



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

A way out of the cul-de-sac?

*Japanese “Office Ladies”,
internationalism and work-life balance*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Una Hlín Valtýsdóttir

Október 2010

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Hugvísindasvið
Japanskt mál og menning

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Introduction

The topic of this essay is to explore future prospects of young Japanese women working as so-called *Office Ladies* in Japanese companies. A common cliché implies that women working in this position live a carefree and glamorous life. Since they usually still live with their parents they can spend their income on luxury brand fashion and accessories, travel and leisure. After five years or so they quit their job to get married and become full-time housewives. Their position gives no prospect of promotion whatsoever. In order to pursue a meaningful career, women have to postpone marriage and family or decide against it altogether. Even today, it is not possible to combine the two.

The aim of this essay is to try to prove this cliché wrong by finding out whether modern Japanese women working as general clerical employees but want to pursue more challenging careers have the possibility to realise their expectations without sacrificing family life.

The material used consists of field studies conducted by anthropologists and sociologists, newspaper articles, as well as data from Japanese Government sources. By comparing the results of the field studies with the information and statistical data from Japanese authorities a clearer picture of the future prospects of female clerical workers should be obtained.

It should be pointed out, though, that obtaining sources was subject to the author's limited proficiency in the Japanese language, which prevented the use of, for instance, current newspaper articles or other material in the original language depicting different points of view than the ones outlined in the main sources. Since the main sources are field studies conducted over a longer period of time and published some time after, they can only reflect the status at that time, which was around the turn of the last century.

Moreover, this essay consists of the accumulation of information from various sources and their comparison, which is by no means coherent with the position of the author on this issue.

In the first chapter, the work of the typical *Office Lady* is defined and work conditions and environment described. Actions taken by the government and government authorities towards a social and professional environment of gender equality are the topic of the second chapter. In the third chapter, the different options of managerial or career-track

(*sōgōshoku*) and general track (*ippanshoku*) positions are described as well as the seemingly still existing glass ceiling women hit when trying to climb the career ladder in Japanese firms. The fourth chapter deals with the issue of marriage and family life and how they collide with modern women's ambitions. Traditions concerning the "appropriate marriage age" (*tekireiki*), traditional gender roles and the growing discontent among women with those traditions are looked at as well as problems women face when they are not readily willing to quit their jobs at marriage or at a certain age. Modern women's desire for a new lifestyle with more fulfillment in both life and work is the topic of the fifth chapter. Some look towards Western countries which are seen as an environment of equality and freedom for self-fulfillment. The sixth chapter describes so-called "internationalism": ways women have found to escape still existing gender discrimination, by seeking education and work in a western environment both in their home country and, increasingly, abroad as well.

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1. Definition of the white-collar female worker in Japan

Women in offices all around Japan today face a rather difficult task: preferably hired right out of High School, they are expected to clean ashtrays, make copies, welcome guests that come to the office and make and serve tea, hold open elevator doors (and push the buttons as well) for their male co-workers and smile while doing so. Male colleagues must not be criticized and resignation is appropriate when getting married – or reaching the “proper” marriage age (*tekireiki*). Payment usually is about half that of the men¹. This constitutes, in a nutshell, what it was like to work as an *Office Lady* (OL) around the turn of the last century.

The term *Office Lady* was first introduced in the 60's to replace the allegedly more derogatory *Business Girl*, a label which was put on female office workers in post-World War II Japan. Some companies today have abandoned the term *Office Lady* as well and use the more neutral women employees. The average *Office Lady* or OL is a young woman in her twenties, a graduate from either High School or 2-year Junior College still living at home with her parents. Actually, companies are reluctant to hire young women who do not live with their parents. Women are hired as clerical workers in charge of simple and monotonous tasks for their male co-workers who are most often salaried men or *sararīman*, white-collar life-time employees in large corporations. Those tasks include filing, delivering office memos and data input. A daily routine this monotonous does not offer much opportunity for individuality. The role of OL is to support her co-workers and be a part of the group.

Women have to adopt a quasi-domestic role at the workplace. The detested task of serving tea is characteristic for this subordinate role.

“You know what you have to do at Japanese companies? You serve tea, ...? And you have to remember that division chief likes black tea with two lumps of sugar, and section chief will drink only green tea, and so-and-so takes only coffee.”² a former OL reports.

Overall, an OL's job does not involve much responsibility. As one male real estate agency employee puts it bluntly: “...I don't expect them to assume responsibility for work.”³ In addition to the bulk of secretarial work, running personal errands for male co-workers such as buying gifts or making vacation travel arrangements come with the job. In a nutshell,

1 McCarthy

2 Kelsky 2, p.95

3 Ogasawara, p.75

her role is basically to create a good atmosphere in the office with a pleasant appearance, a sweet smile and politeness. This is why OL are also called *office flowers* ⁴.

