Gendered division of labour

Definition

A process which sorts workers into roles deemed suitable for their gender, according to essentialist notions about certain gender attributes (e.g. men are better workers and women are better caregivers). All human societies exhibit some degree of gender division of labour and these divisions have continued to exist as participation in paid work increases over time. (Jacobsen 2008) This is especially pronounced in postwar Japan as compared to many developed nations around the world.

A Gendered Workforce

The shift in occupational structure throughout the postwar period resulted in an expansion of white-collar employment. However, permanent employment in white-collar jobs was highly restricted to male salarymen. Thus, the famed Japanese Management System (JMS), premised on the three pillars of lifetime employment, seniority wage system and corporate welfare, was only applicable to white-collar male salarymen, at the expense of women and non-regular workers.

Distinctive gendered spheres of employment were set up in Japanese companies as early as the 1960s, providing separate channels of employment for long-term male employees and short-term female employees. (Macnaughtan 2006, p. 40) With the expansion of the seniority wage system between 1955 and 1965, the gendered division of labor became an "absolute necessity" which removed women from the competitive upward track. (Kumazawa 1996, p. 167) Women, including highly educated university graduates, were almost automatically placed in clerical positions performing simple and routine work. These young "office ladies" (OLs) functioned as the "flowers" of the workplace since their primary role was to create a pleasant office atmosphere for the men who engaged in "real work". (Ibid., p. 166)

Sasagawa asserts that women's office work generally came to be regarded as a form of socialization for marriage. (Sasagawa 2006, p.189) Young female regular employees were offered clerical jobs without any specific responsibility, or jobs which were aimed at "learning about and experiencing society" (shak ai benkyo). (Ibid.) They learned about the social rules and manners, such as general rules about social hierarchy and the proper way of handling guests.

A Reserve Labour Force

The sexual division of labor became deeply entrenched in postwar Japanese society, where intense normative pressures were put on women to quit their full-time jobs upon marriage. (Charles, Chang & Han 2004, p. 183) After marriage, they were expected to perform the role of a "good wife, wise mother" (ry osei kench) by dedicating themselves to the family. However, only a minority could afford to become full-time housewives. The majority of housewives provided a reserve labor force throughout the postwar economy by returning to the labor force after childbirth as part-time and temporary workers, leading to the so-called "housewife labour" (shufu pato) which increasingly dominated female employment. (Macnaughtan, p. 38)

Unlike other post-industrial economies where part-time employment was seen as a flexible mode of employment especially for married women, part-time employment became institutionalized as a system which confined Japanese working women into modes of non-regular employment. (Ibid., p. 38) Many companies shun hiring working mothers as they are seen as a burden to the company, nor can working mothers afford to seek permanent employment due to her socially prescribed role as a caregiver within the family. Thus, unlike the salarymen who were protected under the JMS, women often had to settle for jobs with lower wages, few or no benefits, and were susceptible to pay-cuts and lay-offs.

The situation was exacerbated during the post-bubble economy, which sees an increase in the ratio of non-regular employment. The number of part-time workers in Japan increased from 4.5 million in 1985 to 12.1 million in 2002. (Macnaughtan, p. 37) Many of these part-time workers are middle-aged housewives who have to go out to work in order to supplement the family income in a period of inflation, rising educational costs and general economic uncertainty. However, there are also housewives who re-enter the workforce due to their personal desire to work.

Macnaughtan suggests that instead of keeping women to the periphery, they should be brought to the core workforce in order to improve the overall labour market. For example, women could be the answer to creating a healthier work-life balance for both men and women by reducing the long hours of work for men.

Sources


