Spring 2013

Changing Ideals in the Hegemonic Salaryman: A Study of Post-War Japanese Masculinity in Relation to Hikikomori, Freeters, and Women in the Workforce

William Rahardjo
Trinity College, william.rahardjo@trincoll.edu

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Changing Ideals in the Hegemonic Salaryman: A Study of Post-War Japanese Masculinity in

Relation to *Hikikomori*, Freeters, and Women in the Workforce

By William Rahardjo

Submitted to the International Studies Program, Trinity College

Supervised by Jeffrey Bayliss

© May 8th, 2013

Abstract

In the after-math of World War II, the Japanese workplace and family were largely defined by the nuclear family. Women were primarily expected to stay at home to look after the home, while men were expected to enter the workforce as salaryman. Following international economic success, the salaryman became the symbol of masculine power for decades to come. Work for the salaryman was difficult, but certain benefits like lifetime employment ensured them job security within ones company up until retirement. But, with the bubble-economy collapse of the 1990s, resulted in the loss of this vital component of the salaryman, resulting in a decreased sense of job stability and prosperity. This loss of stability dealt a bruise to the salaryman masculine image, resulting in slow shifts in both home and work life. In this essay, I will evaluate these changes within the home and office and analyze its effects on the masculine salaryman hegemonic role, women, and the *hikikomori*, a group of young non-working shut-ins that have risen in awareness in the public sphere over the past two decades. Overtime, the dichotomy between masculinity in the office and women at home has changed very slowly. With the social implications of the *hikikomori*, part-time workers, impending labor shortage and tendency to marry later, profound changes in salaryman masculinity and the family seem to be on the horizon.

Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>

       In the decades following World War II, Japan went from war-torn country, to a highly prosperous and technologically advanced society. Much of this prosperity was tied to the work of salaryman and his image as the masculine ideal[1]. The traditional salaryman was viewed as a dedicated and loyal businessman who worked at one company his entire life, and worked long hours into the night. His difficult work supported his family, and over time he could retire knowing that he would be well supported by his company[2]. But, overtime this conception became harder to attain with the bubble economy collapse of the 1990s, resulting in a weakening of the lifetime employment system. After the collapse, becoming a salaryman was more difficult, and even those who became salaryman had to work harder in fear of losing their jobs. This loss resulted in more companies to rely on part-time workers that did not require as many promotions, bonuses, or the prospect of lifetime employment[3]. The effects of the collapse brought some disillusionment to the salaryman lifestyle as more young workers were deciding that the traditional salaryman lifestyle of working long hours in a married unit was no longer worth trying to attain.

       In my paper I will use the concept of hegemony to describe the salaryman as the predominate masculine role within Japan. Though the image was hurt after the bubble years

---

[1] Dasgupta, Romit. 2013. *Re-reading the salaryman in Japan crafting masculinities.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 27.
http://www.novanet.eblib.com/EBLWeb/patron/?target=patron&extendedid=P_1024581_0.
[2] "Sayonara, salaryman," *Economist.* 386 2009, http://www.economist.com/node/10424391.
[3] "Sayonara, salaryman"

with the weakening of lifetime employment, the salaryman as a provider of the family is still very much the desired masculine role[4]. But, since the bubble years, the family unit of a working father and stay at home mother has become less available and desired amongst younger people[5]. In this essay, I will analyze the gendered distinctions between a masculine workplace and feminine home and that it has been altered and will continue to be challenged due to the bubble economy collapse. Lastly by using examples of the *hikikomori* as a foil to salaryman masculinity, I hope to shed light on the process of becoming masculine in Japanese society, and the extreme reactions of not doing so. With more women willing to work and pressures of marriage waning, as well as a reliance on part-time workers, Japanese hegemonic masculinity and society is due for change in it's rigid gender distinctions between a masculine workplace and feminine home.

Chapter one focuses on the salaryman lifestyle and it's role in hegemonic shaping's. I will examine the macro and micro reasons of how this image has formed, its purpose, and give some insight into their daily life. I will briefly document the history of lifetime employment and how it became a staple to the Japanese nuclear family of the high growth years. In this section I will also define what hegemony means throughout this essay; how it formed, what the norm is, and how individuals interact with it. By looking at the salaryman through a hegemonic masculine lens, I will try and define gender as learned series of processes instead of a biological one. Lastly, I will discuss changing attitudes after the weakening of the lifetime employment

---

[4] Cook, Emma E. "Expectations of Failure: Maturity and Masculinity for Freeters in Contemporary Japan." *Social Science Japan Journal* 16.1, 2013, 29-43. Web.
[5] Cook, "Expectations of Failure,"

system caused by the bubble collapse, and how workers are dealing with strenuous efforts to keep up with their jobs.

In chapter two, I will discuss the *hikikomori* phenomenon in Japan. *Hikikomori*, a relatively new term, has steadily increased since the post-bubble economy years. These individuals are often male and are defined by their extreme fear of social situations, locking themselves in their rooms and having little to no face to face social interaction. In many ways, the *hikikomori* are a rejection of salaryman masculinity, trading a social life at the workplace for one that is anti-social and devoid of responsibility. I will discuss group thinking going back to days as early as kindergarten, tracing bullying and a hands-off approach of teachers as reasons for *hikikomori's* existence. I will also give some insight into their home life, often characterized by a constantly working salaryman father, and an extremely protective mother. In it, Japanese perceptions of individual vs. group appearance come to light, revealing complex ways of constructing identity. I will also discuss some of the attitudes and daily lives of the freeters, the growing group of part-time workers who have either had trouble finding job as salaryman or have rejected it entirely. The emergence of these groups after the bubble years gives good insight into attitudes about shifting gender roles when comparing the salaryman's role as breadwinner to less stable lives of the freeters and *hikikomori*.

Lastly, in chapter three, I will discuss women in their home life as well as their role in the office. Strong expectations of a taking care of the house and children within a marriage are very much tied primarily to the wife. Because of this, women often have part-time jobs that require little skill, despite being as educated as their male-counterparts. In this section I will discuss the

history of women in the workforce and their tightly defined roles within the home as caretaker. I will also discuss the Equal Employment Law as a government effort to help women in the workforce, although it had no real power. Lastly, I will discuss how recent trends in marriage, and a rise in educated women have resulted in more female workers, and how this could possibly alter salaryman masculinity.

Chapter 1: Salaryman, Hegemony, and The Decline of Lifetime Employment

Since postwar Japan, the term salaryman, referring to middle class office workers, has been engrained into Japanese society. Salaryman are such a part of the culture that you can find tourist books on how to be a salaryman called "Salaryman in Japan" next to Japanese cuisine by the Japanese Travel Bureau.[6] The guide goes into great detail about the salaryman life to an almost humorous degree of specify, discussing what he reads in the paper, what he talks about with his peers, as well as various health problems like over stress from working[7]. The minute details in this book imply a sort of general national awareness of what a salaryman is, how he should act, and how to become one. The guidebook's nature and inclusion with other books in the series about traditional food, architecture, dance, imply that the salaryman's importance is as vital to Japanese culture as the aforementioned groups and should be noted with pride by foreigners[8].

---

[6] Dasgupta, *Re-reading The Salaryman,* 2.
[7] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 2.
[8] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 2.

The salaryman has long been tied to Japanese masculinity. The nuclear family consisting of the working father, stay at home mother, and children has long been a standard in Japan since the post-war years[9]. Because of the success of this family unit, many facets of the salaryman have been studied such as their "class, income, age, lifestyle patters, work habits, consumption patterns, etc"[10], but little had been studied pertaining to gender. Coinciding with the bubble collapse in the late 1980s and 90s, was a growing field of study in both western and eastern countries that focused on masculinity as a social construct.[11] What connected these studies was the assumption that no true male masculinity exists. Instead, masculinity was framed by historical, social, and economical trends. Because men's lifestyles of men vary so greatly throughout the world, as well as by social class, and upbringing, access to various aspects of patriarchy varies. Therefore, masculinity is not onset by biology, but one that varies between individual men who live in different societies.

