

Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

Volume 25

Article 7

2020

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Recommended Citation

Butler, Haley (2020) "Work Yourself to Death: The Honorable Way to Die for the Sarariiman," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 25 , Article 7. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol25/iss1/7>

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Work Yourself to Death: The Honorable Way to Die for the *Sarariiman*

Haley Butler

Finding one's true purpose in life depends on many factors. In Japan, true purpose is best described by the term *ikigai*, which means "that which most makes one's life worth living."¹ Initially, for many Japanese men, their true purpose was to protect Japan from Western encroachment whether as a samurai or as a soldier. After World War II, the economic boom in Japan led to the rise of the *sarariiman*, or salaryman, that is, a man poised to take Japan to economic prosperity. Many citizens have felt, however, that their *ikigai* requires them to fulfill their role as a company employee, making them feel as if they are influenced through government and social propaganda to succeed for Japan and not for themselves.² This demand causes unfortunate consequences. The rise of the *sarariiman* has been accompanied by the rise of *karoshi*, or death by overwork. The death by overwork phenomenon arises from a need to assert a new type of masculinity, different from the traditional military man of the past. This new man must fulfill his *ikigai* and masculinity through dedication to his work. These men are so dedicated to their work that they endure unsafe working conditions and extremely long hours in effort to display this new masculinity. Companies seeking more financial success exploit these overeager men who feel the need to express themselves in this way. A vicious cycle leads to men either dying from the stress of trying to uphold this standard or committing suicide due to failing under the pressure.

¹ Gordon Matthews, "Finding and Keeping a Purpose in Life: Well-Being and Ikigai in Japan and Elsewhere," in *Pursuits of Happiness: Well-Being in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Gordon Matthews and Carolina Izquierdo (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2010), 167.

² *Ibid.*, 171.

The origins of the salaryman's ideal characteristics can be found in many varying forms of masculinity that have changed over time throughout Japanese society. Baseline characteristics of an ideal masculine man come from the samurai in the Tokugawa period. The *bushidō* code that every samurai followed as his rules for life described notions such as duty, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and mental and physical endurance. Underneath the samurai and high-ranking civil servants, however, in the background, remained the *koshiben* or the "lunch-bucket man," a low-ranking civil servant common during the Meiji era (1868-1912). *Koshiben* were characterized by the lunch boxes attached by a cord around their waist. Instead of having a sword like the traditional samurai, they carried a lowly lunch box.³ They were civil servants who had to live up to all of the masculine characteristics of the time while receiving none of the benefits enjoyed by their social superiors. After the abolition of the samurai class in the early 1870s, many ex-samurai and lower ranking *koshiben* joined the white-collar working class, becoming civil servants.⁴

From the late Meiji into the early Shōwa era (1926-1989), the samurai transformed into the loyal soldier who would defend against Western encroachment and lead Japan to victory.⁵ At the same time, however, when not in war, Japan cultivated civil servants that functioned as prototypes of the modern *sarariiman*. Men going through the civil service examinations, which were in theory based on skills, were mostly graded and accepted based upon their personalities. Men going through the civil service examinations could be rejected if they did not conform to the

³ Earl H. Kinmonth, *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought: From Samurai to Salary Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 277–8.

⁴ Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class: The Salary Man and His Family in a Tokyo Suburb* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), 5.

⁵ Romit Dasgupta, "Creating Corporate Warriors: The 'Salaryman' and Masculinity in Japan" in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, ed. Kam Louie and Morris Low (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 120, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/santaclara/detail.action?docID=240462>.

popular attitudes and correct personality.⁶ Similarly, companies looked for men who exuded orderliness, temperance, dutifulness, optimism and politeness, characteristics not too different than ones prized in the early samurai and soldier.⁷ These early masculinities indicate that Japan cultivated an environment that fostered the growth of men who abided by strict rules and conformed to ideals that brought the country together.

