



Exploring Gender-Related SDG Indicators: Critical Studies on Patriarchal Shifts in Western Europe and East Asian Practices

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Abstract. This study evaluates how patriarchy shifts in Western Europe (Germany, France, the Netherlands) and East Asia (Japan, South Korea, China) from 2018-2022 by examining key gender-related indicators: maternal mortality, adolescent birth rates, educational attainment, female labor force participation, and women's political representation. Drawing on SDGs, the analysis employs interpretive pattern framed by Sylvia Walby's institutional patriarchy model, extended with Confucian gender ideology and developmental state theory for East Asia. Findings show that Western Europe cultivated greater social resilience through welfare reforms and quota policies, embedding gender equality structurally. East Asia, by contrast, revealed selective gains in education and health but persistent patriarchal resilience in labor and politics.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender-related SDGs, Institutional Resilience

1 Introduction

The global adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has offered governments and international organizations a common framework to track progress on gender equality through measurable indicators in health, education, political representation, and labor. These indicators, especially those linked to SDGs 3, 4, 5, and 8 have become central tools for monitoring state performance and shaping international policy discussions (Wisskirchen and Friesen, 2022). At the same time, feminist scholars caution that numerical progress in these domains does not necessarily translate into the erosion of patriarchal structures. Rather, patriarchy often adapts to institutional reforms, embedding itself in welfare systems, cultural narratives, and workplace arrangements (Walby, 1990). This raises an important question: how should we evaluate patriarchal shifts in societies where statistical indicators show improvement, but structural gender inequalities persist?

To address this question, this paper examines gender-related SDG indicators in 2018-2022 periode in two distinct regional contexts: Western Europe (Germany, France, the Netherlands) and East Asia (Japan, South Korea, China) (Torrado, 2024).

These regions provide insight into different trajectories of state-building, welfare regimes, and cultural traditions, yet both demonstrate how patriarchal resilience is reproduced within modern institutions. In Western Europe, inclusive welfare policies coexist with persistent gender role expectations, particularly through part-time labor markets and family-based policy frameworks (Heß, 2020). In East Asia, rapid developmental policies have expanded access to health, education, and employment, yet Confucian traditions and state-centered demographic strategies continue to subordinate women's autonomy. Confucianism refers to a family-centered philosophical tradition that prioritizes filial piety, social harmony, and lineage continuity, historically manifested in Japan through the *ie* system—a patriarchal household structure in which authority was concentrated in the eldest male and women's roles were defined through obedience, reproduction, and care work (Miller, 2007; Benegas Torrado, 2024). By tracing how patriarchal shifts within these contexts, the paper evaluates not only progress in achieving SDG targets, but also the limits of these indicators in capturing the endurance of gendered power.

The selection of the 2018–2022 period is based on academic considerations related to the maturity of global SDG data and the international policy context at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda. During this phase, the quality and consistency of gender-related data increased significantly, as reported in *Pulse of Progress: The State of Global SDG Data*, which notes that same-year SDG data reporting rose by up to 150% between 2019 and 2022 (Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, 2022). This period also encompasses critical global moments—particularly the COVID-19 pandemic—which the United Nations identifies as one of the major crises affecting women's health, employment, and social protection outcomes, thereby providing crucial empirical conditions to assess whether progress in gender indicators can withstand structural shocks (UNSDG Chair Report, 2023). Furthermore, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023* highlights that most of the latest reliable data ends in 2022 due to international reporting lags, making 2018–2022 the most complete, consistent, and compatible range for indicator-based academic analysis (UN Statistics Division, 2023).

Both Friesen and Wisskirchen (2022) and Maguth and Yang (2019) highlight important limitations in the global SDG framework, yet their analyses reveal substantial research gaps that this study directly addresses. Friesen and Wisskirchen focus on global gender-data shortages and call for stronger intersectional data systems, but they do not examine how gender-related SDG indicators evolve within specific high-income democratic regions, leaving a population/regional gap in understanding how patriarchal structures persist even where data availability is relatively strong (UN Women, 2022c). Meanwhile, Maguth and Yang identify a conceptual gap—the misalignment between SDG 5 and national curricula—but their work does not analyze actual SDG indicator performance over time, creating a temporal and evidence gap in assessing how gender equality shifts during critical global events such as COVID-19. In contrast, our study fills these gaps by comparing empirical gender-related SDG indicators (SDGs 3, 4, 5, 8) across Western Europe and East Asia during 2018–2022, a period marked by both data maturation and global crises. This approach not only provides region-specific empirical evidence that is absent in both studies but also advances the discussion from

normative critiques of SDG frameworks toward a cross-regional, data-driven evaluation of patriarchal transformation, thereby offering insights with stronger analytical and policy relevance.

