

# Working Mother vs Working Father: Are We Equal?

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of this study is to explore the male perspective about gender equality issues related to working fathers and working mothers: a perspective that is lacking in gender equality studies.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A preliminary investigation of gender equality from the perspective of working fathers was conducted qualitatively through interviews with respondents from Malaysia and Japan. Then, based on Gioia's data analysis framework, a data structure was developed for gender equality issues related to working mothers and working fathers through the lens of stigma theory.

**Findings:** There is consensus among the respondents that working mothers have more responsibilities as compared to working fathers. Structural stigma and cultural values are the dominant influencers that distinguish men's perspectives about work-life issues and gender equality between the two countries.

**Research limitations/implications:** This is a preliminary study in which a small number of samples were involved. Further investigation could enhance the reliability of the data to explicate the gender equality issues facing working mothers and working fathers. The implications of the findings are discussed in terms of the influence of structural stigma and cultural dimensions in shaping gender role expectations in different countries.

**Practical implications:** Due consideration can be given to social and cultural indicators to improve the formulation and implementation of work and family policies.

**Originality/value:** Enhancing the understanding of gender equality issues from diverse perspectives including those of men could be of significant value in paving the way to a new norm of an inclusive society, both locally and globally.

**Keywords:** discrimination, gender equality, work-life balance, human resource management, Japan, Malaysia

### **Introduction**

As a working parent, juggling work and family matters is not easy. In order to perform multiple roles, the individual needs to weigh the good and the bad of their actions before they can prioritize their various tasks. Often, these tasks put every working parent in a dilemma as conflicts arise between work and family expectations. The greater burden in this regard has become synonymous with working mothers as compared to working fathers, which is supposed to be a sign of a lack of gender equality. The issue of gender equality arises in many aspects of life, and in order to understand its wide-ranging implications, several reviews of past studies on gender equality and work-life issues have been undertaken (see Shimazu et al., 2020; Okubo et al., 2021; Goy et al., 2019). Such reviews are crucial as they can provide a comprehensive synthesis of impactful research findings that are beneficial for achieving an inclusive society, both socially and economically.

The gender revolution is one of the current movements that aim to solve many social issues discussed at the global level, especially among developing countries. This movement focuses on the issue of gender equality between males and females, particularly in relation to employment matters. The main purpose of achieving gender equality is regarded as crucial at the workplace is to attain efficient operations by utilizing the skills and enhancing the performance of every employee so that they can contribute toward achieving organizational goals. It is envisaged that the performance of employees be measured based on merit and not on other indicators, including gender. This approach is intended to allow every individual to have the same opportunity and treatment based on their contributions.

Gender equality at the workplace is an important starting point to explore because of its connection with other social systems including employment opportunity, family rights, work-life balance, political representation, and many others (Gabbaret & D'Andria, 2021). In addition, the addressing of issues of gender equality provides a huge potential for solving mental health issues, a concern that has become very important in recent times.

Gender equality can be defined as the provision of equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities to every person regardless of their sex. This definition is led by the sentiment that certain labor markets are dominated by men with a consequent underrepresentation of women. In the past, this scenario was often observed in certain industries such as science, technology, and engineering (Edmunds et al., 2016). However, as more development and advancement occurs in society, due consideration needs to be given to the issue of gender equality in order to provide a more harmonious environment and a better work-life balance for employees, regardless of their gender.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Men's view of gender equality***

The need to obtain the male perspective on how to solve gender equality issues has been raised in the literature for several reasons, but in particular the recognition that obstacles to gender equality are also caused by men's behaviors and attitudes (Essig & Soparnot, 2019). Researchers believe that the effort to achieve gender equality requires the collaboration of men and that changes need to be made by men in terms of seeing the solution to this issue as being in their best interests as well (Kimmel, 2009). While, men, unlike women, generally have the

advantage of not being categorized as a minority group, men need to be aware of the difference so that they can understand the need for fairness in the social system and support equal opportunity and treatment for all members of society without any discrimination (Acker, 2006). An awareness of status differences is vital so that men can act better rather than just 'talk' and 'ignore' (Essig & Soparnot, 2019). This is particularly true currently as the economic challenges and environmental uncertainties facing the global community have impacted both men and women and have resulted in greater pressure in balancing work and family responsibilities. Therefore, the cooperation and focused attention of every family member is needed to overcome the challenges (Le et al., 2020).

As mentioned above, there is a lack of studies on the male perspective in relation to gender equality (Essig & Soparnot, 2019). This is an important knowledge gap that needs to be filled as studies have also reported that men face their own challenges and difficulties at the workplace, particularly in balancing work and family responsibilities (Kimmel, 2009; Ghiulamila & Levet, 2007; Scambor et al., 2014). The challenges faced by men have been described from several aspects, including the nature of their occupation and potential sources of difficulties encountered in work life. These aspects are closely related to gender equality issues because of their connection to work-life aspects, including conflict in occupational choice, work and family conflict, gender conflict, and intrapersonal conflict (Essig & Soparnot, 2019). Researchers have therefore suggested that further investigations should be conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the male view of gender equality in order to provide solutions for the workplace and to guide policy development for a better work-life balance (Essig & Soparnot, 2019).

