Women Managers in
Neoliberal Japan

This book is about the varying difficulties experienced by women with professional careers in post-bubble Japan, where they are persistently treated by the state and employers as a pool of cheap, contingent resources for the benefit of the broader economy, that is, convenient tools for meeting the government's economic plans on 'womenomics.' Based on ethnographic data gathered from interviews with 160 women managers over a period of nearly 18 years of fieldwork, this study analyses how precarity is produced, reinforced, and perpetuated by continuities and discontinuities in shifting structural processes that generate and perpetuate the experiences of angst, anxiety, frustrations, disillusionment, and insecurity for this segment of the white-collar workforce.

To be women managers in a society that assiduously assigns women's rightful place to the domestic realm in their roles as wives and mothers is to subject their behaviour, choices, and aspirations to scrutiny and criticisms. Women managers are also peripheral, non-core players in the corporate workplace, where opportunities for career advancement are limited, and work conditions become incrementally more difficult with the rise of managerialism and nominal management in the increasingly flexible work environment of today.

With weak in labour unions to offer them limited access to collective representations, and ineffective legislations that provide little protection from unfair or abusive corporate practices, the risks many women face in their pursuit of management-track careers far outweigh the rewards promised by the opportunities they receive. Women's greater access to managerial work in neoliberal Japan is thus a mixed blessing, with significant ramifications on their emotional health, psychological well-being, social relations, and senses of self-worth.

In scrutinizing the contradictions, ambivalence, and conflicts in the lives of women managers in Japan, where neoliberal values are implemented in particular and arbitrary ways for economic agendas, this research offers unique and rich insights into understanding how womenomics as an ideological tool that persistently values women primarily and solely as contingent labour contributes to conflicts of identity and socio-economic precarity for women pursuing management-track careers in the neoliberal work environment today.

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Gender, Precarious Labour and Everyday Lives

Swee-Lin Ho

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Note to readers

All informants' names in this book are pseudonyms to protect their identities. The names are presented in the style used in Japan, which begins with the family name and is followed by first name.

Japanese words have been romanized according to the Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary (fifth edition), while abbreviations are used for names of government ministries in the text and in citations, such as MHLW for Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and MOFA for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

All Japanese words are italicized or written with appropriate diacritical markings when they occur, such as *pawahara* (power harassment), *okāsan* (mother), and *kūkyo shōshin* (empty promotion). The only exceptions are place names – such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto – which are not italicized or written with diacritical markings.

The currency in Japan is referred to simply as yen. The sign $ refers to the U.S. dollar, and £ denotes the British pound. For easy reference, all currencies in the book are converted at $1.00 to 108.61 Japanese yen, and at £1.00 to 131.74 yen. The exchange rates are based on the closing foreign exchange spot rates at the end of 30 July 2019 as reported by The Financial Times.

Abbreviations

CC	Civil Code 1896
CCP	Code of Civil Procedure 1998
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFA	Chartered Financial Analyst
CFO	Chief Finance Officer
CPA	Certified Public Accountant
EEOL	Equal Employment Opportunity Law 1986
JapanGov	The Government of Japan
JICHIRO	All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers Union
JILPT	Japan Institute of Labour Policy and Training
JLR	Japan Labour Review
LCA	Labor Contract Act 2007
LDAD	Legal Doctrine of Abusive Dismissals
LSA	Labor Standards Act 1947 (Revised 2003)
LTA	Labor Tribunal Act 2004
LUA	Labour Union Act 1947 (Amended 2005)
MIAC	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MHLW	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPMJ	Office of the Prime Minister, Japan
RENGO	Japanese Trade Union Confederation
SHJ	Statistical Handbook of Japan

Glossary

akuma   devil
akuryō   evil spirit
anime   animations
arubaito   part-time job, from the German verb *arbeiten*, which means 'to
    work'
aruhara   alcohol harassment
asobi   play
asobi no jidai   an era of play
atama ga ii   intelligent
baba   middle aged or older woman
bābī   Barbie doll
baburu   bubble (to refer to the economic bubble era in Japan)
baburu no jidai   the bubble era
baburu no kodomotachi   children of the bubble
baito   part-time work (abbreviated form of *arubaito*)
batsu   cross, or being given a cross
batsu ichi   one cross, or crossed once
batsu ni   two crosses, or crossed twice
bijinesu boi   business boy
bijinesu gāru   business girl
bōnenkai   year-end party
bosei   maternal
bosei shakai   maternal society
bosu   boss
buchō   head of department or division, at times a director
bugaisha   outsiders
Chef: Mitsuboshi no Kyūshoku   *Chef: Three Star School Lunch* (TV drama)
chūryū shakai   middle-class society
Danjo Koyō Byōdōhō   The Equal Employment Opportunity Law 1986
dansei   male
dokonimo tsugaranai nagai michi   long trail that leads nowhere
dokuritsu   independence
Dokuta-X   *Doctor-X* (TV drama)

doragon redī   dragon lady
eien no shokuba no hana   permanent flower in the workplace
eigyō   sales
eigyōman   salesman, to mean a man working in sales
eikyū shūshoku   lifetime employment
era sugiru   too high, senior, distinguished, honourable, or important
erai   high, senior, distinguished, honourable, or important
fūfu   husband and wife
fūfu kankei   marital relation
fujin   wives or married women
fujinkai   Wives' Club (a society or club for married women)
fukubuchō   the deputy head
furekkusu taimu   flex time (flexible work hours)
furekkusu wāku   flexible work
furendoshippu   friendship
furendoshippu netowāku   friendship network
furītā   'freeter,' someone who has part-time contingent jobs
fusei shakai   paternal society
Fushin no Toki   *Times of Distrust* (TV drama)
futsū no onna   an ordinary woman
futsū no shigoto   an ordinary job
ganbaranakute iiyo   to not work hard
ganko   stubborn
gensō tekina mokuhyō   an elusive goal
genzo   illusion
gimu   obligations
ginkō ūman   female banker
ginkōman   banker
giri   duties
gōman   arrogant
gyakuhara   reverse harassment
haha oya   mothers
haken   part-time or temporary work
hakenshain   part-time or temporary workers
han shakai teki   anti-social
hanabi   viewing of fireworks (in the summer)
hanami   cherry-blossom viewing
hataraku dansei   working men
hataraku josei   working woman (a woman who works)
hataraku ningen   working person
hazukashii   embarrassing or to be embarrassed
herupā-san   helper (such as a domestic helper or babysitter)
hikkikomori   a self-imposed alienated person
hontō   real, genuine

hontō na otona   real adults
hontō na tomodachi   real friend or friends
hontō na watashi   the real me
ibasho   a place that offers a sense of belonging
ichininmae   a complete person (who is mature and responsible)
ie   household, or home
iemoto   head of a household
ii otōsan   good father
ijime   bullying
ikidomari   dead-end
inaka mono   country bumpkin
inaka musume   country girl
ippan shoku   ordinary work, as in having a full-time job in an office
izakaya   Japanese-style restaurant
jendāhara   gender harassment
jibun   self
jibunrashī   of one's own choice or style
jibunrashī seikatsu   lifestyle of one's own choice
jidai   period, time, or era
jiji   old man
jikan   time
jikohakken   self-discovery
jimu shoku   clerical work
jiritsu   independence
josei   female
Josei Union Tokyo   Women's Union Tokyo
jūjitsukan   self-fulfillment
kachi gumi   group for winners
kachi inu   winner dogs
kachō   section chief
kagayaku   to shine
kagayaku josei   shiny women
kagyō   family businesses
Kaikoken Ranyō Hōri   Legal Doctrine of Abusive Dismissals
kaisha   company
kakarichō   supervisor
kanjō   emotions
kanjō teki na kyori   emotional distance
kanpeki   perfect
kanri   management
kanrisha   manager
kanrishoku   a managerial position
kantokusha   supervisor
karoshi   death from overwork

karyū shakai   downward-drifting or sinking society
Katagoshi no Koibito   *Over-the-Shoulder Lover* (TV drama)
kazoku   family
kazoku kokka   the state as family
kazu   quantity
keigo   honorific language
kekkon   marriage
kigyō   business, or company
kigyō kumiai   company unionism
kikokushijo   returnees
Kinkyu Torishirabe Shitsu   *Emergency Interrogation Room* (TV drama)
kitai   expectations
kodoku   solitary
kodomo   child, or children
kodomo no umu kikai   childbearing machines, or birth-giving machines
kodomotachi   children
kojinka   process of individuation
kokoro no tomo   friends of the heart (beloved friends)
komakai   trivial
konkatsu shippaishita josei   women who have failed in marriage
kōshi no bunri   separation between the public and the private
koshikake   chair, temporary seat or transitory job
Koshonin   *The Negotiator* (TV drama)
kowai   scary or frightening
kūkan   space
kūkyo shōshin   empty promotion
kūkyo shōshin   an empty promotion
kurabu   club
kurisumasu kēki   Christmas cake (someone who has exceeded the marriageable age of 25)
kusobaba   nasty women
kusojiji   nasty old men
kyaria   career
kyaria daun   career down, ' which means taking up job positions of lower status and salary
kyaria kīpu   career keep, ' meaning to keep their career
kyaria ūman   career woman
kyaria uppu   to advance one's career
kyōiku mama   educating mothers
kyori   distance
mai homu   my home
majo   witch
make gumi   group for losers
make inu   loser dog

mama-san   mother (women who manage hostess clubs and entertainment venues)

manējā   manager

manējā no mane   imitating a manager

manga   comics

maru   round, or whole

matahara   maternity harassment, or harassment relating to women's roles as mother

meiro   maze

meiwaku wo kakeru mono   someone who is a nuisance to others

mendōkusai   tiresome or burdensome

mezurashii   rare

miai kekkon   arranged marriage

mizushōbai   water business, or entertainment venues for drinking and voyeuristic play

modorenai   to be unable to return or turn back

mongaikan   amateurs

Monsuta Parento   *Monster Parent* (TV drama)

