

# A Look at Our Students' Future: A Review of *Office Ladies and Salaried Men*

Steve Cornwell

## 短大生の将来に関する一考察 *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies*

スティーブ コーンウェル

### Abstract

This paper reviews Yuko Ogasawara's book, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies*, (1998) in an effort to shed some light on the realities students face when they enter the job market? Since the majority of junior college students enter the work force as office ladies (OLs), information on the life of an OL is helpful. Any insight into our students' lives, past, current, and future, helps us interact with them in a more relevant way.

The impetus for the book came when Ogasawara tried to reconcile two conflicting views of Japanese women: one in which women are discriminated against and are "relegated to low-paying and dead end jobs" (p. 3) and the other where they are powerful within the home and "have considerable leverage in society." (p. 4) With this as a starting point Ogasawara spent six months conducting participant observation as a temporary employee in a major Japanese bank, and then she interviewed 30 salary men and 30 OLs from major companies each employing 1000+ employees. The resulting book presents a quite complex topic in a clear and readable way.

**Key words:** gender, discrimination, employment, OL, junior college

(Received September 10, 1999)

### 抄 録

本稿は、短大生が就職をしてつきあたる現実の問題を検討するという観点から、小笠原祐子著 *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies* (1998) の書評をこころみる。短大卒業生の多くは、いわゆるオフィスレディーになる。OLの現実を分析検討することは、学生理解の助けとなり、学習支援に有益である。

「日本女性は差別され、低賃金で将来性のない職業にあまんじている」、「日本女性は家庭において権限が強く、社会においてかなりの影響力がある。」この二つの矛盾した日本女性像が、本書の出発点である。小笠原は6か月間日本の大手銀行に臨時職員として勤めながら、従業員1000人以上の大企業に勤務するサラリーマン30名、OL30名をインタビュー調査した。本書はこの複雑な問題を、明解に提示した興味深い一冊である。

なお小笠原祐子著 中公新書「OLたちのレジスタンス」は本書をもとにしている。

**キーワード:** 性別、差別、雇用、OL、短期大学

(1999年9月10日 受理)

I'm returning from a three-day trip to Yoshima<sup>1</sup> with 107 second-year students. During our three days together we had many opportunities to talk. It's amazing how an island setting helps relax people. Some students shared their hopes and dreams with me; others confided their worries and fears. While a few are going to transfer to four year colleges or study abroad, the majority are going to work. Next year holds much hope for these young women. They are looking forward to joining society as full-fledged members.

Notes on the Jetliner, 5:00 p.m. September 4

I value the young women described above—everyone of them is special, everyone of them is unique. They all have the potential to influence our society greatly in the future through their words and deeds. As wives they may marry the men who will lead Japan through the beginning of the 21st century; as mothers they may raise the next generation of leaders. On the jetliner I wrote, "They are looking forward to joining society as full-fledged members." Unfortunately the realities of our society will not allow them to be full-fledged members. They may be able to raise the next generations of leaders, but without changes they cannot be the next generation of leaders.

What are the realities they face? Since the majority of students will enter the work force as office ladies (OLs), information on their future work environment will help shed light on their realities. Any insight into our students' lives, past, current, and future, helps us interact with them in a more relevant way. To that end I have decided to review Yuko Ogasawara's book, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies*, (1998), a book that all junior college teachers should become familiar with.

Ogasawara has done a remarkable job presenting a quite complex topic in a clear and readable way. Her introductory comments underscore some of the complexities inherent in this topic. When telling friends in America about how women in Japanese companies have little chance for advancement and are delegated to a life of pouring tea and making copies, the friends lamented the situation of women and wondered why they put up with such treatment. This caused Ogasawara to pause. "Things aren't that bad," she thought.

And so, in the future when discussing the topic, she pointed out how women often control the family finances and she told the story of one wife and daughter who spent the heat of summer in Hawaii in a condo the husband had rented even though he would not be able to leave Japan due to work responsibilities. This time the

friends pitied the husband and viewed the wife as being a “tyrant” and living a life of ease and comfort. “That’s not the picture I want to paint either,” thought Ogasawara. She writes

The more I tried to be accurate, the more I failed to communicate. I was frustrated: I had failed to impart the “truth” about relations between men and women in Japan. When I emphasized how much women as a group were discriminated against, I made individual women seem more vulnerable to oppression than they really are. When I described how influential individual women often are both at home and in the office, I downplayed the glaring discrimination they face. I was confused. Are Japanese women oppressed or not? Are they powerless or powerful? The questions guiding my research thus emerged. (p. 2)

And thus her research began.

