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Career Women in Contemporary Japan

Pursuing identities, fashioning lives

Anne Stefanie Aronsson

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Career Women in Contemporary Japan

Since Japan's economic recession began in the 1990s, the female workforce has experienced revolutionary changes as greater numbers of women have sought to establish careers. Employment trends indicate that increasingly white-collar professional women are succeeding in breaking through the "glass ceiling," as digital technologies blur and redefine work in spatial, gendered, and ideological terms.

This book examines what motivates Japanese women to pursue professional careers in the contemporary neoliberal economy, and how they reconfigure notions of selfhood while doing so. It analyzes how professional women contest conventional notions of femininity in contemporary Japan, and in turn negotiate new gender roles and cultural assumptions about women, while reorganizing the Japanese workplace and wider socioeconomic relationships. Further, the book explores how professional women create new social identities through the mutual conditioning of structure and self, and asks how women come to understand their experiences; how their actions change the gendering of the workforce; and how their lives shape the economic, political, social, and cultural landscapes of this post-industrial nation.

Based on extensive fieldwork, *Career Women in Contemporary Japan* will have broad appeal across a range of disciplines including Japanese culture and society, gender and family studies, women's studies, anthropology, ethnology, and sociology.

Anne Stefanie Aronsson holds a PhD in Anthropology from Yale University, USA.

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To the women of the world, especially the women of Japan.

Preface

Many people, especially the Japanese women I interviewed for this book, have asked me why I have had such a strong interest in Japan. Although I am a Swiss citizen, I lived most of my life in São Paulo, Brazil, a city with a large population of overseas Japanese. As an adolescent, I was intrigued by their language and culture and often journeyed to the "Liberdade," the Japanese residential area in downtown São Paulo, in order to participate in annual festivals and view traditional performances. I took Japanese lessons as a teenager and resumed them six years later at a university in the United States. I became fascinated by the ways in which the Japanese immigrants had adapted to and reproduced their own language and cultural meanings in my hometown, and I longed to learn more about them. Lectures and work experience aroused my curiosity about how human societies weave meaning through life. Furthermore, my extensive experience abroad – living in Brazil, Japan, the United States, and Switzerland – has heightened my cultural sensitivity and strengthened my commitment to ethnographic understandings of various patterns of living. In the end, these experiences have all contributed to my passion for studying human behavior in general, and my study of Japan in particular.

The overarching aim of this book is to showcase the current situation of Japanese career women and shed light on how they make sense of their daily lives. Despite the frequent negative news about the Japanese economy, women are increasingly pursuing careers. Moreover, their commitment to lifetime employment is reorganizing the Japanese workplace, socioeconomic relationships, and even cultural assumptions about women. My guiding question is this: What is the role of the career woman in contemporary Japanese society? Through extensive fieldwork, I examine the private lives of a vast group of women from different generational backgrounds; how they are fashioning their professional identities amidst a still largely male-oriented workplace; and how their lives shape the economic, political, social, and cultural landscapes of this post-industrial nation.

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Writing this book has been an exciting journey and my research on Japanese career women would not have been possible without the constant support provided by family, professors, friends, colleagues, and sponsors as well as the generosity and patience of my Japanese informants. Many close friends and colleagues have accompanied me part of this way or even through the entire journey. First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to my advisor, Professor William Wright Kelly. I want to thank him for the tireless guidance and constant encouragement he has provided me with throughout the entire graduate school process. Professor Kelly's commitment to and knowledge of anthropology have greatly influenced my intellectual development. In him I have found encouragement, enthusiasm, and creativity, and I greatly appreciate the trust he has placed in me as a scholar. I would also like to thank Karen Nakamura and Helen Siu for their constant support, valuable comments, critical reflections, and their mentorship throughout graduate school. Furthermore, I am indebted to Glenda Roberts for her support while I was away from home conducting fieldwork in Japan. I am also grateful to the late Kawahara Yukari's guidance while I was in Japan. Finally, I would like to thank Florian Coulmas from the DIJ (German Institute for Japanese Studies) in Tokyo, as well as David Slater, Moriki Yoshie, Yokoyama Kazuko, Yoshida Kayako, Sato Rimiko, and Nohata Mariko, all of whom commented on my work and provided me with valuable feedback.

Throughout graduate school my research has been made possible thanks to the following grants and fellowships: For fieldwork research between 2009 and 2010, the Japan Foundation and the East Asian Studies Research Fund. Throughout my years as a graduate student I was granted multiple Yale University grants, such as the Council on East Asian Studies Summer Travel and Research Fund, the Sheffield Scientific School Scholarship, the Henry A. Page Fellowship Fund, the Richard U. Light Fellowship, and the Schwartz Fund. I am deeply grateful for these generous grants.

