level of gender inequality. Where firms are facing shortages of labour and talent, they may introduce a proactive human resource policy to attract and retain women workers. Where the labour market is slack and business competition pressure heightened, employers often adopt a labour cost reduction strategy to keep operating costs down and women tend to be more vulnerable than men. For example, in Korea, women are encouraged by companies and union members to resign 'voluntarily' and accept a re-employment contract as an irregular worker with lower pay and less job security when their companies are undergoing downsizing processes (Chun 2006). In Japan, new opportunities created for women by the equal opportunity law in the late 1980s and early 1990s were then eroded when Japan's economic growth 'bubble' burst after 1992 (Gelb 2000). It was 'the marginal nature of Japanese women's employment' as a deliberate strategy of the employers that accommodated the core employment system which privileged men during a period of heightened international competition, reduced growth rate, a rapidly aging workforce and the inflexible hiring and firing system (Kucera 1998, p. 28). Similarly, women workers in China were disproportionately laid off or forced into early retirement during the radical downsizing programme that took place in the state sector during the mid 1990s and early 2000s (Zhang and Zhao 1999).

Employers in Japan and Korea also exert pressure, albeit now more implicitly following the introduction of equal opportunity laws in the late 1980s, for women to resign when they get married and become pregnant. Age limits are also used to screen out women (Gelb 2000). Although the 'marriage bar' is far less common in China, employers in private enterprises may impose an age limit on female factory workers. To some extent, if the marriage bar for the Japanese and Korean women is aimed primarily at protecting men's jobs and earning, then the age discrimination in China is motivated by increased productivity.

Women university graduates in all four countries encounter discriminative recruitment practices from blatant advertisements to more subtle practices (Chun 2006; Cooke 2003; Gelb 2000; Gupta, Koshal and Koshal 1998). For example, Gupta et al.'s (1998, p. 23) study of 162 managers in India found that '74% women and 80% men perceive that pregnancy makes women less desirable employees than men'. 'More than 40% men and women believe that there are significant barriers to women's advancement in their

organizations and organizations do not encourage women enough to assume leadership positions' (Gupta et al. 1998, p. 23). 'Even at senior level positions, female managers continue to be perceived as "women" first. Women need to work harder than men and need to prove their competence more often than men' (Gupta et al. 1998, p. 24). These findings echo that from similar studies in many countries across the world (e.g., Davidson and Burke 2004; Yukongdi and Benson 2006).

Labour law and government policy intervention

The elimination of gender inequality necessitates state intervention through legislation and affirmative actions to provide at least the most basic level of protection in principle. For this purpose, governments of all four countries have introduced gender equality laws and other mechanisms at different stage (e.g., Budhwar et al. 2005; Cooke 2005; Kang and Rowley 2005; Yuasa 2005; Magoshi and Chang 2009). In China, protecting women's employment rights and interests has long been seen by the Chinese Communist Party as an essential measure for realizing equal opportunity, at least in principle. In order to promote women's participation in employment, the state has intervened, since the 1950s, through legislative, administrative, economic and media educational mechanisms. Significant investment was made in childcare facilities to relieve the burden of working mothers. This intervention has provided considerable scope for significant advances in pay and social equity for female workers. As a result, China has achieved possibly greater gender equality than industrial capitalist societies (Stockman et al. 1995). However, the effect of these interventions has not led to true gender equality in China. While women have wide access to employment, their career progression remains severely handicapped.