Morahara   moral harassment

nabakari kanrishoku   a 'name only' or nominal managerial position

naishoku   private jobs

nenkō jōretsu   seniority promotion

netowāku   network

niau   appropriate, compatible, suitable or what feels right

Nihon Rōdōkumiai Sōrengōkai   Japanese Trade Union Confederation (RENGO)

nihonjin   Japanese people

nihonjinron   theories about the Japanese people and Japanese society

nihonshu   Japanese rice wine

nijikai   second round (usually of drinking)

nītto   NEET, or 'Not in Education, Employment or Training'

nomunikēshon   communication over drinks

ofisu no okāsan   mother in the office

ōgon jidai   golden age or era

ohitori sama   solitary customers

ojisan   middle-aged and older men

okane   money

okāsan   mother

OL   office ladies (doing secretarial or administrative work)

omiai   matchmaking

onēsan   older sister

oni   demon

onibaba   demonic hag

onibaba kai   group of demonic old hags

onijiji   demonic old men
onikuma   bear demon
onīsan   older brother
Oniyome Nikki   *Diary of a Demonic Daughter-in-Law* (TV drama)
onna   woman
onna dakara   because one is female
onna no shigoto   women's job
onna poi   like a woman, or feminine
Onna Rōdō Kumiai Kansai   Kansai Labour Union for Women
onsen   hot spring
otoko   man
otoko janai   not men, or unmasculine
otoko mitai   like a man
otoko no shakai   men's world
otokoyaku   male role, in a play or performance
otona   an adult, or a mature individual
otōsan   father
parasaito baba   parasite middle-aged women
parasaito onibaba   parasite demonic old hags
parasaito shinguru   parasite singles
patahara   paternity harassment, or harassment relating to men's roles as
     father
pāto   part-time workers
pawā harasumento   power harassment
pawahara   power harassment
pinku monsuta   pink monster, used to describe a female
RENGO Japanese Trade Union Confederation (*Nihon Rōdōkumiai
     Sōrengōkai*)
Rigaru V: Gen Bengoshi   *Legal V: Ex-Lawyer* (TV drama)
Rikon Bengoshi   *Divorce Lawyer* (TV drama)
risuhara   harassment relating to corporate restructuring
rōgandō   impish old men
ryōsai kenbo   good wife, wise mother
sabishī   lonely
sābisu zangyō   free overtime
sakariba   an entertainment district full of places to drink, eat, and play
sake   a generic term for alcohol, or Japanese rice wine
sanhara   three forms of harassment
sanshu no jingi   three types of jewels
sararī ūman   salaried woman (white-collar female worker)
sararīboi   salaried boy, or young office boy
sararīgāru   salaried girl, or young office girl
sararīman   salaried man (white-collar male worker)
seikai   world, international or global

seikaijin   an international or global person

seitaigo   Empress Dowager Cixi

sekuhara   sexual harassment

sengyō shufu   professional housewife (full-time housewife)

senmonka   experts or specialists

senmu   managing director

sensei   teacher, or master

sewahara   sentiment harassment

shakai   society

shakai kengaku   an experience of the world outside the home

shakai ni detteta onna   women who went out into society (to work)

shakaijin   a person or persons in society (a working adult)

shigoto   work

shigoto ga jōzu   to be good at one's work

shine   die (imperative form of the verb *shinu*)

shinguru baba   middle-aged, single women

shinnenkai   New Year's party

shinu   to die

shōbai   trade, or business

shōbai onna   women in the 'water business' or entertainment industry

shōchū   an alcoholic beverage distilled from rice or root vegetables

shokuba no hana   flowers placed at a particular site

shokugyō fujin   woman with a vocation or occupation

shufu   housewife

shunin   supervisor

shushin koyō   lifetime employment

shūshoku katsudō   job-hunting

sobaya-san   Japanese restaurant which serves buckwheat noodles

sugiru   to exceed, expire, pass by (a point) or be overdue

sūpā   super

taka sugiru   too expensive

takai   expensive

tenjihin   item for display

tenshoku   job-changing

tesuto   test

tokubetsu   special, unique

tokubetsu na tomodachi   special friends

tomodachi   friend

toshi   age, year, old, aged

toshi ginkōka   investment banker

toshi sugiru   too old, or too aged

tsukaenai   useless

tsuma   wives

wākingu ūman   working woman (a woman who works)

wagamana   selfish
warikan   paying equal share
yakatabune   a slim, long, old-styled, Japanese houseboat
yakuin   member of a company's board of directors
Yawata no Yabushirazu   Yawata's Mystery (a forbidden forest in Chiba prefecture)
yōkai   monster
yowai   weak
yowai otoko   weak man
zangyō   overtime
zecchō   peak position

1　'Womenomics'

To make women shine or die?

Are women to die for the economy to shine?

It rained unusually hard that Sunday morning in February 2018. All four of us arrived half drenched at the café in Tokyo's Shinjuku[1] district. 'What a heavy downpour!' Hayami Harue[2] exclaims. 'It has been so warm that I had prayed hard for rain, but I did not expect my prayers to be answered like this!' She was quickly teased by her then 24-year-old daughter Hikari[3] who said, 'The rain is good for mother, as she needs to cool down. She has been worried sick about my new job.' Nakao Nyoko laughs at her old friend for constantly worrying about the young woman, and advises Hayami to be glad that Hikari has graduated with distinctions in Business and Economics from one of Tokyo's top universities, and become a *shakaijin*[4] (a social person) and that she has her first job as a management trainee in a large, reputable advertising company. Nakao congratulates her god-daughter Hikari whom she had helped look after on many occasions when Hayami was called away on a business trip. Both women are divorced single mothers, and have a daughter each, though Nakao lives with an elderly mother who adores Hikari as she does her own grand-daughter Niki.

How swiftly time has flown, and how they have aged, Hayami and Nakao sigh. Though relieved to have brought their daughters up well, both women are also anxious about the younger women's future. Could their daughters endure the demands of a professional career as they had? Japanese women are today able to pursue their own dreams and passion as freely as men, but they are unable to realize their dreams in the same way that men could. The corporate workplace is still a male-dominated world in which even men themselves are struggling to survive, remarks the 53-year-old legal director Nakao. Her 51-year-old friend Hayami agrees, and then recalls their own experiences from when they entered the job market upon graduating from university, and developed their respective careers through the difficult post-bubble recession.

Hayami, a senior economist in a large American bank, is unsure if she ought to dissuade Hikari from joining the advertising industry. It is no place for women whose roles are mostly at the lower ranks, as in banking. Hayami has worked for many banks in varying positions – both part-time and full-time – before her

capabilities were recognized by her current workplace. Yet, she knows that she has reached the *zecchō* (peak position), from where a woman – especially someone her age – has no opportunity to *kyaria uppu*[5] (career-up). There is no glass ceiling, since everything above is opaque and unknown to women. Hayami is also aware of the excessive workload – for both male and female workers – in the advertising industry, the obligations to drink frequently after work, and the necessity of entertainment activities with clients.

Hikari assures her mother that she would do her best to learn as much as she could in advertising and leave when she is ready to start her own business, and that she would try to not be a victim of *karoshi* (death from overwork), or be pushed around as women have been in the past. After all, a new law[6] to be enacted soon would protect workers from *ijime* (bullying), *pawahara* (power harassment), and various kinds of abusive practices in the workplace. Hayami and Nakao laugh on hearing Hikari's remarks. Then, Nakao advises her god-daughter to not have too much expectations of the new law, which could be yet another vague and ineffective legislation. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law[7] (EEOL), she explains, was enacted in 1986 to supposedly help improve gender equality in the workplace, though the outcomes have been mixed. Women have always been, still are, and would continue to be easy victims in the corporate workplace.

Nakao also expresses her concerns about her own daughter's naiveté and idealism, wondering how well the young woman is surviving in the food and beverage industry, which is as male-dominated and challenging as the advertising world. Niki – a year older than Hikari – has several internships in London and Milan to complete after graduating from a culinary school in Paris on a scholarship granted by her future employer, a restaurant in Tokyo where Niki would work as an apprentice the following year. Niki aspires to have her own restaurant one day which will have an all-female staff, like the sushi restaurant Tsurutokame[8] in Ginza. How Nakao wished her former husband had not misled their only daughter into believing that she could succeed in the same way as he has in the culinary industry. It is tough for a man to become a professional chef, and much tougher for a woman.