As regards the existing literature on gender-related issues there also three key limitations that need to be addressed. First, most studies have focused mainly on professional employees in Western countries (Chung & Lippe, 2020). This implies that there is a need for more diverse contexts and samples to be investigated in future research undertakings. Therefore, the consideration of a different national context is regarded as vital because of the influence that context has on working arrangements which are so significant for both gender equality and work-life balance (Chung, 2018). Second, gathering data from groups of employees other than professional workers may assist in deepening our knowledge about the influence of contextual elements in solving the gender equality issue. Third and finally, there is a dearth of research on the influence of the organizational context. Hence studies in this area could potentially contribute to improving policy formulation in respect of the development of gender equality in modern organizations (Le et al., 2020). Therefore, researchers have recommended that gender-related studies give more consideration to the male perspective and its impact on men and women's gender inequalities (Essig & Soparnot, 2019).

In light of the above, this preliminary study focuses on gathering and analyzing men's perspectives about gender equality in the context of two non-Western contexts, namely, Malaysia and Japan with a focus on fathers working in a variety of sectors. Data structures are then developed for these two respective countries by looking at the information provided by the respondents through the lens of stigma theory.

### ***Stigma theory***

While the percentage of female employees in the labor market is increasing over time, the issue of gender equality is still the focal point for the fair and just implementation of human resource management policies in most organizations. Social and psychological factors are among the indicators associated with gender inequality in certain contexts (Stoet et al., 2016). An

understanding of social constructs provides a potential way forward in solving social issues such as gender inequality in society and at the workplace. Stigma is one such social construct, and it is particularly relevant to the area under investigation.

Stigma can be defined as a prejudice or negative assessment of a person due to stereotyping (Corrigan & Penn, 2015). When a person has a stigma in society, this implies that the person is exposed to different treatment and assessment based on his/her particular identity groups. Stigma is associated with discrimination whether formal or informal (Kawase et al., 2016). It can happen to minorities based on race, gender, and sexual orientation as well as to those who have less power than others (Frost, 2011).

Stigma exists at three levels: societal, interpersonal, and individual levels (Bos et al., 2013). It has also been proposed that stigma can be measured according to four dimensions: public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association and structural stigma. Public stigma is developed by the cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to a particular group. Self-stigma occurs when someone shares the social and psychological impact from a particular stigma. Stigma by association implies social and psychological reactions toward stigmatized groups. Structural stigma is related with the societal institutions and systems that legitimize certain stigmatized statuses. While all four stigma dimensions are interrelated, researchers believe that the core dimension is public stigma (Bos et al., 2013).

The consequences of stigma can be seen in many ways. For example, at the workplace, a woman may feel that she is the victim of biases and prejudices in a performance evaluation, which then results in low morale and poor motivation to perform well. Having a stigma in society could position women as people who merely nurse and care for children and therefore have no need of further education. This then influences how society portrays the role of men and women in the family. As a result, organizational systems and social structures that hold on to that kind of stigma become a barrier that stands in the way of women's career development (Wolfert et al., 2019). Also, the inherent qualities of women that are apparent when they perform their work roles can be misunderstood as weaknesses that adversely affect their performance (Robinson, 2003). The situation can worsen when the stigma held about a particular gender is associated with the compensation system and other employment policies which demonstrate injustice to that group (Butkus et al., 2018). As a result, the victims may choose to leave such an environment and look for a more acceptable organization or system (Pickern & Costakis, 2021). This type of exit has been described as a consequence of social rejection, discounting, discrediting, dehumanization, and other significant differences in the treatment and opportunities given to the stigmatized group (Dovidio et al., 2000; Herek, 1999).

Researchers have also noted the contextual influence of stigma, where one aspect that is stigmatized in one context may not be treated the same in another context (Crocker et al., 1998). It has been suggested that stigma is promoted through the social structure rather than as a result of the natural characteristics of the individual (Crocker et al., 1998; Hebl & Dovidio, 2005). It is the social structure, which includes laws, policies, and religions, that shape an understanding about individuals and stigmatized groups (Frost, 2011). It has also been shown that stigma can result in social disapproval and stigma-related stress for the victim (Chan et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2008). Stigma-related stress can occur in many forms including stressful life events, everyday discrimination and expectations of rejection (Frost, 2011). However, changes in the social structure can happen and emerging trends in structural factors such as a new education system and law legislation can have a significant influence on the stigmatization process. This potentially could shed light in changing the stigma through the integration of social and cultural factors with other research disciplines such as economics and policy (Bos et al., 2013). Indeed,

recent studies have reported that stigmatized groups that live in supportive environments are able to receive health benefits from their identity disclosure as compared to those who live in hostile environments (Quinn, 2018).