Indeed, ineffective enforcement of equal opportunity legislation has been a common finding in China, India, Japan and Korea (e.g., Budhwar et al. 2005; Cooke 2005; Kang and Rowley 2005; Yuasa 2005; Magoshi and Chang 2009). It was reported that despite the promulgation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOC) in 1986, Japan had a much lower proportion of women managers in government organizations than that in its corporations in the early 1990s (Steinhoff and Tanaka 1993). The introduction of EEOC was controversial among the legislator, employers and the state at the outset and had 'produced few gains in employment opportunities for women' (Gelb 2000, p. 385). There is a widespread consensus among scholars in Japan that the Government passed the EEOC more as a response to international pressure than as an acknowledgement of the changing social values in Japan (Gelb 2000). EEOC has been criticized for its 'over-reliance on voluntary compliance' with 'little government enforcement power'. Nevertheless, 'it has led to renewed efforts at litigation, increased consciousness and activism among women, and amendments to the law, passed in 1997' (Gelb 2000, p. 385; also see Broadbent 2008). Similarly, the enforcement of the constitutional rights of Indian women is uneven owing to 'the lack of a uniform civil code in India' (Ghosh and Roy 1997, p. 904). This ineffectiveness reflects the poor enforcement of social legislation in India including that for women empowerment (Saini 1999). Nevertheless, the Indian courts have been considered to be playing an important role in defending women's rights 'in a context where government, employers and unions largely remained either indifferent and unconcerned, or reluctant and ineffective in addressing the issues of gender equality' (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002, p. 281). 'Korea's Gender-Equal Employment Act of 1987 stipulates that employers can be imprisoned for up to 2 years if they pay different wages for work for equal value in the same business; but few, if any, employers have actually gone to jail' (Van der Meulen Rodgers 1998, p. 746). By condoning employers'

discriminative practices, the state is actually 'perpetuating gender norms and stereotypes that disadvantage women' (Seguino 2000b, p. 34) (Table 3).

Legislation that is aimed at providing an enhanced level of equality may actually prove to be counterproductive, especially when ineffectively enforced. For example, India's labour regulations are considered to be 'among the most restrictive and complex in the world' and 'have constrained the growth of the formal manufacturing sector where these laws have their widest application' (World Bank 2006, p. 3). This discourages employers from creating employment with a better job quality in the formal sector and forces millions to continue to be trapped in poor jobs in the informal sector. Banning women from night shifts in India, an act that is being lifted in some sectors, has also led to a reduced scope of employment for women, 'even though there is great potential for employment in information technology-related areas involving tele-work in call centres, where round-the-clock work is the norm' (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002, p. 279). Mandatory maternity leave and the requirement of breast-feeding breaks and crèches in workplaces where the majority of workers are women are often perceived by employers as liabilities and discourage them from employing women (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002).

The passing of other labour laws may also lead to worsening prospects for women. In Korea, an amendment to the Labour Standards Law was passed in 1998 which allows employers to legally lay off workers in the process of business restructuring and 'hire workers employed under temporary agencies' with inferior employment packages classified as irregular employment (Chun 2006, pp. 9–10). Irregular employment is now extensively used and is regarded by both employers and the state as a key mechanism to reduce workers' job security, employment rights and wage levels and a powerful weapon to disintegrate the militant labour movement in the name of enhancing business competitiveness (Chun 2006). The passing of the flexibility labour law has caused tension between the two groups of workers and weakened union power.

Organizing and representation of women workers

Labour organizations such as the trade unions provide an additional potential source of labour protection. The effectiveness of trade unions, however, varies across industries and countries. A common finding here is that trade unions have been less than effective in representing women workers (e.g., Broadbent 2008; Cooke 2008; Hill 2008; Moon and Broadbent 2008). The low proportion of women activists in union leadership positions has been attributed as one of the main reasons for the ineffective representation of women issues in Korea and India (Chun 2006; Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002). In India, trade unionism has a history of about 100 years, although less than 8% of the workforce in India is unionized (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002). There are five trade unions in India, three of them affiliated to political parties. 'All unions have established a women's wing, which deals with gender issues' (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002, p. 277). Women make up only a very small fraction of union membership, with varying membership levels across occupations and industrial sectors. Those who join do not participate actively in union activities because gender stereotypes, religion, taboos and cultural inhibitions make it difficult for women to break into male environments. Family responsibilities and the masculine union structures and operating style that are unfriendly and even hostile to women add further barriers (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002). Trade unions largely operate in the formal sector and are disinterested in organizing and representing workers in unorganized employment, despite the latter's desire to be organized and represented.