2. Theoretical review

The theoretical grounding of this study draws on Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy, which conceptualizes gender inequality as embedded across multiple institutional domains—such as politics, labor, health, and education—rather than being reducible to cultural traditions alone (Walby, 1990). Complementing this, Esping-Andersen's welfare typologies provide a framework for understanding how different institutional arrangements shape women's access to work, care, and autonomy, while also illustrating that no welfare system is value-neutral (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Taken together, these perspectives enable a critical evaluation of SDG indicators as both tools of measurement and as sites where patriarchal adaptations and institutional constraints can be observed (Walby, 2011; Esping-Andersen, 2009).

I recognise that the comparative study of patriarchy has been enriched by Szołtysek's article *Family Patriarchy East and West: A Controlled Comparison of Historical Europe and Contemporary Asia (The History of the Family, 2025)*, which applies the Patriarchy Index (PI) to measure cross-regional differences in familial organisation. While valuable for establishing a consistent metric, the study lacks a broader theoretical framework to substantiate its claims, relying exclusively on the PI without adequately explaining how patriarchal structures are causally related to contemporary social transformations.

Similarly, in his earlier article *Family Patriarchy and Child Sex Ratios in Historical Europe (The History of the Family, 2022)*, Szołtysek himself acknowledges that his findings should be treated as a preliminary step, calling for more qualitative evidence on how patriarchal organisation translated into everyday gender discrimination. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Gruenbaum's *Reconsidering the Role of Patriarchy in Upholding Female Genital Modifications: Analysis of Contemporary and Pre-industrial Societies (Ethnology, 2022)* is firmly grounded in theoretical debate but does not employ empirical datasets or temporal comparisons, limiting its capacity to trace changes in patriarchal practices across different contexts.

Taken together, this body of work underscores a notable gap: while some studies emphasise measurement without theoretical depth and others foreground theory without systematic evidence, few attempts have been made to integrate both approaches in order to analyse how patriarchal arrangements evolve in interaction with broader socio-economic transformations. This is where the present study intervenes, by situating patriarchal shifts within the framework of gender-related SDG indicators to capture the interplay between historical resilience and contemporary change in Western Europe and East Asia.

The main contribution of this article is to enrich the debate on patriarchal resilience by moving beyond single-index measurements and purely theoretical accounts, situating the analysis instead within the framework of gender-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Whereas Szołtysek's *Family Patriarchy East and West (The History of the Family, 2025)* relies exclusively on the Patriarchy Index without embedding

its findings in a wider theoretical or developmental perspective, and his earlier *Family Patriarchy and Child Sex Ratios in Historical Europe* (*The History of the Family*, 2022) explicitly calls for qualitative evidence to understand how patriarchal family systems produced everyday gender discrimination, this study integrates both structural and cultural dimensions through contemporary UNDP indicators.

In contrast to Gruenbaum's *Reconsidering the Role of Patriarchy in Upholding Female Genital Modifications* (*Ethnology*, 2022), which focuses on theoretical complexity without engaging with empirical data or temporal change, the present article uses cross-regional comparison of Western Europe (Germany, France, the Netherlands) and East Asia (China, Japan, South Korea) to evaluate how patriarchy adapts within modern institutions (Johnson, 1982). By applying SDG indicators across health, education, politics, and labor (SDGs 3, 4, 5, and 8), the analysis captures both numerical progress and its limitations, showing how apparent gains in equality are often embedded in welfare ideologies, cultural narratives, and state-led developmental priorities.

To complement these structural comparisons, the study also examines the case of Japanese journalist Shiori Ito, whose public struggle for justice illustrates how gendered exclusions within law, culture, and media intersect with the very dimensions measured by the SDG indicators. In doing so, the article offers a methodological and theoretical advancement: it bridges quantitative assessment with critical feminist theory and qualitative case evidence to trace the transformation of patriarchal structures, highlighting not only regional variation but also the global persistence of gendered inequalities within ostensibly modern regimes.

3 Discussion

The case of Japanese journalist Shiori Ito in 2017 illustrates how patriarchal structures continue to operate within institutions, despite Japan's strong performance in health and education indicators. Ito publicly accused a high-profile television journalist with close ties to the political establishment of rape, but her attempt to pursue justice was obstructed by state institutions. Police investigations were abruptly halted, reportedly under political pressure, and prosecutors declined to indict the perpetrator despite substantial evidence (Rönkkö, 2022). This reveals the limits of SDG 3 (health and bodily autonomy) and SDG 5 (gender equality) in practice, where institutional barriers undermine women's safety and rights.