### *Asia as a non-Western context*

Contextual elements constitute an important mechanism that influences social issues including gender equality. Contextual elements can be cultural, economic, and institutional (Le et al., 2020). Importantly, the cultural factor is one of the contextual indicators that can shape individual perceptions and reactions toward work and life. The cultural factor consists of the values, beliefs, interpretations or meanings given by an individual to a particular event which are developed through a common understanding and the experiences shared over time through the generations (House & Javidan, 2004). The uniqueness of a group's shared values could distinguish their reactions toward other peoples or events. Further, researchers have noted that individuals' experiences about work and life matters are largely influenced by the national context (Allen et al., 2015; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). Thus, as far as cultural and contextual differences are concerned, researchers contend that findings from a Western context may not be applicable in another context (Liu & Cheung, 2015).

Asia as a non-Western context may offer a different explanation about the gender-related values held by people. As Asia has a large population and is undergoing rapid economic development, there is a clear need to conduct research on the work and life issues of this large proportion of the global workforce (Budhwar, Varma & Patel, 2016). However, there is still a scarcity of studies in the Asian context despite the greater challenges of economic growth that are bringing significant changes to the social fabric of the societies and the lifestyles of the people in the region (Le et al., 2020). The studies that exist have reported increased stress among employees in Asia due to fast and intense economic development which has resulted in longer working hours, an imbalance in work and family life, improper employment regulations, and a lack of work-family policies that sufficiently assist the workforce to adapt to the new changes (Lee & Lin, 2013; Poulouse & Sudarsan, 2017).

Based on Hofstede's definitions of cultural values, most Asian countries are collectivistic, high on power distance and uncertainty avoidance, and focused more on long-term achievement as compared to Western countries. Asian countries are also reported to be low on masculinity, except for Japan. A low masculinity society is often described as a society that is relationship oriented and that puts a high value on quality of life and people. A low masculinity society also focuses on work as a source of income for daily living (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, a high masculinity society, which is viewed as synonymous with the Western context, is related to ego-oriented characteristics and positions money and materialistic values as the highest priority. Therefore, people in a high masculinity society are usually obsessed with work (Hofstede, 2001). In terms of gender-related issues, the dimensions of masculinity and femininity also provide an understanding of social gender roles in these two types of society. A society with high masculinity has distinct social gender roles that clearly distinguish between the roles of men and women. In contrast, a society with low masculinity allows for social gender roles to overlap.

Although Asia consists of many countries (e.g., China, India, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, and others), to ensure sufficient depth and focus the current study applies content analysis and stigma theory to just two of those countries, namely, Japan and Malaysia.

### ***Gender equality studies in Japan and Malaysia***

Methodological decisions can have a significant influence on the outcomes of research conducted on gender equality topics. Therefore, a review of articles based on research conducted in Japan and Malaysia was undertaken to assist in developing the methodology for the current study. Ten recent studies on gender equality and work-life balance that were published during the period 2015–2021 were reviewed. The studies were extracted from the Scopus database, which is a well-known and reliable source of academic publications. The timeframe 2015–2021 was considered to be suitable for observing the current trend and determining the knowledge gap to be filled. All the studies were in the form of journal articles and are considered to be available online, and thus likely to be viewed and cited by other researchers.

As the intention of this study was to observe the influence of contextual elements on the gender equality phenomenon, the scope of this research review encompassed the publications related to the two selected countries (Japan and Malaysia) in order to allow for observations and cross-context comparisons to be made.

Table 1 below shows the results of the methodological review, from which it can be seen that there is a preference for a quantitative approach to gender equality topics and dependency on a single source of data in both countries.

**Table 1: Summary of gender equality and work life studies in Japan and Malaysia**

#### **Japan**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Journal</b>	<b>Research design</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Measure</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
Izuhara (2015)	Gender, Place and Culture	Qualitative	Single source	Predetermined topic guide	Not specified	23 women
Shimada et al. (2016)	Community. Work & Family	Quantitative	Single source	SWING-J	Not specified	2701 dual-earner parents
Mun and Jung (2017)	Administrative Science Quarterly	Quantitative	Multi source	Panel data	Publicly traded firms	829 Japanese firms
Shimazu et al. (2020)	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	Quantitative	Multi-source	DUWAS, UWES, SWING, SDQ	Not specified	208 families
Okubo et al. (2021)	Asian Economic Papers	Quantitative	Single source	Work efficiency and Task, evaluation and work environment	Telework	10516 first wave 8407 second wave