Similar to the response of the Japanese government to modernize against western forces from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 through the end of World War II, postwar Japan needed a new type of soldier and samurai, a man who would lead them to economic prosperity, after their loss in World War II: the *sarariiman*. It was at this time that the *koshiben* became the *sarariiman*.⁸ Postwar Japan experienced many changes, including rapid industrialization causing an economic boom which led to a massive growth in white-collar workers, increasing focus on nuclear families, and strengthening the notion that women belonged in the house, causing men to become the face of the household.⁹ At the end of the war, the era of farmer and soldier masculinities ceased. The government needed, created, and demanded an ideal family unit with two equal parts, a compliant worker and a “good wife, wise mother,” which they believed would enhance the redevelopment of the nation.¹⁰ The *sarariiman* carried the “Economic Miracle” that Japan experienced in the 1950s and 1960s on his shoulders.¹¹ At the same time, many men saw the benefits of becoming a white-collar worker. They would become part of the “new middle class.” Their income was salaried, therefore less prone to changing due to economic fluctuations. They would become part of a large white-collar work force which

⁶ Ibid., 312.

⁷ Kinmonth, *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought*, 310.

⁸ Ibid., 289.

⁹ Dasgupta, “Creating Corporate Warriors,” 122.

¹⁰ Ibid., 120.

¹¹ Ibid., 122.

made them hope their employers would treat them well. Young men were heavily encouraged to join the ranks of *sarariiman*, who were potentially eligible for regular promotions and bonuses.¹² In most businesses, the *sarariiman*'s employer would guarantee him life-long employment.¹³ There was a sense of pride in being a salaryman and a sense of security as the life of the salaryman was quite predictable.¹⁴ Many men felt they were guaranteed a spot with a certain reputation and status compared to non-salaried workers.

Manga characters at the time, such as *Sarariiman Kintarō*, became incredibly popular as a “hero” for Japanese men, for he gave an ideal picture of what a *sarariiman* should be and how to gain success as a *sarariiman*.¹⁵ A Shōwa era biography of the famous daimyō (sixteenth-century feudal lord) Hideyoshi also became quite popular for *sarariiman* as it described his military organization in corporate terminology. His superior-subordinate relationships were related to executive-employee relationships.¹⁶ The *sarariiman* could see himself as a warrior fighting for the “Economic Miracle.” However, in addition to this “Economic Miracle,” challenges to traditional Japanese masculinity facilitated an even stronger push by the government for the *sarariiman*. The *mobo* (modern boy) of the 1920s—characterized by his effeminate looks, materialism, and lack of care for his future—introduced a fear for the future of Japanese men, and the rise of the postwar *sarariiman* was a response to it.¹⁷ Magazines during the late Showa and early Heisei era (1989-2019) pushed prescriptives on how to be a proper *sarariiman*, therefore telling young men in essence how to fulfill their true masculinity. These magazines advertised “how to” guides on varying aspects of a *sarariiman* life,

¹² Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class*, 4–5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵ Dasgupta, “Creating Corporate Warriors,” 127.

¹⁶ Kinmonth, *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought*, 321.

¹⁷ Dasgupta, “Creating Corporate Warriors,” 121.

such as cultivating perfect workplace behaviors and fostering a healthy family environment.¹⁸ The *sarariiman* type of masculinity needed to be learned and shaped for each man in Japan to fit the perfect ideal with exact characteristics that were consistent with corporate behavior and life in the home.

To fit into corporate life, one must assume the proper persona perfectly. Each *sarariiman* must assume the persona to keep his reputation. Many can picture the *sarariiman* on his way to work making his way through the hustle and bustle of everyday corporate life. Not only are there physical aspects to becoming a *sarariiman* but mental aspects as well. Romit Dasgupta describes the *sarariiman* as a man who would:

Be expected to display qualities of loyalty, diligence, dedication and self-sacrifice. Everything about the salaryman embodies these values: his behaviour, deportment (white shirt, dark business suit, lack of “flashy” clothing and accessories, neat hairstyle), consumer habits (for example reading certain types of magazines), even his verbal and body language. Moreover, his success (or lack of it) would be premised not only on workplace conduct, but also on his ability to conform to the requirements of the hegemonic discourse—to marry at an age deemed suitable, and once married to perform the appropriate gender role of husband/provider/father.¹⁹

These characteristics harken back to the age of the samurai and the *bushidō* referenced above. The *sarariiman* was diligent in his work and loyal to his employer and his fellow *sarariiman*. Any failure was his own fault and no one else’s. The uniform of a dark, unflashy suit kept men from expressing uniqueness. He sacrificed his individuality for the greater cause of economic prosperity. The *sarariiman* exuded an aura of normalcy. Japanese men upheld

¹⁸ Ibid., 124.