The concept of male hegemony is one that should be understood throughout the paper. Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell explains hegemony as a "social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute force into the organization of private life and cultural processes." [12] This ascendancy is "embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation, evaluation and so forth" [13] This means that hegemony does not imply a sense of a dominant patriarchy in a top down perception of power. Instead, power works through various facets of society subtly, often

---

[9] Takeda Hiroki. 2004. *The political economy of reproduction in Japan*. New York: Routledge, 2004, 02.
[10] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 6.
[11] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 7.
[12] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 8.
[13] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 8.

times not explicitly stating itself or it's purposes. Because there are so many factors into what defines masculinity, as well as men who have varying degrees of success in attaining it, there exist many forms of masculinity not only within society, but within an individual as well. A purely hegemonic masculine ideal is one that is impossible attain, but it can be seen as a sort of map for individuals to attain to.

This hegemonic ideal is not static, but always changing and evolving through the individual's interaction with hegemony. As Demetriou describes in his interpretation of Connell, power can change through "culture, institutions, and persuasion"[14] The concept of "internal hegemony" within individual males can alter the dynamics of power over femininity, which he labels "external hegemony", as well as over other forms of male hegemony that seem dated. This means masculine trends between individual and a central hegemonic masculine ideal are never one; instead the internal male hegemony is constantly picking, adapting, and discarding aspects of masculine hegemony. Therefore it is important to both study macro and micro examples as to how the role changes.

First let's look at some recent interviews of salaryman. In Romit Dasgupta's book *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan*, she interviews salaryman from various companies, big and small, and asks questions pertaining to their early life and realization of gender. When asked what their conception of masculinity was, the workers were slightly confused. They never seemed to have been asked this question before, but many answered in similar ways.   A very

---

[14] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 8.

common answer was becoming a shakaijin[15], or company employee. Often, one realized they

were men once employed in a stable company with the ability to provide for their family.

Another very common response was to define masculinity in terms of what they are not in

relation to women. For example, women are emotional, have kids, and stay at home. Perhaps

the most common answer was that women primarily take care of the house while men are the

daikokubashira, or breadwinners of the family [16]. But, many men were quick to also point out

that they were also open to the ideas of their wives working, a more recent masculine trait that

allows for a husband to be sensitive and understanding to their wives and children's needs.

Being sensitive implies spending more time at home and having wives work. Despite being

"open" to this idea, the tone of their wishes was more them *allowing* their wives to do *part-time*

work, instead of them having them be the *daikokobashira*[17]. The sensitive role of staying at

home and spending time with the kids is also not fully embodied. According to surveys in

2006, in households where both partners worked, husbands only helped with 10% of

household labor, up only 5% from the mid 1980s[18]. Despite this increase, the type of work

considered feminine, remained so. This type of work includes laundry, cooking, and diaper

changing, while men's work was shopping, and playing with children. From their interviews,

it seems evident that these salaryman still view the home and workplace through gendered

spheres. Though they think it is progressive to allow their wives to work part-time, they still

solidify their masculinity by relegating their wives to subordinate work roles and providing for

the family. Dasgupta also asks the question, of who they believe is a public symbol of

masculinity. A name that came up among many was the actor Takakura Ken, an actor that

---

[15] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 58.
[16] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 49.
[17] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 115.
[18] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 118.

resembles masculine ideals almost in a "parodic"[19] sense, similar to an actor like Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is almost "too" manly. Dasgupta finds this interesting because this implies a sense of distance in their perception of masculinity between what is idealized and what is expected from an everyday male.

After World War II, the salaryman was seen as the primary hegemonic model of masculinity[20]. In the immediate post-war years, management was deeply paralyzed by political and economic disorder, and unions took advantage, gaining rights in wages, working times, as well as the prospect of seniority based wages[21]. But, with the shift of Japanese economy into the free market meant a recession that challenged long-term employment. Long disputes between unions and management took place, with many less radical strikers joining "second unions" overtime that cooperated more with management[22]. By the 1960s, In exchange for union cooperation, management awarded workers with long-term, stable employment, opting for unions to help transfer employees or solicit early retirement in downtimes[23]. Over the next three decades long-term employment became so integral to Japanese worker identity that judicial decisions would often side with the workers[24]. Lifetime employment was further solidified with the high growth period from the 1960s-1970. During this time, Japan was "kickstarted" by the double income plan that saw a 10% annual increase in GDP for over ten years[25]. More families from rural Japan were moving into cities than ever before, with Tokyo becoming the first city to

---

[19] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 45
[20] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 2
[21] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono. "Japanese Lifetime Employment" in Institutional Change in Japan, ed. Blomström, Magnus, and Sumner J. La Croix. London: Routledge, 2006.
[22] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment" 12.
[23] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment" 13.
[24] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment" 14.
[25] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment" 14.

reach ten million inhabitants in 1964[26]. This rapid growth brought about real changes within the standard of living for many Japanese. This influx of prosperity and workers meant a change in lifestyle. The percent of households spent on essential items dropped from 44.5 percent to 32.8 percent in 1969 meaning that families had more money to put towards quality of life items[27]. The phrase *akarui senkatsu*, or bright generation, entered the national lexicon in the 1960s and 70s, symbolizing the ease of attaining modern and luxurious items. These include the "three C's (car, color television, cooler); the three Js (Jet, [i.e. holiday overseas], jewels, *jutaku* [i.e. own house]; *mai-homu* (own house, with the implication of privatized lifestyles), and *mai-kaa* (own car, implying mobility, consumption of leisure)"[28] As more families were able to afford and notice the perks of living with these luxuries, the prevailing thought among families was that they were part of the middle-class.

The prosperity of the time, along with the foundation of senior promotion, worker equality, and job stability laid out by unions in the decades prior, resulted in the prospect of lifetime as a stable of the salaryman[29]. Rapid expansion meant that companies could construct housing facilities for workers, provide specialized training, and establish a stable relationship where job dismissal became rare. The concept of lifetime employment came under attack during the oil crisis in the 1970s [30]. Despite economic pressures, employers handled the crisis by treating dismissal as a last resort, and instead made "efforts to reduce overtime, transfer workers within the firm, reduce new recruits, sell corporate assets, cut executive bonuses and salaries, and

---

[26] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman,* 31.
[27] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman*, 31.
[28] Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman*, 31-32.
[29] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment" 15.
[30] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment," 17.

cut dividends."[31] Despite this, many firms were forced to cut jobs at some levels, often choosing the lower ranked regular employees. Following a second oil shock, the idea of employee security was so central to workers that unions settled for a reduction in wages[32]. Despite these shocks, the company structure of lifetime employment was not changed.