### Malaysia

Authors		Research design	Source	Measure	Industry	Sample size
Samuel and Ramayah (2016)	Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities	Quantitative	Single source	WLB	Manufacturing and service organizations	152 MBA students/employees
Johari et al. (2018)	International Journal of Educational Management	Quantitative	Single source	WLB	Education	302 teachers
Goy et al. (2019)	Studies in Higher Education	Quantitative	Single source	Data from Ministry of Health	Education	2008–2012 panel data
Adapa and Sheridan (2019)	The International Journal of Human Resource Management	Qualitative	Single source	Interview	Accounting firms	20 accountants
Dousin et al. (2020)	Journal of Advanced Nursing	Mixed method	Single source	WLB, LOMS and SWLS	Health	379 nurses (survey) 22 nurses (interview)

### Research Methodology and Data Collection

The review of the above-mentioned ten articles related to gender equality and work-life studies conducted in Japan and Malaysia provides a clear motivation for the current study. Although it is apparent that a consistent effort has been made to explore gender equality, most studies have used a quantitative research design. Thus there is a paucity of research approaches that can explore the issue in more depth and observe the phenomenon from a contextual angle, which indicates a need for studies in this area to employ a qualitative research methodology.

A qualitative approach is particularly pertinent for social issues such as gender equality in the community as well as human resource management issues, which are potentially influenced by the social structure and system (Mat & Barrett, 2017). Accordingly, due observation of contextual elements is required in order to answer the questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ certain phenomena happen and continue to happen in the way that they do. Indeed, contextual observation is crucial for suggesting solutions that could work well in real life (Cooke, 2017). In particular, previous research has identified specific gaps that need to be filled by future studies on gender equality issues, namely, lack of attention to male voices, blue-collar workers and self-employed workers and lack of use of country predictors in order gain a more in-depth understanding of the issue (Le et al., 2020). Therefore, the current study seeks to fill these gaps and contribute to the effort to achieve gender equality in society.

Interviews were conducted with working fathers from Malaysia and Japan to get an overview of their understanding about the position and role of working fathers and working mothers in their respective communities. The characteristics of working fathers chosen for this study include men within the age of 30 years and above, married, having children and from various work sectors. The demographic background of the respondents is provided in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Demographic background of respondents**

Characteristics	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
<b>Age</b>							
> 50			1	1		1	
40–50	1						1
30–39		1			1		
< 30							
<b>Religion</b>							
Islam	1	1	1	1	1		
Buddhism						1	1
<b>Education level</b>							
Doctoral		1					
Master	1						
Bachelor					1	1	
Diploma				1			
Secondary school			1				1
<b>Working sector</b>							
Public	1	1					
Private			1			1	
Self-employed				1	1		1
<b>Country</b>							
Malaysia	1	1	1	1	1		
Japan						1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

A total of seven respondents were contacted and interviews were conducted: five respondents from Malaysia and two from Japan. Although the number is small, the data offers sufficient depth of understanding for emergent themes and categories to be developed. Some researchers suggested that conceptual depth is more important than merely achieving data saturation to determine a fixed point to stop the data collection (Nelson, 2016). This is because adding additional interview or data will not necessarily influence the data richness, but instead it is assumed to be more insightful as the researcher becomes clearer of what the data means (Saunders et al., 2018).

The data collection took place from June to July 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic and while a Movement Control Order was mandated in Malaysia which prevented face-to-face meetings. This restriction was solved through the use of online video conferencing. This was considered to be an efficient approach during the pandemic as interviewer and interviewee were living in the same country and reduced the risks associated with face-to-face meetings for both the interviewer and interviewee. WhatsApp messages are sent through WhatsApp groups to attract respondents that fulfil the set criteria. All feedback is screened through to ensure all criteria are being met.

The selected participants were then being contacted to schedule the interview sessions. In the case of the Japanese respondents, interviews were done by Japanese students who had returned to Japan after completing an exchange program in Malaysia interviewed their fathers and sent the interview responses to the researcher via email. Each interview lasted around one hour and was conducted in the Malay or Japanese language as appropriate. All interviews were recorded and translated into the English language before the transcription process was conducted.

The interview questions were designed to obtain information about the respondents' background and their perceptions about working fathers and working mothers from life and work perspectives. The questions were aimed at gathering the respondents' actual experiences as a working father and their observations on the situation faced by their partner/wife as a working mother. The interview started with general questions about the issue, which empowered the respondents to develop the discussion topic on their own terms and based on their own understanding. This enabled the researcher to get in-depth information to explore the issue in depth. As a result, interview questions were expanded as more interviews were held.