¹⁹ Ibid., 123.

these characteristics, no matter how constricting, in order to adhere to the social constructs of masculinity and normalcy.

Sarariiman faced many consequences when trying to adhere to the strict ideas of masculinity. Most notably, *sarariiman* possessed few visual differences between each other. They sacrificed their personal expression to fit the mold of a corporate business employee. Lines of men entered and left packed trains every day to go to work. One homogenous unit. From the beginning, even in the early days of their lives as civil servants, “employers made little effort to evaluate them as individuals...they were treated as a homogenous commodity,” Earl H. Kinmonth writes.²⁰ Individuality was not necessary in Japan’s corporate setting. The *sarariiman* was a fungible commodity, and unfortunately, most understood that. To attain this distinct yet anonymous persona required money. *Sarariiman* made up a majority of the middle class and had to keep up their appearance no matter the cost. Despite sometimes gaining bonuses or special allowances from time to time, spending was a large part of participating in corporate life. Expensive suits were required to make the *sarariiman* fit in with all the other men around him. A middle-class home was necessary to house the *sarariiman* and his family. He and his fellow *sarariiman* were in a constant competition to spend more than the other. He was taught from the very beginning; spending was hardwired in his brain to spur the economy and allow it to remain prosperous.²¹ The *sarariiman* must socialize outside of work, but not too much, in order to maintain his reputation.²² If he socializes too much, he cannot be taken seriously and appears to be careless. If he fails to thrive in social situations, he faces ostracization. He must balance appearing in complete control of his work life while also being in complete control of his social life as well—no matter the costs to his health.

²⁰ Kinmonth, *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought*, 316.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 316–7.

²² *Ibid.*, 318–9.

Not only would his wallet run dry, his mental health and physical health suffered as well. *Sarariiman* were forced to work harder and smarter than others, taught to come to work early and leave late.²³ Those who could not keep up with the pressure faced failing to thrive and being looked over for promotion—or even worse, being fired and most likely needing to find blue-collar work. They would log hundreds of overtime hours each month so they could be seen as the most productive worker.²⁴ Because they were fungible and one of many, menial tasks were part of their everyday lives. Anything that their supervisor asked of them needed to be done, no matter how below their experience level.²⁵ Mentally, *sarariiman* felt as if they had no other choice as they had been taught from birth to be successful. Once in the lifestyle, they had no way of escaping it. Gordon Matthews writes that many men felt “chained to their workplaces, most could neither live for their own personal pursuits, as some men sought to do, nor, more pivotally, for their families. A man living for his family was not a real man, many said or implied, but some longed to do so all the same if only they could.”²⁶ Success for a man was marked by his success in the workplace, not by his success in the home. The life of a *sarariiman* created a degree of separation between family and home. Traditionally, his wife remained in charge of the house and would know nothing about her husband’s work life except for menial details. Neither knew much about each other’s respective lives, which created a relationship gap in the ideal of the nuclear family of Japan. Families with white-collar workers for husbands showed an increased rate of family depression and conflict as the

²³ Ibid., 318.

²⁴ Atsuko Kanai, “‘Karoshi (Work to Death)’ in Japan,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 84 (2009): 213.

²⁵ Kinmonth, *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought*, 318–9.