Around 1986, the economy recovered from the oil crisis, and the normally low interest rates shifted to aggressive corporate investments due to an appreciation of land and stock prices. Due to the growth, employers were hiring at extremely high rates[33]. But in late 1989, signs that a recession was near, and in the following years the economy was noticeably suffering. Companies were left with bad loans and a surplus of workers, yet dismissal rates remained largely the same, using the same tactics of keeping workers as mentioned before. But eventually, layoffs did occur, and companies were sooner to fire younger workers as well as drastically cut hiring rates[34]. The workforce became overstocked with workers in their thirties, creating problems for promotion rates and training opportunities because there wasn't enough room for workers to move up in the ranks [35]. Massive restructuring efforts were not implemented, and many of these older workers who were hired before the bubble years have higher-ranking jobs than young workers, even if they are more skilled. This labor surplus of middle-aged workers will eventually turn on its head and labor shortage in need of young trained workers will occur. So, although layoffs do occur, the general model is to try and keep workers as long as possible

---

[31] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment," 17.
[32] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment" 19.
[33] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment," 20.
[34] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment," 20.
[35] Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono, "Japanese Lifetime Employment," 21.

with a façade of lifetime employment, only cutting them when it is absolutely necessary [36]. This labor shortage increases the part-time labor force, especially amongst younger workers who could not get jobs as salaryman. Massive layoffs in the future are bound to occur, and perhaps the idea of lifetime employment will end entirely[37].

Attitudes of what it is to be a man is now different than what it was before the bubble-economy collapse of the 1990s. With the decline of lifetime employment, meant a decrease in job stability as well as their role as the *daikokubashira* (breadwinner) within the family. Their work may have been tedious, demanding, and tiring, but the salaryman of the past would not consider going to another company, as their skills would often not translate well to other companies, and they would miss out on company benefits. With the end of widespread lifetime employment, meant a break in the relationship between individual and company. Benefits from lifetime employment included a promotion system with strong ties to seniority. Though skill has become more of a factor for Japanese promotions, the differences between salaries are not great. For employers of the same age, the wages of the highest paid worker to the lowest generally waiver around 25%[38]. This may be good to promote a sense of equality throughout the office amongst one's peers, but it does not give much incentive for those to excel and take on more responsibility. Wages rise slowly until the age of fifty, generally seen as the time where salaryman children go off to college and begin to think about retirement, when salaries grow

---

[36] Hiroki, Tabuchi. "Japan Pays a Price for Its Lifetime Jobs," *New York Times,* May 19, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/20/business/global/20zombie.html.
[37] Kuchikomi "Looming layoffs: Which Workers are at greatest risk?," *Japan Today*, Jan 25, 2013, http://www.japantoday.com/category/kuchikomi/view/looming-layoffs-which-workers-are-at-the-greatest-risk.
[38] "Sayonara, salaryman"

sharply till the age of sixty, the age where one is expected to retire[39]. Another benefit, one that

has been declining over time, is the use of a company bank that accumulated a substantially

larger amount of interest than that of an ordinary bank. Lastly, companies often provide housing,

subsidizing the house so that the homeowner only has to pay a fraction of the cost.   To leave the

company for another was seen as a betrayal, as the company would go out of its way to help the

salaryman[40]. Although some of these practices still go on today, their prominence is fading.

Though Japanese workers have long relied on lifetime employment it is a system that is no

longer prominent as only twenty five percent of Japan's total workforce are on a fixed term

contract[41].

This instability within Japanese companies has resulted in harder working workers who

often work long hours overtime or don't use their paid holidays in fear that the company will see

them as lazy or uncommitted[42]. In modern times, the word *karoshi*, or death by overwork,

indicating the demanding work hours, sometimes over 60 hours a week[43]. This need to work

further emphasizes a split between home and work, as men will spend all of their time at the

office. In the book *Portraits of the Japanese Workplace*, Japanese sociologist Kumazawa

Makoto dedicates a chapter to this phenomenon and titles it "Working Like Mad to Stay in

Place" [44]. When he starts writing he mentions another sociologist, Tsurumi Shunsuke, who

---

[39] "Sayonara, salaryman"
[40] "Sayonara, salaryman"
[41] Okunuku, Hifumi, "Labor law reform raises rather than relieves workers' worries," *Japan Times,* Mar 19, 2013, http://www.japantimes.co.jp/searchresults/?q=lifetime%20employment
[42] "Sayonara, salaryman"
[43] "Death by Overwork in Japan: Jobs for life," *The Economist*, December 19, 2007, http://www.economist.com/node/10329261.
[44] Kumazawa, Makoto. *Portraits of the Japanese workplace: labor movements, workers, and managers*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1996, 249.

suggested in 1984 that Japanese ridicule "gung-ho company men" or "children driven to study obsessively by their 'education mama's'"[45]. Makoto denies that Japanese from the 1970s to 1990s were like this, and argues that after the bubble they were the exact opposite. Younger salarymen work harder than ever, and it is extremely common for children to go to cram schools (a topic I will touch upon next chapter.). Makoto believes that now, salarymen "have no choice but to work like mad"[46] and that the adoption of this idea has become quite commonplace.

Makoto makes the point that an average lifestyle is "sustained only by accepting the severe pressures of life at work…In Japan, there is no room for joking, no space to achieve a critical distance from the intensity of working life"[47] He ends by questioning claims that Japan has learned from the bubble-economy collapse: that younger people have more choices in the workforce and independence, and that people can live "non-stereotypical" lives within their incomes[48]. He counters this by bringing up examples of over-worked workers, children who spend long hours at cram school, and the harsh demands of the workforce. Overall, the norm for many Japanese office workers is still that of long hours in the workforce providing for family that they get to spend little time with. Thus, in many ways the hegemonic masculine salaryman is still in place, but he has to work harder for his survival. He no longer can rely on his company to look out for him when he retires, or even for guaranteed employment. This characteristic, once vital to the identity of the masculine hegemony of salaryman has weakened. The effects of the loss of power was not a sweeping gesture that resulted in a rapid re-evaluation of home and work, but instead resulted in changes in employment methods and policies as well as social

---

[45] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace*, 249.
[46] Makoto, *Portraits of the Japanese workplace*, 249.
[47] Makoto, *Portraits of the Japanese workplace*, 253.
[48] Makoto, *Portraits of the Japanese workplace*, 253.

trends that have the potential to change Japan's conception of masculinity drastically. With the number of committed workers so low, the close tie between masculinity and work stability will change through various processes that define manhood in new ways. Changes in the way masculinity is perceived is slow, as evident by long standing work practices as well as by the answers of the interviewed men who still had a traditional view of work and home. But the rise of women workers, less reliance on the nuclear family, as well as the rise freeters and implications of the *hikikomori* are all signs that they may not be too far away.

Chapter 2: The Masks of the *Hikikomori,* and the Disillusionment of the Freeters

It is a common complaint in America that the current generation's youth is going downhill in moral and social values. Instead, it seems more of a way in which older generations can look back and compare the younger generation with their own lives. In Japan, this phenomenon exists as well, but a more identifiable problem has occurred after the bubble-economy collapse. *Hikikomori* has been a steadily progressing problem in the wake of the collapse, and stands as a stark contrast to the salaryman lifestyle. The term *Hikikomori* in Japanese literally means, "Pulling inward, being confined", a fitting term for their behavior. *Hikikomori* are usually young males, under the age of thirty-five who avoid nearly all interaction with people. They often live at home with their parents, though some do live alone. Their fear of social situations is so deep that many do not leave home unless it is absolutely mandatory, eliminating any possibility of having any friends or a job outside of their room. In extreme

cases, hikikomori stay in their houses for years, sometimes decades[49]. Their problem is one that appears to be uniquely Japanese, a byproduct of an economically unstable society that emphasizes a complex relation between the individual and the group. It is estimated that around 700,000 Japanese are *Hikikomori* by the Japanese Cabinet office[50].