The interview data were analyzed using Gioia et al.'s (2013) framework of data analysis. Thus, in developing a data structure for working fathers and working mothers, three stages of analysis were involved: first order analysis, second order analysis, and aggregation of dimensions. In the first order analysis, the transcripts were referred to and the interview data were arranged based on the respondents' exact words. At this stage, no categories or groups of responses were formed as the aim of this stage is to demonstrate the variety of responses from respondents. Next, the second order analysis was conducted in which the data were arranged based on the assumptions of stigma theory. These elements guided the interpretation of the interview data and minimized the researcher's personal biases. During this process, similarities among responses were identified to form themes. In the last stage, known as the aggregation of dimensions, the data structure was developed and produced evidence about working fathers and working mothers that was supported by the theoretical assumptions.

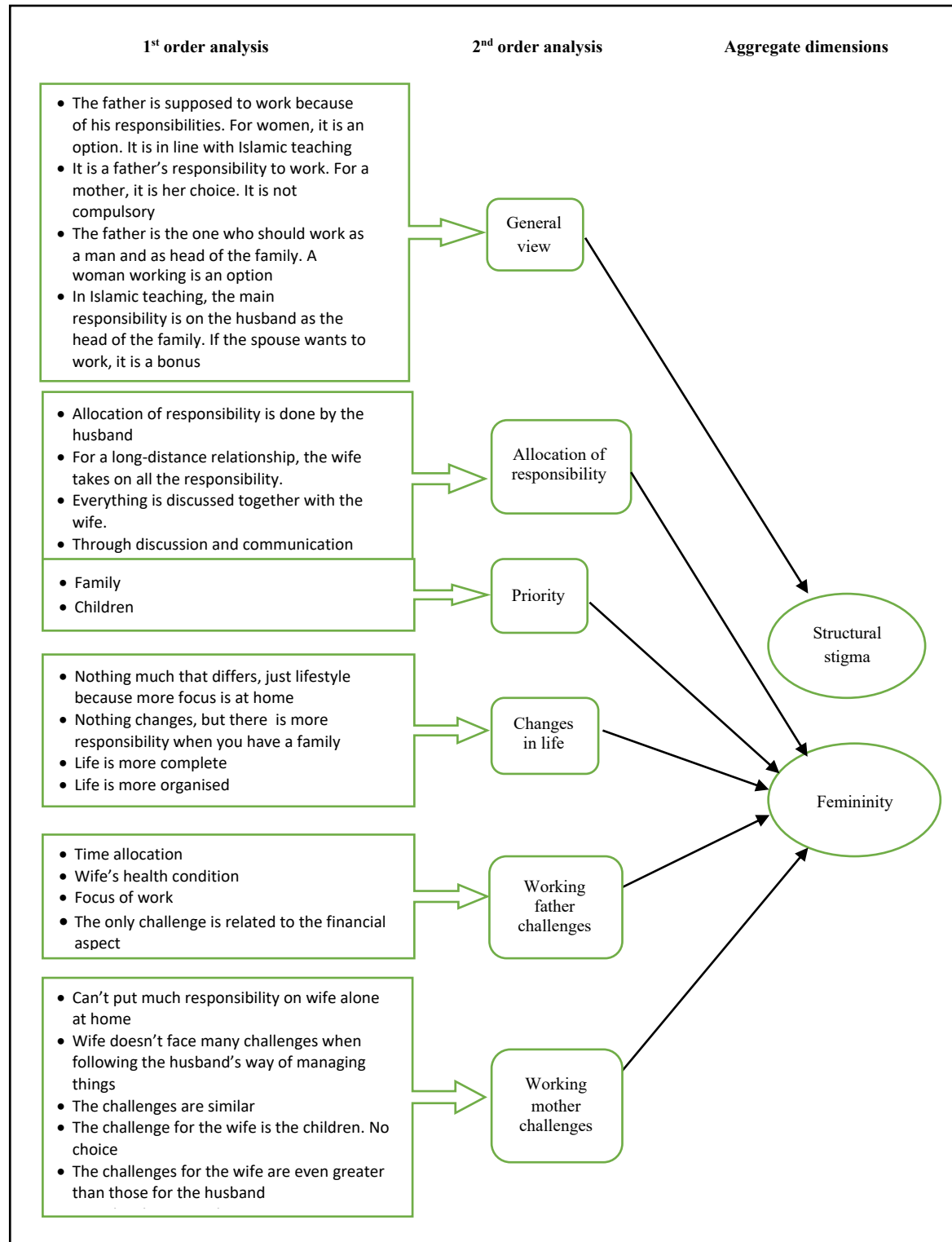
## **Results and Discussion**

To fill the gap identified in the literature, the current study considered few aspects of the research context in order to address the methodological limitations of previous research, specifically in relation to the research design and the respondents' background characteristics. First, as most of the previous studies used a quantitative approach, the current study employed a qualitative approach in order to obtain more in-depth information. Second, the current study involved male respondents from various working backgrounds. As illustrated in Table 2, almost half of the respondents were self-employed working fathers, which expanded the respondent profile to include respondents other than white-collar employees who have been the predominant category of respondents in previous works (i.e., Dousin et al., 2020; Adapa & Sheridan, 2019; Mun & Jung, 2017). Further, the current study also considered the influence of two different country contexts, namely, Japan and Malaysia. It is therefore hoped that the findings can provide a comparative assessment of the gender equality issue that can be used to frame a more efficient approach to solve inequality in society and improve the work-life balance. This is an important aspect of the current research as it has been suggested that the identification of country-level differences is regarded as a reliable tool for formulating solutions for complex human resource management issues (Parry et al., 2020).