Ogasawara spent six months conducting participant observation by working as a temporary employee in a major Japanese bank and then she followed-up by interviewing 60 men and women (30 salary men and 30 OLs or ex-OLs) from major companies employing 1000 employees or more (some were international firms with nearly 10,000 employees). She describes her methodology in some detail and appears to have followed standard qualitative research methodology. This is important to note because in the sections that follow readers may be surprised at some of her findings. I’d suggest that if readers are surprised by Ogasawara’s interpretations, they read the entire book.

Her findings are presented in six chapters entitled: 1) The Japanese Labor Market and Office Ladies; 2) Why Office Ladies do not Organize; 3) Gossip; 4) Popularity Poll; 5) Acts of Resistance; and 6) Men Curry Favor with Women. This paper will use those chapter titles as section headings. Please note that Ogasawara’s findings relate to major companies; smaller firms’ treatment of women will be different.

In addition, I find the Introduction to also be an important part of the book where Ogasawara summarizes research that presents two opposing views of Japanese women that parallel the anecdote told earlier.

Many studies describe how women face intense sex discrimination and, as a result are relegated to low-paying and dead end jobs. Other studies, many of which examine the woman’s role at home, emphasize that women have considerable leverage in society. (pp. 3-4)

The introduction goes on to explain exactly what an office lady is and talks about the methodology Ogasawara employed in her study. Although she mentions several studies from both schools of thought, the one I enjoyed most was Iwao's speaking of women's control and influence over men that suggested that the "Confucian ethic of the three obediences formerly binding women could be rewritten ... for men: obedience to mothers when young, companies when adult, and wives when retired." (quoted in Ogasawara, 1998; Iwao, 1933, p. 7)<sup>1</sup>

### **The Japanese Labor Market and Office Ladies**

Forty percent of all employees are women and one third of all female employees are clerical workers or office ladies, a term coined in the early sixties for the then popular "business girl." (p. 23) Women's participation in the work force by age looks like a letter M; in their twenties, about 75% of women work, in their thirties, the percentage drops to fifty five per cent, and by their forties, it rises to about seventy per cent. In a company most of this work consists of filing, serving tea, and other clerical tasks; outside a company the work would be part-time in nature. In Japan there is a two-track employment system: most men enter the *sougoushoku* or integrated track, while most women enter the *ippanshoku* or clerical track.

There are many ways in which OLs are discriminated against or treated differently than their male counterparts. They are rarely seriously evaluated since they are rarely promoted. On a scale running from A or excellent to E or poor almost all OLs get Cs or average. They are encouraged to leave the company when they marry; if they marry a fellow employee this encouragement borders on an order. Whereas men invite the general manager to wedding parties, OLs usually invite the vice general manager. The explanation is that the general manager is too busy to bother attending an OL's party. The task that seems to annoy OLs the most is serving tea; it is the one task that must be performed immediately (on other tasks such as filing or typing, OLs have some leeway on how to organize the tasks). It is also the one task that emphasizes OL's subservient role.

### **Why Office Ladies do not Organize**

OLs do not have strong ties with one another; this is the result of company policies. For example, OL's educational backgrounds are mixed. There are university graduates working with junior college graduates working with high school graduates. Length of tenure influences job responsibility, but level of education influences salary. Therefore, younger, lower-status OLs (university graduates) might make more money than their older *senpai* (high school or junior college graduate).

Early retirement is emphasized for OLs. Marriage is a "goal" for many OLs; in fact, pressure is put on older OLs to "get on with their lives" by marrying. This system of early retirement is one way that the inequality of the system can be hidden. It prevents there being large numbers of middle-aged women working at menial tasks.

Many observers think that OLs are satisfied with their lot because they don't complain. For example, instead of complaining about their jobs among themselves, at lunch they usually talk about superficial items such as what happened on a particular soap opera or where they are planning to go on vacation. Ogasawara feels that silence is not a sign of satisfaction. Their silence comes from divisive company policies such as the salary system and early retirement. Yet, in spite of not organizing formal protests, they are able to find ways to resist male authority.

