

Immigration, Women, and Japan—A Leap Ahead and a Step Behind: A Qualitative Journalistic Approach

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Abstract

Japan has become a super-aged society, facing demographic challenges resulting in societal and economic consequences. In its political structural reform, the Japanese government presented the urgency to consider the increase in labor mobility that includes the issues of immigration and female employment, both domestic and foreign. The aim of this study was to explore, from a Japanese woman's perspective, the intertwined issues of immigration. An in-depth interview was performed and analyzed by content analysis with a methodological departure in qualitative journalistic interviewing. The case was a Japanese woman with a unique profile. The results of this study, family permanency and group cohesiveness, can contribute to understand the potential interdependency between the roles, within the Japanese society, of foreign female domestic workers and Japanese women. In conclusion, it appears that the pivotal role of women in the Japanese society and the global feminization of migration challenge Japanese social consistency.

Keywords

case study, demographic transition, immigration, Japanese super-aged society, women's employment.

Introduction

This study is part of a larger project called Women's Voices in a Shifting Global Health Landscape. This specific study was motivated by the combined scientific and journalistic curiosity to hear the "voices" of women around the world on timely and urgent matters in which they play central roles.

The effect of migration on women's lives in general is one of these concerns. The purpose of the present study is to develop a preliminary and overall understanding of the topic in the Japanese context as the country is facing simultaneously major demographic challenges such as becoming a super-aged society and facing the lowest fertility rate in the world. It implies multiple societal, health, and economic consequences (Münz, 2008).

Women's Employment in Japan

The female full-employment rate in Japan is very low compared with other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) countries (OECD iLibrary, 2013). This low female employment rate includes career and noncareer track employment (OECD iLibrary, 2013). Furthermore, during the past two decades, the Japanese economy has experienced deflation (http://web-japan.org/factsheets/en/pdf/e04_economy.pdf). Urgent questions are being raised in Japan regarding the low ratio of women in

full-time employment within the total workforce. A substantial increase in the full-time employment of women in remunerated activities would entail more taxable incomes necessary to face the financial need of a super-aged society (Elborgh-Woytek et al., 2013). In fact, the government is considering reducing and even abolishing the spousal tax benefit implemented in 1961 (Kodera, 2014). With the present tax system, the head of the household, usually the husband, can obtain a spousal income tax deduction if their wife earns less than ¥1.41 million a year. In addition, the wife is not required to pay a premium to become eligible for the national pension plan if she earns less than ¥1.3 million a year (Miyamoto, 2016). As a result, many women are not encouraged to seek full-time employment. Boosting female employment implies also inspiring women to develop careers, become executives, and find themselves in leadership roles. To facilitate this development, Prime Minister Abe even promotes eradication of waiting lists for day care centers by the end of 2017, employment of at least one woman to an executive position in listed companies as well

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as the option for women to get their old job back after maternity leave (Kodera, 2014). Christine Lagarde, director of the International Monetary Fund, supports this approach and believes that women can “save” Japan through joining career-track jobs that would boost economic growth (Kingston, 2013). Some would argue that women already are taking on the task as they care for all sorts of responsibilities ranging from “being mothers, wives and caregivers for elderly relatives to employees, volunteers and household finance ministers” (Kingston, 2013).

Increased women’s employment rate as well as a more liberal immigration law, facilitating the entry in the country of foreign domestic workers (<http://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/Childdomesticlabour/lang-en/index.htm>), has been discussed at the highest level of the Japanese government (“Japanese Women and Work,” 2014). In fact, Prime Minister Abe highlighted in his political structural reform the urgency of increasing labor mobility. This reform combines the revision of the Japanese traditionally restrictive immigration law and low female employment. Its objective is to raise the country’s gross domestic product (GDP), but these two main issues are still very sensitive (Sanda, 2014). “We would like to proactively consider how to use foreign domestic workers from the perspective of women’s empowerment and economic growth” stated Prime Minister Abe in April 2014 (“Government’s Foreign Home Helper,” 2015). This political, economic, and immigration strategy is a way to tackle the consequences of a super-aged society. It is proposed that foreign domestic workers could potentially ease strains on Japanese families, in particular help Japanese women with the burden of domestic responsibilities, child, and elderly care (Straubhaar, 2000; Yamanaka, 2008). This solution would therefore boost their chance of career development (Itoh, 2014; “Japanese Women and Work,” 2014).