Table 3. Selected examples of labour and equal opportunities laws in China, India, Japan and Korea.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Labour and equal opportunities laws</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Impact</i>
China	Constitution (1954, 2004) Labour Insurance Regulations of the People's Republic of China (1953) Announcement on Female Workers' Production Leave by the State Council (1955) Female Employees Labour Protection Regulations (1988) Regulations of Prohibited Types of Occupational Posts for Female Employees (1990) The PRC Law on Protecting Women's Rights and Interests (1992) Labour Law (1995) Employment Promotion Law (2008)	To ensure equal rights in employment between men and women To protect married women from being discriminated due to their maternity status	Ineffective enforcement, little, if any, punishment to non-compliant employers
India	Constitution (1950) The Employees State Insurance Act (1948) The Factories Act (1948) The Maternity Benefits Act (1961) Equal Remuneration Act (1976) The Sexual Harassment of Women Act (1992)	To guarantee women's equal rights	Ineffective enforcement due to lack of uniform civil code Complex and restrictive laws deter employers from creating jobs in the formal sector
Japan	Constitution (1946) Equal Employment Opportunity Law (1986, amended in 1997 to take effect in 1999)	To ensure equal rights in employment between men and women	Controversial introduction Over-reliance on voluntary compliance with little government enforcement power Limited impact on increasing women's employment but has led to increased awareness of gender inequality among women
Korea	Equal Employment Opportunity Act (1988, amended in 1989) Guidelines to Eliminate Sexual Discrimination in Employment (1991) Labour Standards Law (1998)	To guarantee equality between men and women in employment; To protect women's job security on their marital status, pregnancy, and childbirth; To allow employers to lay off workers	Ineffective enforcement Informalization of employment with declined employment terms and conditions

Only one trade union – the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) – is recognized in China. It is operated under the leadership of the Communist Party. While membership level is high at over 90% in the state sector organizations where a union function is established, trade unions in China are considered ineffective in representing workers' interests against management prerogatives and, in some cases, unlawful practices (O'Leary 1998; Clarke 2005). Trade unions however, are not the only official channel which women workers can turn to for help. The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) has long been a patron in championing women's causes under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party. The co-existence of two official organizations that in principle offer representational mechanisms for women workers does not necessarily mean that women workers in China are well-organized and represented. This is because the ACFTU and ACWF's work does not address the two fundamental constraints faced by Chinese women – 'inaccessibility to the leadership structure and the persistence of cultural norms on gender roles' (Wang 1999, p. 39). The suppression of forming independent associations outside the ACFTU and ACWF also means that the nature, process and substance of women's representation are largely determined by the Party with little scope for women activists to champion women's causes outside these state institutions. In the private sector where workers need more support to defend their employment rights, gaining employer recognition remains a difficult task for the unions because of the persistent resistance of private firms in spite of the stipulation of union recognition in the Labour Law (1995) and the Trade Union Law (2001).

By contrast, the Korean trade unions have been far more active and aggressive in leading the labour movement to protect workers' interests, although their strength has been in decline since the 1990s in part as a result of intensifying global competition (e.g., Lee and Lee 2003). Led by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), they have deployed mass rallies, petition campaigns, hunger strikes and joint solidarity actions since the year 2000 to campaign against the erosion of wage levels and employment security as a result of the continuing expansion of irregular employment (Chun 2006). However, the trade unions' efforts are hampered by two major obstacles (Chun 2006). One is the unions' narrow constituency base, i.e., representing mainly the full-time regular male workers employed in large enterprises that make up less than a quarter of the total workforce. Tensions arise between the regular and irregular groups of workers as the former sees the latter as a threat to their employment security and wage standard. The other is the unions' inability to combat strategically the anti-unionism stance adopted by Korea's new democratic state regimes established since the 1990s, a period that also witnessed the 'rollback of formal labour rights and protections' (Chun 2006, p. 3). In addition, research studies have revealed that both union leaders and union members in the regular workforce are unwilling to allow irregular workers to join the unions as equal members or to represent their grievance (Chun 2006). It must be noted that there have been attempts to set up new unions by irregular workers. However, these attempts have largely ended up in failure in part because the main stream unions refuse to allow them to be affiliated and in part because of their powerless position against employers' retaliation for union activities (Chun 2006). According to Chun (2006), at the height of female union membership in 1980, females made up 36.68% of the union membership. By 2003, female membership had dropped considerably to 21.07%.