Just as flowers perish after a certain time and are replaced by fresh ones, OL in their late twenties were throughout the past expected to quit their job. In an interview one OL states that after three years of tenure, superiors start to ask “When are you getting married?” (read: “When are you going to quit so we can hire a new flower?”).⁵

The menial tasks performed by OL are regarded as services provided for their male co-workers. Men tend to “ask favours” rather than expect work to be done. This reflects in bosses’ use of language towards male as opposed to female employees. With male employees, they use the expression *gokurōsan* which means “I appreciate your efforts” and is an acknowledgement of work performed. With female employees, however, *arigatō* is used which only means “thank you” and implies gratitude for services provided. Women themselves seem to have a weak sense of professionalism in this respect since they refer to their work as *shigoto wo yatte ageru* which means to do s.th. for s.b. instead of *shigoto wo suru*, meaning to do work. OL’s performance altogether is not evaluated seriously, women are treated together as “girls” and they generally do not feel they own their work. ⁶. In a survey conducted by Chere magazine (1993:4) among 27-year-old single OL, a standardized image of this group is conveyed which would : OL are depicted as glamourized secretaries with good incomes but no promotion, living careless lives. They want respect, but not the obligation that goes with it. Marriage and children are a goal of the far future but without the cross-generational or cross-gender problems.⁷

Under this circumstances, it is not surprising that a new generation of young Japanese working women and men has emerged who are not willing to sacrifice themselves for their companies without getting anything in return. To them, leisure is almost as important as work. They are called *shinjinrui* or “New Breed”.

Since the work of women in Japanese corporations has been marginalized they have little to lose by devoting themselves to the thrills of consumption. Consumption as an immediate gratification is seen in a positive light – values have obviously shifted.

4 Shoji

5 Ibid.

6 Ogasawara, p.74

7 Ogasawara, p.146-8

2. Government actions towards gender equality:

Laws and provisions

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was implemented in 1986. It was meant to be a protective law, enabling women to compete with men on the job market and opening doors to managerial positions. The law stipulated that companies had to show the willingness not to discriminate in the following fields: hiring , assignments, and promotion as well as retirement, dismissal, fringe benefits and training. However, there was no statement of how companies that would not comply should be penalized.

In 1997, the Japanese Diet revised the EEOL, the Labour Standards Law and others towards guaranteeing equality of work conditions for men and women. The revision took effect in 1999 and abolished both protective measures such as restrictions on overtime and holiday work for women, as well as making the anti-discrimination provisions for companies mandatory. However, the only penalty is the publication of names of companies that do not comply.

In 1992, the Child Care Leave Law came into effect which enables full-time employees, both male and female, to take child care leave until the child is one year old. However, the law does not guarantee paid leave. It was revised in 1995 and now contains family care provisions.

In her statement at the 53rd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women on March 6, 2009, Dr. Meguro Yoriko outlined a strategy promoted by the Japanese government which is aimed to enforce “awareness-raising activities” on gender roles. This Basic Plan for Gender Equality is based on the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society. According to Dr. Meguro ´s account, a recent poll revealed that the traditional perception of gender roles of “husbands as breadwinners and wives as caregivers” was rejected by more than half of the respondents. Unfortunately, however, her statement does not account for the size of the survey nor age, sex and educational status of the respondents. So, one should take this poll with a grain of salt. Despite the positive outcome of this poll, gender inequality does exist in Japan, and it manifests itself exactly with regard to duties at home and to caregiving for elderly family members. Of total hours spent for caregiving, roughly 80% rests on the shoulders of women, as well as domestic chores, for which women spend 7 times more time than men per day.

The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (enacted in June 1999), the actions to be taken

state, local governments and citizens are not clearly identified and the law reads more like a suggestion or an encouragement towards “promotion of a gender-equal society”.

A Charter for Work-Life Balance and an Action Policy for Promoting Work-Life Balance were introduced at the end of 2007 by the “Council of Public and Private Sectors to Promote Work-Life Balance”.⁸ Emphasis is put on economic independence, healthier lifestyle and more freedom of choice when it comes to balancing the responsibilities of family and work. To put this into action, the government – together with the private sector – has announced to work on issues such as limitation of overtime, improvement of child care and maternity leave.

Changes are expected to take place within the time frame of 10 years. Examples of numerical targets are the reduction of casual employees from about 1.9 million to around 1.4 million. The employment rate of women aged 25-44 years should raise from 65% to 69-72% as well as the employment rate of citizens aged 60-64 years is expected to raise from 52% to 60-61%.

Furthermore, the proportion of employees working 60 or more hours a week (10,8% in 2007) is to be reduced by half, and that employees use all of their annual paid leave, while it was only 46,6% in 2007.

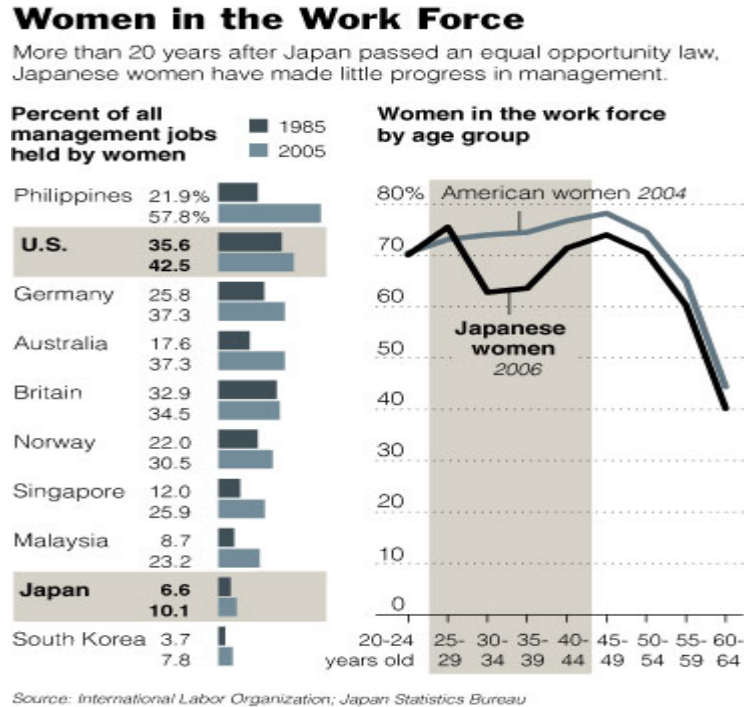
With regard to maternity leave, the target percentage of mothers by 2017 is 80%, fathers are also encouraged to take paternal leave (from current 0,5% to 10%) as well as spend more time in child rearing and household chores.

