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Book Review: Gender and Career in Japan

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Gender and Career in Japan. Edited by Atsuko Suzuki. Translated by Leonie R. Stickland. 2007. Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press. 168 pages; contains figures, tables and index; \$34.95 paperback

Reviewed by Cecilia Manrique, Ph.D.¹

Conventional wisdom about gender relations in Japanese society has divided spheres into men in the workplace and women in the home. As Japanese society develops, evolves and is influenced by a highly globalized world such relationships are slowly changing. This book, according to its editor, has several purposes. The first is to show the impact or the micro and macro changes in society on career and gender in Japan, using the lens of sociology and social psychology. The second purpose is to deepen our understanding of Japanese society, culture, family life and people in terms of career and gender. The third aim, resulting from such an understanding, is to be able to rid society of the disadvantages and unfairness associated with the career choices of women and to be able to achieve great freedom of choice for the individual when it comes to the pursuit of peace and happiness in the home, the workplace and society in general. The uniqueness of the work lies in the use of an interdisciplinary sociological and social psychological approach in each of the chapters except for the last, which employs an economic approach to show the similarities between the situations in Korea and Japan.

The book is made up of 5 chapters. The introduction gives an overall view of the changes taking place in Japan over the past fifty years that have had an impact on gender and careers. Despite accession to international declarations and resolutions calling for the equality of women in the workplace and despite the various law changes within Japan itself (i.e. in 1999 the law prohibiting night work for women was lifted) there are still various factors that hinder women from pursuing career paths that are compatible with having a family and children. The M curve² indicates that many women abandon jobs and careers once they have children either because they are forced to or they want to in order to balance the two. Factors, such as having adequate child care and a husband who contributes to the house work, influence the ability of women to continue in their careers. Alternative paths have been taken by women such as becoming entrepreneurs, free agents or independent contractors. This chapter is very informative in its use of comparative data and statistics that show where Japan stands relative to several other countries in the world when it comes to various factors such as fertility, time use, and the wage gap.

The second chapter focuses upon women who have to struggle between work and child rearing. Data indicates that only about 30 percent of fulltime, regularly employed women continue to work after child birth. Women who continue to work experience role overload, which they may experience as battles in regard to their self image, especially when it comes to issues of work equality. Very often, in the private sphere, equality does not occur unless there are extenuating factors such as the presence of other working wives, daycare centers and relatives living within close proximity thus helping to reduce

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² An analysis of female labor-force participation and age cohorts, which indicates the peaks and dips of women's rate of participation in the labor force.

the stress of working and taking care of the home. The level of a husband's participation in housework serves as a factor, while government incentives such as allowing for 5 days leave per year to take care of a sick child help reduce stress as well.

The third chapter talks about gender, career and leadership effectiveness in the workplace. The study takes a look at the difficulty of following a career that includes managerial development due to the following reasons: the number of women who quit after giving birth; those women who do not have enough experience; the existence of the limited pool theory; insufficient decision-making, planning, and negotiation experiences, etc. Thus, even when the child care issue is resolved, there are still other factors that hinder women's movement on the ladder of success. There is a glass ceiling in Japan as well. This chapter is the most interesting because it deals with transformational and transactional leadership roles, task-oriented vs. relationship-oriented behavior, the implications of the differences in the use of "power to" vs. "power over" in terms of male and female leadership behaviors, and female effectiveness in educational, business and administrative organizations.

Chapter 4 takes a look at the relationship among education, employment and gender ideology and aims to explain, with the use of rational choice and cognitive dissonance theories, the frequently-reported paradoxical relationships among the levels of educational attainment, employment status and gender ideology of Japanese married women. In Japan there is a negative association between 1) educational attainment and attitudes towards the gendered division of labor, 2) these attitudes and employment and 3) educational attainment and employment. The study takes various factors such as the life-stages in a woman's life, the choice between getting a "general education" or one that makes a woman more marriage marketable, the impact of a mother's education, and the encouragement or discouragement by the father, into consideration in trying to understand the existence of such a paradox in the Japanese woman's life.

The last chapter takes a look at the case of young married women in Korea especially when it comes to job discontinuation and returning to the work force after the first childbirth. In examining a society that is similar to Japan, it is hoped that the study will also shed some light on Japanese society especially since both have reached a certain level of development where low birth rates and rapid ageing brings about a dependent population larger than the working population. The active use of underutilized female labor as a solution to the envisioned shortage in a working age population is a possibility. However, despite the qualitative and quantitative growth of the female labor force, women's participation in the labor force remains under-utilized due to the interruption in work during childbirth and childrearing, which has brought about the M-shaped labor structure that Japan and Korea are now experiencing. The last chapter takes us back full circle to the issues raised previously regarding the factors that influence the ability of women to go back to work after children come into the marriage picture. A lot depends on the existence of childcare facilities or relatives close enough to take care of the children as they grow up with a mother who desires a career. A lot depends on the male partner's willingness to cooperate with the care of the child as well as contribute to housework. Many of the experiences of Korean women run parallel to those of Japanese women and vice-versa. They can learn from each other.

The book is an excellent in depth analysis of factors affecting the lives and careers of women in Japanese society. Some of the work is pioneering in the sense that they try

to go beyond the usual conventional explanations for the treatment and role of women in a more conservative society. The data and analysis should serve as useful starting points for scholarship in the field of comparative women's studies.

The book is useful because it uses empirical data to try to prove various hypotheses. For those who rely on data to show various changes in society, the studies in the book provide depth to the general knowledge about Japanese society. However, because it is a translation from Japanese to English one cannot help but think that there are times when translation problems ensue. These problems are not serious enough to warrant discounting the value of a book that goes beyond generalities and brings to life actual studies that show various concepts that are used in the classroom: hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical structures, individual vs. group oriented behavior, male dominance vs. female subordination. In all, this book was an educational and enjoyable read.