

How has the Japanese workplace achieved gender equality? : the voice of women who work in foreign-owned companies

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Abstract Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law was enacted in 1986, its primary aim to establish a decent working environment for women and, by extension, ensure greater opportunity for women to transform their lives. Prior to passage of the law, women's labor was largely unpaid and confined to the household, such as in housework and child rearing. The social environment in Japan was such that women encountered difficulty in pursuing regular employment readily available to men. This law was designed to enhance women's prospects for participating in the labor market by providing official support for equal opportunity for both women and men. However, Japan continues to lag behind other developed nations with regard to gender equality in the workplace. This study investigates this matter using the life histories of working women in Japan to examine the environment in which they were raised, their attitudes towards work, and their identities and insecurities. By examining how working women have built careers in a difficult environment, this study describes realities and transformations in the Japanese workplace.

Key words gender equality, workplace, Equal Employment Opportunity Law, working women, Japan

Introduction

In 1985, Japan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, becoming the 72nd nation in the world to accede. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law was then passed in 1985 and put into effect in 1986 in order to create an environment suited to the requirements set out in the Convention. The law prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender with the aim of establishing a decent working environment for women and obligates firms to treat all employees equally regardless of gender in all aspects of job recruitment, hiring, position assignment, promotion, educational leave and assistance, promotional training, welfare benefits, retirement plans, resignation, or dismissal.

In this way, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law set the stage to transform the lives of women in Japan. The “standard family” envisaged by the heavy industries that formed the foundation of Japan’s rapid postwar economic development was a nuclear family comprised of a working husband (the Japanese “salaryman”), a housewife, and two children. Women’s labor was for the most part unpaid and confined to the household, such as in housework and child rearing. Women did generally enter the labor force following education but only until they married, and even where they worked part time after marriage or childbirth, the social environment prevented them from pursuing the same corporate careers as those pursued by men. However, enactment of the law increased women’s prospects for regular employment by providing official support for equal opportunity for both genders.

At the same time, Equal Employment Opportunity Law did not include punitive clauses to prevent firms from failing to meet their legal obligations regarding equal opportunities in job recruitment, hiring, allocation, and promotions. Hence, the law has also been widely regarded as ineffective and riddled with loopholes. Furthermore, opposition also emerged from the business community for the reason that “treating women on an equal basis with men was a misconceived notion of equality.” Thus, even if the applicant’s gender was not stipulated in the content of documents such as job advertisements, an evident

tendency nonetheless existed for giving preferential treatment to men in the selection process.

In addition, even where women succeeded in finding a job, they comprised a minority, and many found it difficult to fit into the predominant male culture. In 1991, Yomiuri Weekly published *Burnout syndrome: the rise in resignations among elite career women*, a report on a seemingly limitless series of cases in which women employed in regular positions quit their jobs after two or three years. The article noted that reasons for quitting included having to work under the same pressures as men while simultaneously being encumbered with the double burden of having to fulfill the traditional female role of performing menial tasks. According to a 1994 Ministry of Labor survey on working conditions for women in regular or professional work, 60% of respondents answered that being a woman was “disadvantageous,” with 45.2% citing “recruitment/hiring” and 35.3% “promotions/job advancement” as key junctures where disadvantage was most concentrated. Barriers to promotion and job advancement, commonly recognized as the “glass ceiling,” meant that women were only able to advance to the level of section manager, and hit an “invisible wall” in promotion to department manager or above (Takenobu 1989). Ministry of Labor surveys conducted between 1983 and 1993 also evidence that the percentage of women in department manager positions increased only very slightly from 1.0% to 1.6%. In contrast, the number of assistant managers and section managers doubled.

In light of such issues, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was revised in 1997. The amended law strengthened prevention of gender discrimination by codifying that firms make “provisions for prohibition [of discrimination]” in addition to their previously legal “obligation to cooperate”. It also included provisions requiring companies to adopt positive action, towards remedying gender inequality in the workplace countermeasures against sexual harassment, and measures for maternal healthcare such as an extension of maternity leave. The Japanese Labor Standards Law was also revised in the same year so as to

better ensure employment equality. While its predecessor featured legal limitations on late-night, overtime, and holiday work for women in its labor standards, these were abolished and new gender-neutral terminology was also adopted for certain job titles. In 1999, the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society was passed with the purpose of achieving “a society in which members of both genders are guaranteed the opportunity to participate as equals in activities by their own volition in all realms of society, wherein they are able to enjoy political, economic, social, and cultural benefits on an equal basis and shoulder the burdens of society together.”

Further amendments were made to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 2006. These included extended measures for preventing gender discrimination by expanding the scope of anti-discrimination provisions previously limited to women so as to include men. Furthermore, it introduced provisions for preventing “indirect discrimination” (e.g. requirements for height, weight, and physical fitness stipulated during job recruitment, or job transfer requirements that involved moving to a new location during recruitment/promotion) that had until then been difficult to identify as discrimination. In addition, countermeasures against sexual harassment were strengthened from being designated as merely an “obligation for consideration” to an “obligation to take measures.” The goal of these amendments, thus, was to achieve a more enforceable type of gender discrimination prevention.

However, twenty years after the enactment of Equal Employment Opportunity Law, one cannot say that Japan has yet achieved gender equality. In 2009, Japan ranked 57th out of 109 countries in the United Nations Development Program’s gender empowerment measure (GEM), the lowest among all developed nations. In the 2010 Global Gender Gap Report presented by the World Economic Forum (2010), an independent Swiss financial research organization, Japan ranked 94th among 134 countries. While it ranked 1st in health and life expectancy, it was 84th in education, and 101st in economic

participation and political authority, revealing gender gaps in the fields of politics and economics.

