Gender And Employment In Japan: Foreign Employers As Institutional Actors Or Fickle Opportunists

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Introduction

Gender parity in paid work and especially in management remains an aspiration rather than a fully realized ideal in even the most gender-equal economies of the world as we move through the 21st century, but Japan’s performance in this area has been particularly poor, especially as compared to other developed economies. In fact, Japan has long been and remains “arguably exceptional among advanced industrial countries in the attitudinal and institutional constraints it imposes on its own women managers” (Volkmar & Westbrook 2005:465). Nevertheless, there are recent reasons to anticipate fundamental changes in the traditional and entrenched underrepresentation and subordination of women in the Japanese workplace. In academic, business, and popular media forums, there is ever growing debate about how the drastic demographic shifts, possible social and cultural transformations around gender roles, and the ascendance of a diversity agenda in the purported global “best practice” of business may lead to a decline in gender inequality at work in Japan. The puzzle remains, however, that despite the urgency and seeming strength of these structural factors, change appears slow, disjointed and lacking clear and sustained momentum. This paper argues that, against a backdrop of continuity and change in the Japanese world of employment (Keizer, 2009), the transformation of the gendered nature of work is not a foregone conclusion inevitably to follow from all-determining forces. Rather, such transformation will be in part
guided and shaped by the choices and practices of a range of institutional actors. These institutional actors, most observers would immediately concede, include the government and especially the legislature, (large) Japanese corporate employers, workers' representative bodies, the popular media, and institutions of education, in particular Japanese universities (Bozkurt & Honda-Howard, 2013). Far less frequently acknowledged in discussions of the topic is the way in which the practices of foreign employers in Japan may be a constituent part of the transformation of the career prospects and paths for women in management in the country. In terms of the sheer number of employees, foreign employers in Japan do not appear to be significant players, but as with the paradigmatic significance of their differences from domestic corporations at large (Olcott, 2009), their practices as employers also deserves a closer look in the Japanese context. This article draws on a small number of individual career histories to explore what, if any, alternatives foreign employers may be offering women managers in Japan and what the constraints on any such opportunities may be. Through this empirically illustrative discussion, it also intends to raise the question of whether the way foreign employers alter the field of career opportunities for high-skilled, professional women in Japan amounts, or can eventually lead to, institutional work that may inform subsequent changes in the gendered nature of managerial employment in the country (Bozkurt, 2010).

The Gendered Foundations of the Japanese Employment Model

To observers around the world, and certainly in the advanced Western economies, Japan offered a promising alternative to organizing production and going beyond the bottlenecks of Fordism in the 1970s and 1980s. The Japanese employment system was widely seen as a key element of this model and among the foundations of nothing less than a miraculous economic performance (Dore, 1973; 1989). Attempts to emulate the success, ie "Japanization", became hugely popular (at least in discussion), with great interest in the Japanese employment model and its essential features including life-long employment, seniority-based pay, teamwork and continuous improvement. Although the fascination in the West with the Japanese model rapidly (and unreasonably) waned after the burst of the "bubble economy" in the 1990s (McCormick, 2007), it has firmly gained its place in studies of work and employment as a paradigmatic alternative, with overwhelmingly celebratory overtones.
Yet this much-studied and heralded model was always, beyond its lauded elements, characterized by traditionally low rates of labour force participation by women, their relegation to the peripheral, temporary and marginal positions in the workforce, and their near-absence from managerial posts. Taylor has argued that, far from being an unintended consequence, the peripherality of women should be seen as part of the very essence of the Japanese employment model (Taylor, 2006). Similarly, Lam (1992) has noted that the Japanese employment system in its core involved active discrimination against women. At the peak of the popularity of Japan as an exemplar of a radically different model of employment, most women employees of large corporations were “office ladies” whose job was to serve tea to the male managers (Toshiko, 1983) and the not very hidden expectation for working women was that they would retire upon marriage (Hiroshi, 1982). As the number of women in paid employment has increased over time, the number of women in management remained dire.

In the mid-1990s, a decade after the legislative changes that were to promote greater gender equality in the Japanese workplace first came into effect, women constituted around 40% of the workforce in Japan but fewer than 10% of managers (Renshaw, 1999:3). Brinton (1993) has argued that Japan’s status as a leading world economic power has systematically depended on the unpaid and under-rewarded labour of women, both at home, as domestic workers and psychological support, and at the workplace, as workers in low-paying jobs with little or no serious career prospects. In short, rather than being an idiosyncratic footnote in the largely successful Japanese model, women’s subordination across the ranks, and particularly in management, has in fact been its “hidden pillar”.

