Feminization of Labour in Japan

Aims of the writeup

As there is another writeup on the gendered division of labour in Japan, I will seek to differentiate my writeup by writing this from a slightly different angle. The thesis of my write up is to posit that feminization of labour is a product and a consequence of developments in the global economy today. Yet, by appropriating Lyotard's idea of the localized narrative (petit de recit), I argue that feminization of labour is not a universal phenomenon but will be different in every country. What then will be the feminization of labour for Japan? For Japan, such feminization of labour can be reflected in the M-Curve which was used by Yu and Gottfried and Nagisa to describe the labour force participation of women.

An understanding of the term

The term 'feminisation', when applied to labour forces, is often described as 'ambiguous' and nebulous in meaning (Standing, 583). Standing described such ambiguity as representative of the irony in which 'generations of efforts to integrate women into regular wage labour as equals' resulted in the convergence of efforts where employment patterns are highly divided along gender lines (583). Before proceeding to focus on the Japanese society and economy as case study, there are several caveats which I will like to stress, first of them is that feminization is not necessarily a modern phenomenon. As observed by Jacobsen, all human societies do exhibit some degree of division of labour by gender (Jacobsen, abstract). The second caveat is a corollary of the first, where this division of labour is not an uniquely Japanese phenomenon, other countries have such occurrences as well. Graham Lowe has written about the feminization of clerical positions in Canada during the period of 1900-1931 where he argued that such a shift was based on the segmentation of labour market and the profiling of jobs according to gender. To Lowe, the female gender was accorded certain 'natural' qualities thus making certain jobs more suitable for them (Lowe, abstract). Samuel Cohn in his book on gender stereotyping in clerical occupations in Great Britain noted that while clerical jobs in the postal system was seen as feminine during the early 20th century but the very same clerical jobs were not seen as feminine in the railways, thus coming to the conclusion that profiling of jobs are not determined solely by the nature of the job but by the settings and environments of such work as well.

After foregrounding the assumptions and caveats that this article operates under, one might be inclined to ask what then are the intentions of this writeup? What I desire to establish in this essay is to illustrate how the feminization of the labour force takes place in modern Japanese society which we can clearly identify in the significant numbers of married women participating in 'nonstandard work arrangements, in particular part-time employment' (Brinton; Rosenfeld and Birkelund qtd in Yu). While I appropriate Standing's theory on feminization of labour in examining labour trends in modern Japanese society, his ideas have to be reinterpreted and translated into the Japanese context. I argue that macro or national level policies have shaped such global or meso forces which Standing describes as the driving forces behind feminization of labour.

Examining Feminization of Labour in Japan

As mentioned earlier, the M-Curve graph succinctly describes the labour force participation and it also reflects an interesting phenomenon which is unique to Japan. Although Yu has noted that most industrialized countries do have a high proportioned of married women in the workforce, 'what makes the Japanese case particularly puzzling is that older married women, rather than mothers with young children, constitute the majority of part-timers in the society'. There has been a plethora of arguments to explain for this. Joy Hendry has described that Japanese society has placed a great emphasis on child-rearing where married women are expected to have in the first place. Yu in her article gave an anecdote of how childcare facilities are made available only to part-timers and not full-time employees. While this is only an anecdote, Yu argues that this reflects how married women are not considered as part of the standard full-time workforce. Examining extant literature on this issue, Yu argues how many academics look into how married women are pulled into part-time employment, in the sense that they are involved in part-time employment because they are attracted by positive characteristics such as flexibility in working hours and wages. Yu however gives a different argument, she argues that married women are pushed into part-time employment because of the limitations and restrictions that these women face when they try to enter into full-time employment such as age limits, a lack of childcare facilities and many others.

Sources