In light of these problems, numerous reports including the General Labor Research Center Editorial Room (1987), Kanai et al. (1991), Nishimura (1991), Maeda (1998), Wakabayashi et al. (2002), Nishimura (2002), Kageyama (2004), Maeda et al. (2004), Yui et al. (2004), Yoshida (2007), Yui ed. (2012) have been published on Equal Employment Opportunity Law and transformations in female labor force participation. However, there has been very little research focusing on women's career formation that is based on their life histories, even at an international level. Nakazawa et al. (2008) investigate the experiences of Japanese women working in Singapore and attempt to uncover the social structure that underlies their experience. In this study, I conducted surveys on the life histories of women who primarily began their careers following the introduction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. Through these surveys I demonstrate how Japanese women have built careers in this era of rapid change in Japan's gender order.

I have previously investigated the career formation of Japanese men under a joint research project conducted in fiscal 2006–2007 by the University of Sydney and Kurume University, titled “Masculinity, Change and Conflict in Global Society” (Murata 2011). This research collected data on the career formation trajectories of 34 Japanese respondents (29 men and 5 women) using the snowball method (Taga ed. 2011). In this paper, I utilize data on women culled from surveys of three women who work in foreign-owned companies: two (Ms. A and Ms. B) who gained employment at around the time of the passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and one (Ms. C) who gained employment thereafter. The cases of Ms. A and Ms. B are noteworthy because these women belong to the generation that first made progress in careers as regular, private sector corporate workers, which lay beyond the limited range of careers traditionally accessible to women such as in teaching, nursing and the public

sector. Ms. C provides an ideal case for examining the extent to which the Equal Employment Opportunity Law has impacted the Japanese workplace.

The research method used in this study consisted of semi-structured interviews where I prompted participants with key questions as presented in *Table 1* and allowed each to respond freely. Each interview generally lasted between one to two hours per person. I used both handwritten notes and audio recordings to capture participants' responses and later analyzed results using the following three steps. First, I transcribed all recorded audio data. Second, I created life histories for each participant based on the content of transcribed conversations and notes taken during the interviews. Third, I analyzed these life histories thematically while rereading them in a cross-sectional manner. By investigating participants' awareness of the ways in which women work in Japan, their identities and insecurities, and their career strategies over the years since the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, I will draw together suggestions regarding how gender equality can be achieved in Japan's working environment.

Table 1. Main Questions

Upbringing	Structure and characteristics of the family in which you were brought up
	Details of the area in which you were brought up
	Details of educational background and school life
Work life	Work experience/career
	Current job profile and way of working
	Overview and characteristics of the workplace
	Gender-based segregation of duties/differences in job ranking
	Child-support system at the workplace
Family life	Family structure and marital history
	Participation in housework and child rearing
	Conflict between work and family life

Social life	Way of spending free time/interests Friends and acquaintances/ties with local area Health Personal care (health/body type/appearance)
Values and outlooks	Interests/opinions regarding social conditions Outlook and anxieties about the future Interest in the job

Awareness of women of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law generation

Employment at foreign-owned companies: the case of Ms. A

Ms. A was born in Tokyo in the early 1960s to a corporate employee father and a housewife mother. She believes that her mother had a major influence on her education.

From the day I was born, my mother devoted herself tenaciously to my education, deciding that she would be strict and raise me to be a smart child. From the time I was a baby, she was quite fussy about such things as my sleeping hours and the nutritional value of my food. When I was in kindergarten, she would take me to the Imperial Hotel on Sundays to treat me to something nice to eat. When she heard me say, 'Mama. This is tasty, isn't it? What should I do so I can eat lots of such food?' she laughed and replied, rubbing her point in, 'Study hard, go to a good school, join a good company, and you will be able to eat such delicious food all the time.'

As demonstrated here, Ms. A was brought up from an early age with a strong awareness cultivated through her mother's enthusiastic lesson that even women can pursue economic independence. She subsequently went to a public grade school and a private all-girls high school, following which she entered a

prestigious private women's university. She relates that her mother's wishes had a strong influence on her decision regarding higher education as well.

When I was applying for university, my mother said that she wouldn't pay for me to go to a second-rate university. She told me to take a year or two off and try and get into a good school. She never once told me to get married but to be an independent woman. My father agreed without hesitation with everything my mother said, and he might have also had expectations for his daughter.

The fact that Ms. A was an only child is a major reason why her parents had high expectations for her; however, what she says also implies that housewives in the 1960s hoped that their daughters would follow a course in life similar to that of men, which was to get into high-ranking schools and companies. At university, Ms. A majored in international relations and set her sights on studying and working abroad. However, given that she was an only child, she decided against going overseas and instead decided to find a job with an international company within Japan, such as one at a foreign financial institution that dealt with overseas markets.

However, Ms. A noted that in 1985, exactly one year before the passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and just as she began searching for a job, the situations were challenging. She reflects on this period of her life as follows.

It was quite tough in those times, when there were jobs only for women who had graduated from junior college. At any rate, though, after I graduated I found a job at a Japanese brokerage. Things changed about a year after this, and it became easier for women to find employment at companies.

Although at present there are more women from four-year universities than junior colleges receiving informal job offers (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2008), prior to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, women who graduated from universities were at a disadvantage. Japanese companies at the time took it for granted that even if hired, women would soon quit to become full-time homemakers after they married. This served as the premise for the introduction of the “office lady” in Japan, popularly referred to as “OL”. The term was coined in 1964 after being selected in a reader’s poll run by the weekly magazine *Josei Jishin* (Ogasawara 1998). In general, it denoted regular female employees and female office staff in charge of auxiliary work around the office.