The two single mothers agree with each other that young Japanese women today talk incessantly about ideals, dreams, passion, work-life balance, and pursuing *jibunrashī seikatsu* (a lifestyle of their own), that they might be easily disappointed and disillusioned when they experience difficulties in actualizing their goals in white-collar work. Both women had their own dreams too in their younger days, when they also embraced the fervour, ambitions, and desires of having their own *jibunrashī seikatsu* and living fulfilling lives. However, the pressure to marry and give birth was much stronger in the 1980s and 1990s, when a *sengyō shufu*[9] (professional housewife) held a higher status than a *kyaria ūman* (career woman). After their divorce, both Hayami and Nakao have each endured being labelled as *make inu*[10] (loser dog) for having failed to be *ryōsai kenbo*[11] (Good Wives Wise Mothers), or *kyōiku mama*[12] (educating mothers).

'We could at least be complimented for having brought up our daughters well, no?' Hayami says with a chuckle. 'That is impossible, since we cannot celebrate *batsu*[13] (a cross, or being crossed) as a good thing,' Nakao retorts. 'You are *batsu ichi* (one cross, or being crossed once), and I am *batsu ni* (two crosses, or being crossed twice)…we could never be *maru*[14] (round, or whole) again!' Nakao's first marriage to a European lasted two years while she was living in France. She later married a young Japanese man who was training to be a professional chef, and ended her second marriage after six years. Nakao laughs as she recalls her second husband's explanation to the divorce lawyer for the separation:

> My wife is a stubborn and selfish woman who spends most of her time working, and is prouder of being a good lawyer than a good wife or mother.

Nakao had been amused by the ironic comment, since her former husband was typically out of the house every day before sunrise and would not return till after midnight. But to him, it was improper for a married woman with children to be a *hataraku ningen*[15] (working person). Hayami reminds Nakao of how the latter used to be teased – criticized, actually – by friends and colleagues for being among many *kikokushijo*[16] (returnees) who had cultivated the undesirable values, attitudes, and behaviour of westerners from living overseas, and hence failing as a Japanese woman, like all other *konkatsu shippaishita josei* (women who have failed in marriage).

Hikari looks puzzled, and asks why it is always the woman's fault when a marriage breaks down, and why a woman who chooses to not marry is also a failure. Times have changed, and very few of her friends think that a woman's main purpose in life is to support her husband's career and educate her children well. 'If there are still strong views that women should be homemakers, why not ban women from working?' she ponders aloud. After having a good laugh, Hayami says to her daughter:

> If women are banned from working, then your mother would not have been able to support your education. You would also have been married by now and have children of your own (*laughs*). Women need to live, and the government also needs us to keep the economy growing. Employers also get a better deal from hiring women than men, as we are cheaper…

Hikari finds it difficult to believe that women are paid much less than men for doing the same job, and asked the two older women to tell her more about women being contingent workers for the economy. Hayami and Nakao try not to discourage the young woman but to explain a little so that young Hikari could manage her expectations. Women are given opportunities to pursue professional careers when they are needed to meet a labour shortage to keep the economy growing, and are often the first to be fired when there is

an economic recession. Even as corporate managers, women are ultimately flexible, non-core players in the office where they are often made to perform tasks that are deemed appropriate for women, and are at times promoted to help improve their employers' corporate profile and public image. More recently, the impending legislation to curb abusive practices such as *ijime* and *pawahara* has given employers more ways to target undesirable or unproductive workers – especially women and older employees – as scapegoats to show that they are complying with the law. Hikari looks shocked when she learns that Nakao had once resigned after being falsely accused of having verbally and emotionally abused a junior employee, but could not receive any help from the government's labour office or a workers' union.

After shifting to more cheerful topics, the conversation that afternoon returns to discussions on the working lives of Japanese women when Hayami and Nakao could not stop laughing at Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's proposed economic initiative – widely referred to as 'womenomics'[17] – to make women 'shine' or become *kagayaku josei* (shiny women). Hikari could not stop giggling when she learns that the English word 'shine' is pronounced in Japanese as *shine*[18] which is the imperative tense of commanding or ordering someone 'to die.' Perhaps it is an intentional pun, they chuckle. Heaving a deep sigh, Hikari says in a pensive and disappointed voice:

> What an irony that Prime Minister Abe's claim to make women 'shine' is pronounced in Japanese as a command for someone to die, *shin e*. Perhaps the pun is intentional? After all, to make women work harder in such a difficult environment is really to force them to die sooner, is it not? Or, perhaps the intention is to make women die as a result of working hard to make their economy shine?
>
> Women are dead in his cabinet. There is only one woman in it.[19] If he does not set an example, how does he expect government offices and companies to promote more women to high positions?

Hikari is referring to Abe's 19-member Cabinet which comprises only one female, Katayama Satsuki, who was appointed as the Minister of Regional Revitalization in October 2018 after a reshuffling. Critics have commented on this poor effort at raising the standing of women in the workplace, despite having first championed the campaign after becoming prime minister in late 2012 (McCurry 2018).

Hayami is proud of her daughter's strong sense of justice, though she is also worried that this might be an impediment to Hikari's ability to adapt to the corporate workplace. Feeling the need to encourage the young woman, Hayami gives the following advice:

> There is no need to be upset. Having more women in an organization does not mean there is gender equality or fairness. Women could be placed merely as props and puppets for display purposes. The

government and companies will always place their interests ahead of those of citizens and employees.

Just remember that if you have a dream, and are serious about it, you must have the courage and determination to realize it. It is not going to be easy, for women and also for men. To be sure, women have to make more sacrifices and withstand more criticisms than men. Whatever you do, be sure to protect your self-esteem, confidence, and pride. These you can never regain properly if they are lost or destroyed…

The conversation over brunch that afternoon captures the varying difficulties that many women managers have experienced, and are still are experiencing in Japan today. The discussions also highlight how women's already precarious conditions are being exacerbated further both by changes and also the lack of change to state policies and corporate practices over the past decades. All these can be attributed to the persistent treatment of women in Japan as contingent labour for the broader economy (Brinton 1993: 107; Ho 2018: 20), and their value as a pool of 'under-utilized,' 'cheap,' and 'expendable resource' to be utilized to suit the country's changing political agendas and economic needs (Waswo 1996: 154). Women have been mobilized for the nation's modernization programme during the Meiji era, for the postwar reconstruction of the economy, to meet the labour shortage during the rapid economic expansion during the bubble decade, and again to fill gaps in the white-collar workforce in post-bubble Japan. The significance of women as economic tools is thus not new at all. It has only taken on the new, modern business rhetoric of womenomics.

At the same time, the socio-cultural perceptions of women and expectations of their roles in Japanese society have also remained relatively unchanged. The old Meiji feminine ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* (Good Wives Wise Mothers) has also merely shifted rhetorically to the postwar model of *sengyō shufu* (professional or full-time housewives) to continuously designate women's rightful place in society to their domestic roles as wife, mother, and caregiver (Uno 1993: 301; White 2002: 126; Yoda 2006: 247). The socio-historical construction of femininity too is aimed at benefitting the economy. Women marry and give birth to provide a steady stream of workers for the economy; they receive education to train a more competent future labour force; and women's role in caring for the elderly and other members of the family helps alleviate the state's burden of providing welfare.

This accounts for why women have always occupied a marginal position in the workforce, where their careers are not taken seriously as those of their male counterparts. This also explains why the state persistently ignores many signs of drastic demographic shifts to improve work conditions for women by implementing policies without adequate monitoring, and hence allows employers to continuously exploit this vulnerable category of the country's population. As the pervasive influence of neoliberal capitalism transforms the work environment and erodes employees' sense of job

security for both men and women, this worsens the precarious conditions and experiences of women as the dominant non-core, peripheral players in the corporate workplace.

The social reproduction of precarity for women managers

This book is about how women manage the varying difficult social and economic conditions that they encounter as corporate managers in post-bubble Japan. It examines how women managers struggle in an increasingly flexible work environment and a persistently male-dominated society, and how their position of marginality and vulnerability is continuously exploited and exacerbated by state policies and corporate practices. I have previously documented the innovative ways in which 27 women managers in Tokyo mobilize their friendship as a strategic site to mitigate the disappointments in their working lives, and conceptualize new understandings of independence and equality (Ho 2012b, 2018). This book expands on these works by examining the broader structural conditions that shape the experiences of 160 women in supervisory and managerial positions across Japan. More specifically, it analyses how precarity is produced, reinforced, and perpetuated by continuities and discontinuities in shifting structural processes that generate and perpetuate the experiences of angst, anxiety, frustrations, disillusionment, and insecurity for this particular segment of the population. By precarity, I refer to the 'structure of daily life' that entails the incessant concerns about work performance, job security, and the sustainability of economic life (McCormack and Salmenniemi 2017: 4). I also follow Flavia Cangià (2018: 10–1) in understanding precarity as the subjective experiences of individuals that have been shaped and exacerbated by unequal power relations through processes of change to the broader political, economic, and socio-cultural environments.

