

BLUE-COLLAR WOMEN IN A CULTURE OF PROFESSIONAL HOUSEWIVES: EXPANDING THE MEANING OF GOOD WIFE, WISE MOTHER

GLEND A S. ROBERTS

One day in the summer of 1994, I found myself in an elite suburb of Tokyo, being interviewed by the director of the affiliated kindergarten of a prestigious private university.¹ The director noted that there was only one other working mother amongst all the kindergartners enrolled, and her mother-in-law was responsible for the child's activities. How did I plan to manage on the days when the children were sent home at 11:30 am? Would I be able to pick up my daughter at the 1:30 pm dismissal on the other days? Would I be sure to make her a lunch? Would I be able to join the mothers' chorale? The director had anticipated that I was not equipped to hand sew the personalized smock, placemats, cloth napkins and carry bags that were requisite for each kindergartner, so it had been decided that one of the mothers would make all of these for me. When, on my daughter's first day at the kindergarten, I went to pick her up, I could not help but be struck at the sight of all the other mothers waiting outside the doors of the school, chatting with each other. Dressed to the nines, they looked fit to grace the covers of *Fujin Gaho* (Women's Pictorial). Their lifestyles matched their wardrobes. Well-educated, married to professionals, business magnates, and stars of the film and television world, many of these women were sophisticated consumers of international culture. They dedicated a good deal of their time to their children, supervising their play groups, taking them on outings, staying up late at night helping their older children study for exams.²

This scene becomes juxtaposed in my mind with another, where mothers in blue uniforms stood in a circle to greet each other before a day of work at a lingerie factory which I call Azumi, in urban Kansai.³ Because they are full-time workers as well as wives and mothers, their lifestyles differ greatly from those of the women I pictured above. Because they are blue-collar workers with limited educations and budgets, their social circles, pastimes, interests, and consumption patterns are also markedly different. While I cannot elaborate here on all of these, in this paper I will focus analysis on three of the areas where my co-workers' views and lifestyles, forged in part from their combination of their careers as blue-collar "corporate warriors," (Osawa 1994), and their roles as wives and mothers, differ from

¹ I was in Tokyo to do research from May through August of 1994, and was accompanied by my daughter, aged six, and my husband, who was carrying out his own research project. It was through his affiliation that we came to live in the housing of this university, and we were invited to place our child into their kindergarten.

² One of the women, a full-time homemaker with a kindergartner and an elementary-aged child enrolled in this school, remarked to me that she was throwing all her energies into preparing the best meals she possibly could for her family, as she saw this as the most important thing she could do for them.

those of upper-middle class professional homemakers. These are first, household economy, second, child-rearing and education, and last, their expectations toward their husbands vis a vis the household division of labor.

What these two groups of women have in common is that both are affected by the dominant gender-role model in Japan whereby married women are seen as household managers, nurturers and educators of their children, and caretakers of their husbands, while married men are considered the primary income earners and status bearers of their households (Edwards, 1989; Lebra, 1984). Iwao Sumiko, in her analysis of well-educated upper-middle class women's interpretation of this model, indicates that besides carrying out the duties listed above, contemporary women also devote themselves to personal development, through sports classes, culture classes, travel, grass-roots political participation, or part-time employment (Iwao, 1993).

Many of the production workers of my acquaintance are expanding on the homemaker role by insisting on remaining in their full-time jobs as regular employees in a large company. In so doing, they are challenging cultural norms which see women's contributions to the household as supplementary, and women's main role as housewives and mothers. They are also challenging implicit company policies and explicit, publicly voiced opinions of top managers that favor women workers' early retirement at marriage or the birth of the first child. For instance, Azumi production workers were placed in jobs which required repetitive hand and arm motion and concentrated use of eyesight. In the Inspection and Packaging Division, where I worked, workers were required to stand on concrete floors during work hours, because the manager felt it would "look bad" if outsiders who might visit the factory saw us sitting down to work. Despite the physically taxing nature of the job, the company had no plans to alleviate or try to prevent the resultant injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, varicose veins and eye strain, from which many workers with long years of service suffered. The reason for the company's lack of interest in prevention of such health problems stemmed from the expectation that women would quit work before such problems developed, combined with a strong attitude that women ought not to be staying on through marriage and pregnancy. Measures to improve working conditions would only serve to encourage women to remain. A department manager told me that the only women workers the company really desired to keep on for the long term were the designers, whose productivity and skills increased with years of service (Roberts, 1994).

