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A review essay on women's work in modern Japan:  
with a focus on social class

Sinai HAREL, Yan LI, and Beverley Anne YAMAMOTO

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## A review essay on women's work in modern Japan: with a focus on social class

Sinai HAREL, Yan LI, and Beverley Anne YAMAMOTO

### 1. Introduction

As Brinton (2001:1) has noted, one of the most dramatic economic changes in the twentieth century was the increase in women's labor participation outside the home, particularly among married women. Women's greater presence in the waged workforce has not necessarily led to parity with men in terms of wages and opportunities. The extent of gender segregation, both horizontal and vertical, varies greatly between countries even those with a similar level of income and development (Jarman, Blackburn and Racko, 2012).

Women's presence in the waged labor force in Japan also grew dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. In 2018, the most recent data, women comprised 46% of the total labor force which is roughly on a par with many other high income countries (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2019: 1, calculated by authors). Yet, the level of occupational inequality, especially in terms of vertical gender segregation, measured on the basis of pay and social stratification, is notably high among industrially developed nations (Jarman, Blackburn and Racko, 2012). Japan's labor market not only operates with a larger gender gap in income compared to countries with equivalent economies, but promotion opportunities and employment status for women are also far more limited than for men (Yu 2012: 208). It is noted that women's working lives "diverge from men's soon after entering the labor force" (Yu 2012: 208). Even if they are doing the same work, they are rarely given the same opportunities for promotion and career development. The now outdated notion that their professional career is only "until marriage and childbirth" (Dore 1986: 94) continues to inform work practices and worker aspirations (Takami, 2018).

In order to better understand our present, we can turn to the past for insights. Contemporary gender norms and relationships have their roots in modern constructions of the family, labor and ideas of how gendered individuals should serve the state. Rather than being absolute or universal in the Japanese context due to culture and tradition, they need to be understood as fluid and transformable (Kimura 2010: 13). Chimoto (1990: 228) points out that in the modern era (1868 to 1945) the family in urban areas came to display a gendered division of labor, regardless of the social class of the actors. She argues that the construction of the modern family, with deeply embedded

gender norms is part of the reason for the persistence of conservative gender notions in Japanese society even through to the present. To better understand the social construction of gender norms and gender relations in the present, which includes changes in women's economic position, a historical perspective of Japan's modernization and industrialization period is invaluable (Miyake 1991: 292; Hunter 1993: 1, 5; Kimura 2010: 13).

One notion used to explain the persistence of strong gendering norms is that of "semi-compressed modernity" (Ochiai 2013: 538), whereby Japan's transition from being a non-developed, agrarian economy, to being a highly-developed, industrial one took place over a relatively short period of time (Ochiai 2013: 538; Hunter 1993: 6). This rapid transformation in a relatively short space of time, it is argued, has resulted in labor relations in modern Japan combining features of both preindustrial and industrial economies, both tradition and modernity (Chimoto 1987: 156-167; Hunter 1993: 6). We would argue, however, that the speed of industrialization undoubtedly shaped the economy, but decisions made by the Meiji elite that came to be reflected in the Civil Code, among other instruments nationalized a patriarchal system with rigid gender norms that had not been practiced throughout Japan in the pre-modern period. The expected role of women in this process was different from that of men, but also mediated by class (Sievers, 1983). The tensions and paradoxes that emerged as Japan transitioned to modernity as a result of growing expectations of women's domestic role, encapsulated in the slogan 'good wife, wise mother', and the need for women in the labor force (Nagy 1991: 215) are evidenced in our findings.

As we do not deal with women's work during the height of the Asia Pacific war period, for the purpose of this paper we focus on the modern period starting with the Meiji restoration in 1868 and ending with the opening of the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1937. Studies on women's work during Japan's modern era have tended to focus on working-class women, particularly textile factory workers. The spreading ideology of domesticity and its relation to the middle-class ideal of the housewife and family structure had also been explored in detail. However, such topics as middle-class working women, peasant women and other alternative occupations had rarely been investigated. Although papers on the topic of women's work in the modern era, especially during the interwar period, regularly used social class terms such as middle-class and working women, their meanings are usually taken as self-evident and they remain undefined or poorly defined (Nagy 1991: 201).

In this review paper we aim to construct a comprehensive picture of the female labor market, paying particular attention to social class as a mediating factor. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to illustrate the complex interplay and intersection of class and gender in women's labor force participation in the modern era, in order to gain a better understanding of the construction process of intersecting inequalities in the Japanese economy and society from a historical sociological perspective.

## 2. Conceptualizing working women's class in modern Japan

### Classical class theories: Marxist and Weberian Approach

Originally, class referred to the division of the Roman population on the basis of property. In the western pre-modern period, 'class' was perceived as static and ascribed, a characteristic one was born into, which did not change throughout one's life course. Following the industrial revolution, the term class became inextricably associated with modern capitalism, which resulted in a transformed class structure and a new understanding of class position as something one achieves, rather than a status ascribed from birth (Edgell 1993:1). Thus, one might argue, class theory itself is a product of modern industrial societies.

The conceptualization and theorization of class and stratification by Marx [1818-1883] and Weber [1864-1920] form the basis of most sociological analyses of class that is reflected in the continuity between their perspectives and in subsequent attempts to understand the key concept of class (Giddens and Sutton 2013: 485; Edgell 1993: 16). Both of their theories provide the essential conceptual tools for analyzing class structures (Edgell 1993: 13-14). Class, in Marxist theory, is rooted in relations of capitalist production, while in Weberian stratification theory, hierarchies of categories or continuous variables such as status or party are also included in the social stratification in addition to class (Acker 2006a: 16). Marx and Weber's theories and concepts of class differ in their "conclusions about capitalism and the fate of the working classes" (Giddens and Sutton 2013: 486). Marx claims that the inevitable outcome of class conflict in the relationship of production is a proletarian revolution against the ruling bourgeoisie class (Marx and Engels 1848: 49; Edgell 1993: 3-4). In contrast, Weber's approach focuses on fragmentation within class groupings and the heterogeneous characteristic of the working-class as a whole. Thus, according to Weber, a homogenous working-class action against capitalism is not likely.