Despite a phenomenal increase in the number of white-collar female workers in Japan over the past few decades, their lives and experiences still remain under-studied, and those of women in managerial positions are understood even less. Studies on precarious labour and experiences of precarity in Japan have focused mostly on the struggles of women and youths who are in irregular employment and informal jobs (Allison 2012; Brinton 2011; Roberts 1994; Slater 2010). The silence in scholarly literature on Japan reflects a similar lack of attention paid by the broader anthropological scholarship to the predicaments of corporate managers and women managers.

Scholarship on precarity and precariousness has exploded over the years to discuss the implications of the neoliberal flexible work regime on income stability and job security of workers (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018; Vosko 2011). Since Pierre Bourdieu's study of working class families in the 1960s and the social problem of the *précarité* (insecurity) as the fundamental dimension of the experience of work, the term precarity has been widely used in association with 'employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky'

(Kalleberg 2009: 2). Concerns about how the marginalization and exclusion of workers have increased their vulnerability and insecurity have spawned many works on the abject conditions of individuals – both men and women – in irregular work, youth employment, and seasonal migrant jobs that come with low wages, no minimum wage protection, short contractual terms, and negligible benefits (Biehl 2016; Campbell 2016; Curtin and Sanson 2016; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Kretsos 2011; Lan 2002; Millar 2014; Parreñas 2002; Vosko 2000).

In recent years, a growing body of literature has emerged to explore the precarious situations of white-collar workers with the rising incidence of flexible work that render their jobs meaningless and their struggles futile (De Certeau 1984; Sennett 2000). There are also studies on the production of 'precarious elites' (Thorkelson 2016: 483), due to a 'jarring disconnect' between graduate education and the realities of the flexible job market in academia (Muehlebach 2012: 305), and of countless 'graduates with no future,' such as those who work as adjunct lecturers working in universities (Bousquet 2002; Žižek 2012).

While there is a wide consensus on the pervasive and adverse influence of the neoliberal transformations of work on individuals' experiences in diverse forms of employment, scholarship has paid extensive attention to the precarious conditions of workers at the lower strata of society and the bottom of the employment system. There is a paucity of data on how the work conditions of individuals in managerial positions and certain professions – especially those of women's – are equally exposed to the same processes of change to the work environment as irregular workers, and share similar experiences of anxiety and insecurity due to a growing lack of secure work-based identity.

This silence in scholarship is perhaps due to varying difficulties of access that scholars may encounter to workers who are generally perceived as occupying 'privileged' positions in the job market. More likely, it is due to perceptions of corporate managers and various professionals as 'privileged' individuals whose work situation is more secure given their relatively high incomes when compared to the situations faced by irregular and informal workers. In reality, working as corporate managers is no longer a stable or secure job in today's environment of neoliberal capitalism, where corporations are relentlessly reducing staff costs as a key strategic means of managing profitability, and utilizing modern management methods of disciplining permanent employees (Gagné 2018: 72). As the old Japanese system of employment – based on the three pillars of lifetime employment, seniority wages, and enterprise unionism – gave way to new international styles of business and management based on meritocracy and individual performance, the corporate work environment gradually became more company-centred, rendering the daily lives of employees more susceptible to policies and practices of individual corporations (Hall and Soskice 2001: 6; Keizer 2010: 7).

As Nancy Ettlinger (2007: 322) remarks, precarity 'spares no one, haunting even privileged persons.' Yet, Laura Nader (1972: 304) points out that there is the problem of double standard of 'studying up' and 'studying down' in scholarly approach to analyzing the lives of subjects. As Eli Thorkelson (2016: 481) also notes, anthropologists tend to shy away from 'studying up' for reasons which include their unwillingness to be intimidated by 'privileged' individuals, whereas 'studying down' places them in a position of authority over the subjects of their inquiry. But as Sherry B. Ortner (1998: 428) demonstrates in her study of a distinct cohort of hippies and yuppies in the US known as Generation X, anxieties and feelings of insecurity are experienced and dealt with in diverse ways by individuals of different categories of gender, class, and social status. Exploring how a certain category of a population encounters the same difficult economic conditions as others deepens our understanding of how this group of individuals also manage problematic social conditions that may be shared by others (Ibid.: 418). Examining the lives of corporate managers and other 'privileged individuals' need not be seen as a form 'studying up,' though omitting their voices and lived experiences would impoverish our understanding of the richness and complexities of social reality which comprises the experiences of individuals of diverse occupations and professions.

Precarity is the predominant experiential dimension of the crisis in today's society of flexible work that has evolved since the 1980s with widespread implementations of neoliberal policies by many states to achieve political control and economic benefits (Harvey 1989). This has resulted in a disintegration of stable societal bonds, destruction of occupational identities, a weakening of collective representative powers to provide individuals with adequate protection against exploitation, and an intense disciplining of personal values to suit the goals of corporations, individuals higher up the corporate ladder experience just as much economic uncertainty and existential angst (Chauvière and Mick 2011; Klikauer 2015). Understanding how the lives of corporate managers and their experiences in particular localities would shed fresh insights into the specific the ways in which shifts in the adaptation of neoliberal tools by agents of power have shaped the emergence of new opportunities and challenges for an under-documented category of the working population.

Moreover, the corporate workplace is not a neutral or safe space, but a 'battleground infused with contradictions and conflicts,' and with territorial boundaries carefully drawn to divide people (Skachkova 2007: 705). Given that women managers are a small minority and are treated as 'outsiders' in the corporate workplace, they often experience 'a sense of being out of place, out of sorts, disconnected' (Allison 2013: 14), and hence are more vulnerable and insecure to be in a place where they do not belong (Hinkson 2017). This is the case in Japan, where women managers are still a small minority whose works are persistently under-valued and unvalued both by the state and employers (Osawa 2005; Steinhoff and Tanaka 1993; Yuasa 2005), but are valued

primarily for being cheap resource (Brinton 1993; Ho 2018; Lam 1993). It is the historically consistent treatment of women as an economic tool by the Japanese government and employers that has produced, reproduced, and perpetuated the precarious conditions that women managers are in.

Precarity cannot be understood as an ahistorical unidimensional notion (Matos 2019: 16), but as a historical and multi-faceted dynamic that gradually structures and permeates every aspect of an individual life. As Nader (1997: 721–2) describes cultures as 'historical ideas' that are controlled by structural processes which gain their power incrementally over time, the tensions and conflicts that are 'experienced and lived' are also shaped by processes of change over time for a particular category of people based on their social position and status in a given society (Millar 2014: 35).

The problem of womenomics as always

In 2014, one year after Prime Minister Abe announced his wide-ranging fiscal and labour reforms – which is widely known today as 'Abenomics' – his government released a special issue of the quarterly bulletin *We Are Tomodachi* (We Are Friends) called 'Womenomics' to declare the need for women to 'play an increasingly active role in Japan' (JapanGov 2014: 16). An article in the bulletin also states that the government is pushing forward various measures to 'increase the percentage of women in leadership position to 30 per cent,' and that the country 'is now making rapid progress toward turning those words into reality by creating a Japan where women can shine' (Ibid.: 18).

Three years later, an article entitled 'Toward a Society Where All Women Shine'[20] in the same quarterly bulletin cites the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as reporting that 'the labour force participation rate for Japanese women aged 25–64 has reached 71.1 per cent, surpassing the figure of 69.9% for the United States' (JapanGov 2017: 24). While the article acknowledges 'the glass ceiling that hinders women from rising to executive positions continues to be an issue in Japan,' the government is said to have taken measures 'to address this issue, with a focus on increasing the numbers of women in executive posts' (Ibid.). One such measure was a five-day intensive Executive Program for Women Leaders participated by 66 high-ranking women managers from leading companies in Japan, who were 'motivated by Prime Minister Abe's address at the closing reception' as 'a sign of government support for their career goals' (Ibid.: 25). The article then concludes that '[S]ince 60 companies sent managers to this program, we should soon see women sitting on 60 corporate boards' (Ibid.).

Japan's female workforce participation has risen significantly over the past decades, though the government's official statistics showed the rate to be 51.1 per cent for women in 2017, in contrast to 70.5 per cent for men (SHJ 2018: 122). The fact that a 'glass ceiling' still poses difficulties for women to ascend the corporate ladder is true. The article cites a survey conducted by

data services company Toyo Keizai as showing that the total of 1,400 female board members in the country accounted for only 3.5 per cent of all corporate board memberships of the country (JapanGov 2017: 25). Not only is the figure far beneath the 30-per cent target proclaimed by Abe's government three years earlier, but it has also not risen much since 2017. According to a research report issued by the American investment bank Goldman Sachs, female participation in corporate board membership stands at approximately 5.3 per cent in 2019.

Then, there is the question of how many female board members have real executive powers to actively participate in and influence high-level corporate decisions as their male counterparts, and how many are nominal executives appointed as a cosmetic arrangement to enhance the profile of a company's board and its corporate image. A similar question could be raised about the Japanese government's statement that 'we should soon see women sitting on 60 corporate boards' (JapanGov 2017: 25), given these 60 women managers had been sent by their employers to participate in the state-funded training programme at the request of the government to illustrate the 'success' of Abe's womenomics. Several, if not all, of the appointments could be cosmetically arranged, since there are benefits to be gained from being 'women-friendly companies,' which are entitled to receiving various incentives including subsidies, tax reductions, awards, and public praise by the government (MOFA 2015: 4).