²⁶ Gordon Matthews, “Being a Man in Straited Japan: The View from Twenty Years Later,” in *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*, ed. Satsuki Kawano, Glenda S. Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press: 2014), 60.

family members failed to communicate with each other.²⁷ The wife was limited to the home and the husband was limited to his job. This combination of physical and mental distress birthed a major toll on the life of a *sarariiman*, and the consequences have proven to be deadly. With the rise of the *sarariiman* came the rise of *karoshi*, or death by overwork.

Japanese men to this day work increasingly more hours than the rest of the world. On average, taking into account unpaid and unofficial overtime, a Japanese white-collar worker will work around 2,600–3,000 hours a year, which is at least 50 percent longer than the closest neighbor, the United States, whose average worker logs around 1,900 hours.²⁸ Looking back, the term *karoshi* truly broke ground in the late 1980s. The term was coined in 1978 by Dr. Tesunojo Uehata, who described the phenomenon as “a permanent disability or death brought on by worsening high blood pressure or arteriosclerosis resulting in diseases of the blood vessels such as cerebral hemorrhage...and acute heart failure.”²⁹ In the 1980s, the term was directly correlated with men working excess overtime hours.³⁰ In 2002, 160 men died due to excessive overwork which was double the previous year’s total.³¹ In 2005, 328 men died of *karoshi*.³² As time progressed, more and more men killed themselves due to excess pressure to work better and longer than their fellow male employees.

To make matters worse, not all men were dying of sudden cardiac arrest or cerebral hemorrhage. Some men committed suicide due to the pressures of the Japanese work environment. Another term has now been coined, *karo-jisatsu*, or suicide by

²⁷ Kanai, “‘Karoshi (Work to Death)’ in Japan,” 213.

²⁸ Tetsuro Kato, “The Political Economy of Japanese ‘Karoshi’ (Death from Overwork),” *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 26, no. 2 (1994): 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁰ Kanai, “‘Karoshi (Work to Death)’ in Japan,” 209.

³¹ Koji Morioka, “Work till You Drop,” *New Labor Forum* 13, no. 1 (2004): 82.

³² T. Hiyama and M. Yoshihara, “New Occupational Threats to Japanese Physicians: Karoshi (death Due to Overwork) and Karojisatsu (Suicide Due to Overwork),” *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 65, no. 6 (2008): 428.

overwork, to describe the plight of workers who fall into depression, leading them to end their lives. What makes *karo-jisatsu* so distinctive is that the men who are committing suicide do so before their physical health fails them. They kill themselves due to feeling they are not meeting the expectations of their workplace and their status.³³ Typically, the men who commit suicide are known to be diligent, dependable, and willing to work excessively, but not depressed.³⁴ Suicide notes from men who have committed suicide highlight feelings of inferiority and sadness for causing their families trouble by failing as a worker and a man. Typically, there fails to be any ill will toward their superiors or their workplace at all.³⁵ In times of economic hardship, especially during economic crisis in 1977 and the economic bubble collapse in 1991, the rates of *karoshi* and *karo-jisatsu* rose dramatically due to massive numbers of layoffs and unemployment rates skyrocketing.³⁶ These men were, counterintuitively, killing themselves out of altruism. They failed to be men, therefore, for the sake of their families, they would rather end their lives than see their families suffer due to their failed masculinity.

Despite all of the constricting notions that go into being a *sarariiman* and the obvious hazards to their health, *sarariiman* continue to work themselves to death. Why do *sarariiman* literally work themselves to death? Why do some men crumble under the pressure and succumb to committing suicide? There is a problem in Japan, a problem of improper representation of the only way to be masculine. Yuko Kawanishi argues that both *karoshi* and *karo-jisatsu* “occur as a result of the intricate dance between individual

³³ Yuko Kawanishi, “On Karo-Jisatsu (Suicide by Overwork): Why Do Japanese Workers Work Themselves to Death?” *International Journal of Mental Health* 37, no. 1 (2008): 65.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65–6.