In fact, Ms. A relates that the environment at the Japanese brokerage she joined was not suited to women who sought financial independence and to further their careers.

Women were all treated alike, being used to pour tea, make photocopies, and change ash trays, and I remember feeling quite uncomfortable about this. I put up with it in my first year as I thought it was part of my training, but as the women I worked with, who were over 30, had been doing the same kind of work since day one, and I realized that that was the way it was around the office. Around the time when the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was created, I happened to look at the newspaper and see an article about how a securities department had been established at a foreign-owned bank. I wasted no time in sending my CV to the bank, and one-and-a-half years later, made my career move.

Thus, the jobs that Japanese businesses at the time assigned to women were largely menial tasks, with no possibility of career advancement. Within a short time, Ms. A became painfully aware of the fact that there was no future for her at a Japanese company, and, encouraged by the Equal Employment Opportunity

Law, she discovered the chance of a new career path at a foreign-owned company. However, in some ways, she felt lost during her early days at this company.

At Japanese companies, people are nice; more specifically, they help with anything. However, at the foreign-owned bank, I received no help whatsoever from the time I received my offer letter. When I became anxious and called, they said, 'Why are you calling? You were accepted, so what's the problem?' They were not as polite as Japanese companies are. On my first day, there were many intimidating women, whom I found a little unnerving at first; later on, however, once I became accustomed, it proved to be a fresh experience.

She reflects that her time spent at this foreign-owned company was to prove extremely meaningful later on in her life.

Ms. A has subsequently enjoyed a successful career, working at three different foreign-owned companies. Her first job was at a foreign-owned asset management company when she was around 30. While the asset management company was less profitable than the stock brokerage, she felt that the work would not be difficult and seemed to be a good job. She worked for approximately six years, dealing with business partners running corporate pensions. The second was in her mid-30s when, thinking that there would be an expansion of investment trusts, she decided to move to a major foreign-owned investment trust company. Here, she spent nine years as a manager whose daily work as a local supervisor comprised of giving pep talks in English to junior staff members. The third job was in her mid-40s, when, reflecting on her age, she decided that she wanted to work on longer-term projects rather than do complicated everyday work. She was headhunted by a foreign-owned investment trust company and is at present satisfied in her job as a section manager, which

allows her to organize her junior colleagues and work on long-term projects.

Employment at foreign-owned companies: the case of Ms. B

Ms. B was born in the early 1960s in the Chugoku Region, but moved often due to the fact that her father, a technician, was constantly transferred to different towns with industrial complexes. Her mother, a housewife, was not very strict when it came to her education, unlike Ms. A's mother.

My mother was the type of person who was absorbed in her own hobbies, and quite liberal—or perhaps lax is a better word. My father was also lenient, so I grew up in a household where I was the one lecturing my parents. I realized around junior high school age that things wouldn't turn out well if I listened to what my parents said, which is why I would have to decide my future on my own. However, I was never taught that women should act like women or anything like that, so I was free in this sense.

Ms. B reports being brought up by “lax” parents who did not make a point to instill gender norms. After attending a local private high school, she went on to study at a private university in Tokyo and began living alone. Her reason for wanting to go to Tokyo was that her local area was too laid back, and she wanted to study with people who were more active and intelligent. She considered her life in Tokyo exciting as she was surrounded by many stimulating people. Over the course of her university education, she studied for one year at an American university. At this time, when one dollar was equivalent to 180 yen, studying abroad was far from common, but she led an extremely fulfilling life in America. Her international outlook was greatly influenced by her childhood spent growing up near a U.S. military base and the fact that she often listened to English on the radio.

Although her time at university was meaningful, job-hunting during the

early 1980s proved extremely difficult.

It was before the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, and I chose a foreign-owned company because no other options were available. One condition for women at many places was that they would only hire you if you were commuting from your parents' house and your commuting time was within 90 minutes door-to-door. During a job interview at a foreign-owned bank, when I told the foreign branch manager that my hobby was playing the piano, he replied that people who played the piano were suited for that kind of job. I was given the go-ahead and thought that I would get on well at a foreign-owned company. As I had taken courses in computing in university and could punch cards with a machine that was as big as a cow and type in English, I was hired. It was different in those days; we didn't have Word, and all documents had to be created with an English typewriter.

Prior to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, there were many constraints placed on women seeking employment. Ms. B states that no choices were available to her other than the company to which she applied. The foreign-owned company hired her because of her English and typing abilities.

She initially worked at a financial office; however, with the first wave of the IT revolution in the latter half of the 1980s, which saw the launch of BOJ-Net, she became a section manager in her 20s because of her interest in IT and her ability to learn quickly. Kaminogo (1990: 138), who interviewed women following the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, points out that the diffusion of computers in the workplace marked the post-industrial transformation of business "from [that based on] physical strength to intellectual ability" and expanded women's roles in business to a previously unanticipated extent. Utsumi (2005) also identifies IT as one area in which women could be expected to play a major part. She additionally notes that, apart from changes in

women's attitudes, transformations in the business environment owing to the widespread infiltration of IT served to reinforce women's career progress at the time.

Ms. B also states that young people were able to respond more flexibly to rapid changes in the banking industry than their older counterparts.