Yakuin (corporate board of directors) has never been a female realm. Japan historically ranks at the bottom among OECD countries in female representation in leadership and managerial positions in both the public and private sectors (Matsui et al. 2019: 23). As of September 2019, Abe's own Cabinet comprises only two female ministers.[21] Most large Japanese corporations also have very few female board members. Sumitomo Mitsui Financial Group[22] has only one female as 'outside director' among a total of nine external members, and none from within the company. Mitsubishi UFJ[23] too does not appoint any female employee on its board, as all three female board members are from 'outside.' Softbank Group[24] has several non-Japanese on its board but there is no female. As for cosmetic group Shiseido,[25] five out of 11 members of the board are female, though four are external members. Despite being perceived as among the most progressive Japanese companies, the country's two largest advertising conglomerates Dentsu and Hakuhodo also do not have female representation. The two female members on Dentsu's board of 12 are non-executive directors from 'outside' the company, while Hakuhodo's 13-member board has no female. There is clearly a disjuncture between state rhetoric and reality.

Furthermore, middle to lower management too appears to be male-dominated spaces. Official statistics compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) indicate – though without providing details on the types of work – that 13.2 per cent of the country's 'administrative and managerial workers' in 2017 were female, while 86.8 per cent were male

(SHJ 2018: 128). The figure does not seem to have changed much since. It is estimated that female executives still account for approximately 14 per cent of all managerial positions in the country in 2019 (Matsui et al. 2019: 22), a meagre increase from a previous estimate of 10 per cent in 2010 (Matsui et al. 2010: 18). Women managers are a small minority in Japan still, despite a significant increase in white-collar female workers over the past five decades. As shown in Table 1.1, Japan's white-collar labour force doubled in size from 28.8 million in 1965 to 56.4 million in 2015, but the number of women working as company employees nearly tripled from 9.1 million in 1965 to 24.7 million in 2015 (JILPT 2017: 20–1).

Indeed, there have been improved opportunities for women to gain greater access to salaried work and even improve their career prospects (Blind and Mandach 2015: 54). However, since most of their subordinates, peers, and superiors are Japanese, and higher levels of management are still occupied by men, female corporate managers are still to deal with certain challenges pertaining to prevailing gender perceptions and cultural practices. The persistently gendered and increasingly demanding work environments have led many female corporate workers to gradually leave the job market or devise strategies to maintain lasting economic stability (Nemoto 2013: 513–4; Roberts 2011: 573). In addition, a growing number of women has over the years shied away from Japanese employers and joined foreign corporations, in the hope of being better recognized for their capabilities, of gaining favourable prospects for advancing their careers, and having greater exposure to international business practices (Ho 2018: 69).

It is also important to note that only approximately 44.5 per cent of all white-collar female workers are regular employees, while 78 per cent of all male employees are regular workers (see Table 1.2 for figures in 2017). Clearly, women's lower participation in regular corporate employment explains why women are not well represented in supervisory or managerial positions, though the reason for the lower number of regular female employees

Table 1.1 Company employees by gender from 1965 to 2015 (*in millions*)

Year	Total in employment	Male	Female	Total employees	Male	Female	% of total employees	
							Male	Female
1965	47.3	28.5	18.8	28.8	19.6	9.1	68.3	31.7
1970	50.9	30.9	20.0	33.1	22.1	11.0	66.8	33.2
1980	55.4	33.9	21.4	39.7	26.2	13.5	65.9	34.1
1990	62.5	37.1	25.4	48.4	30.0	18.3	62.1	37.9
2000	64.5	38.2	26.3	53.6	32.2	21.4	60.0	40.0
2010	62.6	36.2	26.4	54.6	31.3	23.3	57.3	42.6
2015	63.8	36.2	27.5	56.4	31.7	24.7	56.1	43.9

Source: The Japan Institute of Policy and Training (2018: 20–1).

suggests that there is a stronger proclivity among employers to hire women as cheaper workers on short-term contracts of employment. This applies to regular female workers as well. As statistics also show, regular female workers are paid approximately 72 per cent of the average annual salary of their male counterparts, and receive less than 60 per cent of the total annual bonuses that Japanese men are paid (JILPT 2017: 47).

It is evident from the figures shown earlier that while women's labour contributions are important to the country's workforce, they are valued for being a pool of economical resources. Whether it is called womenomics or given another name, the trend of utilizing women primarily – if not solely – for the purpose of their contributions to the economy is hardly new, as mentioned before. Women have historically been utilized as contingent labour for the country's economic programmes. The phenomenal increase in the number of management-track careers was offered to women during the 1990s, when economic growth reached its peak and turned Japan into the world's second largest economy after the US. Japan's rapidly growing retail and financial services sectors were experiencing a labour shortage, and demanded a larger female workforce to serve the industries' expanding female customer base. Later, white-collar female workers were once again preferred by employers as cheap resources during the prolonged economic recession after the demise of the country's bubble economy. The country's white-collar male workforce has been shrinking over the past two decades, as more employers replace permanent jobs with short-term, temporary positions in the increasingly flexible post-bubble work environment. As shown in Table 1.1, the total number of male employees dropped from 32.3 million in 2000 to 31.7 million in 2015, while the country's total white-collar female workforce expanded from 21.4 million to 24.7 million over the same period (JILPT 2017: 20–1). What the Japanese government's womenomics agenda seems to have done, in terms of creating more white-collar work opportunities for women, is the expansion of the country's cheap, flexible, and insecure workforce.

What is perhaps different, new, and potentially more dangerous about womenomics as an ideological tool is that it has gained greater legitimacy as a lauded initiative in modern business and state governance that intensifies the justification of state policies and corporate practices in extracting more value out of the country's female workforce by promoting more women to

Table 1.2 Company employees by gender in 2017 (*in millions*)

	Total employees	Regular	% of total employed	Irregular	% of total employed
	54.6	34.2	*62.7*	20.4	*37.3*
Male	29.6	23.1	*78.1*	6.5	*21.9*
Female	25.0	11.1	*44.5*	13.9	*55.5*

Source: Statistical Handbook of Japan (2018: 129).

supervisory and managerial positions, but with controls in place to keep the cost of the female corporate management workforce low, coupled with insufficient measures to improve on their working conditions. Given the persistent neglect on the part of the state to resolve many past and current problems, more difficulties have emerged to increase women's vulnerability in the corporate workplace, undermine the sustainability of their economic life, exacerbate their job insecurity, and hence further aggravate their precarious conditions. The playing field has never been a levelled one for the two sexes. The increasingly flexible work environment may have generated similar challenges for men and women in Japan, but women's marginal place in Japanese society and their role as non-core players in corporate workplace expose them to further difficulties and threats that relate to the problem of their being 'female,' which are not shared by their male counterparts.

With perceptions of gender remaining conservative and unchanged, employers will continue to not take women's professional careers seriously and also to limit women's career opportunities. As employers continue to adopt newer and more modern business methods to promote managerialism and entrepreneurialism, female managers will experience more difficulties in their work and face greater risks in the workplace. And as a new legislation offers employers with new and more extensive justifications to threaten and exploit employees to show their compliance with curbing workplace bullying and power harassment, women as the 'weaker sex' in the office will be further exposed to risks of being victimized as perpetrators. Given the historically weak voice that labour unions in Japan have, women managers – as well as other employees – lack the ability to seek redress through collective representations from unfair and abusive practices at work. Many women managers are already experiencing a wide range of stresses and conflicts that have emerged over the past decades, and are questioning the futility and meaninglessness of being *kanrisha* (a manager). Indeed, women have made substantial inroads into the labour market in Japan to gain regular employment and real wage enhancement (Blind and Mandach 2015: 68–9), but their improved situation has also aggravated their precarious conditions with serious long-term re-ramifications on their physical, emotional, and mental health, as well as on aspects of their personal, family, and professional lives.

This study

This book presents the narratives of many women managers in Japan from a total of 160 subjects, and offers insights into their lived experiences as female corporate managers in a rapidly changing and increasingly challenging work environment in post-bubble Japan.

In discussing the difficulties presented by state policies and corporate practices, the details might depict the working lives of women managers in Japan in a negative and gloomy light. It is not the intention of this book to

highlight only the problems and contradictions, as many of my informants have benefitted significantly from improvements made to various policies and practices, and developed life trajectories that are radically different from those of women of previous generations.

Indeed, an increasing number of women have experienced enhanced economic capital that permits them to have *jibunrashī seikatsu* and find fulfilment in ways that their mothers could only imagine but not realize. Nonetheless, the opportunities and gains that these women have experienced have not come without difficulties and sacrifices. The intention of this book is to draw attention to the various critical problems relating to state policies and corporate practices that have persisted, and also new ones that have emerged, which could have been better managed, reduced, or eradicated in order to effect positive change to the work environment amidst radical change, but they have instead posed further contradictions and ambivalences in the lives of many women managers in Japan.

The fieldwork

The data for this book come from various phases of fieldwork which began in January 2002. My fieldwork comprises three long and many short stays in Japan. The first of the three length phases was an eight-month period from January to September 2002, when I was working as Vice President in an international, multimedia conglomerate and was on a business assignment to supervise the restructuring of the company's Tokyo-based subsidiary. During the eight months, I spent many evenings out drinking with colleagues and business associates, as well as meeting their friends and acquaintances. Since my job involved the re-allocation and recruitment of employees, I spent a considerable amount of time interviewing white-collar workers in supervisory and managerial positions. The detailed notes I kept were to later become valuable data for my research.