**Prospects for, Limits to and Obstacles for Change**

With the reversal of fortune experienced by the Japanese economy in the early 1990s, the “intense attraction, sense of awe and rather stunned appreciation” turned critical (Van Maanen, 2006: 281) almost overnight. While the difficulties encountered by the Japanese economy and therefore the increased criticisms of some tenets of its employment system have naturally caused considerable concern about the continued competitiveness of Japan as an economic superpower, the state of flux in the Japanese model and its employment system also raises the possibilities of more positive change, including in the position of women in the workforce and in management.
It is not warranted to make sweeping statements such as saying "sayanora to salarymen" (The Economist, 2008), and some changes in the Japanese workplace may be undertaken only to ensure the continuity of certain practices, particularly the lifetime employment of male white-collar workers (Morris et al., 2006). Nevertheless, underwritten by concerns about the loss of economic competitiveness, there is an increasingly pressing debate in Japan about several key factors precipitating system-level change. Prime among these are demographic factors, which involve a sharply declining fertility rate and a consequent shrinkage of the working age population in the coming several decades. The looming need for sustaining a labour force from ever smaller demographic cohorts coincides with the increasingly popular discourse around the "business case" for greater diversity in the Japanese workplace. In this context, the highly-educated women of Japan constitute the obvious candidates for future workers and managers to compensate for the anticipated staffing shortages (Prideaux, 2007) and hence these structural changes may pave the way towards greater gender equality in Japanese employment.

Recent data suggests the gendered nature of the Japanese labor market remains staunchly so, although it also depicts a certain momentum of change. The percentage of women in the overall labour force has risen from 33.06 in 1970 to 40 in 2000 (Web Japan, 2008). As a disproportionate number of the contingent, and especially part-time jobs are held by women, however, such increased labour force participation may not lead to significant increases in women in management. In fact, the number of women in Japanese management has remained very low well into the 21st Century (Hanai, 2004; Kageyama, 2005) Yet again, there is some room to interpret the data more optimistically. Data from the Basic Survey on Wage Structure, by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2010) shows that the highest ratio of women in management, at the subsection chief level, and higher than numbers further up the ranks by a wide margin, remained at around a very modest 25% as late as 2010. Corresponding numbers are just above 10% for section chiefs and under 5% for general managers. However, while these scores are clearly indicative of a still very heavily gender unequal workplace, the proportion of women in subsection chief, section chief and general manager roles were all in the single digit percentages twenty years ago. The movement charted is definitely one going upwards, though admittedly on a rather flat slope.
Numerous factors contribute to the persistent lack of women in work and especially managerial work in Japan. That child and elderly care responsibilities are expected, more so than in comparably developed economies, to be borne by women as part of domestic labour constitutes possibly the single biggest obstacle to change, but the resilience of this arrangement is only possible by the perpetuation of cultural and social norms that have traditionally expected women to be "good wives and mothers" first. Factors ranging from the practical arrangements of paid and domestic work to social and cultural understandings of women's roles in the workplace continue to hinder more rapid change in the Japanese workplace.

Institutional Actors and the Gendered Futures of Work and Management in Japan:

Fundamental change for women and their managerial careers is ultimately going to be shaped by the decisions individuals make and the way they chart their life and employment histories, but there are key institutional actors that define the structure of opportunities such agency will encounter. These include, in particular, the government and the legislative apparatus, large Japanese corporate employers, workers' unions, and, this paper argues, the otherwise rather (quantitatively speaking) "insignificant" foreign employers in Japan.