Whereas there are clear differences in emphasis and analysis, Marx and Weber's writings on class overlap in important ways (Edgell 1993: 14). Class is conceptualized in economic terms hence class differences are based on objective economic conditions such as ownership of property, wealth, and occupation. Class is perceived as the most predominant social factor to influence people's lives in modern societies (Giddens and Sutton 2013: 485-486; Edgell 1993: 13-14).

### Women's class position: family or individual as the unit of analysis

Whether we follow a (neo-) Marxist or a (neo-)Weberian approach, the conventional way of assigning class positions is to put women in the same category as that of the male head of the household and, Weber adds, depending on market situation (Erikson 1984: 507; Hashimoto 1997: 56; Acker 1973: 937, 2006a: 17). Feminists, however, question the family unit approach of class theories, as it results in women as the *de facto* excluded or invisible subjects in class structure and

class studies (e.g. Watson and Barth 1964; Acker 1973; Ushijima 1995: 26; Hashimoto 1997: 5).

In response to the criticism feminists put forth, mainstream class theorists and scholars debated class theories in regards to the rapidly changing composition of the labor force in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Felson and Knoke 1974; Goldthorpe 1983; Erikson 1984; Baxter 1988; Wright 1989). Another debate focused on the best way to formulate the economic processes producing class structures, depending on production relations or market relations (Acker 2006a: 2). As a result of these debates and the attempts to liberate women from the dependence on male-based social class, four major models to analyze women's class positions were suggested as follows (Akagawa 2000: 50): a status-borrowing model, an independent-status model, a status-sharing model (Felson and Knoke 1974: 516) and a dominance-status model (Erikson 1984: 503).

Felson and Knoke (1974: 516) suggest that a status-borrowing model is particularly relevant in the case of unemployed married women, who derive their class position from their husbands; an independent-status model, in which women's class is based solely on their own income, emerged following the increasing participation of women in the labor force; a status-sharing model implies that both husband and wife influence each other's class position, which involves some degree of reciprocity (Felson and Knoke 1974: 516). Both the independent-status model and the status-sharing model can be understood as a response to "the classical assumption of stratification theory that women have little or no effect on their own or their husbands' status" (Felson and Knoke 1974: 516). Erikson (1984: 503) adds the dominance-status model, in which individual positions are based on an order of dominance, and the family's class position is assigned utilizing the family's highest occupation, according to market order.

With the exception of the independent-status model, families in which women and men occupy similar social class positions are conceptualized as class-homogenous families, whilst families in which women and men occupy different social class positions are conceptualized as cross-class families (e.g. Britten and Heath 1983: 60; Wright 1980, 1989; Leiulfstrud and Woodward 1987). Although the new models are critical of the conventional view, in most models it is still the family, rather than the individual, that is used as the unit of analysis that defines women's class position (Baxter 1988: 108). As women largely occupy the lower positions of the labor market, even these critical models may result in their persistent dependence in regards to class.

### **Contemporary class theories and women in Japan**

Class theorist Hashimoto (2002) theorized Japanese women's class using the Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM) survey data of 1995, which resulted in 13 categories based on unmarried women's individual income and occupation, and married women's income combined with their husbands'. To go back to the previously introduced models, Hashimoto's theory uses either a status-sharing or a dominance-status model, with a class-homogenous family approach.

Hashimoto (2002: 50) argues that Japanese women's individual class positions are not necessarily determined depending on their own socioeconomic resources because of two reasons. One is that a large number of women do not work and therefore, based on income, they do not have an independent class position. The other is that a lot of working women's worktime is short or their wages are low, therefore they are financially dependent on their husbands. As a result, Hashimoto concludes, we have to consider both women's individual class position and their husbands' when we categorize Japanese women's class (Hashimoto 2002: 50).

Another example is Akagawa (2000) who also uses the same SSM data of 1995 to test the validity of the above mentioned four class models, and examines which model is the most suitable to measure Japanese women's class. Akagawa finds that the independent-status model for full-time working women does not fit Japan's case, at least at the time, as full-time working women's wages are lower than their male partners'. In Japan, even full-time working women's income is supplementary (Akagawa 2000: 61). The result echoes Hashimoto (2002)'s theorization of Japanese women's class and shows that in the case of Japan, while income and occupation are the primary markers of class, women's independent position may still be quite far away.

### **Working women's individual and family class**

Similar to Western industrial countries, occupations and income dominantly represent the stratification structure of Japanese society (Ishida and Miwa 2009: 650; Hashimoto 2002: 52). For the purpose of this paper, class is therefore defined in terms of occupations and income. Corresponding to previous theories and studies both in the Western and the Japanese context, we approach working women's positions depending on both individual and family class. Individual class position is assigned by their own occupation and income, while their family class is positioned by the occupation and income of either the male head of the household or the family as a unit accounting for all its members combined.

## **3. Studying history: a review of research findings**

Reconstructing the situation of women's work during Japan's modern era is not an easy task. Several compilations of relevant primary sources published starting the 1980s by the 'research society for women's history' (*joseishi sougou kenkyuukai*) suggest the growing academic interest in this topic is quite recent. As a testament to that, two thirds of the sources found in our search were published after the year 1999, with only a small number dating back before the 1990s. As these are historical studies, we should note that many of the numerical data, such as labor participation rates and wages cited in this review are estimations. As often different studies provide different numbers we attempted as much as possible to give a comprehensive picture of the data. Most studies use

primarily statistical data from various surveys, as well as magazines, books and personal narratives published at the time. Another insightful source is the published accounts of ‘middle-class social observers’, used by some of the researchers (e.g. Uno 1993; Mathias 1993). Interviews with female workers are also a source of information for some of the studies (e.g. Tsurumi 1994; Liao 2013), some also use postwar era interviews with former workers (e.g. Mathias 1993).