³⁶ Kanai, “‘Karoshi (Work to Death)’ in Japan,” 211; Naoki Kondo and Juhwan Oh, “Suicide and Karoshi (Death from Overwork) during the Recent Economic Crises in Japan: The Impacts, Mechanisms and Political Responses,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* (1979) 64, no. 8 (2010): 64.

willingness and society's compulsion as well as a growing mismatch between traditional values and the changing reality."³⁷ Japan's cultivation of a workaholic atmosphere created a vicious cycle. Workaholic gives birth to individuals who feel an increased need to work due to internal and outside pressures, low enjoyment in their work, and a need to involve themselves more and more in work. Workaholic *sarariiman*, however, see the benefits of overworking including promotion, more pay, and a feeling of personal success. They respond to high demands hoping to gain a high return, not expecting the physical toll it will take on them.³⁸ As mentioned above, *sarariiman* felt and still remain trapped in their lifestyles. They alone must support themselves and their families. If they live for themselves, they are seen as failures as men. *Sarariiman* are forced to uphold unfair prescriptions of what it means to truly be a man with little support from anyone, causing increased toxic masculinity in Japanese workers. Emotions come second to success for the *sarariiman*. They must understand that on the outside they are a cooperative worker, but on the inside, they hide their drive for personal success. They are in constant competition with their fellow workers to prove who can be the best worker and who can get the next promotion while also having to understand that they must cooperate with others to bring overall success to their company. As mentioned before, students are taught to do anything to remain in good favor, and this continues into a man's work life. Diligence and a cooperative attitude are the two main aspects that go into being a successful *sarariiman*. Men are looked down upon if they leave right at the time work hours are officially over, as they are seen to be leaving the rest of the employees to do their work. A *sarariiman* must be willing to do more than required of him to be successful. Men are willing to not log their numerous hours of overtime so that they do not burden the company with excessive overtime payments. Working for

³⁷ Kawanishi, "On Karo-Jisatsu (Suicide by Overwork)," 67.

³⁸ Kanai, "'Karoshi (Work to Death)' in Japan," 213.

others is seen as the honorable and manly thing to do. Companies then take advantage of these men, failing to enforce the logging of hours so they do not have to dole out overtime pay, and the *sarariiman* nevertheless accept these conditions as a basis for maintaining their lifetime employment status.³⁹ For many men, there is no other way out. Some men were not given the choice, dying on the job, while others felt as if their only way out was to take their own life. For a lot of men, responses to these troubling conditions came too late.

Initial responses to *karoshi* arrived slowly and attempts to acknowledge the dying *sarariiman* faced backlash. Japan's labor laws inherently allow abuses of employees. Most clauses fail to protect employees from dangerous working conditions and overwork. Enforcement of the laws themselves is also very lackluster. The Japanese government refused to recognize *karo-jisatsu* due to it being considered intentional behavior on the part of the worker.⁴⁰ Many companies argued that employees worked out of their own volition, therefore their untimely deaths were their own fault.⁴¹ This framing of *karoshi* as an individual problem made many struggling workers hesitant to speak out about the problems they faced themselves or even their fellow coworkers' issues as well. If it appeared to not be a common workplace occurrence, then there was no need for any real legal recognition or action. The first recognition of the term outside of Japan came in 1988 in an article in *The Chicago Tribune* entitled "Japanese Live...and Die...for Their Work" which described the plight of a 48-year-old middle manager who died suddenly of "sudden cardiac insufficiency." The *Chicago Tribune* article noted that he had worked nearly 3,500 hours in the year before his death; this included 1,400 hours of overtime. Unlike many others, however,

³⁹ Kawanishi, "On Karo-Jisatsu (Suicide by Overwork)," 68–9.

⁴⁰ Kanai, "'Karoshi (Work to Death)' in Japan," 209.

⁴¹ Morioka, "Work till You Drop," 83.

he received pay for this overtime.⁴² The *Oxford English Dictionary* did not recognize *karoshi* until 2002.⁴³ Progressively, though, with the number of deaths climbing and applications for worker's injury compensation streaming in, the Japanese government realized that they needed to acknowledge the state of affairs in front of them.