The world of the treasury also underwent changes, and it was around the time when older men who didn't know anything were being forced out of the industry that I too became concerned about being forced out. That is why I started training as much as possible and gained an understanding of basic concepts such as value at risk and derivatives. Had I not been able to catch up, I would have been fired. While I, thinking that I had to survive at all costs, studied over the weekends, older men went around in a state of bewilderment, not knowing what to do with themselves, drinking at bars, and waking up with a hangover.

Thus, she was able to survive by responding to rapid changes; she felt that if she failed to adapt, she would have had no choice but to quit. She subsequently worked at a treasury-related job for ten years and a human resources job for two years. However, she was admitted to hospital for a month due to fatigue. As the human resources work was both physically and mentally demanding, she shifted to a company specializing in finance and credit, where she is currently the manager of the international division.

Gender strategies

Did Ms. A and Ms. B, both of whom have enjoyed long careers in foreign-owned companies, experience any gender-related problems? Ms. B characterizes foreign-owned companies as follows.

There is no sexual harassment at foreign-owned companies, and it is a case of whether you can or cannot do the job, with no room for discriminating against women. Overtime is seen as evidence of inefficiency, which is why everyone goes home at around 6 o'clock. One does not have to transfer, and you can find balance between life and work.

Ms. B has not encountered problems such as gender discrimination or sexual harassment at foreign-owned companies, and notes that what counts is “whether you can or cannot do the job.” Furthermore, in contrast to Japanese companies, where overtime tends to be taken for granted, foreign-owned companies seemed to perceive it negatively, which means that they provided a beneficial working environment. Ms. A, who at first worked for a Japanese company, is of the same opinion.

There was overt gender discrimination at the Japanese company I worked for. However, I have worked at foreign-owned companies and have been fortunate to work in an environment where everyone is treated equally without favor or prejudice, regardless of one's gender, as long as one can do the job. I thought this was normal now, but I am shocked to hear from women working at Japanese companies that sexual harassment is rife even in this day and age.

While she notes that gender is irrelevant at foreign-owned companies, she is always surprised by what she hears about gender discrimination at the workplace from her acquaintances working at Japanese companies.

Thus, neither woman directly experienced the problem of gender discrimination in the workplace owing to decisions to work at foreign-owned companies, and have therefore been able to concentrate on work and further their careers. However, this does not mean that these women are not aware of

gender relations. Even if there is no direct discrimination at foreign-owned companies in terms of organizational structure or at times of personnel evaluations, it does not mean that all employees are bias-free. There remains a distinct possibility that events reported by participants stem from an environment in which employees' male-centric attitudes are hidden.

For example, Ms. A relates that she has used a strategic awareness of "being a woman" in furthering her career.

I don't have the slightest intention to compete head-to-head with men and don't want to work in messy areas like men. Thus, I have worked in niche markets, the kind that men don't tend to want to work in. Men like doing cool and showy things, such as sales and trading, but I chose to work in offices behind the scenes, where there are few men and where it is easy for women to hold power.

She states here that in the highly competitive world of finance, she has chosen not to work in the same manner as that of men or in the departments favored by men but in the "offices behind the scenes" where there are few men. Behind this decision is an awareness of the problems that are generated through women competing with men.

Men are intimidating when they get jealous, and go on the offensive against women who invade their territory. Even if women want to make hundreds of thousands or billions of yen in finance, competing against men ends up destroying one's emotional balance. In fact, I have seen a number of cases in which women's personalities become strange after engaging in extended conflict with men. A woman's jealousy is nothing compared with a man's.

As evinced by the remark, *There is nothing scarier than the jealousy of a*

woman (Shukan Post 2000), the emotion of jealousy has tended to be understood as something particular to women. However, in this case, Ms. A recognizes that the jealousy of men in the workplace is more frightening than that of women.

One major factor in her strategic choice to not compete in men's arenas is her experience in schooling at all-girls institutions.

I went to both an all-girls high school and university as I did not want to be in an environment surrounded by arrogant guys. If you are surrounded by only girls, you can do anything, which is why I preferred not having guys around. I get the impression that those who have been to all-girls schools feel that they have to do everything themselves because nobody else will do it for them. However, there are many women who went to co-ed schools, who subscribe to the old-fashioned ways of thinking, such as delegating everything to men from the start.

Her preference to not be in an environment surrounded by men and to work in groups comprised of only women is naturally connected to avoidance of places in which she will become embroiled in conflict with men. In addition, she relates that she is mindful of gender roles when communicating with men.

I'm happy when I find out that a man is not my competitor. I'll help out if it's an old man or if they ask me to do something simple. I even show them my sweet side sometimes to make them happy. I have learned from the experience of working in an organization that human beings will not go on the offensive if they do not think that you are hostile toward them.

She has been able to survive within the organization by acting as the type of woman that men expect. This fact highlights a sizeable presence of gender bias even in foreign investment companies. Ms. A has been able to build her career

by employing a strategy of not competing with men in the same arena and working in offices behind the scenes.

In contrast, regarding their family lives, while both Ms. A and Ms. B are currently single, Ms. B had married and lived with a man for ten years between the ages of 25 and 35.

He was a really nice person when I got to know him in our college days, but he changed when he started working. He wanted to be comforted when he got home from work but was always met by the sound of me typing and having meetings in English on the phone, which meant he couldn't relax. Having successful careers put unbearable pressure on both of us. At the end of the day, he wanted someone who could be a housewife, so I thought he should have married someone else. I thought that I could put up with it if we had a child, but we were unsuccessful.