Immigration to Japan

Until now, the Japanese government had insisted in principle that it would not accept unskilled workers as it did not want to maintain foreign workers into problematic working conditions and as such, foreigners could not, as a rule, obtain a long-term visa as domestic workers. The exceptions were for those employed by diplomats, non-Japanese nationals with a high income, or those married to a Japanese citizen or with another preexisting residency qualification (“Government’s Foreign Home Helper,” 2015). In Japan, domestic workers are mostly immigrant women from Southeast Asia. The strict immigration policy, described above, has made it historically difficult for these women to immigrate to Japan. Time-limited working visas have been delivered traditionally to women “entertainers” or job training assimilated to low-paid jobs (Roberts, 2008). The outlook of gaining a long-term legal status in Japan as an unskilled worker is low. In addition, the prospect of acquiring employment in a Japanese household is socioeconomically difficult for several reasons. First, domestic work is

not widely socially accepted in Japan compared with other Asian countries. Even household help by Japanese to Japanese is not common, as many Japanese perceive that working as a domestic worker is somewhat shameful, but also hiring help to care for loved ones can be perceived as dishonorable (Sanda, 2014). Second, the language barrier can also be, in some cases, an important issue for these unskilled workers. Third, it is costly for a middle-class Japanese family to hire a domestic worker (Sanda, 2014). According to a survey by the Nomura Research Institute (NRI), the main reasons for not hiring domestic workers was the cost and the reluctance to bring a stranger into the home (“Government’s Foreign Home Helper,” 2015).

Legitimate concerns from human rights defense groups are raised in regard to the legal status, working conditions, and rights of those foreign women domestic workers (Llewelyn & Hirano, 2009; “Overwork Cited in Deaths of Record 34 Foreign Trainees,” 2009). Increase in human trafficking, as Japan has been on United Nations Watch list, is one of the many dangers for these women (Noguchi, 2006). A more generous immigration policy might mitigate the problem as long as the laws are clear and in accordance to international labor law protection for foreign workers and human rights. By not having a well-defined and stringent protection law, the risk of creating abuse of all kinds is highly probable (Noguchi, 2006). From a Japanese perspective, a reasonable degree of apprehension regarding immigration is present and is associated with worsening of public security associated to criminality, “social costs” related to education, reduced wages connected to competition (“EDITORIAL,” 2016). The potential increase in labor mobility encouraging the employment of foreign domestic workers could be perceived as a threat toward the employment of unskilled Japanese workers who have already very low wages (“Government’s Foreign Home Helper,” 2015; Sugimoto, 2010). Nevertheless, the demand for such workers will probably keep increasing due to the rapid growth of the elderly population and its needs. This situation is under serious scrutiny by the Abe’s government and needs an urgent sustainable approach. That is why the present government sees the immigration to the country and employment of foreign domestic workers as a mean to anticipate and respond to the urgent demand within elderly care. In the near future, the demand will probably be higher than the supply (Kato & Miyamoto, 2015). Already, an increasing number of Japanese people, most often women but also men, had to quit their job and start caring for elderly relatives (Sanda, 2014). Furthermore and in accordance with the widespread concerns regarding immigration, not only unskilled but also skilled workers such as nurses, usually from Southeast Asia, are often refused the right to immigrate to Japan due to political pressure by the Japanese labor unions (Sanda, 2014). Indeed, the government imposes a difficult and challenging examination for foreign nurses, which, among other difficulties, requires high Japanese language competency

("Issues Relating to Foreign Workers in Japan," 2004). With increased immigration, Japan would be expected to move from a homogenous and exclusionist society to a heterogeneous and inclusive one which would shake the whole social organization, fear widely exploited historically by conservative political groups (Komai, 1995). Of significance, Japanese women seem to be more in favor toward immigration in general than men as well as Generation Y more in favor than Generation X and previous generations (Llewelyn & Hirano, 2009).

Economists and social scientists see the issues of female employment, immigration, and demographic changes as interconnected, influencing one another, and being potentially linked to solutions for a more sustainable future. However, very little is known about the thoughts of Japanese women and their own desire to join the workforce and accept foreign domestic help to care for their children and elderly family members. Indeed, to our knowledge no study has been combining, through an in-depth interview, the exploration of the following two intertwined factors: the boost in Japanese female employment and the increase in immigrant female domestic workers to Japan. The context of this study is a Japanese megapolis with a focus on the work distribution between low-skilled immigrant women compared with their potentially higher skilled Japanese counterparts.