I returned to Tokyo in March 2003, and spent two years conducting research on various aspects of the lives of Japanese women as graduate students until June 2005. My next field trip was a nine-month period in Tokyo from March 2007 till January 2008, when I returned again to gather data for my doctoral study of women managers in Japan. I made more than 25 short field trips – of one-week to two-month durations each – in between the three intensive phases mentioned earlier, and after January 2008 till today. I communicate frequently with many informants while I am not in Japan, via social media, text messages, and telephone calls. I have travelled with many of them – in small groups of three to five – on short holidays to various places in Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Many women have also visited me outside Japan – in England, Hong Kong, Seoul, and Singapore – during their business trips or while on holiday with their family.

I have interviewed more than 200 white-collar workers of various ranks and positions, both male and female, across many cities in Japan for various research projects. This book is based on the field data gathered from unstructured interviews with 160 women in supervisory and managerial positions, and from participant-observations of the activities. It also draws on additional field data collected from interviews with 40 male managers and corporate executives of 30 Japanese companies from across the country. What began as a snowballing sampling method of data-gathering gradually became webs of many informal, though strong, networks of women with professional careers across many cities in Japan. Having known many of my informants for nearly two decades, I am a frequent guest at many homes, and have come to learn many aspects of the women's professional, personal, and family lives.

Issues from the field

The field data have been enlightening, though the process of gathering has not been an easy one. Having worked as a corporate executive, I was able to share my own work-related experiences with my subjects and relate to the different encounters of many. Some women readily recounted their experiences to me in the presence of a mutual acquaintance or friend, though more than half of my 160 informants were more willing to give detailed accounts of their experiences when we talked on a one-to-one basis. Still, it was difficult for many women to express their feelings of disappointment, anger, frustrations, humiliation, and disillusionment relating to their jobs. It was much harder for them to share their experiences of unfair or abusive treatment. Most of my informants gradually felt comfortable to open up only after the second or third meeting with me. Many women found – and still find – it embarrassing as highly educated and professionally qualified corporate executives discuss their work-related difficulties, for fear that they would be laughed at for being weak, incapable, or incompetent. However, coping with how they are perceived by others has been as challenging as managing their own-image. A considerably large number of my subjects say that their friends or family members have expressed disbelief on hearing the women's experiences and grievances. Some have been told that they are petty or difficult individuals who are constantly complaining, whining, and moaning. Many hence prefer to keep their work problems to themselves, and would share them only with like-minded friends, particularly those who are also career women (Ho 2018: 46–76).

Granted, it is not uncommon for Japanese men to avoid work talk in the home or with general friends, due to reasons given by white-collar female workers discussed earlier. Male office workers too are afraid to be perceived as weak, incapable, or incompetent, qualities which are not regarded as masculine. However, the experiences of their female counterparts are confouned by the added problem of being 'women.' Many of my informants who

are single have struggled with remarks by others for being self-centred and stubborn, and some have been advised to get married so that they would not have to deal with the problems of having a professional career. While those who are married have also been described as self-centred and stubborn, many women's difficulties in the office were attributed to their inability to cope with the dual demands of career and family. 'You would be happier if you were to quit working and be a full-time mother' was a phrase that married women have heard after sharing their work-related problems with friends and family members. These remarks and advice are not unfamiliar to those who are divorced, who are often deemed as having prioritized career over family, and hence failed in their marriage for being negligent wives and irresponsible mothers. Despite the wide-ranging difficulties that white-collar workers in Japan have to cope with, the experiences of many female corporate executives seem to be readily attributed to their problem of being 'women,' and less to the persistent structural challenges posed by state policies and corporate practices.

The subjects

The 160 women in supervisory and managerial positions interviewed for this book are aged between 25 and 65 years. Of these, approximately 15 per cent are aged 25–35 years, while 36 per cent are in the 36–45 age group, with 39 per cent aged 46–55 years, and 10 per cent are above 55 years of age (see Table 1.3). The majority of my informants are aged between 35 and 55 years, due largely to the access that I have gained to women managers over a prolonged period of fieldwork spanning from 2002 when I began this research. Studying women belonging to this age group enables me to track the upturns and downturns in their career through the many neoliberal changes that have taken place in state policies and the corporate workplace.

In terms of marital status, one-third of the women are single, while another one-third are married, and the remaining one-third divorced (as shown in Table 1.4). While the sample size is too small to indicate if marriage poses a hindrance to their pursuit of a professional career, the fact that two-thirds of my informants are single and divorced might suggest that many women choose or find it possible to work outside of wedlock. A clearer indication perhaps lies in the high number of married and divorced women with no children (see Table 1.5). Only 24 out of 67 women who are married have children, while 43 do not. Among the 50 women who are divorced, more than half or 33 have no children, while 17 are divorced single mothers. Moreover, all but six of the 41 women who are mothers have only one child. The figures – which are limited only to this study – highlight the difficulties posed by childbirth and child-rearing to the women's career pursuits than the demands of marriage (Roberts 2011: 575).

The women's educational backgrounds also show the considerable demands exerted on them to upgrade themselves by acquiring professional

Table 1.3 Age profiles of research subjects (total of 160)

Age	Number	Percentage of total
25–35 years	24	15
36–45 years	58	36
46–55 years	62	39
56–65 years	16	10
	160	

Table 1.4 Marital status of research subjects (total of 160)

Status	Number	% of total	With children	No children
Single	43	27		
Married	67	42	24	43
Divorced	50	31	17	33
	160			

Table 1.5 Current employers of research subjects by company type and size (total of 160)

Company type	Number of research subjects	Small (less than 50 employees)	Medium (50–250 employees)	Large (more than 250 employees)	% of total
Japanese	68	26	34	8	43
Foreign	92	18	56	18	57
	160	32%	53%	15%	

Note: The company sizes are based on definitions by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

qualifications. All but five women are university graduates. Nearly 110 women have acquired further academic and professional qualifications, which include Master's degree in Business Administration (MBA), Certified Public Accountant (CPA), Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA), and post-graduate diplomas in fields related to their respective lines of work. However, almost all my informants work in low and mid-levels of management. While nine are technically in upper management – holding job titles such as director and vice president – all of them say that they have little or no executive powers, and are not active in important decision-making activities of their respective places of work.

In terms of their employers, more women seem to have developed their careers in foreign companies than in Japanese firms. As shown in Table 1.5, two-fifths of my subjects work for Japanese companies, while the other three-fifths are employees of foreign corporations. The number who works

in small-sized Japanese businesses amounts to 26, outnumbering 18 employees of small non-Japanese firms. However, only eight women are managers in large Japanese corporations, in contrast to 18 women in large foreign companies. Meanwhile, more than half of the 160 women under study are hired in medium-sized companies, while another one-third work for small enterprises. Based on my sample, it appears that more Japanese women have been are able to pursue a professional career in medium- to large-sized foreign companies than in Japanese corporations.

More importantly, the majority of the women under study hold supervisory or managerial positions in typically 'feminine types of work' (Lam 1993: 198), such as finance, corporate communications, customer service, human resource management, marketing, office administration, public relations, tax accounting, and treasury. These are back-office, non-profit generating divisions which are historically female domains, and lower in status than the types of work that Japanese men do. Only 17 out of my 160 informants are in predominantly male lines of work, which comprise business development, product design, sales, and the legal department. Also, nearly all of my informants are employed in the retail, financial services, and wholesale industries which are also 'traditionally female-intensive sectors' (Ibid.). The opportunities that presented an unprecedented number of Japanese women to pursue management-track careers during the bubble decade in the 1980s remain little changed. Even today, a gender divide still exists in many companies, where women are yet to make significant inroads into taking up positions in important corporate divisions that are of higher status.

The aforementioned patterns are also reflected in the profiles of the subjects discussed in this book (see *Appendix*). How women managers in Japan cope with their daily work lives under such circumstances will be elucidated in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

The chapters

So far, this chapter has laid out the scope and significance of the issues to be elaborated in this book. It contends that the persistent deployment of women as a pool of cheap, expendable resource by the Japanese state and employers is posing conflicts and contradictions in the lives of women working as corporate managers. This chapter also argues that the intensified push for womenomics by the government would aggravate the precarious conditions that women managers are already experiencing.

Chapter 2 examines the proliferation of negative discourses on and portrayals of women with professional careers in the local popular media since the 1980s as a reflection of how they are perceived in the broader Japanese society. It scrutinizes many women's narratives on the range of difficulties they have encountered, and are still encountering, in managing meaningful and coherent self-identities.

Chapter 3 analyses the changing significance of after-work drinking for white-collar workers and the enactment of culturally constituted gender roles as some of the strategies for women managers to manage the challenges they experience in their relations with subordinates, peers, and superiors. As *tenshoku* (job-changing) replaces permanent employment to become the dominant work norm in post-bubble Japan, the flexible work environment leads to weaker and disharmonious relations among employees, and increases the importance of drinking among co-workers for corporate managers as a necessary means of stabilizing relations with subordinates in order to protect their jobs.