The government, or rather successive governments, and the legislative wing of the Japanese state apparatus have been deeply concerned with the demographic shifts in the country and hence tried to encourage gender equality in the workplace primarily out of a concern to ensure that the labour force remains at the levels demanded for the continued functioning of the economy. The 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was enacted in order to provide an "effective long term solution to gender inequity" (Parkinson, 1989; Araki, 2000: 466; as reported in Courmadies et al 2010:104), first by preventing overtly discriminatory acts allowed by Japanese Civil Law (Nakakubo, 2007:9). Compromised, according to many, because of the "traditional employment practices and social values of Japan" (ibid, pg.10) the EEOL is widely seen as a significant landmark that nevertheless did not suffice to support radical societal change (Courmadies et al, 2010). The government
and the legislative in Japan have nevertheless carried out important institutional work in changing the rules of the game in the world of work with subsequent initiatives and laws, including the Law for Child Care Leave in 1992, which allowed maternity leave for up to a year, and legislation in 1995 targeting increasing nursery facilities. In 1997 revisions to the EEOL established rules about the implementation of positive affirmative action on behalf of women workers, in 2000 The Basic Law for Gender Equal Society confirmed the significance of gender equality as a key policy issue, and in 2001 a report by the Government Tax Commission underscored that a “double income family” ought to become the new “standard” (Nakakubo, 2007:11). Criticized for a “soft law approach” (Courmadias et al 2010: 106), the government is still undeniably a key, if not the key actor shaping the institutional landscape of gender and employment in Japan.

A second key institutional force thoroughly implicated in the gendered nature of employment and management is “Corporate Japan”, that is, the organizational field of large Japanese corporations. The Japanese employment model has largely been shaped in this domain, and hence the constraints on women in work and in management are also deeply embedded there. The growing endorsement of a “diversity” agenda by large Japanese corporations/employers could therefore be seen as a critical move towards the opening up of career paths for high-skilled women in corporate and managerial life. Diversity management, certainly as a catchphrase and discussion point is increasingly more popular in Japanese business circles and, as in legislative and governmental policy, based on the “business case”, ie that more women in paid employment and in management makes “good business sense” (Maruko, 2011). However, as the situation of women managers in the private sector discussed above highlights, the observed change is far more incremental than the heated popularity of the diversity management discourse in Japan.

Much of the commentary on the underrepresentation of women in paid work and in management in Japan has largely focused on these two institutional actors. It may be that especially in the case of women in management roles they do not immediately come to mind, but workers’ unions nevertheless constitute a third, certainly potentially significant, institutional actor that needs consideration in this debate. By 2001 the unionization rate in Japan was a mere 20.7% (Mouer & Kawanishi, 2005: 200), less than half of the numbers at
their peak, and this obviously puts the unions on rather defensive ground. They consequently have been more immediately concerned with hanging on to previously earned rights. Much of the fall in union membership is closely linked to the rise of part-time employment, which is also heavily feminized. Somewhat ironically, because part-timers tend not to participate in unions, and they also tend to be women, greater labour force participation by women has not led to an increased voice for women in Japanese unions. Nevertheless, the Japan Trade Union Confederation (JTUC)’s Action plan for 2006-2012 did pay particular attention to gender equality issues. Most notably, the first item on the agenda under “Promoting equal participation toward the realization of gender equality and equal treatment for women and men” was a commitment by the confederation to increase the number of female executives among its own ranks, where a numerical target for at least one female executive was set for all affiliates, enterprise-based unions and all Confederation locals (RENGO, 2006). Other action plan items included the confederation’s involvement in addressing the gender wage gap, supporting gender equality through labour laws, developing women among its own ranks and networking with international partners. Clearly, this is at best a “bare minimum” sort of agenda for the pursuit of gender equality in the Japanese workplace, but as bodies representing the workforce the unions cannot and should not be erased out of the debate, however lacking in force they may currently be as an institutional force.

Finally, let us consider the role of foreign employers in Japan, and whether what they do to help shape the relationship between gender and managerial work in the country could possibly amount to institutional work. Despite Japanese firms’ increasingly public claims to have embraced diversity practices to entice more women workers into their ranks (Kageyama, 2005; Kyodo News, 2008) the popularity lists of preferred employers by professional Japanese women are typically topped and dominated by foreign employers (Takahara, 2008). Through some illustrations from a case study looking at a US-based retailer in Japan and two of the women managers who pursue their high level managerial careers there, the next section will attempt to argue that these least-studied of institutional actors do deserve a closer look in the discussion of gender and work and especially gender and management in the Japanese context.
Foreign Employers and Women Managers in Japan: Institutional Actors or Fickle Opportunism:

Based on ongoing research in Japan on the objective and subjective career histories of women managers this paper argues that foreign employers deserve a place among the institutional actors whose role in the transformation of the gendered nature of the Japanese world of work and even more so management should be considered seriously. This does not preclude recognizing that the institutional role these organizations may be playing in Japan may in good part be unintentional, and realized in the pursuit of other primary goals such as organizational survival or profits. What the foreign employers do do, it is argued here, is to offer “relief routes” for the pursuit of managerial careers that are in many instances blocked or more complicated with domestic employers in Japan (Bozkurt, 2010). There is an underlying element of fickle opportunism in why women may enjoy better prospects of managerial career development with foreign employers, but the end result is nevertheless foreign employers exerting, through practice and through example, an influence in the playing field. This paper argues such influence does amount to being an institutional actor, even if a reluctant or accidental one.

Traditionally, foreign employers have not enjoyed the sort of popularity they do in most job markets in Japan, suspect as they have been of not offering the security and safety of the largest Japanese corporate employers. Those who have favoured foreign employers have been the exception, and within them highly-skilled women “a notable example” (Ono, 2007: 275). The availability of highly-skilled women as potential employees, and the fact that they may in fact prefer foreign employers, seems fortuitous for the foreign firms who are otherwise underprivileged players in the job market. Indeed, as early as 1988, commentators noted that the difficulty experienced by foreign companies in finding and hiring the people with the needed skills sets and experience in Japan could be in good part resolved by actively pursuing women. Accordingly, the local employers were “reluctant to hire them even if they may be better qualified than male graduates,” and left a “large untapped pool of well-qualified people who may be willing to forego traditional prejudices about foreign firms” (Lansing & Ready, 1988:112).
The "elective affinity" has become even clearer in the passing decades. Given the relative lack of change in the absence of women in managerial roles with Japanese domestic corporations, it appears that the institutional environment continues to produce highly skilled women but then fails to afford them the paths for sustained careers, especially higher up the corporate ladder. The Japan Institute of Labour found that the proportion of women among managers in foreign affiliated companies in Japan was as high as 17 per cent, with almost a quarter of the companies having 20 per cent or more female management (Japan Institute of Labour, 2001). In a very concrete way, then, it can be said that foreign employers in Japan offer certain opportunities to women in management. In the study that this article is based on, of a retailer that had been taken over by a US-based global chain and thus had become American-owned, the challenges of recruiting staff were consistently highlighted as having been very serious. In the interviews with the (male) Human Resources Manager, the (male) American expatriate supply chain manager and with the team in charge of training store managers, the difficulty of coming in to the notoriously competitive and traditional retailing sector in Japan, finding staff with existing networks in the sector, especially among the key suppliers, and convincing them to jump ship was underlined repeatedly. This sort of institutional context where foreignness, in addition to newness, created considerable disadvantages for the company in the recruitment market where reputation is so key to how individuals make and rank their choices, also opened up, however, managerial roles to women.

The two Japanese women interviewed in the retail chain had already gained positions of high authority and power within the country-level operations, Mariko* was Vice President of General Merchandising and Aki* the Director of Human Resources Development. Their career trajectories demonstrated how women's individual pursuits were informed by the general institutional context, and hindered as well as supported by a range of institutional actors. Mariko had graduated from university in 1987, just as Equal Employment Opportunity Law had gone into effect so more opportunities seemed to be possible, while the economy was still strong. By the time Aki graduated from university, in the early 1990s, the job market had changed drastically. Mariko, despite the work done by the government in changing the rules of the game, was still, as a woman, relatively disadvantaged in the job market, however, and ended up in a retail sector job with a domestic employer only after
her attempts to secure a job in a more prestigious sector like banking or media failed. Aki’s prospects upon graduation were likewise limited by the institutional context, this time of shrinking opportunities for work, which may very well have been further difficult for women as the competition for jobs became more intense. Her response to this was a “semi-exit”, of leaving Japan to pursue a postgraduate degree in the United States. This move, although helping her acquire a new set of valuable skills, in the Japanese institutional context in fact meant that she was by doing so leaving the traditional track to a career.