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore, from the perspective of a Japanese woman, the intertwined issues of female immigration to Japan and the need for foreign domestic workers, and Japanese women's employment as the country is facing major demographic and societal changes.

Method

To fulfill the aim, a case study with an in-depth interview was performed and analyzed by content analysis with a methodological departure in journalistic interviewing. Under this particular type of interview, the research questions—issues are expected to be refined continuously as new and previously unexpected aspects of the phenomenon come to light, a process that Partlett and Hamilton (1976) called progressive focusing. Indeed, the qualitative research in journalism allows to start out the investigation of a given topic with a preliminary idea, and then to reveal more significant issues than originally thought (Hartin Iorio, 2004). The product of this type of interview permits then the qualitative case study research to capture the complexity of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Paillard-Borg & Strömberg, 2014). A case study is suitable when the case represents something unique worth documenting and analyzing (Yin, 2003).

The study had for starting point the major global demographic transition that is currently taking place in the world characterized by an aging of the population and a dropping

fertility rate. Japan was chosen for its front line position in this demographic change accompanied by a strict immigration policy and a low women participation in the labor force.

The Case

A 48-year-old Japanese woman, called Yuka for the purpose of this study, was interviewed. She was divorced and mother of an 11-year-old child. She owned a successful business with an international profile in the center of Tokyo. She spoke good English and had studied and lived in the United States for many years. She lived in a house near her office with her child and a female Filipino domestic worker.

Yuka answered very early during the interview that she considered herself as a single mother and benefited from the help of a domestic worker as her parents and closest family lived in another city, Osaka. Therefore, Yuka explained that she did not have the option to receive the help of her parents in taking care of her daughter. She also commented that the choice of a Filipino domestic worker became a natural alternative as her Filipino family friend had recommended to her some potential domestic workers when her daughter was borne. It was then an option that she welcomed as she knew that she wanted to continue her career. It had been asked to Yuka if she had the knowledge of the employment of native Japanese domestic workers by her friends and acquaintances. She admitted that she did not know any such working arrangement. She commented that she was aware only of the employment of domestic workers from Southeast Asia.

The unique quality of the case was her distinctive and unique profile of being exposed, due to her background and work responsibilities, to both the Eastern and Western culture on a daily basis and therefore her ability to be critical and have a global vision of the topic of interest. She had the ability to "zoom in" the Japanese culture and at the same time "zoom out" in order to share her global understanding of the situation.

Data Collection

In January 2014, the main author was visiting Tokyo for the purpose of scientific research and had the opportunity to meet Yuka. The data were collected through an in-depth interview after informed consent was obtained. The interview lasted approximately 90 minutes in a private space at the workplace of Yuka. It was recorded, transcribed verbatim, checked against the original recording, and edited for accuracy. The interview session began by asking Yuka to introduce herself and describe her marital and familial status, her working situation, education, and living condition. Then, nonleading questions were asked about her own experience and general perception regarding economic-based migration to Japan, more specifically the employment of female foreign domestic workers as well as the role of Japanese women in the labor force. Supplementary questions were asked with the purpose

Table 1. The Themes and Subthemes Identified From the Data.

Themes	Subthemes
Family permanency	Expectation Motherhood Privacy
Group cohesion	Economy Fear Pride

of clarifying some answers, such as “Can you give me examples?” “What do you mean?” “Interesting, please could you develop?” “You are telling me that . . . is it right or would you like to add something that I missed?” and so forth, that aimed to cover various aspects of her own experience, perception, and opinion about issues related to immigration and foreign domestic work and women’s employment.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by qualitative content analysis. The data analysis is similarly reflexive and interactive as researchers continuously modify their treatment of data to accommodate new data and new insights about those data (Sandelowski, 2000). Inspired of Sandelowski’s (2000) qualitative description method, two themes and six subthemes were identified (Table 1).

Ethical Considerations

The data collection and presentation of the findings are subject to the principles of international ethical standards for conducting interviews with an informant capable of giving informed consent to voluntarily participate in a study with a descriptive design. Guidelines from Swedish Law (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 2003) were followed. The relevant ethical guidelines were applied such as autonomy, integrity, and confidentiality of the informant and her surroundings when describing the result in accordance with The World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (The World Medical Association, 2013).