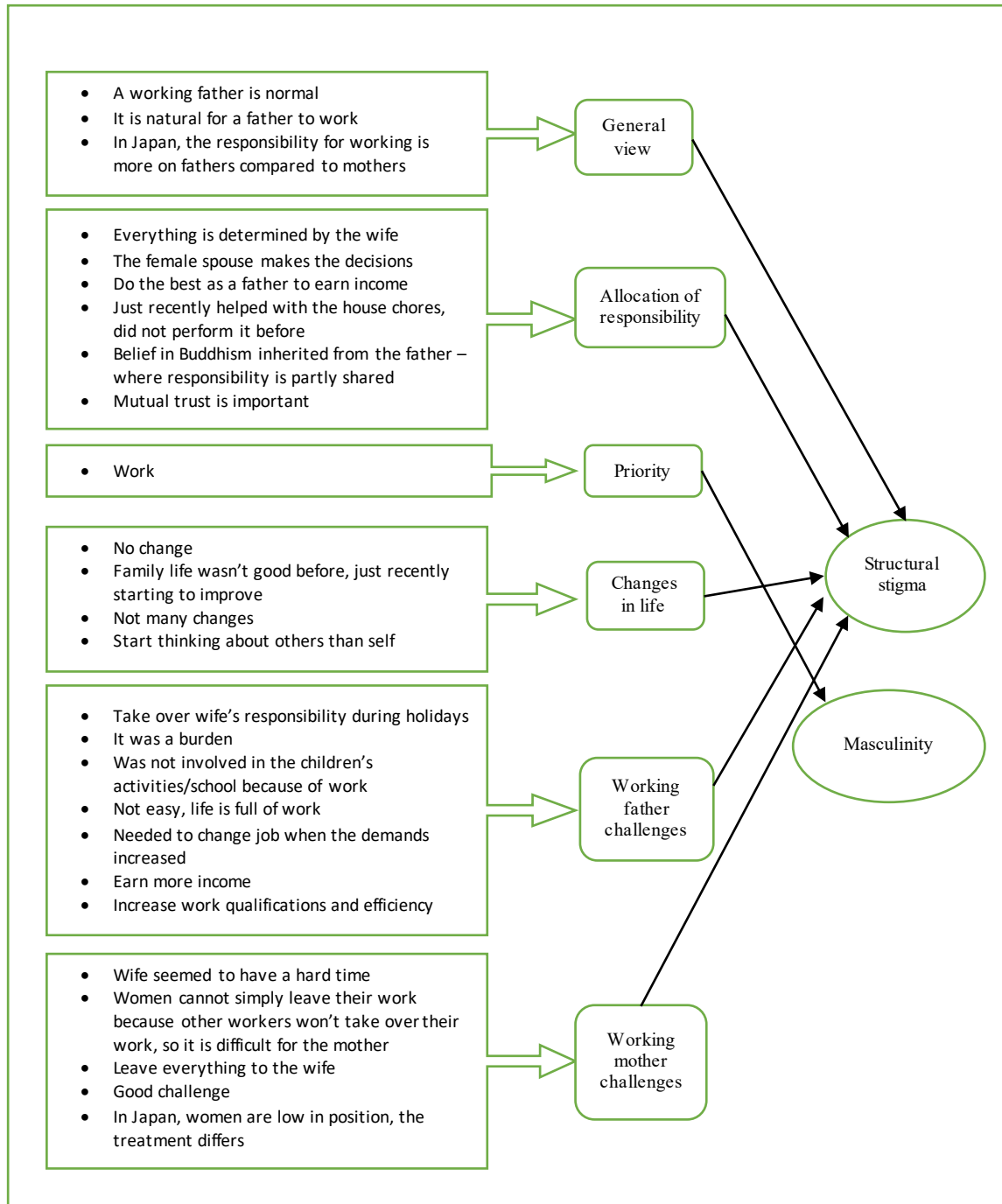
As stated earlier, the purpose of the current study was to gather data on the male perspective of the gender equality of working mothers and working fathers. The findings of this study demonstrate that there is a consensus among respondents from both countries about the