Foreign employers in both these different individual career histories proved to offer opportunities that did not exist with Japanese employers. For Mariko, the initial years on the job with the domestic employer helped her develop skills and expertise in the operational side of retailing, but she felt quite quickly that the career track going forward (and upward) was blocked by her employer’s highly gendered approach to management development. Unable to take up responsibilities in as wide a range of tasks and responsibilities as her male counterparts, Mariko’s experience was that after the initial years, the expectations that she would not be among the future top managers stopped her employer from investing in her literally and figuratively. Aki was even more stranded in the traditional Japanese labour market: being away had taken her off track and upon returning to Japan her credentials did not necessarily generate trust or interest by Japanese employers. For Mariko, the “relief route” offered by a foreign employer was the opportunity at a mid-career employer change, despite some increase still not the norm in high-skilled careers in Japan. She was offered a position of much greater authority by a foreign retailer that was trying to enter the Japanese marketplace and having a hard time recruiting staff with experience. For Aki, a foreign employer in Japan, a telecommunications multinational trying to break into the Japanese consumer market, offered a rare landing ground. That she had a postgraduate degree and work experience from the United States was a major draw, not a drawback, for this employer. In both instances, the foreign employers were merely being strategic players who were trying to find ways to meet their organizational needs. Yet the consequence of this was the possibility of certain types of employment and indeed careers for these two Japanese women.

But, to play devil’s advocate, or, rather, to depict a more accurate picture, we must
just as critically note the very real “fickleness” that is often an integral part of jobs with foreign employers. For both Mariko and Aki, the US retailer where they were interviewed was several employers after their initial jobs working for a non-Japanese firm. In both cases, the initial foreign employers who offered them the jobs they had not been successful in securing with domestic employers spent several years testing their fortunes in the Japanese marketplace, and for both of these companies, the effort proved unsuccessful. The fickless of these otherwise desirable jobs therefore was all too real in the career histories of both women. Furthermore, having “exited” (or never having been on) the long-term employment trajectories with Japanese employers, there was a path dependency that saw them move along a series of foreign employers. At the time of research both of them voiced very strong preference for their current employer, the US-based retailer, for the gender-equal opportunities they perceived to be available for their future, and indeed the company continues to operate in Japan today. Yet not being as embedded a player as some of its domestic competitors, it would not be misplaced to say that there is much greater uncertainty about the permanence of its activities in Japan, and, therefore, of the journey on the relief route for Mariko and Aki.

Conclusion:

This paper has tried to argue that the transformation of the gendered nature of employment and especially of managerial work in Japan will be informed by the activities of several key institutional actors, and that foreign employers should be included among them. These employers may be opportunistic in their market behaviour wherever they operate, including Japan, but even if driven by such strategic goals, their practices nevertheless have implications for how the gendered nature of managerial work may evolve over time. As such, they need to be recognized as part of the organizational field in which they exert an influence as institutional actors. Such recognition does not, and should not, take the form of glamorizing foreign employers, and certainly not of treating them as inherently more progressive on normative grounds. Not only are the motivations of governments and corporations as institutional actors fundamentally different in their ultimate goals, but the role that could be played by foreign employers in Japan is also constrained in several structural ways: Firstly, the sheer number of opportunities they can provide women for
managerial careers in Japan remains severely limited, as they employ a miniscule proportion of the Japanese workforce. Secondly, they also tend to be much smaller operations, meaning that, while they may offer career development opportunities in the short run, these opportunities are constrained by the nature of their operations in Japan. Thirdly, if domestic corporations continue to be the most highly-regarded ones in Japan, then women’s ability to forge careers with foreign firms, if managerial ranks within Japanese firms continue to remain so closed to women, could just mean segregated, and unequal, managerial labour markets. Fourthly, the precariousness of jobs with foreign employers renders careers over the long term difficult to coherently weave and build up. And finally, even if foreign firms offer life-changing career opportunities to a number of highly-skilled women in management roles, their impact as institutional actors remains very much constrained if their activities do not offer career development opportunities for the vast majority of women employed in less skilled and irregular forms of employment.

Neverthelese, novel practices can set an example and can offer alternative visions and encourage new aspirations. If foreign firms’ practices offer concrete examples of human resource management strategies that make “business sense” while also being desirable for employees, they may have an impact well beyond their own organizational boundaries. What may be a small input in terms of numbers of individuals involved may be a very significant input in the transformation of the world of work in Japan, depending on how this input is perceived, interpreted and understood by the other institutional actors and, most importantly, by the women in the Japanese workforce.

*Real names have been changed to protect anonymity.

References


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