She relates that their transition from being students to working members of society led to a change in their sets of values, which made it difficult for them to sustain the marriage. In particular, she says that her working at home was a source of stress for her husband, and that he wanted a housewife who could soothe him. Thus, maintaining a balance between career and marriage has posed certain difficulties for women and this has resulted in an increased number of single women in management positions, many of whom entered corporate Japan alongside the Equal Employment Opportunity Law.

Relations between female superiors and male subordinates

Increase of female superiors

During the mid-1990s, approximately ten years after the introduction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, women were beginning to occupy

management positions. These were women who had started as regular corporate workers around the time when the law was enacted. Naganuma (1998a) introduces that these female managers of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law generation are recognized as pioneers as well as the concerns felt by younger generations. The Group for Women with Subordinates (2001) published a book introducing ideals and ways of thinking for female managers. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2006), between 1989 and 2006, the percentage of companies with female managers in positions equivalent to sub-section manager or above increased from 51.6% to 66.6%. Those in positions equivalent to sub-section manager rose from 5.0% to 10.5%, those in positions equivalent to section manager from 2.1% to 5.0% and those in positions equivalent to department manager from 1.2% to 2%.

Given this increase, it is not rare for female superiors to have male subordinates in the workplace. As evinced by the article such as *Techniques for managing male subordinates for female middle managers* (Kawasaki, 2006), the word “superior” that had hitherto been understood implicitly to refer to men now also encompassed women, with attention focusing on the combination of “female superior/male subordinate.”

In addition to symbolizing a transformation of the traditional corporate culture that presupposed male superiors, the existence of female superiors created the problem of how male subordinates would deal with the changes taking place. In the article *Rapid rise in female superiors*, Shukan Gendai (1997) points out that there are many men who do not know how to deal with female superiors; for example, there existed a somewhat cold view among men in the past that working under a woman would hinder one’s career. Many other articles have examined attitudes and problems surrounding female superiors from a male perspective. These include *Our strained relations with female superiors* (Shukan SPA! 1997), *It’s tough having female superiors* (Ono, 1999), *Female superiors do not fight using logic* (Asahina et al. 2007), and *The increase in*

female managers and the real intentions of men (Forbes 2004a, Ishibushi et al. 2008a).

Conversely, the article *Women fight in the masks of old men: survival skills for female managers* in their 30s, Kakehashi (2001) demonstrates how women superiors use the language commonly used by old men to try and control their subordinates. This reflects the traditional value in which “masculine language” lends itself to seizing power over a space or the workplace, providing a real sense of how women’s language becomes masculinized when they undertake the role of superior.

Ms. B states that her work as a manager was complicated when she was in a department with many male subordinates.

My previous department considered communication to be important, and it was quite painful going to karaoke or drinking with the same people, who all were typical masculine jocks. As long as such men can do routine work such as transferring money, the ability to think is not seen as important, which is why managers also hire only guys like this.

Contrary to Ms. A, Ms. B reflects that as Japanese departments are small, even in the foreign-owned companies, she could not avoid contact with men in the workplace and was unable to keep company with groups of the typical masculine jock-like workers. She subsequently moved to a professional department which had fewer subordinates, resulting in her work life becoming much easier.

It might be just me who is strange or not a typical woman. But I am often told that professional women and masculine men working in the same environment are like different species, and that it’s best not to pay attention to such things.

Ms. B established her position in the workplace by pursuing her own expertise and not caring about communication with men. It has also been noted that because the same male-dominated corporate culture continues despite changes to the system, even if women become managers in fields in which they have a high level of expertise, they cannot apply their abilities well in areas close to sales (Ishibushi et al. 2008b).

Furthermore, female superiors encounter additional challenges in the work environment when they are younger than male subordinates. In an article titled *Increasing numbers of old men in positions with no prospect of promotion*, Naganuma (1998b) introduces a case involving a career woman in her mid-30s who worked as deputy branch manager of a financial institution and her male subordinate in his 50s. This article indicates that in businesses that have hired women for regular positions under the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, difficulties arise when older male employees who fail to hold senior positions owing to a shortage of posts work under a young female manager who has a successful career. The older men do not want to recognize their female superior, making communication difficult.

Ms. A is also mindful about communication with male subordinates who are older than her.

Given that they are soon due for retirement, older male subordinates adopt a stance in which they do not want to become involved in new things or do not want their workloads to increase. This is why, when I approach them, I always go out of my way to show respect and ask them to teach me from their experience of many years. This makes them happy, as if a daughter is entertaining her father.

Thus, acting out the gender roles of father/daughter rather than superior/subordinate allows her to communicate smoothly with her older male colleagues.

Male subordinates who cry

In contrast, the number of men who refuse to recognize female superiors as superiors has decreased among younger generations. According to the Policy Planning and Research Department in the Minister's Secretariat of the Ministry of Labor, Japan (1995), over half of men in their 20s said that they would not be concerned if they have female superiors, with the majority of those who found the idea unacceptable in their late 40s and older. In a study by Yamada (2003), in response to the question, "Do you feel resistance toward female superiors?" 63% of men and 76% of women said "No", showing that feelings of resistance are declining with the passage of time. Additionally, research by Yotsumoto and Kobayashi (2009) also illustrates a change in attitudes, in this case in response to the question, "Would you like to work with male or female superiors?" While there is still a relative tendency for male subordinates to prefer men, with 23.2% replying "Male superiors" and 8.4% "Female superiors," 68.4% replied "Either way/Don't know," showing a general tendency of indifference toward the gender of superiors.