differences between working mothers and working fathers, as shown below in Figure 1 and Figure 2 of the data structure for Malaysia and Japan, respectively. The respondents' understanding about the gender equality issue in relation to working fathers and working mothers is demonstrated through six themes, namely, general view, allocation of responsibility, priority, changes in life, challenges of working fathers, and challenges of working mothers. In terms of their general view, the respondents from both countries share similar opinions and perceptions about working parents. The main idea under this theme is consistent with the traditional gender role expectation that men are the main breadwinners of the family. This view is related with structural stigma. As previously mentioned, there are four dimensions of stigma that can be used to explore the gender equality issue, namely, public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association, and structural stigma. The general view held by the respondents about working fathers and working mothers in Japan and Malaysia is more closely related to structural stigma as compared to the other stigma dimensions because their responses are based on societal values and systems that legitimize a certain stigmatized status to differentiate between men and women's roles (Bos et al., 2013). In both countries, respondents spoke about the same values that are shared in the community and have long been embedded in their lifestyles. It is common in the community that the father works for the family as part of his main responsibility. Women's participation in earning family income is viewed as an additional role to support the husband.

In the case of the Malaysian respondents, most of them relate their understanding of their family responsibilities with the precepts of Islamic teaching. In this regard, they believe it is their responsibility to meet the needs of the family and to not solely depend on their wife. This is consistent with the past literature on the influence of Islamic teaching on the perception of work and life matters among Muslim people in Malaysia (Hassan, Dollard, & Winefield, 2010). The respondents who follow Islamic teaching very closely understand their role and capacity in the family to be that of a leader for women and to thus shoulder more family-related responsibilities as compared to women (Adawiyah, 2019).



**Figure 1: Data structure of working fathers and working mothers in Malaysia**



**Figure 2: Data structure of working fathers and working mothers in Japan**

Although the perceptions expressed by the respondents are common and have long been known, the findings of this study provide an insight into how structural stigma has a negative implication for gender equality. This implication is particularly related to the financial contribution of the women to the family. For instance, almost half of the respondents' partners have a higher or similar income, but the male respondents do not highlight the contribution of their partner to the household income, but rather claim that they themselves are the main source of income for their family. This perception is likely to exist due to the common understanding of the family structure. Indeed, this contention has previously been reported in respect of the gender inequality issue because of the values of local culture, social traditions, and traditional

gender roles that are historically inherited from one generation to another (UNDP, 2015). Also, the acknowledgment of women's contribution in financial terms is blurred with their role as primary caregivers in respect of household and children matters. Yet, greater recognition of their financial contribution could contribute to the development of a new norm to thereby achieve gender equality, especially as the need for double incomes is undeniable due to the high cost of living and the economic challenges in Malaysia and Japan. Moreover, while a previous study claimed that most couples, particularly in Japan, are moving toward a model of shared responsibility (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2009), a recent study by Roberts and Constantini (2021) was unable to confirm whether the model was well implemented because of it only represented one side of the story, that is, the sample consisted only of female respondents. Importantly, their study also reported dissatisfaction among Japanese women in terms of responsibility allocation due to the traditional norms held by their partners.

A comparison between the data structure of working fathers and working mothers in Japan and in Malaysia was made to explore the contextual elements of both countries that might affect the male perspective. As illustrated in Figure 1, the responses of the Malaysian respondents indicate the influence of the structural stigma and the femininity cultural dimensions. In Malaysia, the cultural factor has more influence on the perception of working fathers in relation to gender equality issues as compared to the influence of structural stigma. This is demonstrated by the higher number of themes associated with the femininity dimension as compared to structural stigma. Only the general view is regarded as falling under the structural stigma dimension while the other five are tailored to the femininity dimension of culture. These findings suggest that the process of social understanding is developed based on individual subjectivity, which is upheld by intercultural influence (Roberts & Constantini, 2021). The extent of the influence of the femininity dimension also suggests that there is the potential for gender equality goals to be achieved in Malaysia. The individual subjectivity and flexibility expressed by the respondents suggests that gendered social roles can be changed depending on the situation. Such changes are likely to be achieved through the power of femininity values assisting in offering a better interpretation of women and men's roles in society (Abu-Rabia Quader & Oplatka, 2008).

In contrast, the responses of the Japanese respondents are more embedded in structural stigma in regards to the gender equality issue in relation to working fathers and working mothers. Indeed, five of the six themes in the Japanese data structure are related to structural stigma, while only the priority theme is related to the masculinity cultural dimension. This finding adds to evidence on the existing social norms in Japan about women's burden for household responsibilities, which seems to have remained unchanged since an earlier study (Takashi et al., 2014). Despite changing lifestyles and modernization, factors that are said to influence the understanding of work and family policy formulation in Japan, the efforts that have been made so far have yet to improve the work and life issues in the country due to values that are deeply embedded and that continue shape Japanese men and women's understanding of their respective roles (Roberts & Constantini, 2021). A previous study found that while some Japanese people hope to see changes in this regard, Japanese society as a whole is still typified by strong conservative social values that hinder the adoption of new norms and lifestyles for both men and women (Roberts, 2020). The finding of the current study is also consistent with Shah (2017), who reported on the significant influence of social structure in contributing to gender inequities. Indeed, regardless of the level of awareness and belief among individuals regarding the need for gender equality, in many countries the prevailing social structure has a stronger influence and is perhaps the main hindrance that the gender revolution movement needs to overcome (Roberts & Constantini, 2021). As structural stigma encompasses the power