The ineffectiveness of the trade unions in representing women workers' interests has led to the rise of women's associations as alternative forms of women organizing in Japan, Korea and India (e.g., Broadbent 2008; Hill 2008; Moon and Broadbent 2008). In Japan, 'it was mostly married women who drove women's progress in the workplace' during the

1960s and 1970s (Nakata and Takehiro 2002, p. 521). In Korea, female factory workers have been 'at the forefront of industrial labour activism', particularly from the mid 1970s to mid 1980s, 'against exploitative working conditions' (Yoon 2003, p. 123). 'The suffering and struggles of young factory women workers in the 1970s significantly shaped the feminist movement in the 1980s' (Nam 2000, p. 97). They played a pivotal role in the breakdown of the Korean military regimes. Joined by women college students with broader democratic agenda and women clerical workers against sex discrimination, the women's movement is believed to have led to the introduction of gender equality laws in the late 1980s (Yoon 2003). However, these achievements have not automatically led to their enhanced political position. As Nam (2000, p. 110) noted, 'when democracy is restored, male dominant political parties and institutional political actors, not social-movement groups, become the centre of politics. This leaves little political space for women to be integrated into the political system.' Nevertheless, the ineffectiveness of Korean trade unions in representing women workers has led to the development and growth of women's associations in the 1990s as alternative forms of organizing bodies and voice mechanisms to articulate the grievances of women workers. This is in spite of the fact that neither the media nor the unions are sympathetic to their cause (Chun 2006).

Similarly, it has been observed (International Labour Organization 1994) that 'India has long taken the lead in organizing women in informal sector' (cited in Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002, p. 283). This has taken a variety of organizing forms such as 'trade unions, workers' co-operatives and self-help groups on specific issues' (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002, p. 283). Empowerment groups, Working Women Forum and Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) are among the major organizing bodies that have played an important role in organizing women and others in precarious employment and representing their needs (Venkata Ratnam and Jain 2002; Hill 2008). By comparison, the activities of ACWF in China are much less radical. They are constrained by the fact that they are salaried and led by the Communist Party. They mainly play a welfare and supportive role to help women regain employment instead of campaigning against their lay-offs and gender inequality in employment such as gender pay gaps and discrimination in recruitment and promotion.

Conclusions

This study compared patterns of women's employment and reward in China, India, Japan and Korea to identify how distinctive societal features are born out in their employment systems since the 1980s. The comparison reveals a common historical trend of women's disadvantages, although progress has been made in each country to varying degrees. Institutional structures, persistent patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes, and ineffective representation limit women's bargaining power in the labour market and hold down their financial reward as well as career progression. However, the various institutional and cultural factors are not played out to the same strength and each employment system contains unique features. In Japan, married women are kept at the lower end of the job ladder and form the peripheral part of the labour force. In Korea and China, women have been disproportionately selected for redundancy and laid-off workers are often pushed into informal employment with reduced incomes and job security, a phenomenon that is apparently widespread in a number of countries (e.g., Seguino and Brown 2006). In India, the intersection of gender, ethnicity, caste and religion has been accountable for women's unemployment or being employed in the unorganized sector.

The informalization of employment contracts, the absence of effective organizing bodies outside the male dominant formal sector and the fierce price competition in manufacturing jobs present further difficulties for workers to bargain for higher wages, thus contributing to the persistent gender wage gap. While gender equality may have become the pronounced political ideal backed by legislative and policy interventions, the traditional value and gender norm of each of the four societies examined here continue to present formidable barriers to achieving gender equality. In Korea, the conflict of gender inequality is heightened by the persistent traditional value on the one hand, and the increasing role of women in the economic expansion on the other. In China, the tension exhibits more between the Confucian value of female obedience and the socialist ideology of 'women holding up half of the sky'. To a large extent, progress in gender equality has been achieved by female activists against the government in Korea, whereas gender equality in China was mainly achieved through state intervention which has to some degree diluted the male dominance culture. However, the newly found employer power as a result of marketization and globalization of the Chinese economy has reversed some of the gender equality trends achieved during the state planned economic period, resulting in the resurgence of gender discrimination.