Results

In this case study with a qualitative journalistic approach, two main themes, *family permanency* and *group cohesiveness*, and six subthemes presented below were identified.

Family Permanency

Expectation. It was expressed several times by Yuka that married women were expected primarily to be housewives. She explained further that these women were sometimes employed part-time in low-paid jobs but that full-time career-related

employment was not common when the children were small. She also said that it was expected that men would work full-time and support the family financially. According to Yuka, those expectations were tacit and not openly discussed. She added that the precarious national economy, as Japan had been in recession for the last 20 years, had reinforced gender stereotyping in term of familial responsibility

there is some interest for more homogeneity between genders, predominantly coming from women, but for now people want to feel safe and the home represents security for many people and therefore we are expected to do what we are supposed to do”

Motherhood. Yuka repeatedly expressed that “being a mother” and “acting as a mother” was central in the life of Japanese women and it gave them a strong sense of identity. Two main recurrent comments were made related to motherhood. The first one was the increasing wish from women to work part-time mostly for the purpose of getting a social network. The second comment was the priority in their life of taking care of their child or children. Yuka concluded that, according to her observations and despite the “Japanese tradition,” most international women she had met as well as Japanese women expressed similar ambiguous and dual needs in regard to their role as mothers. They wished to be available for their children without stress when they were small but also wished to work some hours outside the home. She disclosed that she was aware that most women she socialized with had no particular financial pressure and were privileged. However, she added that in large cities like Tokyo, there was an increasing number of young female professionals who enjoyed their profession and wished for a career “ . . . then if they also want children and continue working, they have no choice and need to accept the involvement of domestic workers . . . if their husband agrees to it of course.”

Privacy. The privacy and the intimacy of the family life were described as central in Japan. According to Yuka, it was uncommon for even wealthy Japanese families to have domestic workers to take care of family members, and one of the reasons was the risk to jeopardize family privacy “ . . . accepting somebody in your home and in your private life is difficult. For mothers, it is very difficult as they are worried.” However, she added that when domestic help was recruited, those relatively wealthy families privileged foreign domestic employment mainly from Southeast Asia. One motive was surprisingly the advantage of the language barrier. As the Japanese language is difficult to master and understand for foreigners, it offers more privacy to these families.

Group Cohesiveness

Economy. Anxiety and reflections in regard to “money” and finances were common during the interview. Yuka explained that domestic help was unaffordable for most Japanese

families and only willing wealthy families could afford it so far. According to Yuka, it reflected a clear social–economic dilemma. When asked about the issues of national economy and immigration into the country, Yuka stated that she was aware of the need for foreign skilled and unskilled workers but that the nation, in general, was not ready or at least not open to that possibility yet. She explained that it was largely due to the recession that had been taking place for two decades: “. . . people are worried about the economy, they are aware of the world around Japan . . . but the world coming to Japan and taking jobs and therefore increasing unemployment is worrisome.”

Fear. Yuka described multiple types of fears. One of them was the fear of losing the Japanese traditions and values with the arrival of immigrants to the country. The worry about increased criminality was also a recurrent theme during the interview as liberal immigration was synonym of criminality and danger. It was expressed several times that the Japanese people rationalized their fear of immigration based on the perceived failure of the Western countries on the matter.

Pride. Pride was also an important theme during the interview. Pride was expressed in term of the “higher sense of morality in Japan compared to other countries”; she added that she believed that Japanese treated foreigners well: “. . . but in general in Japanese families, they treat foreign domestic help quite ok. It is not like in some countries . . . we are civilized . . .” According to Yuka, Japan was unique about how well it treated its foreign workers and that she was proud of it. Another sense of pride explained by Yuka was that Japanese were “too proud to work as domestic workers.” Yuka explained that this strong sense of pride prevented Japanese, even the unemployed ones sometimes to work as domestic workers.