This review is based on secondary sources found through a google scholar title search of the term ‘women’s labor in prewar Japan’ in both English and Japanese, with several alternatives for each keyword included in the search. Sources which did not fit the period and topic criteria were excluded. A hand search then added some more sources. As not all sources were accessible, this section is based on 23 articles and book chapters. However, data from an analysis of all 50 relevant sources’ titles and abstracts is included here, as a means to identify some trends in the academic research of this topic.

For the purpose of this paper, we have endeavored to focus on women’s paid labor, as income is a primary indicator of social class. In the state of ‘semi-compressed modernity’ various systems and means of payment were in effect. Hence, in some cases, such as among peasant families, it is quite difficult to make a distinction on the basis of pay between domestic and productive labor. In addition, some occupations, such as prostitution, are only now being recognized and studied as part of women’s labor (Bown-Struyk 2009: 20), thus extending the category. In light of such examples we chose to address women’s labor in a broader, more inclusive sense, which will hopefully give a fuller picture of this topic.

### **Women in the changing labor market**

The labor market was going through rapid changes during the time period under investigation in this study, due to the Japanese state’s modernization and industrialization. In general, Japan’s modern period saw a transition from a mostly (75%) agrarian labor market to the development of secondary and tertiary industries, which gradually took the primary industry’s place, although the transition was complete only in the postwar period. Corresponding to the general transition, changes throughout the period in female labor show the shrinkage of the primary industry, the peak of secondary industries around WWI and the gradual increase in the share of the tertiary industry. However, the female labor was slower to the transition, and by the end of the period the share of traditional and lower-paying labor remained quite high (Kawashima 1995: 273; Odaka 1993: 18).

As a result of these changes, women of peasant households left for work on a temporary basis in various occupations such as factory work, domestic work and prostitution, in order to earn supplementary income for their families. This trend of migrant workers, *dekasegi*, shows the symbiotic relations between the rural and industrial sectors of the time, as the former depended on supplementary income and the latter on workforce supply (Hunter 1993: 93; Odaka 1993: 24),



the brunt of both was borne by working women. Urban areas presented an increasingly diverse female labor market, which varied from unskilled jobs to highly skilled white-collar and intellectual professions. As wars and economic changes created vacancies in formerly male workplaces and occupations (Watanabe 2011: 33; Mathias 1993: 117), and depression generated an increasing need for supplementary income in order to sustain middle class households (Nagy 1991: 204-5), the female labor gradually changed.

### **Distribution of the female labor market**

Our first task is to try and illustrate the various occupations and jobs women were taking part in at the time, as well as changes which occurred during the several decades in question here. The first national census in 1920 showed that a little more than half (53.3%) of women at the time were working (Kawashima 1995: 272-3). Women were mostly working in agriculture, which remained the number one female occupation throughout the period, although it did shrink from 77% of female workers in the 1870s to 60% in the 1930s (Kawashima 1995: 272-3). Many articles on women's work at the time start by stating the prominence of agriculture as women's labor, however further details are rarely provided. Our search found only 5 articles in which women's work in farming is the primary research subject, some of which directly lament the neglect this topic had suffered from (e.g. Saito 1991: 31). The lower stratum of agrarian households – peasant families who did not own any land or those who owned some land but could not earn a living off it – grew during the Meiji period from 62.7% in 1884 to 67.1% in 1908 (Zhang 2006: 165). Therefore, one can extrapolate that roughly two thirds of women working in agriculture belonged to these lower-class<sup>1)</sup> rural families.

Perhaps the most well-known and well researched women workers of the time, were those working in the textile industry. This is most likely due to the textile industry's important role in early stages of industrialization, and women's prominent role within it (Mathias 1993: 98). Women comprised 86.2% of textile industry workers in 1909 (cited in Mathias 1993: 102), a rate which rose to 90% by 1915 (Kawashima 1995: 273). In the 1920s it became the second largest occupation for women, after agriculture, with close to 9% of women working in the textile industry (Odaka 1993: 18). The poor working conditions in the factories, as well as the public discourse regarding them at the time are well documented, as shall be detailed later in this section. Although in the beginning stages of the industry in the 1870s young women were primarily recruited from *samurai* and wealthy peasant families, with increasing demand daughters of poor peasant families soon became the largest source of factory workers. These young women came to earn supplementary income for their families on a temporary basis for 2-3 years (Kawashima 1995: 274).

<i>Industry</i>	<i>1906</i>	<i>1916</i>	<i>1926</i>	<i>1936</i>
<i>Agriculture and forestry</i>	65.5	63.2	60.5	57.4
<i>Fisheries and salt making</i>	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.5
<i>Mining and quarrying</i>	0.4	0.6	0.5	0.5
<i>Construction</i>	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.2
<i>Textile industry</i>	6.4	7.8	8.8	8.9
<i>Clothing industry</i>	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.9
<i>Wood and bamboo products</i>	2.0	1.3	1.1	0.6
<i>Food and beverage industry</i>	1.2	1.4	1.8	0.9
<i>Other manufacturing and utilities</i>	1.5	1.3	1.5	1.6
<i>Commerce</i>	9.9	10.5	7.5	7.3
<i>Domestic service</i>	7.7	7.9	5.2	8.0
<i>Hotel, restaurant and others</i>	-	-	6.3	8.1
<i>Other tertiary industry and nowhere else classified</i>	2.8	3.5	4.4	4.2
<i>Actual figures</i>	9,920,000	9,988,000	10,436,000	11,691,000