This contribution shares some common findings with studies of Western countries (e.g., Dex, Ward and Joshi 2008; O'Reilly and Fagan 1998; Rubery et al. 1998). For example, where the state assumes a level of responsibility of child care (e.g., China) and other child care services are more accessible, women are more likely to be more fully integrated into mainstream employment and find it easier to juggle work-family commitments, as are the cases in France and Finland. Where the family tax system disincentivizes dual earners, women are less likely to work or work full time (e.g., Japan). While a comparatively larger proportion of families in Japan, Korea and India may follow the 'male earner/female home carer' and 'male earner/female part-time carer' models, urban Chinese families largely fall within the 'dual earner/state carer', 'dual earner/dual carer', and 'dual earner/marketized female carer' models. Where trade unions have real influence on improving workers' employment conditions, their power may be weakened by successive assaults from employers and the state (e.g., Korea). Also, unions are reported to be more interested in protecting men's jobs to the disadvantage of women. In particular, trade unionism in Japan, India and Korea displays strong characteristics of male-dominance that are accentuated by the sharp gender divide in the labour markets where women make up mainly the non-core workforce. Where trade unions are supported by the state (e.g., China), their effect in representing workers who are most in need of help remains limited. Women's marginal representation in formal political institutions in all four countries, despite diminishing gaps in their educational attainments with that of men and improved economic opportunities, is further evidence of the perpetuated notion of gender divide 'within the context of a patriarchal social order' (Monk-Turner and Turner 2001, p. 64) that is 'keeping women politically incapacitated' (Yoon 2003, p. 133).

This study contributes to existing studies on gender in general and in comparative studies of patterns and outcomes of women's labour market participation more specifically. It does so by combining and extending the analytical frameworks developed by scholars on comparative employment and HRM studies. It adds to our understanding of women in employment in four major Asian countries that, together, make up over one-third of the world's population and form an indispensable part of the global economy and politics, but have remained under-explored so far. This study provides a dynamic account of the changing level of influence of traditional and new actors in employment relations, including their behaviour and relative power over other actors against a context of global

economy. The similarities and differences displayed in gender inequality in employment and career advancement across the four countries reveal, at least in part, the interplay of institutional, socio-cultural and political economic forces that shape these inequalities in each country. A level of gender equality can be gained, often temporarily, where a key actor in employment relations is able to advance women workers' interests and rights, and where labour market conditions favour women's participation.

The contribution highlights the paradox of how strong state intervention is possible and indeed needed to achieve a level of gender equality in patriarchal societies on the one hand, and how the intervening power of the state may be circumvented in Asian countries where globalization has had profound impact on the nation's economy on the other. It argues, based on existing evidence, that globalization and marketization have had a negative impact on gender equality in part because of the inability of women workers to enforce their rights and in part because of the disinterest of other employment relations actors, notably the trade unions, to represent their interest. As we have seen, the exploitation of gender division has been a crucial labour strategy in Japan and Korea, and in China, marketization has led to the erosion of gender equality previously achieved. One key conclusion is that, in societies where patriarchal social orders remain influential and the representational function of women workers remains weak, strong and continuous state intervention is vital to achieve a level of gender equality, as proved the case in China. Unfortunately, globalized competition and export-oriented economic growth, at least in Japan, Korea and China, tend to erode the determination and ability of the state to intervene and afford more power to employers.

This analysis contains a number of limitations, not least in its methodology which relies on secondary data published in the English language. The reliability, validity, comprehensiveness and timeliness of the data are largely dependent on these sources, as well as the author's interpretation of the data. Space constraint also prevents the study from covering a wider range of issues or covering the issues explored in greater detail. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this contribution serves as a starting point to encourage future research to investigate empirically in women's employment in these four and other Asian countries to provide a more nuanced understanding based on sector-specific studies.

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