Amid this attitude shift, attention has turned to the issue of how well male subordinates get along with female superiors. In the article, *Good at playing up to someone, good at moving up in the world: aiming to become a man pampered by women*, Sakamoto (1998) introduces how men are adopting what is viewed as the traditional female strategy of "playing up to someone." In the article, *Getting on with female superiors at work*, Ota (2005) reports that we have moved beyond the era in which men felt a sense of humiliation at having female superiors to one in which men in their 20s and 30s respect women who are able to do the same jobs.

While Ms. A also says that young men no longer care about having female superiors, she points out a new problem that has arisen among men.

While in the past men were horrified at the idea of having female superiors,

today's young men are completely fine with it. However, they are obedient at work in both good and bad senses of the word. If you tell them to do something, they will do it; if you don't, they won't do it by themselves. However, in the case of women, there is much more variation between individuals, yet there are many who are strong-willed. If I reprimand a woman, she goes on the counterattack; men, on the other hand, just cry. They gradually start to become teary-eyed and, when things get too much, go to the toilet where, I have been told, they cry. It is never my intention to put them on the spot, just to tell them about certain problems.

Thus, when engaging in communication with male subordinates at her previous company, she was surprised to find that men sometimes cried. While Tomizawa (2008) discusses the increasingly-prevalent phenomenon of men crying in front of women—as opposed to traditional values which state that men do not cry—from the perspective of gender transformations, we also see this phenomenon in the workplace. In these instances, men cry when they have been reprimanded by a female superior. Ms. A believes the cause of this to be the fact that younger generations of men have little experience of being reprimanded, reflecting that, “It was difficult, as I had to be careful not to be too harsh on them; in fact, I had to make sure to praise them.”

She also relates the following case as an example of problems with male subordinates.

A certain young man, despite being in his late 20s, had an argument with a female peer, the kind of argument you see among elementary school students. He didn't utter a word for three days, and it was affecting his work, so I asked him what was wrong, to which he replied that he was not talking because the young woman had made fun of him. In the course of the conversation, this woman had remarked that she could forgive a certain

politician for being an idiot because he was cool. As that politician was from the same university as this young man and the woman went to a better university than his, he felt that she was also calling him an idiot. He had a strange complex to begin with, which led him to fly into a rage.

While we can say that the strong internalization of one's academic background is a gender issue particular to men, when this begins to affect one's work, it becomes an issue for oneself as a working member of society. While Naganuma (1998b) touches upon the problem of "employees who sulk when reprimanded by a female superior," the act of not speaking for three days at work because of one's individual feelings differs from traditional forms of masculinity. Along with the act of crying, we can understand this as a new problem among present day men that have been caused by their relations with female superiors.

Attitudes of women of the Revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law generation

Transformations associated with the changes in foreign-owned companies

Next, I would like to consider the case of Ms. C, who is 10 years younger than Ms. A and Ms. B and belongs to the generation that started work subsequent to the 1997 amendment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law.

Ms. C was born in the mid-1970s and, after attending a public high school, graduated from a prestigious public university. At university, an interest in foreign countries led her to join a club for international students, providing her with an opportunity to get to know students from other countries. In 2000, she joined a major Japanese drug manufacturer, where she began work as an MR. She was initially drawn to this company because of its international feel and the fact that it had headquarters in the U.S.

This generation can be characterized as having been influenced by

globalization as it took shape in the 1990s. The company at which Ms. C worked became a complete subsidiary of a foreign-owned company a few years after she joined. She states that becoming part of a foreign-owned company meant that there were changes to the company's square seal, as well as the company logo and president, and compliance (corporate ethics) became a lot stricter.

In Japan, we give cash when celebrating something, but such custom does not exist in the U.S., which is why it was prohibited and replaced with flowers. While they did take the Japanese context into account, it became heavily regulated.

The structure of decision-making also underwent transformations along with these changes in corporate culture. While the headquarters were run in a top-down manner, branches became franchised and were encouraged to be run in a bottom-up manner. However, several problems appeared between the company headquarters in the U.S. and the office in Japan.

Although we were told to decide everything within the branch, everyone was in a panic. This manner of functioning was unheard of in Japanese companies. There were major divergences in what the president had said and what was being done at the branch. There were times when the president understood this and changed his own policies, but in the view of the branch manager, headquarters was passing everything onto the branches and doing nothing of its own accord.

She states here that while becoming part of a foreign-owned company resulted in changes to corporate culture and decision-making. This did not necessarily work well in the Japanese context and prompted ongoing confusion.

Ms. C feels that the organization and its business became complicated, and

although the company was hiring mid-career employees owing to a shortage in staff, domestic recruitment was not functioning well at the organizational level.

Newly-hired mid-career employees are being given the responsibility for challenging projects, which should have been left in the hands of employees who have been at the company for a long time. The work is difficult if one has no networks within the company or experience. However, the company does not grant them any flexibility, and wherever gaps appear, they are forced to do the work that nobody wants to do, as if they are trying to fill them along the way. Meanwhile, because the company wants to make up for staff shortages as quickly as possible, they also hire those who have not had sufficient experience or ability, and the company pays these employees a high salary, as much as they demand.

Thus, Ms. C notes that problems have resulted from the rapid recruitment of mid-career employees in an attempt at crafting makeshift solutions within a confused system. She also relates that a merit-based pay system has been introduced for personnel assessments, which is close to an annual salary system and has resulted in a gradual decrease in bonuses. Although annual salaries can be predicted to a certain extent through target achievement rates, she is concerned about whether this evaluation system will function well seeing as how deviations of a few percentage points during evaluations can negatively impact one's annual income greatly.