**Table 1: The distribution of gainfully employed women, 1906-1936 (%) (cited in Odaka 1993: 18)**

Increasing numbers of women worked in other industries and occupations, as detailed in *table 1*. Generally, women accounted for 20-30% of workers in secondary industries (Odaka 1993: 17; Mathias 1993: 101). Another supplementary income for poor rural families was mine work, which was mostly done as a family, namely men, women and children together. After WWI, mining became the sole income for the lower stratum of rural families, among them also families with *buraku* roots, who couldn't find other means of living (Mathias 1993: 106, 118). In the mines, women were working both above and below ground and doing labor-intensive roles such as haulers of coal. In contrast to the data in *table 1*, Mathias claims that in 1909 up to 10% of female workers were miners (1993: 101), which would have made it the second largest female occupation of the time. Female miners' numbers showed tremendous growth (147%) during the First World War, however this is one profession that did not last in the postwar era (Mathias 1993: 104). Except for women who worked in textile factories and mines, women's labor in other secondary industries had not been further researched as far as our search shows.

Another occupation for young women from poor rural families was being sold into, or temporarily going to work as prostitutes, either in urban areas within Japan (Barraclough & Faison 2009: 2), or abroad in neighboring countries such as Taiwan and Hong Kong as a *karayuki san* (Mihalopoulos 2012: 1). As previously mentioned, owing to prostitution being recognized as labor only in some recent studies, earlier studies showing statistical data of women's labor such as *table 1*, does not include sexual work. As for numbers, in the early 20th century there were about 50,000 registered prostitutes and 80,000 *geisha*, however as not all were registered the numbers were most

likely quite higher (Lie 1997: 253).

Here a brief note in the matter of nationality is warranted. Female labor outside the Japanese mainland is beyond the scope of this short paper, however it is important to mention that at the time colonization and subsequent work migration influenced the female labor market. For example, "Korean women were being recruited as industrial workers within Japan, and as forced sexual labourers for Japanese soldiers" in the growing Japanese empire (Barraclough & Faison 2009: 2). Women's labor and its relation to social class positions, then and maybe even more so today, is influenced greatly by processes that transcend national boundaries, such as colonialism and globalization.

To return to the matter at hand, aside from agricultural and factory settings, urban areas also provided varied work opportunities for women. As illustrated by *table 1*, after agriculture and textile, the single occupation to employ most women was domestic service<sup>2</sup>). Most domestic servants were women of rural origins employed in urban areas, mostly as live-in maids (Odaka 1993: 20). Another closely related occupation was care assistance, which like domestic service was considered unskilled work. Women were employed through 'home help agencies' and provided nursing and domestic services (Shinotsuka 1993: 152, 163). Lower working-class women in urban areas also worked as scavengers of paper and scrap metal, street vendors of foods, petty retailers, hairdressers, laundresses, waitresses, and proprietors of boarding houses, noodle shops and tea stores (Uno 1993: 43). Piecework, *naishoku*, "the manufacturing, assembly, or finishing of goods at home rather than in a workshop or factory" was another prevalent occupation for lower-working class women, as it did not require education or skills and allowed them to work without expending resources on leaving their homes (Uno 1993: 41). Gradually, piecework also became acceptable as middle-class women's work (Faison 2007: 11).

More skilled work opportunities were also available to women in urban areas, and in fact tertiary industry came to employ 25% of women by the 1930s (Kawashima 1995: 273), with various occupations from teaching to clerical work showing an upward trend as women came to replace men as cheaper labor force (Nagy 1991: 203-4). In 1924 there were 865,000 women in such skilled professions<sup>3</sup>), which amounted to more than 10% of the workers in each occupation: "97,000 were nurses and pharmacists, followed by 92,600 clerical workers and typists, 61,500 teachers, 43,800 government officers, and 43,200 journalists, writers and musicians" (cited in Komori 2007: 340). Women accounted for more than 10% of other white-collar occupations such as telephone operators, accountants, bookkeepers and cashiers. Women also entered highly skilled professions and their numbers gradually increased. For example, from 306 female medical doctors in 1914 to 1,032 in 1936 (Komori 2007: 341).

Thus far this review had shown the diversity of the female labor market during Japan's modern period. Academic research in this field noticeably focused on the group of migrant working women,

of which the most attention was given to textile factory workers. In contrast female labor in farming and agriculture garnered almost no academic attention to date, possibly partially due to lack of available sources on the matter.

### Women's wages

Waged employment was slow to develop during Japan's modern period and researchers claim that even in the 1920s employment in Japan was mainly family-based (Kawashima 1995: 275). Hence, as most women were family workers in rural households, wages may give an incomplete picture of women's income and household contribution. Wage and income data are therefore more relevant to secondary and tertiary industry workers, as shown in *table 2*. Despite the fact that income data is incomplete and not always consistent across different studies, some overarching trends can be inferred from the data.

	<i>Daily wage - Female worker</i>	<i>Daily wage - Male worker</i>	<i>Female wage/ Male wage</i>	<i>Monthly wage - Female worker</i>
<i>Piecework</i>	0.06-0.22	-	-	9
<i>Domestic service</i>	0.73	-	-	-
<i>Care assistance</i>	1.00	-	-	23
<i>Agriculture</i>	-	1.16	-	-
<i>Coal mining above ground</i>	0.73	1.51	48%	-
<i>Manufacturing industries</i>	0.78	2.47	32%	26.2
<i>Textile industry</i>	1.1	-	-	25.2
<i>Coal mining below ground</i>	1.29	1.92	67%	-
<i>Chemical industry</i>	-	-	-	30.7
<i>Traffic, communication</i>	1.06	2.04	52%	-
<i>Utilities</i>	1.24	2.42	51%	-
<i>Primary school teaching</i>	-	-	47-76%	39.4
<i>Nursing (War ministry)</i>	-	-	-	55