In 1983, when I entered the Azumi Corporation to undertake participant-observation research, I found, to my surprise, that the company employed a sizable number of married

³ From 1983--1985, I carried out a research project on the attitudes of blue-collar women workers toward their work and home lives, and their strategies for juggling the two roles of worker and mother. For one year of this research, I carried out participant-observation by working as a *paato* at the inspection and packaging division of a large-scale lingerie manufacturer. This allowed me to interact with women of whom some were trying to stay on as regular employees until retirement age. For the second year, I interviewed women *paato* at three small-to-medium sized firms in Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe. My findings are detailed in Glenda S. Roberts, *Staying on the Line: Blue-Collar Women in Contemporary Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994, as well as in "Careers and Commitment: Azumi's Blue-Collar Women", in Anne Imamura, ed., *Re-Imaging Japanese women*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.221-243. In 1983, when I entered the Azumi corporation (pseudonym) to undertake my study, the company had roughly 4,000 employees, three-quarters of them women. At the main office factory where I worked, 224 women and 18 men were employed, with 18 women and one man in my section.

women as full-time, full-fledged "regular" employees. This was unusual, as most companies encourage women to quit their regular positions long before they reach middle-age. Some of my co-workers had begun their jobs after junior high-school or high-school and had stayed through marriage, pregnancy, and child-bearing and rearing. Others entered after their children were school-aged, but they had entered as regular employees because the company, a major producer of lingerie and leisure-wear, was expanding and needed employees who could be relied upon to do overtime.⁴ My co-workers felt fortunate to have jobs as regulars when most women of their age cohort could only find jobs as irregular-status *paato*. Most shared the desire to keep their jobs, and some of them are still at Azumi, fourteen years later.

One of my co-workers described our work group as the "survivors," those who had stuck it out through years of being under the thumb of a tough boss, standing firm regardless of their physical exhaustion, their husband's disapproval of their working, or the company's hints that they were getting too old for the work. Thus, my sample, mostly blue-collar women working as regular employees for a major corporation, is not the norm.⁵ From them, though, I learned the reasons why they were insisting on staying on the line, and how they saw this decision affecting their households, their family relationships, and their self concepts.

First, why were my married co-workers working when the majority of their cohort had long since left the company? Most took a job for economic reasons, whether to help pay for a house or condominium, or for educational or other child-related expenses.⁶ My co-workers agreed that married women work to maintain a certain living standard. Even though they strive to keep up that level, however, some feel it is too high, and that people have succumbed to materialism. But all felt that their husbands' salaries alone had not kept pace with the rise in the cost of living or with the increasing standard of consumption necessary even to maintain one's social position. The commentary of Shimizu san, a 32-year-old mother of two who had worked at Azumi since age 14, is illustrative:

---even if it's only a little, it helps out with the household finances. The standard of living has risen greatly. A house [that] didn't have a refrigerator ten years ago... Now there's one in every house, and a car for every two people, one per household. It's because we have these things and the living standard has risen that more and more people are working...

Nishitani san, a married woman with two children and one on the way, focuses on the consequences of rising educational standards:

...It's funny to call it a luxury, but one wants spending money. People want videos and things. And

⁴ I was told by managers that unlike many industries that can be almost totally mechanized, the clothing industry needs the eyesight and hands of humans to sew and inspect delicate materials such as silk and lace. This company was intent on keeping if not increasing its market share and fine reputation, and they were very concerned about maintaining quality. If the company wanted to expand, they needed to hire more people. The years of expansion ended after the oil crises of the 1970s, and the 1980s saw an increasing shift of production to less-expensive rural areas of Japan as well as off-shore in Southeast Asia and China.

⁵ They were also not the working poor. A regular job at Azumi carried with it all the benefits that come with employment in large corporations in Japan: health plans, pension benefits, eligibility for housing loans, family allowances (only if the workers' husband did not already receive these), commuting allowance, and so on).