On part of the government, actions taken include encouraging prestigious companies to develop their own initiatives towards promotion of work-life balance and make them known to the public, giving awards to companies and individuals who contributed to such initiatives, revising working hour requirements and improving child care services by both increase the number of childcare facilities and expanding them to primary school children. The problem here seems to be a Japanese way of addressing things, which means to propose suggestions in a rather vague fashion rather than implement clear regulations and then leave it to whoever it may concern whether to put those suggestions into action or not. But it takes time to bring about fundamental changes. This is reflected clearly by the study conducted by RIETI which will be discussed in the next chapter.

8 Women and Men in Japan 2009

3. *Sōgōshoku* (managerial track) and *ippanshoku* (general track) positions: Why women don't get promoted

Fig.1



As the above chart shows, progress in the participation of women in management has not been great. The percentage of management jobs held by women rose only by 4% in 20 years, or from 6.6% in 1985 to 10.1% in 2005.

The EEOL, introduced in 1986, gave both women and men the choice between career-track positions (*sōgōshoku*) which involved responsibility, salary and possible promotion (allegedly) identical to male employees. General, clerical positions (*ippanshoku*), in other words OL positions, were the other option. The former option involves not only the prospect of promotion and better salary but also long hours of overtime and the possibility of transfer to another affiliate. The latter option involves only subordinate tasks and no outlook for promotion.

Five years after the EEOL was passed, 50% of companies with 5,000 or more employees had officially adopted the dual-track employment system. The remarkable point about this development is that the majority of female employees is still confined to the non-career track. In many companies, is not considered for women who plan to have a family. On the other hand, men are expected to apply only for *sōgōshoku* positions. The following statistics from 1991 show how the system actually works. The prestigious Tokyo Marine

Insurance, for example, hired 424 men and 24 women to career-track, while 553 women and no men were recruited for non-career-track positions. Japanese Airlines hired 147 men and three women to career-track, and 52 women to non-career-track.⁹

Besides the dual-track system, there are two more essential issues that hinder women in their pursue of a career. In larger companies, lifetime employment and salary based on tenure have been and continue to be important elements of management. Both systems only apply to full-time career-track employees. Since the majority of women still are only hired for non-career-track positions, they cannot usually obtain any benefits of such systems.

According to statistical data, the proportion of full-time regular female employees has decreased from 68% in 1985 to 46,6% in 2007. This indicates that women still face problems in getting hired into career-track positions.¹⁰ The problem is that larger companies still have the tendency to favour men over women when hiring, especially after the recession starting in 1991.¹¹ According to a study conducted by RIETI and published in 2005¹², very few women hold managerial positions in private-sector companies in Japan, with only 1%-2% of female employees serving as *buchō* (department chief), 3%-4% serving as *kachō* (section chief), and 8%-9% serving as *kakarichō* (subsection chief).

According to the study, the distinction between *sōgōshoku* and *ippanshoku* employees is gender-based and the tradition has been to recruit males almost exclusively in *sōgōshoku* positions and females in *ippanshoku* positions. With regard to education choices, the study finds that women hardly choose fields such as engineering but comprise 80-90 % of all domestic science students. The low rate of female students in engineering should be of concern, but it should not be surprising – regarding ideas concerning gender roles still prevailing in Japan - that the majority of domestic science students happens to be female. What is surprising, though, and very positive, is that there seem to be boys who chose this subject. The study claims that still today, the *natural* choice of study for many women is domestic science since they are *destined* to become full-time housewives (my italics). The study furthermore looks at discrimination “from the perspective of women”. Apart from the discrepancy in salary, women are said to “complain” about the fact that they are not assigned to positions where they are fairly evaluated for their capabilities, tasks are of subordinate nature despite the fact that they have the same educational background as

9 Gordon

10 Men and Women in Japan 2009

11 Ibid.

12 Toshiaki,

their male co-workers (college graduation). The study then outlines why – from the standpoint of employers – there is no discrimination. The justification, also called “statistical discrimination” reads as follows: women “choose” to quit mid-career anyway, when they get married and/or have children, “regardless of the training or good posts given to them”. According to this information companies tend to refrain from promoting or training female employees, since it would not pay off for them which results from the belief that women tend not to stay with the company for long.

The problem here seems to lie in the vicious circle at work. Companies don’t bother assigning any important work to women or give them the prospect of promotion, since they don’t expect women to gain high tenure. And because of this, women actually quit after a couple of years of boring work and either get married or choose to study abroad and try to find employment with a foreign-affiliate firm.