**Table 2: Daily and monthly wage in yen of female and male workers of various occupations in the 1920s-1930s (Adapted from Mathias 1993: 111; Minami 2008: 11; Nishinarita 2012: 207; Shinotsuka 1993: 165; Odaka 1993: 32-3; Uno 1993: 42-3; Kawakami 2014: 65; Arai 1982: 267)**

Firstly, from the data in *table 2* we can deduce that wage inequality between men and women was the norm at the time. The largest wage gap was in factories, where women were earning between 29-35% of male wages (Mathias 1993: 109-110). One of the reasons for this large gap was the difference in male and female positions within factories, with men occupying mostly foreman and other higher-level positions, which in turn paid better (Liao 2013: 30). In the case of women miners who worked below ground the gap was relatively small, at times female wage reaching

78% of male wages, as women worked in the same positions as men, oftentimes occupying the most strenuous position of coal haulers (Mathias 1993: 109). Looking at the most prevalent female occupations, the most lucrative work was underground coal-mining (Mathias 1993: 106), second was factory work, particularly in the 1920s when the average daily wage reached a peak of 1.29 yen. Wages in agricultural work are hard to measure, however Odaka's studies indicates they were lower than factory wages and higher than domestic service wages (Odaka 1993: 22-4, 32).

Women engaged in piecework earned significantly less than others, however as their pay was per product their wages varied greatly (Uno 1993: 44). White-collar and skilled work clearly paid more than agricultural and industrial labor, however wage gaps persisted across all professions. Many middle-class jobs paid women a third of the male wage for the same position (Nagy 1991: 209). Women in skilled professions such as teaching and nursing also occupied lower positions and their duties included domestic chores such as cleaning, maintenance and repairing clothes (Shinotsuka 1993: 155; Kawakami 2014: 73), which contributed to the gender wage gap.

### **Working conditions: focusing on young *dekasegi* women**

In order to gain comprehensive understanding of female labor, wages and income data need to be complemented by information regarding working conditions and other social factors of the workers such as age, marital status and household circumstances. Academic literature appears to mainly stress the oppression and harsh conditions of female workers in all types of manual labor. Poor working conditions such as long working hours, harsh and dangerous manual labor, poor sanity, over-crowded dorms, and poor nutrition, all of which had adverse effects on women's health, were to be found in agriculture, factories and mines. Women contracted more diseases than men and death rates were also higher (Saito 1991: 39; Hunter 1993: 84-8; Mathias 1993: 113). Tuberculosis was a major affliction in textile factories, some data suggesting that one of every 6-7 young women came back with a serious illness (Hunter 1993: 77). Textile factory workers also suffered from sexual harassment (Liao 2013: 25; Tsurumi 1994: 24).

Workdays were long in all working-class occupations. Women who worked in agriculture worked 10 or more hours per day, and in smaller peasant families worked more hours a day and more days a year than their male counterparts (Saito 1991: 35-6). In factories women worked between 12-18 hours per day (Uno 1993: 44). A workday schedule of a Nagano raw-silk factory shows a 14.5 hours workday, which included overall break time of 50 minutes (Liao 2013: 29). Miner women's workday lasted for 12-16 hours (Mathias 1993: 107), care assistants, who were live-in maids, worked 13-hour days (Shinotsuka 1993: 165), and pieceworkers had to work at least 12 hours in order to earn minimal income (Uno 1993: 42).

Rural women were recruited, assigned and employed by various associations, agencies and subcontractors, many times under oppressive contracts and conditions. In urban areas, female workers particularly were dependent on these organizations to find employment and earn an income and thus had to comply with entrance fees, membership fees, monthly fees and the like (Shinotsuka 1993: 153-4, 160). Mining families, who were mostly employed by subcontractors, were contracted under much the same conditions (Mathias 1993: 100-101). Temporary young female workers, such as those in factories, domestic service as well as sexual labor, often found themselves in a situation akin to indentured servitude, as advanced payments to their parents bound them to their work (Kawashima 1995: 274; Odaka 1993: 24; Mihalopoulos 2012: 13).

The image of the exploited young single female textile workers in particular, is evoked again and again in the literature (e.g. Liao 2013: 29). Indeed, in the early 1900s most textile factory workers were between 13-24 of age (Faison 2007: 8; Odaka 1993: 17), however by the 1920s the numbers of older and married women increased (Uno 1993: 43). Domestic servants were likewise young and single women, whose average age was 21.3 (Odaka 1993: 18). Home help agencies also tended to recruit single women, most of them in their late 20s or early 30s (Shinotsuka 1933: 164, 167). In contrast, 70% of female miners who worked underground and 90% of pieceworkers were married women, most of them 25-50 years old (Mathias 1993: 110; Uno 1993: 42).

At the turn of the century, some legislative measures were meant to protect workers from being exploited, particularly women and children working in factories and mines. The influence of developing labor consciousness in Japan's political arena as well as international discourse, combined with a strengthening ideology of domesticity, brought forth the Factory Law of 1911, and the 1916 'Regulations for the Aid of Mining Workers'. These two acts attempted to protect women and children by regulating "working hours, shifts, night work, rest period and minimum wage" (Mathias 1993: 115). The developing discourse of domesticity brought forth concern for women workers' health and morals, stressing that women's first duty to their families, and by proxy to the nation, was to give birth to healthy children, a duty viewed as incompatible with manual labor (Molony 1993: 125). However, due to owners and employers' strong opposition, regulations were enforced only in the late 1920s and 1930s, and later suspended on account of the war (Molony 1993: 124-5; Faison 2007: 25). As some researchers persuasively argue, not women and children but 'national efficiency' and productivity, were the true subjects of protection laws. Regulations were only enforced when they suited employers' interests, and provided a rationale for reduction of female labor (Hunter 1993: 74-5; Mathias 1993: 116-7).