The first major response to the *karoshi* phenomenon came in the form of a hotline that provided aid to the family members who suffered from a death from *karoshi*. These hotlines created support systems for family members of victims of *karoshi*, allowing them to connect to legal aid and others who suffered through a death in the family. Once they made these connections, individuals could find the strength to fight legally for recognition of *karoshi* and the toll that overwork takes on the family members of the deceased.⁴⁴ Initial government response consisted of revising the Labour Standards Act to enforce maximum working hours to eight hours a day and 40 hours a week in 1993. The revision proved to have many loopholes and therefore offered no clear concrete solution to the issue of *karoshi*.⁴⁵ Most recently, the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, faced with a push to address these issues from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, released a *White Paper on Measures to Prevent Karoshi, etc.* in 2017. The paper highlighted tactics the Japanese government would implement including reducing the number of employees working more than 60 hours a week, increasing the rate of annual paid leave, and increasing the number of workplaces with mental health care.⁴⁶ Once the government began to respond with fervor, the people began to fight as well.

⁴² Ronald E. Yates, "Japanese Live...And Die...For Their Work," *Chicago Tribune*, 13 Nov. 1988, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1988-11-13-8802150740-story.html>.

⁴³ Morioka, "Work till You Drop," 80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁵ Kato, "The Political Economy of Japanese 'Karoshi' (Death from Overwork)," 48.

⁴⁶ "White Paper on Measures to Prevent *Karoshi*, etc.: Annual report for FY2016," Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, Japan. 2017, <https://fpcj.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/8f513ff4e9662ac515de9e646f63d8b5.pdf>.

In addition to government response, the public and corporations realized the stress that had been increasingly placed upon the shoulders of Japanese men. During the time of massive economic turmoil, scandals, and bankruptcies of the 80s and 90s, companies realized the failures of the culture they worked so hard to uphold. Dasgupta writes, “subscribing to the salaryman model became even less appealing. Indeed, from the corporation’s point of view, the features of the system upon which (ideologically, at least) salaryman masculinity was premised—such as permanent employment and seniority-based promotions—became increasingly difficult to sustain.”⁴⁷ In 1996, the Japan Travel Bureau (JTB), the leading travel agency in Japan, put out a travel pocket guide for tourists showing the disadvantages of living the *sarariiman* lifestyle, describing how much damage it caused to a man’s physical health with a graphic depiction of a tired and melancholic *sarariiman* struggling to survive. One page even went so far as to say, “it is a miracle they are alive at all.”⁴⁸ Many are beginning to realize the importance in creating work-life balance programs or going so far as to find alternative forms of making money.⁴⁹ At this time as well, is the rise of *furitaa* or “freeters,” young people who reject salaried work because they see the toll it imposed upon their parents, choosing to do temporary jobs and not get married.⁵⁰ These *furitaa*, however, eventually must enter the workplace as non-salaried work has proven to be unstable in pay, benefits, and security.⁵¹ They will eventually enter the cycle of workplace abuse as well.

⁴⁷ Dasgupta, “Creating Corporate Warriors,” 131.

⁴⁸ Kinmonth, *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought*, 130.

⁴⁹ Machiko Osawa, “Flexible Employment and the Introduction of Work-Life Balance Programs in Japan,” in *Workplace Flexibility: Realigning 20th-Century Jobs for a 21st-Century Workforce*, ed. Kathleen Christensen and Barbara Schneider (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 305.

⁵⁰ Mathews, “Being a Man in Straited Japan,” 171.

⁵¹ Osawa, “Flexible Employment and the Introduction of Work-Life Balance Programs in Japan,” 305.