Discussion

The main findings of this study, *family permanency* and *group cohesiveness*, can contribute to understand the combined and controversial issues of immigration to Japan, most often of female domestic workers and female Japanese employment from the perspective of a Japanese woman. The results, based on the interview of a woman with a unique profile, reveal the complexity surrounding the role of women living in a country facing a super-aged society and a major societal mutation. The context of Japan is unique as it is an island constantly under the threat of major natural disasters causing thousands of deaths at a time and where national and community identity is essential for its survival (Matthews, 2003). The complex motivations behind individual and group actions in different cultural settings caused by natural disasters are rarely analyzed and understood (Schlehe, 2008). As any vulnerable group, the threat of the “outsider” is constant. Criminality, violence, and perversity of the social

norms are the implicit and explicit fears linked to immigration and social changes (Mahmud, 2014; Shipper, 2005). The vulnerability of Japan to its natural environment probably reinforces its need for traditions and social consistency. The pivotal role of women in societies and the global feminization of migration emerge as the most important points based on the main findings of this study, *family permanency* and *group cohesiveness*.

The Pivotal Role of Women

An increasing number of Japanese women, especially in urban settings, are questioning the lack of gender equality and choosing a career path instead of building a family; however, in this “modern Confucian family,” women’s traditional place in the society is still highly valued (Makita, 2010; North, 2009). These conflicting and ambiguous expectations from the women themselves and the society in general challenge family permanency and group cohesiveness. It appears through this study that Japanese women find themselves nowadays at a crossroad between the past and the future as well as the Eastern and Western civilizations. As confirmed by Yuka, women are still central in the Japanese social order incarnating multiple roles ranging from “mother, wife, household manager and caregiver to elderly relatives” (Kingston, 2013; Rosenberger, 2007). Women appear to consciously act as the guardians of the Japanese social consistency (Butterfield, 2014), while the symbols of patriarchal prestige continue to be very present (North, 2009). Traditions colored by gender displays maintain the certainties of historically contextualized gender identities and reproduced gender inequality (North, 2009). However, the pivotal role of women in informal care is present in many cultures. Women are often the glue holding social relations together and play a central role as friends, daughters, sisters, mothers, and grandmothers throughout all stages of the life course (Bracke, Christiaens, & Wauterickx, 2008). Therefore, the role of the female domestic workers caring for Japanese families could also become a pivotal role allowing Japanese women to work outside the home and still building a family and caring for the elderly under the same roof.

The Global Feminization of Migration

This study has identified how the entangled issues of female immigration and employment of Japanese women are closely related to the importance of family permanency and group cohesiveness in the Japanese society. Even though these results cannot be generalized, it lifts the importance of these challenges to a global level. Although the issues of immigration and the role of women in the society are relatively new in Japan, it has been taking place for a long time in both the developed and developing world. Globalization has accelerated these issues and has made them even more complex (Browne & Braun, 2008a). As a world community, we

cannot only discuss the impact of societal changes at a national level but need to pursue a global perspective. Therefore, it is important to gain a better knowledge about the increasing number of immigrant women coming to developed nations to fulfill the workforce needs (Browne & Braun, 2008b). At the same time, it is crucial to examine in which way the migration of these immigrant women to Japan or other high-income countries impact their community cohesiveness and family permanency (Adanu & Johnson, 2009; Hofmann & Buckley, 2013; International Organization for Migration, 2013). In addition to the impact of migration on their own community and family, it is relevant to wonder about the condition of these immigrant women in the host country. Indeed, by empowering native women, Japanese women in the context of this study, immigrant women risk becoming “second-class citizens” as they are triply disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, their status as nonnationals, and gender inequalities. These concerns are legitimately feared by human rights organizations (Lee, 2005). The dynamic of immigration and women’s role are complex and need to be considered as much as possible with a global perspective without being fragmented. The feminization of migration remains among the least understood trends in migration literature according to Hofmann and Buckley (2013). Most often, the issues related to female migration are investigated unilaterally through the situation of women migrants coming to a host country. In this study, the feminization of migration has a bilateral interest as it lifts the importance of the interaction between the phenomenon of female migration and its potential impact on the lives of native women in relation to *family permanency* and *group cohesiveness*.

Conclusion

Japan has the uniqueness to be a leap ahead in term of its demographic challenges as well as its highly developed society, and simultaneously a step behind in regard to the weight of ancestral traditions. The findings of this study show the intertwined issues of female immigration and employment of Japanese women. It appears that Japanese women find themselves nowadays at an intersection between the past and the future as well as the East and the West. Furthermore, it emerges that the pivotal role of women in the Japanese society and the global feminization of migration has a bilateral dynamic, in other words how the situation of some women can impact other women in relation to *family permanency* and *group cohesiveness*.

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