The study concludes with looking at surveys conducted in 1972, 1997 and 2002 where people were asked whether they approved of the traditional division of gender roles (the man as provider and the woman as homemaker and childrearer). The surveys of recent years revealed a roughly even split between those who approve and those who disapprove. If this disapproval should continue, the author points out, the need of support for women who want to work outside the home will grow.

Last, but not least, the author warns that Japan is about to enter a time of labour shortage and declining birthrates, which would result in a growing need for women participating in the workplace, “whether they like it or not”. He concludes by saying that he cannot see how or whether Japanese society will be able to support this change.

In a New York Times article published in August 2007¹³, Kurose Yukako, then 45 years old, tells about her expectations and experience with the EEOL. In reality, she concludes, the law did not change anything for women, and the *sōgōshoku* positions are still not feasible for married women with children. “Japanese customs,” she says, “make it almost impossible for women to have both a family and a career.” Her own career at a department-store office ended when she had a baby, after having worked there for 15 years. After she started leaving work before 6:30 pm to pick up her daughter from daycare, she was passed over for promotion. She resigned after having to put up with a dead-end clerical job.

Since the passing of the EEOL, women have entered former male-dominated fields of

13 Fackler

work like construction, they started working as taxi drivers or on factory floors. On the other hand, the law has not helped them to gain ground along with men in managerial positions. In 1985, 6,6% of all management jobs were held by women, and that number had only risen to 10,1% by 2005, although women made up almost half of Japan's work force with 27 million working women (Fackler, 2007). As the following chart shows, 42,5 % of managerial positions were held by women in the U.S. at the same time.

The sad truth seems to be that even after passing of the EEOL, women are still forced to quit their jobs before reaching management-level after having children because of the time-consuming work culture in Japan, which includes extremely long work hours and (mandatory) after-work activities. "If expected to work 15 hours a day, then most women will give up," Inoguchi Kuniko, former cabinet minister in charge of gender equality, says. According to an index of female participation in a nation's economy and politics.¹⁴ Women increasingly refuse the demands of family and company in favour of individualism. A study published 1998 which was conducted over several years by the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, Japan's leading economic newspaper, found that women have in fact preceded men in their quest for individualism. The authors claim that women's new lifestyle has the potential to transform Japanese society quite radically towards more flexibility and call this "Women's Quiet Revolution".¹⁵

When we look at Japanese society of the present day, and especially at the situation of Japanese women today, has the "Quiet Revolution" taken place yet?

4. Gender battles: tradition vs. ambition

4.1 Are men really better off?

After retiring, men seem to have lost their existence in the world outside their work, retired.¹⁶ This clearly indicates that men identify with their work to such a degree that life outside the workplace becomes almost non-existent. "A man is his job" (*Otoko wa shigoto da*) was even the slogan for a vitamin drink.¹⁷ A husband has therefore lost his existence in the *soto*-world. As Mori Kyoko accounts for in when describing her family: "If we had been asked to name our family, ..., we would have named each other, our mother, and then

14 Kelsky 2, p.90

15 Kelsky 2, p.90

16 Koyama, p. 181

17 Kelsky 1, p.6

added 'and our father, who's never home' "18.

Although men, too, are now urged to pursue a self-funded MBA or BA degree abroad, which would open to them the possibility of entrepreneurship or employment in a foreign-affiliated firm, the connection between exposing oneself to Western culture and transforming one's personality is not made. Men are also found not to be as keen on the prospect of working and living abroad as their female contemporaries, they seem to choose the comfort zone of their home country's familiar work environment.¹⁹ One woman reports about her (Japanese) company's search for male employees for its New York office: "no matter what, Japanese men will avoid an American company where there is no lifetime employment system and no standard pay scale... Even the ones that joined usually quit within a year, because they didn't like working under so many women....The company was becoming more and more a woman's domain."²⁰ Whereas men enjoy financial support from their employers and can earn their degree almost anywhere, for women, it definitely matters whether they have an MBA from Harvard or Idaho.

As it is the case with study abroad (*ryūgaku*), men working in overseas branches of large Japanese firms enjoy financial stability to a much greater extent than independent women who have to find a job and procure visas all by themselves. Support from their company makes obviously a difference for men on the financial side, but, on the other hand, it ties them even more to their current employer and their degree gives them no additional professional freedom at all. "Japanese men must always act 'properly' Japanese. There's peer pressure. If they don't, they'll be left out of company business when they go home."²¹

Whereas women find living and working/studying abroad liberating, for their male compatriots this is more often than not an unpleasant experience of lost privileges. Writer and editor Igata Keiko who lives in the UK describes the image of the Japanese male expatriate (*chūzaiin*): "What is it you like so much about England?" one of them asked me. ..."I want to go home so bad I can't stand it. Those people (the English) are crazy. The local Japanese staff women are crazy, too. ... How could they send me to a place like this?" ... No matter what I said to them, the answer was the same, "Japan is number one."²²