Despite the image of rural migrant workers as young women exploited by both employers and families, lacking both material and intellectual resources to fend for themselves (Hunter 1993: 89-90; Mihalopoulos 2012: 1), some studies attempt to tell a different story. For example, one study relates the situation in one textile factory with better treatment of workers and good relations with

employers (Hokoi 1983: 154-5). Despite the image of the work of young female migrant workers as a temporary stage after which they would fulfill their 'real' roles as wives and mothers, not all followed the designated path. A 1936 survey of women who completed their time as factory workers shows that 46% planned to find other employment and only 23% got married (Faison 2007: 10). Others acknowledge the agency of working women; showing that they had ways of expressing themselves as opposed to their voices being completely silenced, suggesting that these women did not feel victimized and could be defiant and organize strikes to better their conditions (Tsurumi 1994: 25-7). Young women also had their considerations in choosing an occupation such as factory work, domestic service or sexual labor as a *karayuki san* (Liao 2013: 29-30; Odaka 1993: 23; Mihalopoulos 2012: 12). In terms of education, factory workers were in fact recruited from among the best in rural schools, with domestic servants usually the second tier of students (Odaka 1993: 24-5). In the 1920s factories were offering further education to their workers, a fact that also used to appeal to potential workers (Faison 2007: 9-10). By that time almost all (more than 90%) of factory workers and domestic servants completed primary education (Watanabe 2011: 29; Odaka 1993: 22).

For young single women of rural origin, agricultural work provided the best working conditions, however with the least contribution to household income. Factory work, on the other hand, presented an opportunity for a greater contribution however with much worse conditions. Domestic service could be located somewhere between these two, with a lesser household contribution albeit better working and living conditions (Odaka 1993: 24-25). The temporary basis of the work, as well as the commitment, sometimes forced, to their families, weakened young rural women's position as workers, although they may not have been as passively oppressed as traditionally represented by research.

### **Poor working mothers and married women**

The situation of married women was somewhat different. As data in the previous section shows, most miner women and pieceworkers were married, many were also mothers. Being married and having children added domestic work and child rearing roles to women's workload. It was common for middle-class households to hire help, as evidenced by the prevalence of maids and home helpers discussed in the previous sections. However, working-class women could not afford such luxury, which in turn influenced the organization of their labor.

As mentioned previously, mining started as seasonal side work for peasant families, with both parents and children working together as a unit. This and the fact that wages were largely performance based, allowed female miners who worked below ground some flexibility and autonomy in setting their shifts, which enabled them to better care for their children (Mathias 1993: 107). As industrialization progressed however, the work organization in mines became more demanding and for the poorest peasant families mining became the only occupation. As work

rhythms became more rigid, mothers who worked in smaller mines had to either rely on others or take their children with them underground. Larger mines offered nurseries as early as 1906, as they had an interest in supporting family work, which included the cheap labor of women and children (ibid, 113, 118). Women and children's labor was necessary for the household to earn a living wage. Examples in Mathias' study show that women and children's combined contribution to household income ranged between 25-75% (ibid, 112). Although social observers of the time thought the situation of female miners to be inhumane, describing exhausted women and dirty, ignorant children, in interviews, former female miners remembered the solidarity and community of mining work, also recognizing the independence and autonomy their significant contribution to the household afforded them (ibid, 114). In the case of miner women, industrialization appears to have exacerbated the tension between their productive and domestic roles in the household, while their income contribution bettered their position within the household.

Urban lower-class married women had somewhat of a similar position. Although they did not face the harsh conditions found in the mines, as shown previously, their earning ability was much lower than that of female miners. As a result, their contribution to the household did not even amount to a quarter of household expenses, the average contribution of pieceworkers was 12.6% of household income (Uno 1993: 42). Nuclear family formation was prevalent (80%) among poor urban families, which severely limited women's earning ability, as they had to balance productive and domestic work (ibid, 50). In fact, for these women fulfilling their domestic role meant earning supplementary income which would enable them to feed and cloth their children (ibid, 59). Although women's household contribution was quite small, it was very significant and enabled the survival of the family. It is noteworthy that single mothers encountered extreme difficulties in earning a living wage (ibid, 49), showing that women's labor and wages were meaningful and acknowledged only within the framework of the family. Wives who contributed to the family income, particularly those working at home such as pieceworkers, had a little more autonomy and control over the family budget (ibid, 54). It appears that poor married women's work as well as their domestic role made the significance of their contribution, although in actual numbers it could be less than that of young single women, more evident and they gained more autonomy within their households.

### **Middle-class working women**

In the case of middle-class families, increased household expenses combined with rising prices post WWI, made a second income an economic necessity for many households (Nagy 1991: 204-5). Although some women did not work out of economic necessity but out of interest and in order to gain more independence, surveys show that by late 1920s 60% of middle-class working women worked in order to supplement household income or support themselves and others (ibid, 206-7). In 1927, 66.5% of women teachers in the Tokyo area were married (Kawakami 2014: 140), and



the majority of working mothers worked as teachers (Nagy 1991: 206). Middle-class women who worked in skilled tertiary industry occupations, were in a much better position as workers than that of working- and lower-class women who worked in primary and secondary industry occupations. Not only were their wages and working conditions significantly better, middle-class women were more educated, as some professions such as nursing and teaching required secondary education. Furthermore, they were organized in associations and unions, through which they had better access to information and were able to demand better working conditions (Komori 2007: 340; Shinotsuka 1993: 157; Arai 1982: 266-7).