Parents of *hikikomori* face deep shame largely because the Japanese stigma of standing out. Seeking help would mean to publicize their actions to their neighbors and friends, something Japanese families try to avoid. Instead, they will hide their child in their home, as if pretending that they do not exist[51]. The relationship between family and *hikikomori* within the household is one that is often of negligence of the father as well as the mother, but to different degrees. As for the father, he is normally a salaryman who is married to his family more so than to his job.   The salaryman has created a relationship with his company more so than with his family. It is his job to provide money for the family, while it is the wife's job to take care of the house and children. Therefore their father's are abstract figures in the life, coming back to the home at late hours exhausted and not wanting to interact with their children. Many *hikikomori* have told psychiatrists about the lack of love within the family. No one is willing to speak their mind, instead going about their daily life as though everything is okay[52].

Elementary and junior schools years are often very formative time for many *hikikomori*. Often times, they face constant bullying and harassment in school. In many Japanese schools,

---

[49] Gallagher, Paul, "Hikikomri – The Silent Sufferers," *Dangerous Minds*, November 14, 2010, http://dangerousminds.net/comments/hikikomori_the_silent_sufferers.
[50] Gallagher, "Hikikomori"
[51] Zielenziger, Michael. *Shutting out the Sun: how Japan created its own lost generation.* New York: Nan A, 2006.
[52] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 36.

bullying is not a concern for teachers; instead it is up to the kids to fend for themselves and to solve the problem on their own. One *hikikomori* recalls bringing up his bullying in school to his mother, only to have her say "What are you doing to have yourself be bullied?"[53] In America, bullying within the classroom is highly monitored. In the film *Preschool in Three Cultures*[54], a normal day is filmed in both a school in America and Japan. In the American classroom, when two students got into a fight, the teacher broke it up immediately, talked to the two students individually about the fight, and had them both apologize to each other. In the Japanese classroom, one boy bullied another, taking his toy and throwing it down the stairs. When one of his friends told the teacher that he was being bullied, the teacher continued to sweep and replied "what am I supposed to do about, handle it yourself", despite the child crying in the next room. Japanese often justify this way of discipline by believing that kids will learn the dynamics of the group better if they handle problems themselves instead of relying on a teacher. It is highly dependant on individual children instead of a stable authority figure to solve problems. Many *hikikomori* felt that they were alone in the home and in the classroom. No one stood up for them, including their teachers or mothers. As opposed to western education, Japanese educators do not keep strict tabs on attendance, leaving it up to the students. But, this may put too much pressure on students. Because of constant bullying, many kids in Japan drop out of school before they are in high school. This problem has steadily increased; in 1996 75,000 junior high school students, or 1.65 percent of students had skipped thirty days or more of class to avoid bullying. In 2005 this number has increased to 2 percent for students who refused to go to school entirely[55]

---

[53] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 34.
[54] Tobin, Joseph Jay, David Y. H. Wu, and Dana H. Davidson. 1989. Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States. New Haven: Yale University Press.
[55] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 53.

The hands-off approach that many Japanese schools take towards children is used so that the child will find his own way into the group, without being forced by others. While this idea may seem harsh, it may cause psychological stress amongst those who are not on the receiving end of the bullying. In Japan the term *honne* refers to one's "true" feelings that are felt when alone, outside of the group[56]. On the other end of the spectrum, the term *tatamae* is defined as the way in which one acts within a group. One *hikikomori* describes the trouble that he felt when having to mask his *honne* with *tatame*. While he was well liked by his peers, he knew they only liked him for the act he was putting on for them. He knew that if they ever knew his true feelings that they would never like him[57]. Unlike many *hikikomori*, he was not bullied, but he found that constantly keeping up appearances was too stressful, and he dropped out of school.

Japanese anthropologist Takeo Doi, explains three different areas of Japanese social interaction, that of the family, the workplace, and that of strangers[58]. The first two contain elements of dependence, while the latter does not. In the west, the idea that all should be treated equally is one that is not familiar to many Japanese. It is even included in the Japanese language. Unlike in English, Japanese words and conjugation change based on the status of the person one is talking to. For example, if one were talking to a boss, they would not use the more common verb to eat, *taberu*, instead replacing it with the formal *meshiagaru*. Even when referring to oneself, the word changes. When in polite company, one uses the term *watakushi*, in normal situations *watashi*, and in more casual settings either *boku* or *ore* depending on gender. This

---

[56] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 63.
[57] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 74.
[58] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 61.

awareness of classification illustrates that Japanese are always guessing their rank amongst others, implying a keen sense of group awareness.

This acute awareness to *honne* and *tatemae,* in Japan creates a complex dependence on personal relationships. This dependence on personal relationships is accentuated by the role of the mother in many *hikikomori* homes. The term *amae* refers to this close bond, but in many ways this bond harms and perpetuates anti-social behavior instead of helping it. Doi brings up an interesting comparison of western and Japanese greetings and applies them to the *amae* relationship. In America when one has a guest over they make their guest feel comfortable by saying "make yourself feel at home" when providing them food or drinks. In Japan this would seem too straightforward and inconsiderate. Instead the common thing to say when offering something would be "this may not suit your taste but..." Anticipating what the guest wants is considered more intimate, it illustrates that the server has knowledge of the guests needs[59]. This relationship stretches out to the *hikikomori*. Doi explains through a *hikikomori* point of view that " 'if I have to articulate my problem, then I have to recognize it' which will lead to shame and frustration"[60] The mother should know the needs of the son in a sort of unspoken bond. If the son's desires are not granted by his mother, he will not express them, which can cause withdrawal and resentment towards the mother.

Hikikomori tend to have little understanding throughout the media and even within psychological and medical community. Because many families do not wish to expose their child as *hikikomori,* many just stay in the house untreated. While some doctors have acknowledged

---

[59] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 62.
[60] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 62.

and tried to give symptoms to *hikikomori*, there has been no thorough research on the cause or cure for their condition. One *hikikomori* described his frustration in a Japanese hospital, "Doctors see only my biological reaction, and the Japanese hospital sees me only as a patient. Neither of them really looked at the environment that was the underlying cause of my distress."[61] This rush to diagnose with medicine is normally not effective, merely sedating patients instead of actually fixing their situation. This lack of understanding may also involve the Japanese custom of guessing one's desire. Just like with his mother, a *hikikomori* may feel that his relationship is dependent on the doctor, thus he anticipates the doctors actions instead of bringing up his problems in conversation. Doctors, not wanting to probe too deeply into their minds resort to a quick and easy solution, though it is rarely effective.

If the relationship with the family and doctor cannot help *hikikomori*, what measures should be taken to cure them? One man, Nobuyuki Minami, abandoned his job in advertising to dedicate a house to troubled kids, often times school dropouts or *hikikomori*. While he has no formal psychological training nor has he done any research, he has had great success in treating them. He explains troubling aspects of Japanese schools, "these kids have been rejected by the school culture that forces everyone to be the same, but each kid is so unique; each one of them is different....I don't want to suppress them at all, so that puts me at odds with Japanese culture."[62] Minami believes that this pressure to become one with the group and suppress one's individuality is reinforced by the school curriculum. Today, many high schools in the west have their students think problems in a critical manner, having them analyze and critique on their own and apply them real-life problems. In Japan this is not the case, as rote memorization at

---

[61] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun*, 34.
[62] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 78.

nighttime *juku*, or cram schools, is common, leaving many students unsure how to adequately apply what they have learned[63] The insistence on cram schools and long hours at school represent educational bureaucrat's desires for Japanese kids to be elite and ready for the work force. But, Minami makes an interesting point; the once booming economy is no longer around, and children take notice. "Only after we reached the summit did people find themselves lost. They wondered what should we value? Our strongest virtue as Japanese is that we never got fazed and never got puzzled, we just marched straight ahead. But kids sensed the moment of change. They looked at adults telling them 'you have to study hard or you won't be successful,' and the kids, they did didn't trust it. They didn't believe it. This was when *futoku* (drop-outs) and *hikikomori* started-which is something most people, especially officials in the Education ministry, simply don't understand."[64] Students today did not grow up with the mentality that Japan was a growing, prosperous nation, though society expects them to replicate the success of their parents. This disillusionment is apparent for many, giving less motivation for students who are already having a difficult time in school.