18 Mori, p.21

19 Kelsky 2, p.106

20 Kelsky 2, p.107

21 Kelsky 2, p.105

22 Kelsky 2, p.111

However, men seem to have changed their attitude towards work abroad. A 1998 article in a job-hunting magazine portrayed eight young men who ventured into careers abroad in the search for more professional and personal freedom. They claim that they are now able to pursue hobbies, creative activities or individual entrepreneurship, all of which would not have been possible in Japan. (ibid.). However, Japanese men as a whole still seem to have more to lose than women when relocated abroad due to their unchanged privileged status in Japanese society. Actually, Japanese men are reluctant to join organisations such as the U.N. “because the language requirement is hard to meet, and many Japanese corporations pay higher salaries”.²³

Japanese men usually reject *gaishikei* or foreign-affiliated firms, since they find them frightening and unpredictable. They do not fit their image of a smooth career path. “What incentive is there for a Japanese [male] to risk an unknown future in a place where people speak a foreign language and put their feet on the desk? A person who does join is odd and most likely a drop-out.” says a foreign general manager with 30 years of experience in Japan.²⁴

As Ojima Yukiko, a thirty-one-year-old technical designer in a major Japanese computer firm, puts it, “Japanese society has always been male-dominated, so there are a lot of expectations about how a man must behave, much more than for women. Women have had only to obey men. But men have responsibility,..., so even if they have an interest in Western things, they can’t pursue them, because parents have strong expectations of them to join a company and conform because they are boys.”²⁵ According to the account of another interviewee men are not only bound by societal expectations towards them, but as well by the rigid employment system. If one decided to take for example a one-year-leave to pursue another interest, he would probably lose his job and with it all the benefits that come with lifetime employment. (ibid.). So it could be said that men actually seem to be worse off in Japanese society, since all the power and privileges come with a price. They do not enjoy the same freedom as women do, since they are bound by the lifetime employment system which gives security but also renders them immobile. Even if they have interests and aspirations, they cannot follow them.

23 Kelsky 2, p.112

24 Kelsky 2, p.115

25 Kelsky 2, p.118

4.2 The “I May not Marry” Syndrome (*kekkon shinai kamoshirenai shōkōgun*)²⁶

According to Japanese tradition, both women and men move from one life stage to the next at certain age intervals that are determined by society. Marriage is one of the most important stages, especially for women.

Still today, for a Japanese woman, to be unmarried holds a kind of stigma to it, like it would for westerners to be unemployed. Marriage in Japan could perhaps be compared to a job. So, is it possible at all for both men and women to hold two jobs? With the long working hours for men, they are hardly taking part in family life anyway.

When women of Mori’s generation grew up they were taught that everything that they did or learned for themselves was “empty” and that a woman’s fulfillment lies in taking care of others, especially a husband and children. So it would be completely acceptable for a woman in her early thirties to quit her job, even if she enjoys it, in order to get married. Japanese economy functions smoothly just because women are excluded from it as full-time wives and mothers. They are expected to devote themselves to raising the next generations of workers. The dominant white-collar employment pattern excludes women at every level, young women are almost always hired for dead-end secretarial positions (OL) and are suspect when they work past the age of 35, at which age they are expected to be full-time wives and homemakers.

However, as Tanimura Shiho, the author of the book *Kekkon shinai kamoshirenai shōkōgun* (The “I May Not Marry” Syndrome) points out, modern women want a partner and reject the traditional role model of wife, maid and mother. Men usually only want a wife who takes care of their personal needs and the housework. This is why husbands either do not realise or are taken aback by their wives’ need to find herself. So, with this difference in attitude between the sexes, how long will women keep postponing marriage?.²⁷

Women enter their most important life stage at marriage, which should occur within the *tekireiki* – the appropriate age to get married, which has risen remarkably. According to Kelsky’s study, Japanese women should be married by the age of 30-35, otherwise they would be seen as “inferior goods”. What is surprising is that the EEOL has not brought about any significant change in traditional age-specific expectations, and neither has the growing trend among women to postpone marriage considerably or to choose not to marry at all, pursue an ambitious career and enjoy an independent lifestyle. Matsumura Minako,

26 Kelsky 2, p. 89

27 Kelsky 2, p. 88-89

an assistant manager in the international division of Daiwa Securities in her early thirties, shares her experience “It’s so hard to be single here. There is pressure all the time. ... Every day, all day long, pressure, pressure, pressure. It’s hell for unmarried women. And Tokyo is still on the good side!”.

If I were to...enter a Japanese company, the first thing that everyone would want to know is not my name but my age! ... ‘How old is the new woman?’ That’s the first thing that Japanese men have to know.” , Odawara Yumiko, a UN programmes director in her late thirties explained.²⁸ Those statements show that age plays a crucial role in how female workers are evaluated in the Japanese corporate system.

4.3 Professional frustrations

Women have been systematically denied access to training programmes and job rotations based on the widespread opinion that they lack business skills and knowledge and that they will quit anyway once they have married and have children. They would put family over work and would not be willing to work overtime or accept job rotations.