From the very beginning, women have been excluded from the *sarariiman* narrative. When the *sarariiman* ideal came to fruition, so did the corresponding ideal of the “good wife, wise mother.” In the postwar years, an excessive importance was placed upon separating women into the private sphere and men into the public sphere. During the economic boom, they were the gender who stayed within the home and took care of the children. Women aided the economy’s prosperity in a different way, through the consumption of new technology such as vacuum cleaners, fridges and televisions.⁵² When analyzing the relationship between most young women and *sarariiman* in Japan in 1963, Ezra Vogel argued, “the young Japanese girl hopes to marry a salary man even if his salary were lower because his life is steady, he has leisure time, and she can be free of the anxieties and work connected with independent business.”⁵³ A man traditionally should be the breadwinner for the couple while his wife remained in the home.⁵⁴ Stereotypes like these removed women from the narrative of being capable of hard work and determination, putting them in a place of dependence and subservience. Once women entered the workforce, these sentiments followed them. Women were seen as the counterpart to the *sarariiman* and not “*sarariiwoman*” themselves. In the workplace, as previously described, a good worker needs to be aggressive in his work ethic, heroic in sacrificing his life for the job, and dependable. Women were traditionally thought to be incapable of fulfilling that role due to their delicate nature, therefore justifying their relegation to office assistant positions.⁵⁵ Eventually they would get married and go on maternity leave, leading most companies to avoid hiring them or to intentionally keep them in low-paying helper jobs.⁵⁶

⁵² Dasgupta, “Creating Corporate Warriors,” 123.

⁵³ Vogel, *Japan’s New Middle Class*, 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁵ Kumiko Nemoto, “Production and Navigation of Gender Bias: Heroic Masculinity, Female Misogyny, and Queen Bees,” in *Too Few Women at the Top: The Persistence of Inequality in Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 129.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

Not all women today are taking paid leave; some put in just as many hours as men. More recently, some women feel forced to work long hours, spend money, and do anything to become “one of the boys.”⁵⁷ Women are forced to compete against their fellow workers to be the most successful, yet their homemaker reputation harms them. Because Japanese society does not see women as full-fledged workers, when women die of overwork, their deaths are either hidden or ignored. In July of 2013, Miwa Sado, a 31-year-old female journalist who worked at NHK broadcasting headquarters, died of heart failure. In the month before her death, she had logged 159 hours of overtime and only took two days off of work. In April of 2015, Matsuri Takahashi killed herself at just 24 years of age. She had worked more than 100 hours of overtime in the month before her death. Despite their lives ending several years ago, their deaths are finally being recognized years later.⁵⁸ Despite suffering punishing workloads alongside their male counterparts, women continue to fail to get the attention they need, and their deaths are only coming to light now because Prime Minister Abe requested a change in workplace culture.⁵⁹ Had numerous men not died before them, most of these women and the unfair working conditions they endured would not have come to light.

Despite the amazing hope that Japan had for the *sarariiman*, they allowed for too much pressure to fall upon these workers’ shoulders. The *karoshi* phenomenon proves that one can only demand so much from a single body of people. In essence, the Japanese government has conditioned the Japanese man to work himself to death. His, his family’s, and Japan’s honor and reputation rests on his shoulders. In times of economic struggle, he is blamed and told to work harder. In times of economic prosperity, he is told to work even harder to bring Japan even

⁵⁷ Ibid., 144–5.

⁵⁸ Justin McCurry, “Japanese Woman ‘Dies from Overwork’ after Logging 159 Hours of Overtime in a Month,” *The Guardian*, 5 Oct. 2017.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

further. There is no effortless way out. To solve this issue, the Japanese government and society must change the image of masculinity in the eyes of the public. Despite attempts to fix the state of the Japanese workplace, workers are still killing themselves with numbers still rising above the 400s each year.⁶⁰ Moreover, none of these solutions addresses the mental illness side of overwork. Unless Japan acknowledges the toxic masculinity within their workplace culture, *sarariiman* will continue to overwork themselves to death.

Author Bio:

Haley Butler graduated in 2020 after majoring in History with a Women's and Gender Studies minor. Her research interests include Japanese history with a focus on twentieth-century gender relations. In 2020, Haley's essay was one of two papers honored with the McPhee Prize, established in 2007 through the generosity of Lulu and John McPhee and awarded annually to the student who authors the most outstanding paper in a senior seminar as determined by the faculty of the History Department.

⁶⁰ "White Paper on Measures to Prevent *Karoshi*, etc.: Annual Report for FY2016."