It is extremely difficult to consider whether assessments are being carried out correctly in Japan. There are those in the branch who still follow the Japanese work philosophy and would like to keep the seniority system. Half-baked efforts resulting from Japanese resistance to globalization have given rise to extremely poor results. The amount of pressure on male middle

managers has increased dramatically, to the extent that they don't have a private life. They also have training at headquarters on weekends, and they get called in by the head of sales at headquarters whenever figures are poor. They have time off in lieu, but very rarely have the chance to use it.

Here, Ms. C presents that certain segments of the firm have resisted changes brought on by globalization, preferring instead to continue with more customary Japanese approaches to business, and an inability to reconcile the two as yet has thwarted progress. Such strains, which result from becoming part of a foreign-owned company, have burdened male middle managers, who are obligated to sacrifice their time for training and other responsibilities and are, thus, unable to reap employment benefits such as compensatory leave.

Conflicts surrounding gender

How do gender relations within the organization appear to Ms. C, a member of the Revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law generation?

In Ms. C's company, approximately half of the top management who came to Japan from the U.S. headquarters are foreign women, many of whom came to Japan with their husbands and families from various countries, including Mexico and Germany. In contrast, there are no female managers from Japan. The headquarters raised concerns about this and, in order to establish the company as a place where women are free to work, they attempted to hire a female branch manager, the first ever in this Japanese industry. However, there was a major backlash against this strategy in Japan.

I really got a sense of how difficult it is for Japanese women to get promoted. The male view of women in the workforce became clear. Men did not want to work under or take orders from someone like that, and do not anticipate being in a situation where a woman is above them. While women's

attitudes are gradually changing, there was also a backlash among women, with some questioning whether she should be throwing away her happiness as a woman, and others—particularly those women who appear obsessed over child rearing—are of the opinion that higher management is not suitable for a woman.

Although the percentage of female managers following the Equal Employment Opportunity Law has gradually continued to rise, major resistance to promoting women to managerial positions still exists in workplaces entrenched in Japanese corporate culture. What I would like to focus on here is how gender issues associated with being a woman have come to the fore and the resultant emotional backlash, rather than whether women have the ability to perform these jobs.

To start, Ms. C recounts that men react negatively to talented women.

The more talented women are, the more they are despised behind their backs by male employees. Even talented men criticize women as women pose a threat to their own positions. While there are some women who are good at flattering men and erasing their own presence, I find it bizarre that they feel a sort of strange jealousy toward talented women.

As with Ms. A, Ms. C also states that men find their advancement of women in the workplace to be a threat and women become the subject of jealousy and aggression. A considerable number of male superiors also hold these values, rendering them unable to assess their female subordinates without any gender bias.

While male superiors say that gender is irrelevant, they fail to understand or imagine the various aspects of women's reactions and so feel fear or trauma.

When something happens, they always come out with old stories about how they had trouble with female subordinates in the past, harping on how strange that woman was. No matter how many times someone says men and women are equal, it's hard to keep believing it when you hear them talk about women like that.

Thus, gender has significant meaning in the workplace. For Ms. C, who feels that gender markedly influences how a person is assessed, it appears that gender equality is only being acknowledged superficially. In fact, gender bias including misogyny, remains operative in the workplace, which harms women's prospects for career advancement.

Meanwhile, she observes the following behavior in male superiors when they deal with male subordinates and the manner in which men communicate.

Male superiors seem to take a shine to young men of little talent who engage in naïve behavior, taking care of these men as if they were raising children. Also, communication among men over cigarette breaks is really irritating, standing around as they do, gossiping outside the building. There are times when women are also present at these gatherings, but for some reason they have all quit the company.

To Ms. C, the attitude of male superiors selectively taking immature male subordinates under their wings is incomprehensible. The act of "raising someone by oneself" is important in constructing absolute hierarchical relations. Male superiors are aware that these unskilled naïve male subordinates will be able to recognize this act of support and will be able to protect their superiors' own dominant positions in male society. Furthermore, although smoking is a physical act, associated predominantly with men in Japan, it is also considered useful in constructing social relations and communication among men (Murata 2009), Ms.

C finds it irritating. It is not that she is irritated by the very act of smoking, but she feels that this communication among men in an informal space outside of the building is somehow related to the organization's decision-making. Furthermore, the fact that women once involved in this activity ended up being excluded shows that this communication among men exhibits homosocial characteristics.

Ms. C strives to assert herself in this male-centric society.

I had a chance to undertake training in the U.S. last year but was prevented from doing so. I was mad and protested to a male superior. If a Japanese employee protests too loudly, his or her superior will take offense, which is why doing so is not necessarily productive of positive results. However, if you keep quiet, you will surely be taken advantage of.

Here, she accepts that protesting to a superior carries the risk of disapproval yet nonetheless serves to alleviate frustration and stress that result from keeping quiet. Within Japan's traditional corporate culture, men would often cope with stress due to unreasonable demands and treatment at the hands of superiors by venting pent-up frustrations while drinking with colleagues. The value of silently tolerating bosses' behavior was that it allowed communication in the workplace to proceed without incident, not that the employees' tolerance itself was virtuous. One major reason for this phenomenon is that because the traditional Japanese workplace is based on lifetime employment, it was often a closed community in which people had to work alongside one another for several decades. However, as the lifetime employment system has begun to collapse and the benefits of working at the same company for the long term have weakened, people have begun to see the significance of asserting oneself, as did Ms. C.

Conclusion: beyond the glass ceiling

In this study, I have examined career building strategies and gender attitudes held by women, using the stories of three women who worked in foreign-owned companies from the late 1980s onward, just as Japan's postwar economy and the Japanese lifetime employment system began to crumble.