Married women cannot combine family duties which are usually entirely their responsibility, with the demands of a full-time job. At the same time, men cannot devote themselves fully to their job without the support of a stay-home wife and mother. This means that unless the work environment for men takes on some severe changes, a healthy family life cannot be realised with both parents working. Maybe this is why the majority of young Japanese women still consider marriage and full-time motherhood as their traditional primary life goals.²⁹

This gives young urban women, who at some point in the future want to raise a family, few other options than the position of an OL. Yamamoto Michiko (1993) coined the term “role harassment” to describe women’s confinement in the OL position. “I was invited to try out a management position. I was good at it and I loved it....But then I discovered the reality of male-dominated Japan: that a woman in management is considered an ‘uppity girl’. If I offered the smallest opinion I would be dismissed as a woman.”³⁰

Male politicians were for a long time vehemently against any kind of equal-opportunity law, with the argument that “such a law could only...lead to the destruction of time-honoured

28 Kelsky 2, p .94-95

29 Ogasawara, p. 62-3

30 Ibid.

Japanese custom”.³¹

OL are of course only one group in a more diverse labour market for women. But the number of women in clerical jobs has increased steadily since 1960 and by 1995 one third of all employed women held a white-collar clerical job.

Due to the nature of their job and because there is virtually no chance of promotion within the company, the position of an OL in the past was and still is considered a short-term arrangement prior to marriage and childbirth. OL are recruited on a part-time or temporary basis – although they usually work full-time - and are not entitled to benefits or compensation like full-time permanent employees. So when they take time off for childbirth they are unable to go back to their old job. They cannot use their experience in a new job and are obliged to start from scratch.³² Even now, with women wanting to work longer and increasingly postponing marriage, the aspects of OL work have not changed and there are only minimal career prospects.

Moreover, Japan is the only industrialised country where education has a negative effect on women’s employment (p.92). Chooses a women to seek further education after graduation from High School or Junior College, if only for a some months, she will not be able to attend “hiring season” which takes place right after graduation and will face difficulties when trying to get recruited.

5. Internationalism as means to escape gender discrimination

Kelsky argues that the turn to the foreign has become perhaps the most important means currently at women’s disposal to overcome the traditional expectations by society concerning of the female life course in Japan.

If women are blocked from safe and secure paths of male professional achievement within Japan, women also, as a result, enjoy a special freedom to explore alternatives, such as studying abroad (*ryūgaku*), experimenting in foreign firms, learning foreign languages, or engaging with foreigners in Japan. This opens an international niche in economy occupied by women. They can find jobs as translators, interpreters, international public servants, or bilingual/bicultural consultants.³³

31 Ibid..

32 Skov/Moeran, p.26

33 Kelsky 1,p.6

When looking at accounts of women having succeeded in attaining more powerful positions within the male-dominated business-world, it turns out that many of them are former OL who used their travel experience, language proficiency and international sophistication which they acquired during their OL years.³⁴ This leads to OL filling the growing demand for employees that are capable of facilitating interactions between Japan and foreign countries.

What is it that makes the West, and especially the U.S., so attractive to Japanese women? A former OL describes this in her memoir called *Miserarerete nyū yōku* (Beguiled by New York, 1990): "...Japan, which emphasises efficiency, order, and harmony, and which makes no effort to respect lifestyles that stray from the norm. Then you have America, ... in which individuality, creativity, and personal expression are the top priorities, and which respects people's right to live as they please.". The idea of space is a recurrent image in comparisons of the West and Japan. Women experience themselves having limited space in Japan, both physically and mentally and see the West as land of their dreams, abundant with space. This image has prevailed until the present day. Job recruiting advertisements aimed at women with language skills, for example, praise the attractions of a career in New York, and such advertisements do not differ significantly from those of ten years earlier.³⁵

Nakajima Midori, a former OL who studied in the US and founded her own international consulting firm, perceives Japanese corporate structure as "isolationist ". Women, old people and foreigners are put in one category (*jorōgai*) which literally means "women-old-foreign" and treated as alien to the system.

However, internationalist women, as well as a number of Japanese feminist scholars, argue that all women are imagined in Japan as "partially foreign". As a result of their internationalist connection with the West through language study, *ryūgaku* and/or working abroad or work at a *gaishikei* women even refer to themselves as emigrant, alien, foreigners (*gaijin*), or refugee.³⁶ Nevertheless, women themselves seem to embrace their "aliennes" as a sign of personal freedom and individuality. The connotation between being strange or different and being a lesser member of society has been eliminated.

34 Kelsky 1, p.15

35 Kelsky 2, p.100-101

36 Kelsky 2, p.120-121

6. Forms of internationalism

6.1 Language proficiency

A sound knowledge of English is regarded as women's most important weapon (*buki*) in their battle for professional advancement.³⁷ ". . . in the case of women, if you cannot speak English, you have no chance of getting your foot into the business world" says Matsubara Junko in her 1989 book *Eigo dekimasu* (I can speak English). Professions like translators and interpreters have become a field largely dominated by women. In 1993, over 90% of NHK broadcast interpreters were female (p.100). In 1994, of the 120 students enrolled in the NHK Bilingual Center interpreting/translating courses almost all were women.

Language skills not only open attractive job opportunities for women, but they are a means for personal expression women feel they do not have using their mother tongue. Japanese with its strict rules of hierarchy and gender is perceived as an obstacle to self-expression. In Japanese, "...I can never say what I feel or ask what I want to know" says Mori Kyoko, an author who currently lives in the U.S. "The average Japanese does not have any opinion! Even in Japanese! But I had loads of opinions, and because of that I learned English fast." explains Takahara Etsuko, who is 36 years old and works as a market researcher at an American financial news firm.³⁸

What is interesting, though, is that men seem not to link English proficiency with personal self-expression. On the contrary, Japanese women studying English were even ridiculed in a 1994 men's magazine article entitled "The Stupidity of Japanese Worship of English". In the article, women are said to "forget their Japanese and think they've become 'international' just by learning to speak English." It must be pointed out that this article was published 16 years ago, and standpoints should be expected to have undergone some change in the meantime. Nevertheless, propaganda like this can be interpreted in such a way that men seemed to be wary of women who strengthen their position on the job market with language skills.