Chapter 4 takes a closer look at women's struggles within the office as corporate executives and the rise of modern management methods of managerialism in post-bubble Japan. It discusses how a loophole in Japan's antiquated labour laws permits employers to utilize *nabakari kanrishoku* (nominal management) as a useful tool to promote employees to managerial positions for enhancing their corporate image, and hence reinforces women's role as non-core players in the corporate workplace.

The Japanese state's ambivalent role is examined in Chapter 5. Close attention is paid to analysing the ineffectiveness of legislations implemented by the MHLW. More specifically, the chapter will explain how the introduction of a new legislation to supposedly curb *ijime* (workplace bullying) and *pawahara* (power harassment) ironically presents employers with new justifications to further exacerbate the precarious conditions of white-collar female workers. This chapter also includes discussions on the historically weak position of labour unions and their inability to provide adequate supportive structures and power of collective representations for workers to seek redress for unjust and unfair treatment in the workplace.

Chapter 6 details the narratives and experiences of a young female management trainee (mentioned in Chapter 1) as a way of projecting into the future what the work environment in Japan would be like for younger generations of women managers, given the existing range of structural problems that have been discussed throughout this book.

Notes

1 Place names and all Japanese terms that are commonly used in English – such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto – are not italicized or written with diacritical markings. All other Japanese words are italicized or written with appropriate diacritical markings when they occur, such as *sararīman* and *izakaya*.
2 All names mentioned are pseudonyms, for the purpose of protecting the identities of my informants. Japanese names are arranged by the family name first, followed by the first name. See ***Appendix*** for details on all informants' profiles.
3 I am using the younger Hayami's first name Hikari to avoid confusion with references to her mother.
4 The term *sararīman* describes someone who has become a member of society after gaining economic independence by securing employment. For future reference, all Japanese words are transliterated or romanized according to the Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary.

5 The term means to advance one's career in gaining a higher position in a company.

6 The Cabinet in March 2019 had approved legal revisions to ban workplace harassment by requiring companies to prevent abuses of power or bullying, as part of a bundle of bills aimed at promoting the advancement of working women at smaller firms. These legal changes proposed by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Welfare (MHLW) may take effect in 2020 if passed by the parliament known as the Diet in 2019 (Kyodo 2019).

7 The Japanese government implemented the EEOL in 1986 primarily in recognition of the need to fully utilize the female work force to meet a projected labour shortage due to declining birth rates and a rapidly ageing population. However, the legislation has been criticized for its ineffectiveness by many, given the lack of punitive measures for employers who did not comply in practice. See detailed discussions in Chapter 2.

8 Tsurutokame, which was opened in 2016, is a sushi restaurant run by an all-female staff, though it is owned by Mikuni Osamu and his wife Harumi.

9 The postwar female ideal of the *sengyō shufu* was that of a full-time housewife who devotes all time and energy to child-bearing, child-rearing, and care-giving.

10 See detailed discussions on *make inu* in Chapter 2.

11 The Confucian female ideal *ryōsai kenbo* was institutionalized by the Meiji government to implement a sexual division of labour which assigns women's rightful place in Japanese society to the domestic realm.

12 Mothers, especially full-time housewives, are heavily involved in their children's education and school activities, and are hence often referred to as 'educating mothers.'

13 The term *batsu* means 'a cross' to describe a woman who has failed in her marriage. Once divorced, she is given 'one cross' and is thus referred to as *batsu ichi* (*ichi* means 'one'). If divorced twice, she is described as having *batsu ni* or 'two crosses' (*ni* means 'two'). Despite increasing incidences of divorce (*rikon*) in Japan, there still exist perceptions of divorced women as having 'failed' in their marriage, and are hence described in terms of a cross (Alexy 2011: 902).

14 The metaphor of a *maru* ('circle' or 'round') in the context of a woman's marital status refers to the wholeness or completeness a woman's being, that is, her life is in keeping with prevailing gender expectations in playing her role as wife and perhaps also as mother.

15 This term is often used to describe people who are devoted to their work.

16 The term is used to refer to Japanese people who have returned to Japan after growing up overseas.

17 Expanding the country's female workforce and promoting women to managerial positions are a part of Abe's long-term economic growth strategy which his government refers to as 'Abenomics.'

18 The Japanese word *shin e* is the imperative form of the verb *shinu*, which means 'to die.'

19 Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's 19-member cabinet comprises one female Katayama Satsuki, who was appointed as the Minister of Regional Revitalization in October 2018 after a reshuffling. Critics have commented on this poor effort at raising the standing of women in the workplace, despite having first championed the campaign after becoming prime minister in late 2012 (McCurry 3 October 2018).

20 This reiterates Abe's plan to 'Create a Society in which Women Shine' (*josei ga kagayaku shakai wo tsukuru*).

21 Takaichi Sanae – Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications, and Minister of State for the Social Security and Tax Number System – was the only

female in Abe's Cabinet until a reshuffling in September 2019. A second female member Hashimoto Seiko was named the Minister for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, Minister in charge of Women's Empowerment, and Minister of State for Gender Equality. For more information, see URL at https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/meibo/daijin/index_e.html

22 More information can be found on Sumitomo Mitsui's URL: www.smfg.co.jp/english/company/info/officer.html

23 More information can be found on Mitsubishi UFJ's URL: www.mufg.jp/english/profile/overview/management/people/#jump01

24 Softbank: https://group.softbank/en/corp/about/officer/

25 More information can be found on Shiseido's website URL: www.shiseidogroup.com/company/board/

 1 The primetime TV drama series *Kinkyu Torishirabe Shitsu*– written by Inoue Yumiko, and directed by Tsunehiro Jota and Motohashi Keita – was first broad cast on TV Asahi Corporation (hereafter, TV Asahi) in 2014, followed by the second season in 2017. Actress Amami Yuki plays the role of Makabe Yukiko, the only female detective in the five-member *Kintori* team which works closely with two other male detectives in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department to interrogate suspects in accordance to a new law in Japan enacted to require all police interrogations be recorded in order to minimize police brutality.

 2 *Takarazuka Kagekidan* is an all-female musical theater troupe based in the Hyōgo Prefecture near Osaka founded in 1913 by Ichizo Kobayashi, an industrialist-turned-politician and president of Hankyu Railways. The Broadway-styled pro ductions cover Western-styled musicals, and stories adapted from *manga* and Japanese folktales. Amami Yuki played the lead male parts known as *otokoyaku* from 1987 till 1995.

 3 *Rikon Bengoshi* was first broadcast on primetime television by Fuji Television Network (hereafter, Fuji TV) in 2004, followed by a second season in 2005. The series is about varied cases relating to divorce handled by Takako Mamiya, who passed the difficult Japan's bar exam on her first attempt after graduating from the country's most prestigious Tokyo University, and set up her own private practice after working for a prominent law firm.

 4 *Boss* written by Hirai Koji, and directed by Mitsuno Michio and Hoshino Kazunari. It ran for two seasons on primetime television broadcast by Fuji TV in 2009 and 2011. Amami played the role of Osawa Eriko, chief of a new Special Crimes Unit formed in response to public dissatisfaction with new kinds of crime and dropping arrest rates. Though professionally competent, Osawa was featured as a single, career-obsessed character who would turn to life-sized manukins.

 5 The ten-episode TV drama *Mitsuboshi no Kyūshoku*, written by Hamada Hideya, and directed by Hirano Shin and Tanaka Ryo, was broadcast on primetime television by Fuji TV in 2016. Amami played the role of Hoshino Mitsuko, a professionally trained chef of French cuisines whose determination to pursue her career led her former husband to end their marriage and take custody of their only daughter.

 6 *Fushin no Toki* was broadcast by Fuji TV in 2006.

 7 *Katagoshi no Koibito* was shown on Tokyo Broadcasting System (hereafter, TBS) in 2007.

 8 *Koshonin* was first broadcast by TV Asahi in 2008.

 9 *Monsuta Parento* was broadcast by Fuji TV in 2008.

10 *Dokuta-X* was broadcast by TV Asahi over five seasons, from 2012 till 2017.

11 *Rigaru V: Gen Bengoshi* was broadcast by TV Asahi in 2018.

12 The term *shakai* means 'society' or 'social,' and *jin* means person. When combined, the word *shakaijin* refers to a 'person in society,' as someone who has entered the job market and gained financial independence (Matsunaga 2000: 54).

13 Literally, the word *oni* means 'demonic,' while *baba* is a derogatory term for 'old hag.'

14 Yamada defines a 'parasite single' as 'an unmarried child who lives with his/her parents even after graduation and is dependent on them for his/her basic living conditions.' After the term was made popular in the Japanese media, it also sparked a series of public debates about the growing trend in unmarried Japanese (for more discussions on the topic, see Sarada 1998; Shirai 2005; Wada 2004).

15 Produced by Japanese director Shindō Kaneto in 1964, the horror movie *Onibaba* is about two women during the Nanboku period (1336–1392) who killed samurais and sold their weapons for a living. This reference was made popular again in 2005 by a television series *Oniyome Nikki* (A Demonic Daughter-in-law's Diary) broadcast by Fuji TV, and later spawned a wide range of popular literature and manga on the evil doings of daughters-in-law.