This atmosphere in school that calls for pressures to conform, and a strict curriculum, are often the causes for *hikikomori* symptoms. One psychologist, Hisako Watanabe, believes that the post-war Japanese mindset for that strived for success has much to do with the ways in which schools are set up. But, in her practice, she tends to focus less on education and more on the relationship between *hikikomori* and their parents. According to Watanabe, *hikikomori* start with "...the unhappiness of their mothers"[65] Because of this, she spends almost as much time with

---

[63] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 81.
[64] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 80.
[65] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 82.

parents. The parent's generation was brought up to support a constantly progressing state, much

to the sacrifice of the individual.   Because of this mindset many mothers find themselves upset

with their family life, as much of it is spent alone at home while the children are off to school

and the husband is at work. The household becomes not one of love, but resentment towards

family members. This environment is not suitable for a developing child, and it is only made

worse with a school where they may face bullying and a lack of expressions.   Many

psychologists of *hikikomori* tell stories of them never remembering being hugged or told by their

parents that they love them. Similar to Minami's house for troubled teenagers, Watanabe has

created a hospital environment for *hikikomori* that encourages individual expression. She

describes *hikikomori* as having a sense of *tatemae*, or appearance in group settings, but inability

to keep up with it. Their *honne*, or inside feelings, on the other hand are extremely

underdeveloped due to lack of guidance and affection from the parents[66]. Thus they have the

desire and ambition of an adult, but they emotional clarity of a child. In the hospital they try to

recreate the parent-child relationship with a sense of trust and love in order to teach them how to

cry, laugh, and express their emotions.

Hikikomori is not the only term describing non-working youth that has sprung into the

Japanese lexicon. The term *furita*, or freeter, is also gaining widespread recognition as well as

derision from the media. Freeters, like the *hikikomori*, often times live with their parents and

have part-time jobs or none at all. But, unlike *hikikomori*, freeters are not characterized by their

depression and reclusiveness. Instead, they often want full-time jobs but have difficulty finding

them for a variety of reasons. The Japanese Institute of Labor has recognized and characterized

---

[66] Zielenziger, *Shutting out the sun,* 87.

freeters into three separate categories. There are "on hold" freeters who want to get jobs, but have not yet decided their career path. Secondly there are the "no choice" freeters who settle on part-time jobs while searching for full-time employment. Lastly there are the "dream-pursuing" freeters that are trying to get professional careers[67]. Though they all differ in some aspects, they can all b described as "dreamers who provide a source of cheap, disposable labor." [68]

Many freeters go by the name *parasito shingoru*, or parasite singles, if they continue to live at home without a full-time job and means to support themselves. Since, the bubble years, this phenomenon has been growing steadily. In 2010, The Statistical Research and Training Institute released data that showed that around 3 million people ages 35 to 44 (approximately 16 percent of the age bracket) continue to live with their parents, while 11.5% of them have no job whatsoever[69]. The number has increased drastically since 1990 from 1.12 million who lived at home. The image of part-time workers living at home has shifted significantly since the bubble economy collapse in the 1990s. Before, a person who had a part time job and lived at home in their late 20s was not particularly negative[70]. They were typically viewed as carefree people who wanted to live comfortably and save some money. Since then, with the downward trend in the economy, those living at home relied more than ever on their parent's support. With the growing uncertainty of the sustainability of the salaryman, came more negative images of freeters who represented such a stark contrast. Their income has also decreased overtime with annual average

---

[67] "A New Class of Drifters," *Japan Echoes* (2001): vol.28 no. 5, http://www.japanecho.com/sum/2001/280515.html.
[68] "A New Class of Drifters,"
[69] Westlake, Adam, "Over 3 million 'parasite singles' in Japan: over 35, still living with parents," *Japan Daily Press,* May 3, 2012, http://japandailypress.com/over-3-million-parasite-singles-in-japan-over-35-still-living-with-parents-031659.
[70] Westlake, "Over 3 million 'parasite singles,'"

income going from 2.04 million yen 1in 1994 (approx $25,450) to 1.38 yen ($17,200) in 2004[71], representing a growing difficulty for freeters to establish families.

While freeters people may not be as severely anxious and depressed as *hikikomori*, both are indicative of social and economic changes within Japan. In many ways, not having a full-time job that can provide for a family is out of tune with the traditional male hegemonic model of the salaryman. The inability for many freeters to marry is a large reason why they are not seen as maculine adult members of society. Similar to correspondents in Dasgupta's works, Cook also found that many Japanese saw marriage as a means of a male stepping into his gender role[72]. Lack of funds to get married is an issue for many freeters in their decision to get married, as well as a strong belief among many women that they are not fit husbands. One female correspondent, who happened to be a freeter herself, said "I think that freeters don't work much; they work only when they want and however much they want…I would not want to date or marry a freeter…Freeters are okay when they have an aim they are trying to achieve."[73] The assumption is that freeters are not masculine because they do not have the means to ascend the corporate ladder, instead being stuck to a job with little prospects of promotion or bonuses.

Freeter's are interesting when comparing their struggles to *hikikomori*. Freeters, though working, do not have the *right* job in order to be considered masculine and fit for marriage. They are seen as unmotivated, and unserious people. Interestingly, much of the concern about

---

[71] Westlake, "Over 3 million 'parasite singles'"
[72] Cook, "Expectations of Failure," 38.

[73] Cook, "Expectations of Failure," 38.

freeters is considered a male problem despite there being many female freeters[74]. This illustrates an expectation that the man is the one who should be the main breadwinner in a "serious" work environment, while it is okay for a woman to be a part-time worker. But, if male freeters can be seen, as the "antithesis" of the salaryman[75], *Hikikomori* must be seen as an even further fringe group that does not come close to masculinity. The expectations for fitting in at school, going to laborious cram schools, and finding a good job have proven to be too much in an age where the prosperity of their fathers seems to have dried up. Unlike the freeters, who sometimes have a choice to make between their passion and becoming a salaryman, *hikikomori* see no choice whatsoever, shutting themselves off from everyone else and living alone in silence. To view both these groups as lazy or spoiled avoids analyzing reasons as to why these groups have become more and more prevalent. Focusing on the decline of job stability for salaryman as well as societal expectations of Japan, help explain how these men have come about today and possibly ways in which society needs to change. The stress brought by the bubble-economy could be felt by nearly everybody, but for many freeters and *hikikomori*, the stress to embody masculinity was too much, causing them to lead "undesirable" lives.

---

[74] Cook, "Expectations of Failure," 40.

[75] Cook, "Expectations of Failure," 33.

Chapter 3: Women at Home and in The Workforce

Japan has never been known as a country that featured women with powerful roles within society. Despite being modern in many ways, the most recent studies show a large gap between men and women. The Gender Gap Report ranks one hundred and thirty five countries in a comparative study one gender equality by: "Employment opportunities/salary, educational background, health/longevity, and political participation."[76] Out of these countries Japan ranks one hundred and one, by far the worst ranking amongst the G8 nations, a term referring to the eight wealthiest nations in the world.

This lack of representation should not be traced to women because they are uneducated or lack motivation. In 2011, Japanese women accounted for 48% of those graduating from college[77]. Despite this high percentage of women graduating, they find their talents underutilized by either having low skilled jobs, or instead becoming a housewife. Of those who graduated, 67% are currently employed, with the vast majority of them holding part-time, non-managerial jobs[78]. As recently as 2012, the Grant Thornton International Business Report stated that only 5% of Japanese women had senior manager roles, while the global average was around

---

[76] "Global Gender Gap Report 2012: The Best And Worst Countries For Women," *Huffington Post*, October 24, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/24/global-gender-gap-report-2012-best-worst-countries-women_n_2006395.html.