6.2 Study abroad (*ryūgaku*)

Among Japanese women, OL are taking advantage of this opportunity to a large extent. In 1991, 64% of all Japanese *ryūgakusei* (students abroad) were female, and half of them OL. This phenomenon has even earned a name: "OL study abroad syndrome" (OL

³⁷ Kelsky2, p. 100

³⁸ Kelsky 2, p.102

ryūgaku shōkōgun).³⁹

According to Kelsky's research, study abroad can be considered the most common way women use to escape the Japanese corporate system. During the past 20 years, the nature of *ryūgaku* has changed significantly. In post-WW2 Japan, study abroad was a privilege for managerial-track male employees who were financed by their employers to earn MBA degrees at U.S business schools. After 1980, however, women increasingly outnumbered men. By 1998, nearly 70% of all Japanese *ryūgakusei* (students abroad) were female.

Ryūgaku for one month to several years became accepted and even common career for middle-class single women in their 20s and 30s (1990s). There are two types of *ryūgaku*, the one done by professionally ambitious women, who usually study abroad for a longer time in order to earn a degree, and the "shorter-term" also called *yūgaku* (with *yū* meaning "play" or "waste time"), which became very popular among OL in the late 1980s.

What is striking with this development – apart from it turning into a women-dominated phenomenon – is that women have to finance their studies all by themselves. According to accounts of OL interviewed by Kelsky, they save during years of office work and often have to take loans from parents when their savings are exhausted. This can be interpreted as strong determination in their pursuit of professional training and international expertise which they believe is crucial if they intend to compete against Japanese men in the domestic job market.⁴⁰ It is not only professional ambition that urges women to study abroad, they as well are attracted to the more individualist culture of the West and hope to become more self-confident, "self- expressive and self-assertive". Here, women's desire for an individualist lifestyle and their orientation towards the West merge and they are able to transform themselves by studying abroad. A former OL writes about her experience with studying abroad: "Now, when I draw my life plan, it includes marriage *and* work *and* study. I know from experience how hard it is for women to be this greedy in Japanese society. But if I were to lack even one of these things, I know that I cannot live as myself."⁴¹

6.3. *Work abroad*

Frustration with a working environment where equal treatment of the sexes is not yet

39 Kelsky 1, p.13

40 Kelsky 2, p.104

41 Kelsky 2, p.106

reality has been stated most often as incentive for the decision to work abroad.⁴² Two scenarios are observed most: either former OL are already abroad for study and delay going back home by taking a job locally, or they try to get recruited from Japan, more often than not in overseas branches of Japanese firms. As with study abroad, work abroad has developed towards dominated by women, since men are reported to be reluctant to join Western companies where there is no lifetime employment and no standard pay scale.⁴³ The U.S have been Japanese women's main destination for both study and work. America has the image of a "meritocratic" environment where gender, race, age and marital status do not matter but skill and performance do. As one women working in Silicon Valley as software designer is quoted in a 1999 article in the journal AERA: "If you're talented, you get respect, regardless of your gender or your age." "...More and more of Japan's most talented young people are going to end up overseas." Women do have to make sacrifices when deciding to settle abroad.⁴⁴ This option almost always means a significantly lower standard of living than they were used to in Japan. Nevertheless, they chose a "good life" (*ii jinsei*) over a "good life" *ii seikatsu*).⁴⁵ Another important factor is that "America is a society in which you can always start over, no matter how old you are...if a secretary wants to move up to a professional position, she can go back to college or graduate school at any time...and if you quit work to have a baby, you can always come back and find a job at the same level" (woman interviewed for a 1990 NHK television program and book on the exodus of Japanese working women abroad).⁴⁶

This seems to be, though, a rather idealized view. Actually, the U.S. don't do very well with regard to parental welfare, as the following listing shows:

- United States – Provides 12 weeks of maternity leave for employers with 50+ employees only and all 12 weeks are unpaid unless the employer has a disability benefit program.
- United Kingdom – Provides a total of 52 weeks of maternity leave which includes 15 weeks of paid leave.
- Italy – Provides a total of 20 weeks of maternity leave which includes 15 weeks of paid leave.

42 Kelsky 2, p.107

43 Kelsky 2, p.107

44 Kelsky 2, p.107-9

45 Kelsky 1, p.13

46 Kelsky 2, p.108

- France – Provides a total of 15 weeks of maternity leave which is all paid
- Canada – Provides a total of 14 weeks of maternity leave which includes 10 weeks of paid leave.
- Germany – Provides 15 weeks of maternity leave which is all paid.
- Japan – Provides 12 weeks of maternity leave which includes 10 weeks of paid leave.⁴⁷

6.4. Work for International Organisations

Working in international organisations such as the United Nations has proven to be an attractive professional option for Japanese women. In 1991, for example, 80% of the Japanese who passed the competitive exam for candidates at the U.N. Secretariat's New York headquarters were female. 13 out of 16 selected were women the year before. . Among women employed by the U.N. In 1993, Japan had a higher relative rate than Britain, Germany and the U.S.. Talented Japanese women come to work for the U.N. even when they have the opportunity to be employed by leading Japanese companies,"because they don't want to waste their energies in coping with sexual discrimination."⁴⁸

Women are not only seeking for financial gain when joining international organisations. Personal fulfillment through one's work has come to play a larger role in women's choice of work. Volunteer organisations like the Japan International Cooperation Association (JICA), the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund or the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers Organisation have gained popularity among women who are appealed by the values they represent, although salaries in these organisations usually are only half of what OL at major corporations earn.