Despite these relatively favorable circumstances of middle-class working women, at the same time many appear to have been influenced by the ideology of domesticity, which required them to be “good wives and wise mothers”. The effect and meaning of this ideology varied according to social class and women's labor. As previously shown in this paper, women of the lower-classes fulfilled their domestic role by earning income, namely, being productive (Molony 1993: 126; Uno 1993: 59; Faison 2007: 9). However, for middle-class women, who were more strongly influenced by this ideology through the educational system, the tension between domestic and productive roles was much sharper. Despite the need for women's cheaper labor, the government viewed working women as a threat to the institution of the family and to male dominance within it (Nagy 1991: 214). As the family represented the state (Komori 2007: 336), working women were also perceived as an indirect threat to the Japanese state itself.

For instance, public discourse of the time not only doubted women's ability and competence to do skilled-professional work on the grounds of their sex, but also articulated concern and anxiety regarding the effects of work on women's motivation, physical, and mental ability to fulfill their national and familial role as wives and mothers (Nagy 1991: 200; Watanabe 2011: 34). Although their image did improve somewhat in the first two decades of the twentieth century, middle-class working women still suffered from unequal treatment in the workplace that affected their wages, position and duties, and made them the targets of sexual harassment and demeaning remarks (Nagy 1991: 210-1).

In the 1920s the housewife, *shufu*, became a middle-class ideal, which further emphasized the tension between women's productive and reproductive roles. It was only upper middle-class women, ironically often graduates of girls' higher schools, the highest education for women at the time, who could afford to pursue this ideal (Faison 2007: 9). In order to resolve the tension between the spreading ideology of domesticity and the economic need for the cheap labor women provided in white-collar and professional occupations, “a discourse was constructed to support the needs of the industry” (Komori 2007: 340). Middle-class women were encouraged to take up piecework, as it was “mostly associated with domestic values” and “most consistent with the “good wife, wise mother” philosophy” (Faison 2007: 11). Work outside the house was viewed as acceptable as long

as it fit domestic ideals and skills. Thus, clerical work and accounting were also recognized as suitable work for women (Komori 2007: 340). Lastly, professions that relied on the perceived 'natural femininity and motherliness' of women, such as nursing and teaching, were also acknowledged (Kawakami 2014: 177-9). At the same time this type of gendered discourse limited women, as their 'natural' attributes were not seen as suitable for more higher-level positions, for instance in the teaching profession (ibid, 39).

The diverse studies reconstructing the history of women's labor in modern Japan show how closely social class was related to women's labor opportunities and conditions. This review focused on the relation between gender and social class, however it also reflected connections between social class and other social factors such as age, marital status, household size, education, and rural/urban environment. As the modern period was a time of high-paced industrialization, economical needs greatly shaped the female labor market, mediated by the educational system and public discourse, and varying according to social class. The final section of this paper will consider some implications of the findings brought here in relation to our understanding of women's social class positions.

#### **4. Discussion**

In this final section, we attempt to draw on the two parts of this paper; the theoretical introduction to the relations between gender and class positions; and a review of findings regarding women's class-mediated labor during Japan's modern period, in order to further develop the discussion on Japanese women's social class positionality.

The findings of this review show that during Japan's modern era both gender and class influenced the structure of women's labor. Although gender-based inequality persisted across all types of work, its manifestation and severity varied by social class, and was mediated by national policy, education, and public discourse. In occupations of lower pay and unskilled work gender inequality in wages and positions tended to be more severe, working conditions worse, and women's ability to change their situation lower. Findings show that perceptions of what is suitable female work were related to social class, as well as the balance between productive and reproductive roles. While productive labor was partly how women of the lower classes fulfilled their reproductive roles, for women of the middle-class productive labor was seen as contrary to their reproductive roles according to ideals of domesticity.

In regards to the definition and construction of social class categories, our findings show that most studies of female labor follow the mainstream approach. Although most studies do not particularly focus on class, in accordance with mainstream theory, when referring to class in general, using terms such as working-class and middle-class, authors depend on household income as a class marker (Hashimoto 2002). As our findings show, household income does not necessarily result in

the exclusion of women. Particularly in lower income households, such as in the cases of miner families and poor urban families, women and children's contributions were essential for the family's survival (Uno 1993: 49; Mathias 1991: 112). Even middle-class households depended on the supplementary income earned by women (Nagy 1991: 206). These instances might be understood within a 'status-sharing model' of household social class.

Furthermore, when attempting to consider women's social class independently, studies show a tendency to rely on occupation as a marker for social class. A tendency that also corresponds to mainstream theory (Wright 1980, 1989). Surveys show that women's social class was *de facto* indicated by occupation, a definition which also changed with time. For instance, before WWI the poor included petty retailers, factory workers and pieceworkers, while post WWI factory workers pertained to the working-class (Uno 1993: 38). Use of the term middle-class only started in the twentieth century, with surveys on middle-class women's work referring to 'intellectual work', namely skilled professional work, as an indicator for women's class (Nagy 1991: 201-2). A possible result of relying on occupation is the fragmentation of research findings. Most of the literature in this review focused on the macro level of female labor, most prevalently on one female occupation. Therefore, one of the contributions of this review was to attempt to illustrate a more comprehensive picture of female labor at the time.

We would also like to suggest that some of the academic research trends reflected in this review relate to social theories and the notion of modernity. Although most women at the time were agricultural workers, this review presents little information regarding the conditions of their labor. In fact, our search found a very small number of studies focusing on these women compared for example with the large number of papers on textile factory workers. Although a shortage in primary sources might partially explain this gap, another factor might be the lens of modern social class theories and its effect on academic research. Modern social class theories, based largely on the writing of Marx and Weber, conceptualize class within industrialized capitalist societies (Giddens and Sutton 2013: 485-6; Edgell 1993: 16), leading to the conceptualization of two prominent classes – working-class and middle-class. The period in question in this paper is quite appropriate as it is conceptualized as a time of modernization and industrialization within Japanese history, hence the name, the modern period. However, under the conditions of 'semi-compressed modernity' both preindustrial and industrial labor existed side by side during this limited time period. Adding the factor of gender, we find that although both male and female labor forces gradually transitioned into secondary and tertiary, namely modern, industries, the transition of the female labor force was much slower. Indeed, a majority of working women in the primary industry, namely premodern labor, persisted until the postwar era (Kawashima 1995: 273). The large numbers of agricultural sector households, within them the majority of the female labor force of the time, theoretically belong to a preindustrial peasant class, and do not fall into either working-class or middle-class categories. We

would therefore like to suggest that modern class theories might have contributed to the neglect of peasant families, and with them the majority of female labor, in the study of the period of Japanese modernization.