Ms. A, who belonged to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law generation, worked at several foreign-owned companies in her search for a place that would allow her to effectively use her skills as a female professional. Ms. B, to distance herself from male-centric workplaces, built her career by developing specialist abilities. Although these women advanced their careers not at Japanese companies but in the organizational climate of foreign-owned companies that emphasize ability over gender, they clearly applied their own gender strategies as well. An invisible gender culture took root even within foreign-owned companies that do not emphasize gender. We observed major gender barriers in the workplace for women employed in Japanese companies during the era of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which contained nothing more than provisions for cooperation.

Further, the case of Ms. C, who belongs to the globalized Revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law generation, revealed a persistent, deep-seated male-dominated culture in Japanese businesses, even within one that had become foreign-owned. Thus, we have found confusion over the problem of gender equity attainment in the workplace. This finding confirms that 20 years after the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, adequate solutions to the gender problems in Japanese corporate culture have yet to be found. Although the passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law has stimulated considerable systematic improvements in the working environment for women in Japan, gender issues in Japan's workplaces persist at an emotional level.

In fact, something of a backlash is taking place in 21st century Japan against

the social advancement of women (Ueno et al. 2006). Ms. A notes her apprehensions about this, as she states, “Feminism bashing has become a serious problem in recent years, and I fear that the use of the term ‘gender free’ is becoming a kind of taboo.” Ms. B points out, “There are too many Japanese people who are acting strongly against different and new things. Their hearts are closed off to the outside world.” She also sees this in the form of xenophobia too. She believes that while such attitudes may have been tolerated in the past, Japan needs to change if it is to progress. It is also undeniable that the recent economic downturn has caused a situation in which many young women now express a wish to become full-time housewives. According to the Cabinet Office (2007), when asked to give their views on the statement, “Husbands should work outside the house and wives should be in charge of the household,” the proportion of women who agreed in each age cohort was as follows. In descending order, 58.8% of women 70 and above, 43.1% of women in their 60s, 40.2% of women in their 20s, 35% of women in their 30s, 34.3% of women in their 50s, and 31.7% of women in their 40s. These results reveal that women in their 20s have a more conservative attitude than women of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law generation.

Globalization has led to increased fluidity and diversity throughout Japanese society, including in people’s work lives, in a manner that signals the end of a traditional life course based on the gendered division of labor. In this sense, the women featured in this study have relativized and understood Japan’s workplace culture from an early stage, which has enabled them to free themselves from a life based on Japan’s traditional system of lifetime employment and instead take the initiative to become managers who lead international communications. For example, although Ms. A’s pattern of employment had been an annual salary system in which her contract was renewed annually, she transferred to a foreign-owned company without such guarantees, indicating that she felt no anxiety about her career change. As another example of insight and initiative,

Ms. B teaches her subordinates that the key to successful international business communication as a manager is the ability to recognize cultural differences rather than building knowledge.

Because this study examined only cases of single childless women, future studies need to examine situations of working women who are married and/or are raising children. As evidenced in a number of reports, the greatest hurdle to women's advancement to positions of greater responsibility in the workplace is the lack of systematic support to allow employees to manage work at the same time as family responsibilities, such as child birth and child rearing (Fujiu 1999; Japan Institute of Workers' Evolution 2000; Maeda and Hayakawa 2004). Thus, we see many cases where women either forego having children in order to further their careers or decide to have children and later encounter difficulties in advancement. It is also not uncommon for women to find another job after taking time off or resigning. According to the Japan Institute of Workers' Evolution (2005), 17.4% of companies admitted recruiting for management positions using requirements that are difficult for women to meet, with 42.8% stating that they discourage employing and recruiting women because "many of them quit when they give birth and have to raise children." There are also reports that as parental leave time does not count toward the number of years spent at the company, it delays women's promotions (Maeda and Hayakawa 2004). In fact, several studies have found that in Japan, the rate of men taking parental leave stands at approximately 1%, with most men considering child rearing and care to be the woman's role, and that nearly 70% of female managers feel disadvantaged because of their gender (e.g. Forbes 2004b).

Under its Program for Promoting Gender Equality, the 2003 Cabinet Office Gender Equality Conference set a target of increasing the percentage of women in leadership positions in business, civil service, politics and the judiciary, among others to 30% by 2020. This target underscores the problem of representation of women in management positions in Japan where, as of 2006, women comprised

around 10%, of management as opposed to 30%–40% in Europe and the U.S. (Cabinet Office 2007); however, qualitative aspects of social environments ought to be considered as intently as quantitative measurements. Further, Ms. A indicated that it was difficult for women to pursue careers in foreign-owned companies unless they were in Tokyo. This reveals the differences between the international city of Tokyo and other localities. There is an important relationship between female work and geography, and Tokyo enables women to explore new values within an unorganized society.

However, when considering work environments for women, it is not sufficient to adopt policies that focus solely on women. The Japanese economic situation, in which postwar economic growth ended in a financial meltdown after the 1990s economic bubble, suggests that focusing on only the issue of hiring women is no longer valid. While McDowell (2003) indicated the existence of career problems among working-class young men in the UK, unemployment and irregular employment among young Japanese men in their 20s and 30s have also become serious problems, highlighting the need to identify strategies that transcend traditional gender structures. Studies on Japanese men have indicated that women's issues are also men's issues (Ito 1993; Taga 2006; Taga ed. 2011; Murata 2005, 2009), suggesting that women's work environments transform men's attitudes. In the future, I will examine how men's work strategies and work-life balance have changed.

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