⁶ If the woman were divorced or widowed, however, she worked for the basic necessities; in households where there is no father present, the income of the mother alone is usually insufficient to provide for "extras" such as new appliances, a car, a house, or additional schooling for the children.

we've come to spend money on kids that we didn't used to spend. Luxuries like home tutors, cram schools. Before it used to be okay just to send your child to the regular school program, but that's not good enough anymore. So if you want to give your child the same as the next, it costs money. Because luxury has become so commonplace in our lives, we can't get by on just our husband's salaries, so we have to work.

Several co-workers emphasized that it is a waste of resources to have a woman at home when she could be out working. They also emphasized that while *paato* employment was available, it would be foolish to trade a stable, well-paying but exacting job at Azumi for a *paato* job that offered more flexibility but vastly reduced income and benefits.

Another co-worker noted that since housewives have to operate within their husband's salary, there are those with extra and those with nothing to spare, and she pitied the latter. My impression is that most of my coworkers would have had difficulty managing the budget on their husbands' income alone. If they stayed at home, they would not be emulating the upper-middle class homemakers of television dramas. Instead, they would be stuck in the house, in perhaps morally uplifting but depressing penuriousness. While the literature on Japanese professional homemakers often cites their control of their spouses' paychecks as a sign of their considerable authority in the domestic realm, this authority becomes a burden when the paycheck barely meets ordinary household expenditures.⁷

My co-workers used words such as "dark," "shut-in," and "depressing" when commenting on full-time homemakers.⁸ Although for the most part they did not disparage full-time homemakers, few of them longed to trade places.⁹ In sum, my married co-workers at Azumi remained because they felt that in so doing, they could consistently provide their families with a much higher standard of living than if they pursued any of the other alternatives, such as taking on *paato* employment or by taking in piecework. From many years of meeting the challenge of strenuous and demanding work, Azumi women also developed a pride in their skills and in their abilities to create and fulfill goals. The comment of Fujii san, a twenty-eight year old married worker with three children and thirteen years of service, is illustrative. She is responding to my question about why she continued to work after marriage.

Well, prices have risen, but also, women have found joy in working. Rather than being at home and aimlessly passing the time, if you put the kids in day care and go to work, you get the feeling that you are really alive. You're not just counting the years going by -- five years, ten years -- even if you have just one goal ... if you're working you can have it be to save money to buy a house, for instance.

Fujii san is still at Azumi. She has gone up the lower-level supervisory ranks, and is now trying to prepare for the sub-section chief examination. She and her husband purchased a new

⁷ Along these lines, one of my co-workers, a married woman in her late fifties whose husband worked for a driving school, remarked that her husband was fond of drinking beer, consuming a not insignificant amount of the household budget in this manner. She was trying to find a way to curb his habit, as she felt that after they retired she could not balance the budget if he kept it up.

⁸ This probably speaks to the conditions of the average apartment affordable to single-earner blue-collar workers.

⁹ Women who had entered the company after a period of staying home to raise their children did voice worries over the effect of their absence from home on the children's well-being.

suburban home in 1984, in a neighborhood where the elementary school had after-school child-care, so that she could continue working. Had she quit Azumi along with a majority of her cohort, this purchase would not have been possible.

Childrearing and Education

Women who remain at Azumi through pregnancy and childbirth relied on a combination of public day-care, after school childcare programs, and relatives to assist them in child-rearing from the end of pregnancy leave through elementary school. While it is commonplace now for Japanese children to attend some form of preschool from the age of three or four years, daycare for infants goes against the cultural norm that babies need their mothers' special care to develop properly. Although there are public day-care centers for infants, demand far exceeds supply, so working mothers must plan far in advance to secure reliable sources of childcare.