[77] Hewlett, Sylvia. "Japan's Working-Woman Problem," *Time*, December 11, 2011, http://ideas.time.com/2011/12/11/japans-working-woman-problem/.

[78] Hewlett, "Japan's Working, Woman Problem."

20%[79]. These numbers are extremely low for a country that is so economically and technologically advanced.

Looking at past trends in post-war Japan, it is evident that women had little role in the workforce. According to sociologist Makoto Kumazawa, despite statistical trends in Japan's employment of women over the decades, fundamental attitudes towards women's role as a housewife has changed very little since the post-war years[80]. In the immediate post-war years, Japanese women found themselves working low-paying jobs in factories, or as secretary like workers in more traditional office settings. Part of these jobs required the men to engage in "socializing" the women, which included fetching them cigarettes, food, tea, cleaning shoes, lunchboxes, and other work that implied interiority[81]. These methods of "socializing" and lower wages were ways in which men could hold dominance over women. Interestingly enough, this type of abuse resulted in strikes that resulted in real changes where men found it more difficult to make women do menial chores for them [82]. Despite these gains, women often gave up work only after a few years to raise kids, an extremely time-consuming process, as families were having on average, 5.2 children[83]. During this first decade, women were not recognized for their housework, but more women working out of their home was "significant in raising women's recognition of worth"[84].

---

[79] "Women in senior management: still not enough," *Grant Thornton International Business Report* (2012), 3.
[80] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 162.
[81] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 164.
[82] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 164.
[83] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 165.
[84] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 165.

In the next decade, from 1955-1965, the number of women workers who were employed by companies, as opposed to those in a family business or self-employed, rose from around 31.2 to around 50 percent[85]. Despite the growing number of female workers, there work remained menial, while men had more managerial tasks. To reinforce women's subordinate roles, the *nenko* system was introduced. As companies were establishing and expanding, more menial jobs were available while top positions were thinning out. Realizing that workers did not want to spend their entire lives doing menial work, companies slowly promoted men, instead of women to do the managerial jobs. Though this may seem unfair, many women bought into it as they viewed themselves as the "flowers" of the company, doing their part while the men did the "real work"[86] Though they may have had a subordinate position, some women of this time carried the tradition of protest from the previous decade, demanding better wages, night work, and battled policies that required them to retire after marriage. Many of these rights were granted, and as a result more married women were staying on their jobs. Though more women were working, the assumed path, even amongst women workers, was to become housewives as their jobs had little leeway for growth because of the sexist *nenko* system[87]. This was not an unwelcome idea for many women though, as the idea of staying at home while their husbands earned more money through promotions was a welcome idea.

In the following decade, the subordination of women into lower status jobs was further supported by the introduction of the grading employees by ability. With this policy, workers were not granted raises solely on seniority, but by an "analysis" of their performance. By

---

[85] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 165.
[86] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 166.
[87] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 168.

keeping women in lower skilled jobs, they had less means to attain a higher grade, justifying the company's unwillingness to promote women workers. Even if an individual woman performed at a high rate, her work would often go unnoticed, as space for promotion was limited and would often be given to a man[88]. Kumazawa, calls this "modern discrimination" as employers found a new way in which to demarcate jobs by gender. During this time, the Office Lady became a popular mainstay at many large companies. Ogasawara, details these women as "a woman working regularly in an office who engages in simple, repetitive clerical work with any knowledge or management responsibility."[89] Often times these women are stuck doing simple labor such as make copies of documents, make and serve tea, take calls, etc. Unsurprisingly, women were uninspired by their menial jobs, and would quit after a few years, often times to start a family[90]. To combat this drop off in labor, companies began to hire middle-aged women who had already had families. This worked into their favor, as these women did not want full-time careers because they already saw themselves as belonging primarily to the home. Instead, they worked short hours for extra money to help support their families move into "single-family homes, send their child to college, and occasionally take the family trip." [91] Thus, women were hired out of convenience of the company instead of women demanding any real power within the office.

In 1986, the Equal Employment of Opportunity Law was passed, having some impact on women in the workforce, both intentional and unintentional. The drafters of the law had three

---

[88] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 169.
[89] Ogasawara, Yuko. *Office ladies and salaried men: power, gender, and work in Japanese companies.* Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1998, 27.
[90] Makoto, Portraits *of the Japanese workplace,* 168.
[91] Kumazawa, *Portraits of the Japanese Workplace*, 177.

goals in mind "(1) to promote equal opportunity and treatment between men and women; (2) to foster measures for women workers, including assistance for reemployment and efforts to harmonize working and family life; and (3) to further the welfare status of women workers"[92] These laws pushed that employers should not discriminate in women in the "training and education, employee benefits, job assignment and promotion, employee benefits, and retirement age or dismissal"[93]

While on the surface the ideas presented in the law may be attractive to women, many holes were evident in its implementation. No real enforcement of the law was in place. Instead the law relied on "complaint resolution" in a three-stage process that called on problem solving within the office. The first stage, called for a private confrontation between a woman and her boss. If she felt that the problem had not been solved she would then take her problem, to the Prefectural Women's and Young Worker's Office, only designed to give "advice, guidance and recommendations"[94] Lastly, if the problem was still not solved, and if both parties agreed, it would be brought to the Equal Opportunity Mediation Commission. Requiring both parties to agree to the issue made little sense in solving the problem. If the boss did not want to deal with the problem, he could simply not agree to take it to the third stage and it would be over. This approach signifies a sense of cluelessness in working conditions for women on the government's part. Without giving a more standardized protocol in which to frame complaints, they were

---

[92] Gelb, Joyce. "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law: a Decade of Change for Japanese Women?," Law & Policy, vol 22, October 2000, 387, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9930.00099/abstract.

[93] Gelb, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 387.

[94] Gelb, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 387.

instead taken on an individual level. Thus, employers were only encouraged to be fair to women, despite having no real reason to be.

Though insufficient means to raise complaints were presented in the law, women still raised concerns with employers. In 1994, 20,000 inquires to the government were made, about half of them pertaining to inequalities in hiring[95]. Even when both parties agree to consultation, no legal requirement grants the power to "investigate complaints, summon witnesses, or demand documentation…nor can they initiate proceedings or act on behalf of the complaints in court actions."[96] Only though encouragement can changes be made; sometimes these encouragements are for the women to comply with the employers. Because of the long processes that the law brought about, some companies have given up hiring women in general to avoid the problem altogether[97].