I would also like to thank my numerous informants in Japan who have been of invaluable help and who lent me their time despite their hectic schedules. I hope that in this book I do justice to their efforts. They were willing to share a coffee or a meal with me and sometimes even spent their leisure

time with me over the weekend. I am grateful for the many hours I have spent with my informants in coffee shops, restaurants, hiking, visiting museums, family outings, and other outdoor activities, and their patient sharing of stories from their working lives, family and education history, relationships, regrets from the past, as well as hopes for the future. I want to thank Ann Sado, Engin Yenidunya, Kei Yagaski, Mitsu Kimata, and Sarah Okawa for securing access to key informants.

My time at graduate school would not have been the same without my friends and colleagues. Ellen Rubinstein, sharing an office with you made the writing process so much more enjoyable. Liz Miles, your wit and humor kept my spirits up and the ideas flowing while writing the doctoral thesis. Monthly dinners with Ellen, Liz, Lydia Gulick, Katherine Matsuura, and Grace Ting made my evenings quite enjoyable. I am also very grateful for your comments and advice on the manuscript of this book. Sarah LeBaron von Baeyer, thank you for the wonderful time we spent together either in the United States, Brazil, or Japan. Hopefully there will be many more hours to come of sharing experiences together.

My deepest sense of gratitude goes to my parents in Brazil for trusting me and the ways I chose. You were always there for me, and I greatly appreciate your constant encouragement. I am also grateful to my parents-in-law in Sweden who supported me in the beginning stages of revising this book. Last but not least, I thank my beloved husband Tomas Robert Prem-Raj Aronsson, whose unwavering support and love I could always count on.

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Explanatory notes

All Japanese words are written by using the modified Hepburn system of romanization. Furthermore, I present the Japanese names as they would appear in Japan, with the family name preceding the first name. For non-Japanese names I follow the Western convention of presenting the given name first followed by the family name. When I refer to an informant I use the suffix "-san" and it appears after the person's last name. "San" is a polite title like "Mr." or "Mrs." in English.

I use pseudonyms in place of actual individual names to respect the privacy of my informants, with the exception of authors and other public figures. For individuals related to my informants, such as their husbands, sons or daughters, I use first names. The only exception to informant pseudonyms is my informant Kojima Chizuko (94), who requested that I use her real name. In the appendix is a list of all 120 informants, with their age in 2011, occupation, marital status, and whether they have any children.

Contents

Preface xi
Acknowledgments xii
Explanatory notes xiv

1 Introduction 1
Times of major transitions 1
Postwar Japan – gendering the workforce and diverging paths 7
Professional aspirations and career options 9
Positionality in a shifting field 19
Structure of the book 23

2 Women and work in modern Japan 33
Identity and the shaping of white-collar career trajectories 33
Japan as a neoliberal economy – critical perspectives on knowledge, power, and practice 34

3 Identity, family, and career 53
Identity and selfhood 53
Aspects of an aging society 62
Low birth and high divorce rates 64
Workforce participation of women and work–life integration 68

4 Pioneering female career tracks in Japan – women in their sixties and above 77
Nomura Mihoko and others – the outliers 78
Conclusion 104

5 The performative aspect of self-fulfilling prophecies – women in their fifties 111
Imagawa Tomiko and Kawamori Mieko – the forerunners 112
Conclusion 126

6 Through the labyrinth of their working lives – women in their forties 128
Fukuyama Noriko and others – "last chance" anxieties 132
Conclusion 165

7 Reevaluating the self – women in their thirties 171
Kishimoto Yoshie and Fukuda Reiko – conflicting life choices 172
Conclusion 194

8 Transitioning to a career – women in their twenties 202
Suzuki Masako and Nagata Yoko – finding one's path in uncertain times 205
Conclusion 225

9 Conclusion 230
The "career woman" archetype 230
Constant transitions 231
Future prospects 238

Appendix – list of informants 242
Glossary 246
Index 249

1 Introduction

Times of major transitions

What motivates Japanese women to pursue professional careers in today's neoliberal economy and how does this pursuit affect notions of selfhood? Japanese labor markets for women are in turmoil. The occupational changes present contemporary professional women with serious challenges, as they contest conventional notions of femininity and negotiate new gender roles. Employment trends in Japan indicate that more white-collar professional women are breaking through the glass ceiling, as digital technologies blur and redefine work in spatial, gendered, and ideological terms. Here, we will focus on the professional women who are at the forefront of these profound changes.

Japanese women have been employed in professional career tracks for decades, thanks in part to the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), which guarantees women equal opportunities and treatment. Despite this, women still must fight institutionalized prejudice in order to be accepted as equals in the workforce. Since the Japanese economic recession of the 1990s, the female workforce has experienced revolutionary changes as even more women have sought to establish careers. In fact, the economic stasis has opened managerial posts for women, as the downturn has led to a liberalization of certain career paths that fit female tendencies to engage in short-term and part-time work. How do these women view themselves, how do they act in, and outside, the workplace, and how are they changing the gender hierarchy? In this book I analyze how white-collar professional women fashion their gender identities through the mutual conditioning of structure and self.