16 *Oniyome Nikki* was first broadcast by Fuji TV in 2005, starring Japanese actress Mikuza Arisa and actor Gori. Fuji TV broadcast the sequel *Oniyome Nikki II Yudana*, featuring the same lead actor and actress, in 2007.

17 The popularity of the first series *Oniyome Nikki* spawned a wide range of popular literature and *manga* (Japanese comics), including *Tomizu Ken's Diary About His Wife* (2008), *True Accounts of the Demonic Daughter-in-Law* (Ozaki 2005) and two volumes of comics entitled *True Accounts of the Demonic Daughter-in-Law* (Ozaki 2006a, 2006b).

18 Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) is popularly known in China as the West Empress Dowager, who was the de facto ruler of the Manchu or Qing Dynasty in China for 47 years between 1861 and 1908. It was during her reign when the three Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars took place, which eventually forced China to open up many ports across the country to various European powers. Empress Dowager Cixi is also widely known for her cruelty towards various other concubines, and for ruling China using a child emperor.

19 While the term *baito* is more generally used to refer to the irregular jobs of young high school and college students, many married and older women in Japan would also use it to describe their part-time work.

20 This reference is used to describe a woman for having passed her marriageable age or expiry date at 25 years (Brinton 1992).

21 Nikkei Woman is a monthly magazine published by one of Japan's largest publishing company Nihon Keizai Shimbun.

22 The explanation in Japanese was '*josei ga shakai ni dete hataraku koto no sukunai jidai ni shokugyō wo motsu shakai ni dete hataraku katsudō teki na josei.*'

23 Nakane Chie's (1967, 1970) works, particularly *Tateshakai on Ningen Kankei* (Human Relations in a Vertical Society) portrayed Japan as a naturally group-oriented but also harmonious society, though primarily to justify the highly hierarchical structure of Japanese corporations. Doi Takeo (1971, 1973, 1986) was known for his book *Amae no Kōzō* (Anatomy of Dependence) in which the psychologist explained 'groupism' in Japan as an important and necessary means for bonding between workers, and between employers and employees.

24 This view was strongly expounded by psychologist Kawai Hayao (1976: 24–8) in his book *Bosei Shakai Nihon no Byōri* (The Pathology of Japan as a Maternal Society).

25 Motherhood for Japanese women was systemically enforced by the Meiji gov-

ernment through the introduction of the *ie* system and implementation of the Confucian feminine ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* in the Civil Code in 1896 to promote nationalism and modernization (Ho 2018: 21–2; Mackie 2003). Together, these measures enshrined patriarchy as the norm for all Japanese families and imposed the sexual division of labour in Japanese society by assigning women to the 'private world of the home' and men to the public domain of paid work (Uno 1993: 296–7).

26 The Japanese word *shakai* means 'society,' and *jin* means 'a person' or 'people.'

27 The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (*Danjo Koyō Byōdōhō*), which came into effect on 1 April 1986, applies to all employees – generally referred to as *sōgō shoku* (comprehensive employees) – and requires all companies to include male and female employees in their system of lifetime employment and seniority-based promotions (Molony 1995: 286; Ōwaki 1987: 229).

28 The Nikkei stock price average on the Tokyo Stock Exchange plunged by 63.2 per cent, from 38915.9 on 29 December 1989 to 14309.4 on 18 August 1992.

29 After the notion of *make inu* became a media sensation, it generated a wide range of scholarly debates and public forums, especially in popular literature and comics even today (for more discussions on the topic, see Kumazawa 2002; Shimizu 2005; Yamazaki 2006).

30 The term *furītā* in Japanese combines the English word 'free' with the German word *arbeit* or 'work' to refer to people in temporary, contingent jobs (Roberts 2005: 113).

31 The term *nītto* came from NEET first used by the UK government to classify a growing number of people who were 'Not in Education, Employment or Training,' and emerged in Japan during the 2000s (Hamada 2005: 136).

32 Former health minister Yanagisawa Hakuo made the speech at the Liberal Democratic Party's assembly in Matsue in Shimane Prefecture on 27 January 2007 (Ito 2007).

1 This combines the Japanese word *nomu* (to drink) with part of the English word 'communication.' The word *nomunikēshon* became widely used recently to portray drinking as a way of facilitating communication.

2 The word *ofisu* is a romanization of the English word 'office.'

3 This refers to the fashion doll Barbie that was created and marketed by the American toy company Mattel Inc. in 1959. The popularity of Barbie has spawned successful global industries of related merchandise such as accessories and clothes, but it has also been subject of criticisms, controversies, and lawsuits, for typecasting women as sexy objects.

4 A White Paper introduced by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2012 to curb corporate bullying and power harassment is to be enforced as a new legislation in 2020. See more details and discussions in Chapter 5.

5 Given that the nature of a sales job involves a lot of drinking and entertaining, there is considerable pressure on Japanese men working in sales to live up to the image of *eigyōman* as charismatic, talkative, tough, and strong drinkers.

6 Many employers are exploiting a loophole in Japan's antiquated labour laws, which states that employees who become supervisors and managers are not protected by a maximum limit 40 working hours a week, nor are they entitled to receive payment for overtime worked (Ouchi 2010). This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

7 Based on the English word 'service,' the Japanese word *sābisu* is used to describe a service as requiring no payment. The term *sābisu zangyō* thus means overtime work with no remuneration.

8 The suffix–*kun* is usually attached to a man's first name when one addresses a friend or a family member. While the suffix–*chan* is used for both men and women in a casual context, the suffix–*kun* is hardly used to address a woman. In most formal situations, the suffix–*san* is attached to the family name of both men and women.

9 This title was that of Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) who ruled China for 47 years as regent to Emperor Tongzhi (1856–1875) and Emperor Guangxu (1871–1908) during the Qing dynasty from 1861 till her death in 1908. See discussions on Japanese media representations of women as *seitaigo* in Chapter 2.

10 *Pinku monsuta* is a romanization of the English words pink monster. The colour pink is generally associated with women, as the term 'pink-collar' work is used to refer to jobs that women typically do.

1 According to Article 32 of the Labor Standards Act 1947, an employer 'shall not have a worker work more than 40 hours per week, excluding rest periods' and an employer also 'shall not have a worker work more than 8 hours per day for each day of the week, excluding rest periods.' Article 37 further provides what a worker is entitled to receive for all additional hours worked at a rate that is 'no less than 25 percent and no more than 50 percent over the normal wage per working hour or working day.' However, these provisions do not apply to workers who are 'supervisors' or 'managers' as defined in Article 41.

2 See Chapter 1 for more information about the lack of female participation in the highest level of management in some of the largest publicly listed companies.

3 See Chapter 2 for more discussions on the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (*Danjo Koyō Byōdōhō*) which came into effect on 1 April 1986.

1 The ten-episode weekly drama was first broadcast by TV Tokyo on 15 October 2018 at the 22:00 hours primetime slot.

2 *Aru* is an abbreviation of the romanization of the English word 'alcohol.' *Aruhara* is not new, and is widely known in Japan as referring to someone who has been pressured or compelled to go out drinking with co-workers or superiors.

3 The Japanese word *gyaku* means 'reverse.' The drama explains *gyakuhara* as a situation when a person in a superior position in the office has his or her position of superiority undermined by a subordinate, who may refuse to take instructions from the superior, or perform tasks that defy the superior's orders.

4 The word *pata* is an abbreviation of 'paternity.' As discussed in Chapter 3, Japanese men are entitled to paternity leave, but may be pressured into taking some or none at all. One episode of the drama delves into how this would constitute as a form of harassment.

5 *Risu* is abbreviated from the English word 'restructuring.' In the drama, an employee could be said to experience *risuhara* when he or she is forced to accept a transfer to an inferior position or to a branch office far away from his or her current place of work, in the hope that the employee would eventually resign, and hence save the company on paying any compensation.

6 This is a combination of the Japanese word *sewa* – which means 'care' – and the shortened English word for 'harassment,' to refer to verbal abuse or behaviour that would cause someone to experience discomfort, embarrassment, or shame.

7 This legislation was revised in 2017 in response to pressures from the public to allow workers bearing responsibilities of providing childcare and nursing care to obtain leave. One revision, for example, allows a worker to take nursing care leave of up to 93 days in three separate increments, and not all at once.

8 A tort under common law jurisdictions is a civil act that wrongfully infringes on the right (outside a contract) of a person that causes the person to suffer harm or loss for which the party who commits the act could be held legally liable to pay a compensation.

1 As explained in Chapter 1, I refer to the younger Hayami by her first name Hikari to avoid any confusion.
2 Since the current law forbids women from succeeding the imperial throne, Prince Akishino – son of Prince Hisahito, the new Emperor Reiwa's brother – is next in line to the succession, and not the Emperor Reiwa's only child Princess Aiko.
3 Emperor Akihito abdicated the throne on 30 April 2019, ending the reign Heisei (peace everywhere) which began on 8 January 1989, a day following the death of Emperor Hirohito whose reign was known as Showa, which means 'enlightened peace.'
4 The new reign Reiwa, which means 'beautiful harmony,' officially began on 1 May 2019.

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