of social institutions and the social system to approve stigmatized statuses in society, it is therefore more difficult to reduce stigma (Goldberg, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Gender equality is one the most potent issues for an inclusive society and efficient human resource management in a modern environment. This issue is indicative of a broader social problem facing modern society because of the nexus between work and family dilemmas that it can cause. From the perspective of men in Japan and Malaysia, working mothers have greater challenges than working fathers in fulfilling work and family expectations. However, the respondents' interpretation of the working mother's status differs based on the social and cultural role expectations of their respective country. These differences may have a significant influence on the approach that is needed to bridge gender inequality and the effectiveness of the existing efforts that have been undertaken. The findings of this study suggest that individual subjectivity influences perceptions about gender equality. Importantly, the cultural values that have long been embedded in a society have a significant influence on men's perceptions and behaviors. Thus the uniqueness of the cultural dimension is regarded as a key reference for choosing the right social change tool to employ to pave the way to new attitudes and behaviors toward gender equality in a society. However, regardless of the cultural dimension, the influence of individual subjectivity identified in this study also implies that one approach may not work in the same way among all people in a society and that, accordingly, a consensual response may be difficult to achieve. Rather, the effectiveness of the effort may depend highly on the willingness of each individual to accept change and embrace a new social framework by changing their own perception about conservative gender-based roles depending on the need and the situation. Hence further enhancement of the model of shared responsibility may be required for a gender equal society to be established.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

Theoretically, the findings of this study fill a gap in gender equality research by addressing the methodological limitations of past studies (Le et al., 2020). The current study focused on the male view of the gender equality issue, a perspective that is lacking in the literature. Having working fathers' perception about the differences between their role and that of working mothers provides a useful insight into gender equality through the acquisition of new knowledge development. While previous research (Essig & Soparnot, 2019) noted the importance of the role of men's attitude and behavior in changing the situation for gender equality, the findings of this study provide information for further analysis that may enable the level of gender equality to be improved. A culturally constructed issue such as gender equality is more challenging to resolve in terms of formulating the right approach to enable a switch from an older value to a new norm. This also implies that any approach to resolving this issue needs to be unique and based on specific cultural elements. Further, the findings of this study could shed some light on the opinions of respondents from different research scope as compared to what was investigated before. This study considers male blue-collar employees as it included respondents from different sectors (public, private, and self-employed). In addition, the cross-country comparison allowed the study to contribute to the understanding of the different contextual elements that may affect gender equality issues.

### ***Practical and Social Implications***

Practically, the importance of considering gender equality issues in work and life matters lies in its contribution to enhancing social and economic development through the building of inclusive nations (Gabbaret & D'Andria, 2021). Despite the rapid economic development and modernization that has been happening in the Asian region, some countries still hold on to

traditional gender roles that clearly distinguish between the role expectations of men and women. That is to say, a woman's role is synonymous with household chores and caring responsibilities, while the man is seen as the main breadwinner of the family. In this regard, the findings of this study provide additional insights to strengthen the gender revolution movement by identifying social indicators that could be considered in formulating work-family policies. For instance, having women do non-traditional social roles at the workplace would also signal a similar opportunity for men to do non-work roles at home. This would be an important step toward integrating and transforming the traditional perspective of gender role expectations into one that is in tune with modern life and ensuring that everyone can adapt well to change and achieve a better work-life balance. However, an understanding of responsibilities and expectations is required from both parties to make any such new arrangement work well. This understanding of responsibilities and expectations could also be used by organizations to improve job designs and work-family policies through taking the changes in social roles into account. The consequent new norm could then be implemented to provide equal opportunity to all employees, regardless of gender. Knowing that structural stigma and certain cultural dimensions are more resistant to change, previous researchers have suggested that there is a need for a bundle of legal provision to be put in place to reduce the stigma (Goldberg, 2020). This can also be done to improve the effectiveness of current policy if the rights of every member of society, including women, are taken into account.

### ***Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

The data collected for the current study is a preliminary step and forms part of a larger project that aims to explore the issue of working fathers in Japan and Malaysia. Thus, larger sample and other cross cultural considerations may enhance more understanding in regard to intercultural and intergenerational transmission of social values in the society. This is crucial knowing the significant influence of community shared values in paving a new norm towards gender equality that is necessary for the current and modern work-life demands. Further, the need for different level of analysis may also be considered in the future research to understand the whole process of intergenerational transmission of values and acculturation from the group setting to individual understanding and ensure all efforts are well integrated for achieving inclusive society and nation.

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