Inoguchi Kuniko, a political scientist and politician who served as Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs, insists that the glass ceiling is global. He believes that breaking it in one country might trigger advancement in other countries as well. This may be true, but societal differences remain in every country. For instance, there is still a glass ceiling in the United States (Coughlin *et al.* 2005; Eagly and Carli 2007; Hanson 2006; Roberts 2011; Shipman and Kay 2009), but it is only an obstacle during certain life stages in

a woman's career. In Japan, by contrast, this barrier exists throughout a woman's life (Plath 1983). The glass ceiling follows the female employee and the chance of promotion into higher levels remains inaccessible for most women. This is why the wage gap between men and women is still very large, and this is one of the reasons why the number of female managers is still so low (Fackler 2007; Jackson and Tomioka 2004; Kimoto 2003; Lam 1992; Ōsawa *et al.* 1996; Roberts 2011). Because Japanese society remains age-ordered and stages of life do not affect a woman's position, women become isolated. In other words, better work does not necessarily translate to career promotion.

In light of this, the Japanese labor market for women is currently going through major changes in terms of improved gender equality policies, a more adequate work–life balance, better maternity leave options, and improved childcare facilities. Women can finally enter the marketplace and remain employed, even after marriage and childbirth. Although many women now have long-term careers, they are still bound to the Confucian concept of filial piety. As social psychologist Iwao Sumiko notes, "[t]he Japanese mother's childrearing techniques engrave the actual and symbolic warmth and importance of the home ... forming a strong association between home and mother" (1993: 127). The same holds true for taking care of her husband; she is expected to make his life at home as untroubled as possible. Sociologist Ogasawara Yuko observes that if women reenter the working place, they usually work in either smaller firms or part-time jobs, because the larger firms mostly employ recent graduates. Iwao further explains that the age distribution of employed Japanese women forms an M-shaped curve with the first peak around ages 20 and 24 and the second peak around ages 45 to 49 (1993: 162). After women have briefly worked they are expected to drop out of the labor force, and only after their children have finished school do they have the possibility of working again. Nevertheless, many women are unable to reenter the workforce full-time, as they might have to take care of aging parents at home.

The following analysis explores the gendered dilemmas these women confront on a daily basis and examines how conventional family ties have been undermined by a neoliberal global economy, which accentuates the fluidity of this process of changing social structures (Borovoy 2010a; Kurihara 2009; Linhart 1984; Ōsawa 1999; Rebick and Takenaka 2006; Rindfuss *et al.* 2004; Roberts 2011). Japanese women remain underrepresented in advanced career positions in finance, industry, entrepreneurship, government, and academia, leaving them to creatively redefine what it means to have a career in a male-dominated sphere (Kurihara 2009; Marcus 1983; Moeran 2005). Career paths for Japanese white-collar men in these sectors remain fairly standardized; however, Japanese women are just beginning to redefine what it means for them to have a career.

We will begin by analyzing how the changing global economy has had an impact on Japan and how the country positions itself in a new environment.

Next, how these changes have an impact on shifting gender hierarchies in the different work sectors and finally how these changes play out on the individual level of the white-collar professional women. The focus will be on the three cycles of life, family, and career, and how these three cycles interact. These cycles are currently out of sync for most women, but major transitions are shifting more favorably for most women.

Career is the central concept to understanding these women's lives, because it is their professional career that sets them apart. From the postwar period until the early 2000s, most women became housewives – either full-time or with a part-time job – and they framed their careers in more domestic terms; raising a family was the primary aim of a woman. By definition, a career woman reverses this aim. Thus, building a career becomes the primary goal and although this path is not always straightforward because of lingering gender hierarchies, building a career also helps to establish an identity. These women try to shape a life that includes family and a career. Different historical moments create different environments in the working world, but all of the women interviewed, regardless of historical circumstances, achieved a career.

For the past thirty years more women have been pursuing higher educational degrees and lifelong careers rather than dropping out of the workforce after marriage and childbirth or returning several years later for a part-time job. As Sylvia Ann Hewlett *et al.* ask in a recent study, what continually compels three-quarters of Japanese women to drop out of their careers? (2011: 10). The answer involves many factors:

> For most career women in our U.S. and Germany studies, off-ramps are the result of a complex interaction between 'pull factors' rooted within family, community and society and 'push factors' centered around work. In Japan, however, while family pulls are significant, push factors in an unsupportive workplace are even more effective in derailing female careers.
>
> (Hewlett *et al.* 2011: 10)

Many believe that the main reason Japanese women leave the workforce is because of a lack in adequate childcare support, but this is not true. In Japan, only 32 percent of Japanese women report inadequate childcare, while in the United States 74 percent do (Hewlett *et al.* 2011:10). Another reason given for why women would quit their jobs is a lack of senior care and homes, but only 38 percent of university-educated women say that they would quit their work to take care of parents or in-laws. Thus, the main obstacle keeping women away from their career track is the workplace itself (Hewlett *et al.* 2011: 10).

Hewlett joins many others, including policymakers and labor scholars, in posing the issue of why Japanese women and careers are positioned in the negative: why do they not stay on track? This book reverses the analysis to ask why and how it is that one-quarter of women do get on and try to stay on

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