Given the strong cultural emphasis on training one's child carefully during the early years, I expected my co-workers to have qualms about delegating this responsibility to strangers. To the contrary, however, I found that mothers who had made use of public daycare had nothing but praise for their caregivers. Far from worrying that their children were being inadequately prepared for life ahead, they were confident that the centers were providing them good care. One mother of two stated, "Since they have been in day care since they were infants, I haven't taught them anything at home. I have the daycare center teach them everything -- from how to dress to how to use the toilet. Or, at mealtimes, how to hold a spoon and so on. . . I am thankful to the daycare center." While at first she had felt sorry to put them in daycare from infancy, she remarked they benefited from it by making so many friends. Another worker, whose three children had all experienced public daycare, had the option of leaving her children with her mother, but chose daycare instead:

If I left them with Mother, I'd have to pay her plus feel uncomfortable about it.. So I'd rather leave them at the daycare center where they can be carefree and play with other kids their own age. At the daycare center, they teach them about how to do things they didn't know they could do themselves. They learn a lot of things from group life.

She later commented,

If you' re just at home lazing around looking after the kids, neither mother nor child grows. Because your knowledge is limited -- what can one parent teach a child? But at nursery school, many different teachers with different kinds of knowledge teach the children all sorts of things -- more than a parent could.

Although I did hear comments disapproving of daycare, they all came from those without children or from women who had raised their children themselves until they were school-aged, before the women returned to the work-force. I did hear complaints from those who relied on grandparents for child-care; they said the grandparents spoiled the children. What we can glean from such comments as those above is an attitude of respect for day-care personnel as being perfectly qualified, even more qualified than the mothers themselves, for raising children. In contrast, I have never heard an upper-middle class mother comment that

she felt that full-time daycare personnel were more expert than she in the basic care and training of her child. Sharon Hayes, in her study of working-class and professional-class mothers in the United States, (Hayes, 1996), also found "working-class and poor mothers seem to be more likely than their middle- and upper-middle-class counterparts to believe that other people know more about child rearing than they do. . . By contrast, no professional-class mothers describe their children's paid care-givers as more competent and knowledgeable than themselves." (Hayes, 1996:92). While there are undoubtedly cultural differences between working class women in the U.S. and Japan, this may be one area where attitudes are similar, although further research is needed to substantiate this.

As regular employees, my co-workers could not spend a lot of time with their families, beyond weekends and the occasional holiday. During busy periods they were obliged to work overtime. If a child became feverish and needed to be sent home from daycare or school, it was difficult for Azumi women to leave the floor to go home. Many women stated that in such cases, they would ask relatives to watch the sick child, and a few had husbands whose workplaces offered more flexibility than Azumi did, so the husband would take time off. Mothers could only occasionally get the time off to attend their children's school events, so mothers-in-law or their own mothers would go in their place when possible. It was also difficult for them to attend PTA meetings, which took place during the day. Shimizu san, who had joined the company as a junior-high school graduate, wanted to shepherd her children through their school careers once they were in elementary school, so she quit Azumi after seventeen years of service. So far she has achieved her goals, as in 1992 she told me that one son had successfully passed the entrance exam to an academic high school, and she was turning her attention to the younger one.¹⁰

How much did my co-workers stress educational goals for their children? What sorts of futures did they envision for them? While no one I knew was preparing her children for government or business elite tracks, some supported their children through sports-oriented high-schools, two-year technical colleges or four-year universities, and some of these children have entered white-collar jobs. Several women mentioned they were paying for cram-school lessons for their children. While they had neither the time nor the educations themselves to tutor their children personally, they took great pride in their children's accomplishments.

Social class differentially affects women's strategies and options with regard to work, and this in turn affects their children's futures. As Rohlen pointed out in his study of Kobe high-schools, the higher the rank of school attended, the more likely were the children to come from homes where their mothers were full-time homemakers, and they were also likely to have rooms of their own in which to study. Furthermore, their fathers were likely to have tertiary levels of education and be employed in white-collar jobs. (Rohlen, 1983:130). Highly educated women from upper-middle income brackets face both strong incentives to work, from their career aspirations, as well as strong disincentives, if they have children whom they wish to groom for similarly high social status. It is this social class from whence come the

¹⁰ Shimizu san felt that her children could not achieve academic success without her being home to help (and push) them through the process. Her husband had a regular job in Azumi, and they were financially stable, so she felt able to make this choice to retire from her job. Still, she remained active in income-producing activities, taking in piecework at home. Another co-worker, now officially retired from the company, cleans homes professionally as a side-line retirement job. In the future, I hope to gain more data on women's activities post-Azumi.

kyoiku mama, or “education mamas” who prepare their children from early ages to pass entrance exams to reputable schools. The mothers of children in the elite private kindergarten I mention at the beginning of this essay invest considerable capital in their children’s educations, from a very early stage, not only in the form of the cost of the schooling and other cultural and academic lessons, outings and trips, but in the opportunity cost of their own choice to be a professional homemaker. The reproduction of the upper-middle class in Japan rests a great deal on the energies of such full-time homemakers.

