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Calling for a Gender-Sensitive Approach to Karoshi and Overwork Disorders in Japan

Opinion Editorial

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Karoshi, which translates to “death from overwork,” is a prevalent phenomenon in Japan and much of Asia (p.278).¹ In a culture that values dedication and hard work, karoshi is responsible for 10,000 deaths each year in Japan alone.^{2,3} While it was previously considered a social issue that predominantly plagued men, almost a third of compensated mental health karoshi claims in the last five years have been awarded to women.⁴ This article examines how gender intersects with various contributing factors of overwork in Japan, suggesting that the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s focus on long work hours as the sole determinant of karoshi compensation negates the gender-specific experiences of women. Fostering gender-sensitive karoshi research improves

awareness and understanding of the ways in which women suffer from this complex phenomenon. Women’s economic empowerment is vital to reaching gender equality targets in Japan, but only possible if we strive to understand the issues that contribute to workplace gender inequality.

In 2018, Japan ranked 110th out of 149 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index: while 68% of women in Japan participate in the workforce, women make up only 13% of senior officials and managers, 10% of parliament, and 16% of ministerial positions.⁵ Previous research has outlined ways in which traditional gender roles persist in the workplace, where double-track employment systems see female workers as a



temporary labour solution, often hiring men into the career-track while hiring equally-educated women into clerical-track positions.^{6,7} In addition, it is common for women in Japan to face workplace sexual harassment.⁸⁻¹¹ Huen explains that, “[b]ecause group harmony is so important in Japanese society, those women who openly complain about workplace sexual harassment are seen as disruptors.¹² Very often, they are forced to resign or are even fired” (p.813).¹² This organizational structure not only limits female career development but also reinforces existing structures in which men’s needs take priority. Highly competent women are not given adequate responsibility or opportunity for advancement and are expected to perform their work in a hostile workplace environment. Job dissatisfaction has been linked to suicidal ideation in Japanese female workers¹³ and sexual harassment has been found to contribute to stress-related illness, lower commitment to work, lower satisfaction with life, and lower self-esteem and psychological well-being.¹⁴ Although links between workplace sexual harassment and suicide are difficult to prove, studies have shown significant associations between poor physical work environment and increased risk of suicidal ideation in Japanese female workers.¹³ Similarly, newspaper articles have outlined a tragic series of events in which a woman committed suicide after feeling harassment claims were improperly managed.¹⁵ This suggests that extreme overtime may not be the sole karoshi hazard for women in Japan.

The few women who are given opportunities to progress in their field go to great lengths to maintain their positions as both wives/mothers and employees. Nemoto notes that a career-track woman is expected to “work like a man”: long hours, after-work drinking obligations, and the health concerns that go along with these practices (p.521).⁷ Because of loopholes in overwork legislation, it is not unusual for employees to work in excess of the 80-hour karoshi line: ^{2,16} the legal benchmark for showing a strong link between work and illness, which recommends that overtime be kept to an average of less than 80 hours per month.³ In addition to the grueling hours in the workplace, women continue to be the primary caregivers in the home. Women in Japan complete more than five hours of domestic work for every hour their male counterparts do,⁵ and only 2.63% of fathers have taken paternity leave.¹⁷ Such an

inequitable distribution of domestic labour puts undue stress on working women in Japan and exposes them to an increased risk of overwork. While legislation such as the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law aims to combat these stressors by allowing women absence from work to care for sick or injured family members, such legislation is rarely enforced.¹ Women are forced to prioritize home over work, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles and the masculine culture of the work environment. They are placed in a situation where their needs are not necessarily supported by societal structures –where they are forced to choose between their responsibilities to their family and their desire for gainful long-term employment. The inter-role conflict that ensues can subject women to extreme burnout and poor psychological health.¹⁸ Long working hours can indeed impact women’s experiences of overwork, but domestic responsibilities may also contribute.

While legislation tries to provide numerical overtime criteria for compensation, a review of the research shows that it is not as easy as establishing a karoshi line. The majority of mental health-related compensations in 2014 and 2015 were distributed to claimants who worked less than the 80-hour karoshi line or who were compensated because of ‘other factors’, such as sexual harassment/violence.¹⁹ Numerical guidelines have proven insufficient, necessitating exceptions: women in Japan are exposed to various stressors that put them at risk for karoshi in different ways. Institutional sexism inhibits upwards occupational mobility, normalizes sexual discrimination, and discourages family leave. As acute labour shortages continue to encourage female participation in the workplace,²⁰ stakeholders, including employers, policy-makers, and the general public, need to adopt a gender-sensitive approach to encourage workplace equity. Japan’s highest levels of government and civil service need to lead by example instead of making international #MeToo headlines);²¹ gender discrimination and sexual harassment legislation needs to be enforced. Encouraging men to take a more active role in domestic life might lower female karoshi rates, as might family-friendly initiatives such as childcare in the workplace. Finally, further research that seeks to understand women’s lived experiences of karoshi must be conducted and disseminated to all stakeholders. Structural inequities in society have placed an



undue burden on Japanese women in the workplace. Greater attention should be paid to their needs as they continue to play an important role in Japan's working society.

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