With the introduction of the Equal Employment of Opportunity law (EEOL), companies found new ways in which to discriminate and give women unequal jobs. As discussed before, men have the vast majority of managerial jobs. Because of the EEOL, women were granted more grounds to protest unfairness in the workplace. One way to keep women from getting higher positions was with the two-track system, used in many large companies[98]. The large majority of men are hired through the *sogoshuko* track, the track that allows for entry level employees to eventually train and become managers. The other track, designed for office ladies, is called the *ippanshoku*, a clerical track that involves little chance of promotion and no

---

[95] Gelb, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 393.
[96] Gelb, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 393.
[97] Gelb, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 393.
[98] Ogasawara, *Office Ladies,* 28.

opportunities. Under this track system, employers can justify not promoting women because of the way that their jobs progress throughout the company. Because they were hired on a specific track when they first were hired, arguing for a higher rank, more pay, or more vacation time was not an option. The two-track system is not the only method in which employers try to discourage women from the work force. For recruiting, employers advertise for "women only" jobs, despite recruiting for jobs as male specific becoming illegal under the EEOL[99]. Age limits were also used to screen out women. For example, if a woman was young, they will not want to hire her in fear that she will get married and leave the company. Also, there are separate exams and interviews for men and women as well as different hiring periods. Some places hold interviews only after they finish with males, giving them worse "leftover jobs"[100]

Despite these flaws in the law itself, some praise has been given. While there is no real reinforcement of the law, some believe that the law has had some indirect impacts. For example, the number of women who have graduated from a four-year college as opposed to a two year has grown over the years. In 1985, the percentage of women going to a four-year school was 13.7% compared to 21% in 1994, a marked increase. The law thus finds it's significance not so much in it's actual policies, but instead because it promotes the idea of women's rights and political change But, in the workforce symbolic change is not enough to actually come to fruition. One theorist praised the law for it's widespread recognition, yet also realized that the bubble economy of the early 1990s halted change within the workforce. While some women way want to work more and are becoming more educated, they still do not receive fair treatment in the office in terms of job assignment and promotion.

---

[99] Gelb, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 392.
[100] Gelb, "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 392.

In the 1990s, after the bubble economy collapse, women were often the first to go in the company when downsizing. Women who remained in the workforce, often times remained on the *ippanshoku* track as office ladies. In the mid 1990s, sociologist, Yuko Ogasawara conducted an ethnography on the relationship between office ladies and salaryman in her work *Office Ladies and Salaried Men*. Despite the study being relatively recent, the gender distinctions and hierarchy remained strong and very much a part of the office. In the workplace, Coded use of language in the workforce is used to distinguish gender hierarchy. For example, when an OL transfers a call the caller will often ask if the next person in line is either a male or a woman so he could know whether to use respectful language or not. On the other end, when asked an important question, an OL would reply to a question she was unsure of the answer with "There's no man on the floor at the moment who can take your call."[101] The need to use the word man implies that they are the more knowledgeable and qualified workers, and that the woman works for him.

Often times in the office, when the word "woman" was not used to refer to office ladies, the term *onnanoko* (girl) was. Although men did not call them *onnanoko* to their face, using their names instead, they would use it when talking amongst themselves[102]. The use of the term implies a sense of dominance and belittlement of the female workers by their male counterparts. It also displays a lack of individuality men place on women. A lack of recognition in a woman's abilities translates to when they write reports for men. When preparing and writing a report for a superior, the woman's name does not appear on the report. In Japan, this is common for

---

[101] Ogasawara, Office *Ladies,* 30.
[102] Ogasawara, Office *Ladies,* 31.

subordinate male workers as well, as the boss will take all the credit for the report. But, unlike female clerical workers, an unwritten agreement between the boss and the made subordinate is made, ensuring means to promotion. Thus, women are often unrecognized in work that requires some skill and preparation. Not only will they not get promoted, but a lack of distinction in skill amongst women is not made either, making the woman feel powerless as if she is a "cog in the machine[103]. The feeling that they are dispensable within the company and not equal to men, cause many women to quit after only a few years[104].

Even to this day this assumption that women are to stay at home is one that is very much a reality to many Japanese women, despite being qualified in their education. A recent set of data from the Center of Work-Life Policy found that Americans are much less likely to quit their jobs after having a child with 31% keeping their jobs, while 70% of Japanese women quit[105]. These numbers indicate a huge set of expectations for women in Japan. As discussed earlier many women do not choose career driven jobs in companies, instead part-time jobs. Currently, only 43% of women workers have fulltime jobs, as opposed to 73% in the United States[106] Despite the fact that their responsibilities and hours are not much different from full-time salaryman workers, they receive little benefits and make 30.7 percent less than men (Japan times women empower. According to this same set of data "Nearly two-thirds (63%) say they quit because their career was not satisfying and 49% left because they felt " stymied and stalled"[107] Often times (77%), of these women would like to rejoin the workforce but have a difficult time

---

[103] Ogasawara, Office *Ladies,* 31.
[104] Ogasawara, Office *Ladies,* 25.
[105] Wingfield-Hayes, Rupert"Japan: the worst developed country for working mothers?," *BBC News,* March 21, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21880124
[106] Hewlett, "Japan's Working, Woman Problem."
[107] Hewlett, "Japan's Working, Woman Problem."

finding jobs that they can call careers. A form of subtle discrimination takes place, as women who have not worked in an office for over ten years due to childbirth are quickly rejected. These numbers indicate that women are willing to work, but can't because of social expectations. The unwillingness for many fathers to take paternity leave as well as the high expense and small number of day cares provide little solution to women who want to continue their careers[108].

The contradiction of increasing numbers of educated women and women entering the workforce contrasted with the prevailing assumption of women staying at home, begins to make sense thinking in terms of Kumazawa's "freedom of the discriminated[109] In this, he describes the full-time salaryman as one who dedicates his entire life to the company, leaving little time to the family. Thus, women who want to advance on the managerial track, have to make the decision of work or a family. Generally, the select number of women who do end up on with fulltime jobs are referred to as DINKs, or double income no kids[110]. This choice is simple for a many women as they would much rather give up a high-ranking job than a family. To make matters more difficult for working women, little government efforts have been made to integrate daycares into working life, giving women fewer options. The "freedom of the discriminated" is therefore designated to women who do not have to work as many hard hours as men, but also cannot advance. Thus, the workforce is still based on full-time male workers and temporary female part-time workers.

---

[108] Wingfield-Hayes, "Japan the worst developed country for working mothers?"
[109] Kumazawa, *Portraits of the Japanese Workplace*, 199.
[110] Kumazawa, *Portraits of the Japanese Workplace*, 197.

Despite this, there are some interesting trends in Japan that imply that a change in this model may come sooner than later. In the past, the term, "Christmas cake" was designated to women over the age of 25 who were not yet married, implying that they were too old for marriage. But, in recent years the age has become higher, with social expectations for marriage becoming less strict. With the benefits of lifetime employment and financial stability not as readily available after the bubble economy collapse of the 1990s, drastic changes in marriage rates resulted. The average age of marriage shot up from 25 in 1980 to 30 in 2005[111]. The rate of marriage also dropped drastically from 12 marriages per 1,000 individuals down to 5.7[112]. The higher marriage age, and lower marriage rate can partly be traced to financial difficulties for many young Japanese who choose to save money instead of marry. With less social expectations to marry, comes a re-evaluation of marriage. In the past, it was frowned upon for women to stay single. Once a woman got married, they could quickly have children and buy a house, all with the support of a husband that works and gets promoted. This lifestyle is harder to attain that it once was, resulting in less of an incentive to get married. With this drop in incentive, more women are becoming less dependent on men and are working and getting married on their own terms[113].

These trends indicate a sort of silent protest amongst the salaryman family of the past that married young, had kids, and had a clear distinction of gender roles in the family. In the past, women were more subordinate because they had more of an incentive to be. It was expected that

---

[111] "Asian Demography: The flight from marriage," *The Economist,* Aug 20th 2011, http://www.economist.com/node/21526329.
[112] "Asian Demography,"
[113] Nakagawa, Ulara, "Marriage on the rocks," *CNN,* 28 March, 2011, http://travel.cnn.com/tokyo/life/love-and-marriage-japan-176247.

the male act as the *daikokubashira*, while the woman stays at home. Though women are still not expected to work substantial hours for the family, the number of women who do not feel the need to get married could result in massive changes within the office. On top of that, with a country that is destined to shrink rapidly in upcoming years[114], as well as an impending labor shortage, the need for educated, full-time workers will increase. Educated women disillusioned by marriage, seem fit to take these jobs. These possible changes in the home and workplace have obvious conflicts with the traditional notion of the masculine salaryman. But, if these changes within the workplace are to occur, the longstanding dichotomy between home and office will perhaps become blurred and more equal.