Ito's experience further shows how institutional patriarchy intertwines with social hostility. Following her public disclosure, she endured persistent online harassment and verbal attacks, to the extent that she was forced to leave Japan for personal safety (Kawahara, 2017; Asahi Editorial, 2019; Ito, 2018). Ito herself described the backlash as so severe that "the one who must go into hiding should not be the rape victim," emphasizing the social punishment imposed on women who speak out against sexual violence (Kawahara, 2017). Although her case eventually contributed to changes in Japan's rape law—such as increasing the minimum sentence from three to five years and allowing

prosecution without the victim filing charges—the revised legislation still requires victims to prove overwhelming physical resistance, a standard that remains structurally exclusionary toward survivors incapacitated during the assault (Ito, 2018; Kawahara, 2017). Legal experts have argued, in line with Ito’s testimony, that intoxicated or unconscious individuals cannot consent under any circumstance, reinforcing the inadequacy of the previous prosecutorial rationale (Holingsworth, 2019).

Ito’s struggle helped catalyze the emergence of the #WeToo movement in Japan—a localized adaptation of #MeToo that emphasized collective solidarity rather than individual testimony. The movement gained traction in 2017 as media professionals and civil society actors mobilized to challenge entrenched norms surrounding sexual violence (Mori & Shoko, 2018). Measured against Walby’s institutional patriarchy, the collusion of state, legal, media, and cultural institutions in this case demonstrates how patriarchal power reproduces itself even within advanced economies, while Confucian gender norms amplify stigma by portraying vocal survivors not as victims but as violators of prescribed modesty and silence.

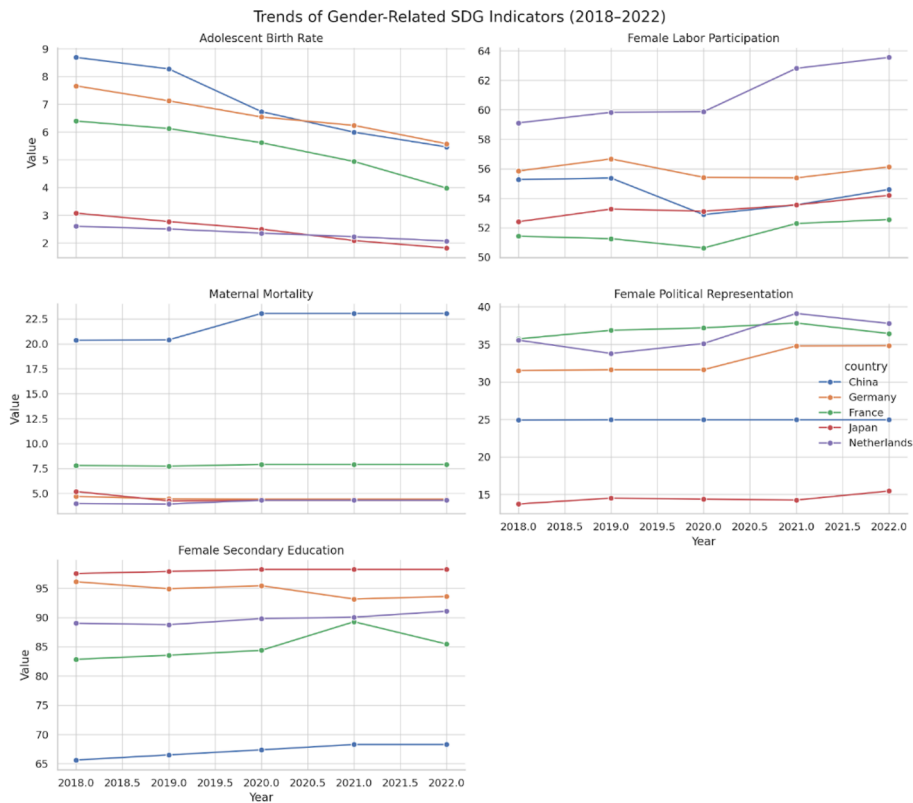


Fig. 1. 2018–2022 SDG Indicators graph per country.

In terms of maternal mortality (SDG 3), the most striking outcome is found in China, where the ratio increased by 13.2% (from 20.5 to 23.2), despite general global trends of improvement (Mu, 2021). This stagnation or reversal underscores how health systems under patriarchal governance structures may deprioritize women's reproductive health, even in rapidly modernizing economies. In contrast, European countries such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands showed stable maternal mortality rates, reflecting institutional resilience in healthcare systems that have already internalized gender-sensitive standards (Birkenkotter et al, 2019).