The Home Fires

Many Azumi women, especially those women who had previously had stints as professional homemakers before entering the company, started their employment under the condition that they “let nothing slip” at home. Their husbands anticipated the inconvenience of the loss of a full-time homemaker, and some of them may also have been reluctant to relinquish the social status of sole income earner for the family. To the women, the more important goal was to raise the family’s living standard. Working full-time at Azumi without the cooperation of one’s spouse was no easy task. A section chief at the shipping center of the company remarked,

If the husband is *teishu kampaku* (petty tyrant) and now the wife is out working as well, they both come home tired from work -- and they’re operating under the same conditions since they’re both working in factories -- if the husband won’t cover any of the housework for her, that doesn’t come off well... the relationship between husband and wife gets very difficult. She can’t get him to cooperate. So when she comes to the company, that comes out in her work-- she can’t get away from it...

Most of the younger women workers expected and received cooperation in childcare and housework from their husbands, unless their mother-in-law took care of the household. Although not unaware of the dominant gender ideology which deems husbands incompetent in household management and childcare, my younger co-workers resisted it. None said that they would prefer their husbands not to meddle in the kitchen, as the professional homemakers in Vogel’s (1978) study did. Nor did any seem ashamed to accept their husband’s help in household tasks; in fact, they considered it their due. As one thirty-two year old co-worker stated, “I do most of the looking after them [the children]. But since we both work, he shares some of the chores with me. I have him look after them as well. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to work . . . What both of us made together, both of us take care of!”

Conclusion

My co-workers at Azumi have been staying on the line to better their families’ circumstances, and in some cases, for the love of it as well. The difficulties they face in so doing give testimony to the remaining strength of the corporate-warrior professional homemaker paradigm. Will their persistence open the doors for long-term employment for women production workers in the future? If Azumi’s actions since the mid 1980s are any

indication, the answer would seem to be "no." Azumi has increasingly shifted production offshore, downsized domestic operations, and hired *paato* production workers to replace regular-status workers who have retired or quit. Yet many women have the desire to remain in their jobs throughout marriage and childrearing. In a 1994 survey of 235 Azumi women workers nationwide, Yamamoto found that unmarried production workers were the most likely of any category of women worker at Azumi (including manager/specialty worker/designer, sales worker and office worker) to want to continue at Azumi after marriage.¹¹ Will they be able to do so? A more aggressive government stance on equal opportunity in employment, as evidenced in the upcoming revisions to the Equal Opportunity in Employment Law, may enhance women's ability to "get a foot in the door", but the accompanying revision of the Labor Standards Law, which will lift overtime restrictions for women, may cause a rift between blue and white-collar workers, forcing production workers to quit but giving white-collar women the opportunity to compete with male colleagues on an "even playing field."¹² Whether the future will bring increasing opportunities for women with fewer years of schooling, or whether it will close out more secure, well-paying jobs remains an open question.

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¹¹ Of the 73 production workers surveyed, fifty-five (75.3%) indicated they desired to continue working after marriage. Although 89.3% (n=25) of the 28 women in the 'manager/specialty worker/designer category' came in at the top on this question, in a subsequent question which queried how they planned to continue working after marriage, a lower percentage of women in the manager/specialty worker/designer group planned to return to Azumi after maternity leave than did those in the production worker sample. Fifty-three percent (n=30) of the production workers sampled indicated they would prefer to return to the present job after maternity leave ended. Forty percent (n=10) of 25 managers, specialty workers, and designers, 27.1% (n=13) of 48 office workers, and 31.6% (n=12) of the sales personnel chose this pattern (Yamamoto 1994 : 71).

¹² The playing field can never really be even until men share equally in domestic labor.

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