Conclusion

In many ways, the salaryman is still the predominant masculine role within Japanese society. Many steps involve becoming a man: one must become a full-time *shakaijn,* marry, create a family, and support them with successive promotion. Traditionally, the life of the salaryman involved long hours and strong dedication to the company, but the benefits of lifetime employment and the ability to provide for the family were worth it for many. After the bubble economy collapse, massive layoffs occurred and decline of these benefits went underway. The idea of "running like mad to stay in place" became a staple of many salaryman, as younger workers were fighting for their jobs like never before. Without these benefits, the masculine construction of the salaryman has begun to change, causing people to re-evaluate former conceptions of masculinity.

---

[114] Wingfield-Hayes, "Japan the worst developed country for working mothers?"

The *hikikomori* are perhaps one of the more tragic social groups that have arisen in recent decades. Their existence of seclusion and depression represents a stark contrast to the masculinity of the salaryman. Unlike the salaryman, *hikikomori* will not get married or have jobs, choosing to live at home instead. Perhaps many of the causes for their depression can be linked to the fast-paced industrial culture that the salaryman find themselves a part of. Their marriage to the company instead to their family, leads many *hikikomori* to go through harsh bullying in schools without an adequate support system. The Japanese education system's competitiveness is mirrored by the competitiveness of the workplace as illustrated with the prevalence of cram schools. Perhaps on a more theoretical level, the traditional salaryman found much of his masculinity and prosperity through a supporting group of co-workers and bosses, which allowed the uniquely Japanese lifetime employment system to become successful for so many years. Schools possibly adopted and uphold an environment of adult non-interference to ready the students for reliance on a group, even though it can be extremely taxing. As a result kids are often bullied, and *hikikomori* are traumatized. Similar to the Kumazawa phrase "running like mad to say in place" retaining to salaryman, *hikikomori*, as children are constantly putting on social masks to appear normal. Perhaps we can also use terms like *honne* and *tatemae*, to better understand overworked workers. With salaryman working long hours overtime without proper recognition. Perhaps their voices are not expressed in fear that it will shake up their position within their group, instead keeping their agony to themselves in hope that they can get a promotion.

Freeters, while working, do not have the jobs that Japanese associate with masculinity. After the bubble economy collapse, more expandable work was needed in the workforce, as companies could not afford to make as many workers full-time employees. Because their pay and job stability is worse than that of a full-time worker, freeters can often not claim the masculine status of breadwinner. With this ideal out of reach, freeters find it economically and socially difficult to get married, as women often want a breadwinner as a husband. With so many workers working part-time or without a guaranteed contract, a re-evaluation of the idea that ties masculinity with the role of *daikokubashira* may occur, perhaps opening up more options for socially acceptable ways of living.

Women have been subjects of masculine power for many years, and in more modern times this power has translated to a dichotomy between the workplace and home. Because of expectations of women to stay at home and have kids, the prospect of lifetime employment for women remains one that is largely unreasonable to day. To do so would be to give up a family, something many Japanese women still want to do. As a result, women are often given menial part-time jobs, like office ladies who are forced to do repetitive tasks. Overtime women have worked more and more, and laws like the EEOL (though unsuccessful in a pragmatic sense) have been passed indicating a slow shift in the acceptance of working women.   Overtime this acceptance can potentially be even greater with an impending labor surplus and the rise of more single educated women that are not as pressured to get married as they once were. In order to help fix impending difficulties in the economy and labor shortages, feminists should note the importance that women workers can play Japan's future. If done so, women will have increased visibility outside of the home and in powerful positions.

Masculine hegemony is a construct that changes overtime, with cultural, economic, and political changes. The prosperous masculine salaryman that shared a close relationship with his company is no longer viable. Instead he should be viewed as more independent, cautious, and less financially stable. These changes in image, policy, and practice contribute to social changes that resulted in the rising prevalence of *hikikomori,* freeters, and women in the workforce. With this change in image and rise of non-masculine groups in challenge to the traditional masculine workforce, further changes in the construction of masculinity will take place, perhaps leading to a less gendered dichotomy between work and home.

Works Cited

A New Class of Drifters," *Japan Echoes* (2001): vol.28 no. 5,
http://www.japanecho.com/sum/2001/280515.html.

"Asian Demography: The flight from marriage," *The Economist,* Aug 20th 2011,
http://www.economist.com/node/21526329.

Chiaki Moriguchi and Hiroshi Ono. "Japanese Lifetime Employment" in Institutional Change in
Japan, ed. Blomström, Magnus, and Sumner J. La Croix. London: Routledge, 2006.

Cook, Emma E. "Expectations of Failure: Maturity and Masculinity for Freeters in
Contemporary Japan." *Social Science Japan Journal* 16.1, 2013, 29-43. Web.

Dasgupta, Romit. 2013. *Re-reading the salaryman in Japan crafting masculinities.* Abingdon,
Oxon: Routledge.

Gallagher, Paul, "Hikikomri – The Silent Sufferers," *Dangerous Minds*, November 14, 2010,
http://dangerousminds.net/comments/hikikomori_the_silent_sufferers.

Gelb, Joyce. "The Equal Employment Opportunity Law: a Decade of Change for Japanese
Women?," Law & Policy, vol 22, October 2000, 3,
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9930.00099/abstract.

"Global Gender Gap Report 2012: The Best And Worst Countries For Women," *Huffington
Post*, October 24, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/24/global-gender-gap-report-
2012-best-worst-countries-women_n_2006395.html.

Hewlett, Sylvia. "Japan's Working-Woman Problem," *Time*, December 11, 2011,
http://ideas.time.com/2011/12/11/japans-working-woman-problem/.

Hiroki, Tabuchi. "Japan Pays a Price for Its Lifetime Jobs," *New York Times,* May 19, 2009,
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/20/business/global/20zombie.html.

Kuchikomi. "Looming layoffs: Which Workers are at greatest risk?," *Japan Today*, Jan 25, 2013,
http://www.japantoday.com/category/kuchikomi/view/looming-layoffs-which-workers-are-at-
the-greatest-risk.

Kumazawa, Makoto. 1996. *Portraits of the Japanese workplace: labor movements, workers, and
managers*. (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.).

Nakagawa, Ulara, "Marriage on the rocks," *CNN*, 28 March, 2011,
http://travel.cnn.com/tokyo/life/love-and-marriage-japan-176247.

Ogasawara, Yuko. *Office ladies and salaried men: power, gender, and work in Japanese companies.* Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1998.

Okunuku, Hifumi. "Labor law reform raises rather than relieves workers' worries," *Japan Times,* Mar 19, 2013, http://www.japantimes.co.jp/searchresults/?q=lifetime%20employment.

"Sayonara, salaryman," *Economist.* 386 2009, http://www.economist.com/node/10424391

Takeda Hiroki. 2004. *The political economy of reproduction in Japan*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Tobin, Joseph Jay, David Y. H. Wu, and Dana H. Davidson. 1989. Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Westlake, Adam. "Over 3 million 'parasite singles' in Japan: over 35, still living with parents," *Japan Daily Press,* May 3, 2012, http://japandailypress.com/over-3-million-parasite-singles-in-japan-over-35-still-living-with-parents-031659.

Wingfield-Hayes, Rupert"Japan: the worst developed country for working mothers?," *BBC News,* March 21, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21880124

"Women in senior management: still not enough," *Grant Thornton International Business Report,* 2012, 3.

Zielenziger, Michael. *Shutting out the Sun: how Japan created its own lost generation.* New York: Nan A, 2006.