Studies focusing on young single women, such as factory workers and domestic servants, are an interesting case in this matter. Although research presents young women as daughters working in order to earn supplementary income for their households, their relation to their family, economic or otherwise is not explored further. For instance, their relative household contribution and its significance is not considered, despite the existence of some data to this effect (e.g. Odaka 1993: 32-3). Their lives before and after their work in the factories are rarely described (an exception is Faison 2007: 10). Due to the character of their work, migrant daughters can be classified as part of the working-class, while their families usually belonged to the preindustrial peasant class. As suggested above, the lack of a social class theory that incorporates peasant households alongside working-class and middle-class, might have contributed to this tendency.

Another direction for discussion indicated in this paper is the role of domestic work as a marker for social class. During this period, industrialization and wage-employment exacerbated the differentiation between the private and public spheres, as only work done outside the private domain of the household was remunerated by means of wages (Kimura 2010: 19; Watanabe 2011: 25). Consequently, unpaid domestic work, increasingly the responsibility of women alone, came to be devalued as a secondary contribution to the household. However, this change also varied by social class. A 1933 governmental survey investigating labor division in peasant households uses four categories; farming labor, side labor, domestic labor and other. The first three make use of the term labor, *roudou*, to qualify the work (Saito 1991: 35). The construction of the survey and presentation of the results implies that domestic work is just as much a part of the labor necessary to sustain the household, therefore contributing to household productivity. This finding might suggest that within peasant households the process of devaluation of domestic work was slower to take place.

Contrary to the position of domestic labor in preindustrial households, as paid labor within urban industrial society, namely domestic services of live-in maids, it was one of the lowest paid occupations for women. One cannot help but notice that piecework, which was also performed within the house, received the least amount of pay (*table 2*). Nowadays, the normative social reality of women having primary, oftentimes sole, responsibility for domestic work might obscure their class position as it negatively affects their labor market participation. However, findings from the modern era, suggest that unpaid domestic work within urban industrial society was the privilege of middle-class women who could afford not to work, or even employ other women as domestic servants. The role of paid and unpaid domestic work in relation to women's class positionality shows two different formations; one in rural-preindustrial households and another in an urban-industrial environment. Both formations changed with time, however, they suggest that domestic

work and the meaning it is given within the household could be related to women's social class positions. Research on this subject might further our understanding of women's social class.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper we had attempted to give a fuller account of female labor that could not be found in the literature so far. This study shows the relation between processes of industrialization and modernization, which sharpened gendered notions of labor and private/public divisions, and women's dependent social class position. The study of women's labor in Japan's modern period illustrates the intersection of gender and class in creating inequality, which affected women's work realities. Furthermore, although not the focus of this paper, the findings show that corresponding to the notion of intersectionality, other social and demographical factors such as age, rural/urban environment, nationality, marital status, and household size also shape women's work.

At the same time, it is women, regardless of social class, who tended to be responsible for unpaid reproductive roles and occupations both in the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the labor market, during Japan's era of modernization and industrialization. However, less attention was paid to women in traditional agricultural labor and to the question of their social class positions, which shows a gap in the literature, possibly stemming from modern social class theory. Women working in agriculture in the modern period, who accounted for the majority of the female working population, are particularly forgotten within class theories and studies. Further study of this group might open new directions in the theoretical consideration of the relation between women's work and social class.

## Notes

- 1) In this part of the paper, terms referring to social class are used in accordance with the language used in the reviewed studies, implications for our understanding of social class will be elaborated in the final discussion section.
- 2) Commerce, which employed a slightly larger percentage of women, accounts for various occupations.
- 3) For comparison, in 1930 there were 710,000 women working as maids (Odaka 1993: 17).

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## **A review essay on women's work in modern Japan: with a focus on social class**

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The contemporary Japanese labor market is characterized by a high degree of gender differentiation compared to other high income countries. There is marked degree of vertical and horizontal gender segregation. Even women with high levels of educational and social capital have difficulty translating this into status capital in the workplace. In this paper, we are interested in the historical antecedents of this situation and aim to illustrate how gender and class have intersected to structure work and work conditions for women in the modern period (1868-1945). Applying the lens of historical sociology, this paper offers a review of the academic literature on women and work in modern Japan. The first part of the paper is a theoretical consideration of how the social class position of women has been understood in the literature and the limits of these viewpoint. The second part offers an overview of the female labor market during the modern period, exploring the intersection of female gender and social class. We consider the areas of work that women typically engaged in, and their wage and working conditions. This review illustrates that pervasive gender inequality was integral to the modern Japanese labor market from its conception. The expectations of women as workers in the industrializing economy were tied intimately to their gender and class positions in a society where patriarchy had been strengthened rather than weakened as a result of the modernizing project. Working conditions were harsh, particularly for working class women. Class position also informed notions of domesticity and the functioning of public/private divide. From this analysis we note that women working in agriculture, despite being the majority of working women throughout the modern era, have been largely neglected by researchers of this period. Instead, women engaging directly in the industrializing economy, for example as textile workers, have garnered attention beyond their numerical representation in the workforce. The paper concludes with a discussion of the effects of theoretical conceptualization of women's social class on the reach and interpretation of research.

*Key words: Social class, Gender, Women's work, Modern Japan, Intersectionality*