The adolescent birth rate (ABR), another health indicator for SDG 3 reveals significant progress across both regions but with differing trajectories. Europe saw notable declines, particularly in the Netherlands (−47.4%) and France (−27.9%), consistent with comprehensive sexual education policies and welfare support that reduce unintended pregnancies (Kamphuis, 2022). East Asia also reported improvements, especially South Korea (−37.0%) and Japan (−23.3%) (Jang et al, 2022). Yet the persistence of conservative sexual norms and the stigmatization of adolescent sexuality suggest that these declines may be driven more by cultural restrictions and late marriage patterns than by structural empowerment of young women.

For education (SDG 4), Europe maintains near-universal female secondary education access (Germany at 98%, France at 94.5%, Netherlands at 90.5%), suggesting that patriarchal barriers have largely been dismantled at the educational level. By contrast, East Asia presents a more complex case: while Japan (96.8%) and Korea (84.0%) remain relatively high, Korea has shown a 6% decline since its 2020 peak, hinting at structural pressures that still disproportionately affect women's educational continuity. China, despite some improvement (+3.1%), lags behind at 67%, illustrating the endurance of familial patriarchy that constrains female access in rural or less developed regions.

The most persistent gender gap emerges in political representation (SDG 5). Europe's parliaments continue to advance slowly but steadily, with increases of around +6–9% across Germany, France, and the Netherlands. In East Asia, however, patriarchal resistance is more evident. Japan's representation increased only marginally (+12%, from 12.5% to 14.0%), leaving women severely underrepresented in governance. South Korea shows a stronger relative gain (+23.8%) but still remains at only 18.2%, while China is entirely stagnant at 25%, reflecting authoritarian constraints that limit gender reform at the political level. These outcomes indicate that institutionalized patriarchy in Asia is deeply tied to political exclusion, where systemic and cultural factors prevent women from gaining decision-making power despite socio-economic progress.

Female labor participation (SDG 8) reveals both resilience and fragility. Europe shows steady improvement, led by the Netherlands (+8%) where welfare policies and part-time work structures enable women's integration into the labor force. Germany and France, though already high, improved modestly (+0.9% and +2.3%). Asia, however, presents mixed patterns: South Korea grew by +4.7%, yet still lags at 51.3%; Japan saw only +2.8%, reflecting entrenched corporate patriarchy and cultural expectations of women's caregiving roles. China, notably, declined (−0.6%) in female labor

participation, showing that economic modernization does not automatically dismantle patriarchal labor segmentation.

The evaluation underscores a critical finding: Asia is more deeply marked by patriarchy than Europe, not only in terms of outcomes but in the resilience of patriarchal structures across institutions. While Europe demonstrates a “modernized patriarchy” that adapts within welfare states and democratic institutions—producing gradual but consistent gender progress—East Asia reflects “resilient patriarchy,” where Confucian family systems, corporate structures, and state policies interact to maintain gender hierarchies despite visible development gains. The stagnation in China’s maternal mortality and political representation, the limited progress in Japan, and the fragile improvements in Korea all affirm that patriarchal resilience in Asia remains structurally embedded.

4 Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that East Asia exhibits stronger patriarchal resilience compared to Western Europe, particularly in the domains of legal justice, political representation, and bodily autonomy (SDG 3 and SDG 5). As shown in the case of Shiori Ito, patriarchal institutions in Japan adapt by maintaining male dominance through legal obstruction, media silencing, and political interference, despite state rhetoric on gender equality. Similarly, South Korea and China reveal patterns where Confucian traditions and state-centered governance reinforce gender hierarchies: women’s participation in education and labour (SDG 4 and SDG 8) has increased, yet institutional barriers and cultural norms continue to restrict agency in areas of sexuality, family law, and political voice. This form of patriarchal institutional entrenchment indicates that reforms often enhance women’s visibility without challenging structural male privilege.

In contrast, Western Europe shows a different trajectory. While patriarchal structures historically shaped family systems and labor markets, recent decades have seen significant institutional transformations. Countries such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands demonstrate that welfare states, transparent legal systems, and gender-sensitive policymaking can erode the resilience of patriarchy, particularly in reproductive rights, workplace protections, and political participation. However, our analysis also indicates that European patriarchy has not disappeared but rather shifted into more subtle forms, such as the gender wage gap, unequal representation in corporate leadership, and persistent care burdens within households. Thus, patriarchy in Western Europe is less visible in legal and political institutions but continues to manifest through structural inequalities embedded in economic and domestic spheres.

The results reveal a critical contrast: East Asia sustains overt institutional patriarchy rooted in Confucian and state traditions, while Western Europe experiences a transformation of patriarchy into structural but less overt forms. This underscores the necessity of evaluating gender-related SDG indicators not only as quantitative benchmarks but as reflections of deeper institutional and cultural dynamics that shape the lived realities of women across regions.

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