6.5 Work for Foreign-Affiliate Firms (gaishikei)

One example among those new job opportunities are international sections of Japanese firms that offer possibilities for English-speaking women. Matsumura Minako, an assistant manager at a Japanese securities firm, said she was employed in order to handle "blue-eyed relations", i.e. relations with foreign firms, whereas "black-eyed relations", i.e. relations with Japanese firms, were handled by male employees. Former OL are reported to respond, almost automatically, to the growing demand for employees dealing with

⁴⁷ D'Anna

⁴⁸ Kelsky 2, p.112

interactions between Japanese and international firms.⁴⁹

Women returning to Japan after studying or working abroad hope to find employment with a foreign-affiliated firm (*gaishikei*) since they are thought to resemble their home companies in the West with regard to non-discriminatory hiring policies. Women also expect to be treated equally to men in those firms. Until recently, employment with *gaishikei* was largely a women's domain, as with work abroad and study abroad. Moreover, women are more likely to be promoted to higher positions of authority than in most Japanese firms.⁵⁰ According to a study by Jane Condon⁵¹, roughly 150,000 women worked for *gaishikei* in 1993, where they find themselves treated with more respect and have better chances of promotion.

Gaishikei are important for Japanese women and, in a growing number, also men, who have worked or studied abroad because they provide the opportunity to use language skills and other qualifications acquired abroad. What is even more important, though, is that Japanese firms usually only hire new employees right after college graduation, whereas foreign firms hire also in mid-career. In addition to that, there is a widespread belief that once a Japanese (especially a woman) has worked for a *gaishikei*, she cannot be hired again by a Japanese firm since she has been "spoiled" by individualism and equal treatment in the Western firm.

Working at a *gaishikei* is what comes closest to working abroad, the foreign firm becomes an object of aspiration and working for and with Westerners becomes a symbol of a Western lifestyle for women.

Foreign corporations increasingly invest in Japanese firms, like Nissan for example, which is since 1999 owned in part by the French company Renault; or Mazda, which has become a subsidiary of Ford. English-speaking women have benefited from this development and are promoted to management in increasing numbers.⁵² This information offers the interpretation that OL's efforts with regard to further study and gaining work experience abroad do indeed open the door to a more challenging career.

49 Kelsky 1, p.15

50 Ibid.

51 Condon, p.195

52 Kelsky 2, p.115-116

7. Conclusion

Female white-collar clerical employees in Japanese companies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have tools at their disposal in order to circumvent still existing gender discrimination at the workplace. However, women are on their own devices in this respect, since government actions have proven rather ineffective. The passing of the EEOL has not brought about significant changes in the participation of women in managerial positions, nor have plans and provisions such as the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, the Charter for Work-Life Balance and the Action Policy for Promoting Work-Life Balance translated well enough into society as yet.

Modern women's consciousness has obviously changed away from the Japanese traditional gendered structures of family and work. They become frustrated at the still mostly male-dominated society and the pressure they experience with respect to marriage and gender roles in relationships.

Faced with this situation, women with professional ambitions choose to "turn to the West" to a growing extent.

For those who are single and flexible enough and have the financial resources to do so, mostly OL, this option opens opportunities for travel, study and work abroad. OL can therefore use turn their dead-end job into a springboard for professional success in the future. "Internationalist" women obtain thus the means to occupy a niche in the Japanese and international job market as translators, interpreters, bilingual secretaries, consultants, UN employees and some even as entrepreneurs. Experiencing a foreign environment leads inevitably to them questioning the expectations in traditional Japanese society concerning the female role in life. Women find a new lifestyle and adopt what is called a "new self" which means that they have turned away from traditional values they would describe as outdated

In the accounts of women interviewed by Kelsky, contact with the West results in a thorough examination of their home country and their "Japanese" self. While they experience pressure and confinement in Japanese society, "freedom" is what women state first and foremost as leading incentive. Some speak of self-transformation, discovering that they are not strange for wanting to have an opinion, gaining self-confidence. It is in order to be different, to have one's own opinion about things. In Japan, *Deru kugi wa utareru* (The nail that sticks out will be hammered down). In the West, emphasis is put on individuality.

The problem, however, remains, that it still does not seem possible for women to combine family life with satisfying work, they still have to decide either upon family – with maybe a part-time job to support the family budget – or an ambitious career. This is reflected in the rise of marriage age both for women and men, as well as shrinking birthrates and the rising number of single-person households.

As the data and information accumulated indicate, equality with men in the workplace does not only mean having responsibilities equal to men, but as well the excruciating work hours combined with extracurricular mandatory activities which make a healthy family life impossible. What can be deducted here is that as long as the work environment does not change for men as well, work-life balance cannot be reached.

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