### **Gossip**

Since they have unequal rights "most OLs think that responsibilities should reflect this discrepancy." (p. 94) So they set high standards for their male colleagues. OLs are great observers of men's actions. They know who is doing what, who is a good worker, who shirks duties, etc. One way OLs pass on information about male colleagues is through gossip. It is one way to make their days more interesting. They not only discuss

unpleasant characteristics of men but also their more pleasant aspect, their performance records, funny stories, and almost anything else about them. In fact, practically everything a man does is observed, evaluated, and reported on. OLs often eye men critically, from head to toe. (p. 95)

If a man develops a bad reputation among OLs, it can affect his ability to get work done within the section, and eventually can affect his standing in the company. This point will be covered in more detail in the section on Acts of Resistance. The reasoning among Personnel sections is that if a man cannot get along with the women in his section, he might not be able to become a good manager.

Ogasawara points out that OL's criticism is only possible because they are outside the so-called serious business world in that they do not compete with men for promotion. This does not mean their criticism isn't heard. Men's attitudes are changing possibly as a result of OL's voices becoming heard through popular columns such as *Ojisan kaizou kouza*, (Lessons for Transforming men) which reports on OL's opinions of the men they work for.

## Popularity Poll

While OLs seldom complain publicly about the men they work with, there are two times when they can make their feelings known. Gift giving through Valentine chocolates and farewell flowers (flowers given when a man transfers to another section or office) are ways of making their opinions known. Men worry about the number of chocolates they receive on Valentines day. If a man receives few gifts, he feels humiliated in front of his colleagues.

OLs often discuss among themselves which men they will give gifts to and whom they will not. When gossiping they may not always agree about which man is a good worker and which is not. However, gift giving is a

concrete action that requires OLs to make many joint decisions they had to agree on which men deserved to receive their gifts, how much they should spend on each gift, and what to buy. Valentine's Day and farewell flowers provided them opportunities to put their opinions into concerted action. On many occasions, their sense of togetherness increased. (p. 113)

There are often hidden messages in gifts. For example, sometimes OLs may delay giving chocolates until late in the day to someone they dislike. They make him sweat so to speak. At other times, they may handle the chocolate so many times that the man who eventually receives it, just gets a bar of broken chocolate. These may seem like childish and petty actions. However, as they occur within a context of on-going discrimination, they can also be seen as acts of resistance against an unjust system.

## Acts of Resistance

There are many ways for an OL to annoy and cause trouble for a man. According to Ogasawara she can:

- refuse to take initiative,
- decline to do him favors,
- refuse to work for him,
- inform the personnel department of his disagreeable behavior,
- shut him out with *sousukan*.

In the first three forms of resistance, women adopt uncooperative attitudes toward a man and thereby affect the efficiency and effectiveness of his work. The latter two acts of resistance harm his reputation. (p. 134)

Because OLs are outside the system of promotion or advancement the above acts are not just done to colleagues or men with similar tenure. Higher ranking men can also be subject to these acts of resistance. A man's rank within the company is not as influential as it might be. OLs are not intimidated by ranks since they are not evaluated seriously.

Some of the forms of resistance are ambiguous. For example if a man puts a work assignment on the desk of an absent OL, another OL could point out the OL's absence or decide to do the work herself if she likes the man. However, if he is disliked, the OL can just do nothing (not take initiative).

The worst form of resistance is *sousukan* or total neglect. In one case three OLs after becoming angry with their boss (he took a lot of personal time off while they worked overtime), ceased speaking to him. They would hand him work without saying anything and they did not exchange pleasantries such as "Nice Day" or even "Good Morning." If asked a question, they would reply, "I don't know" or "It's not my job." This treatment quickly became noticed by others in the department. Fortunately, for the man he was due to be transferred and only endured two months of such treatment. One can hope his attitude toward OLs changed.

In another case, after being transferred, a general manager became courteous and considerate of OLs in his new assignment because of the treatment (*sousukan*) he had received in his prior section. Even though he was quite high in the organization, OLs were able to influence his views and change the way he treated women.

### **Men Curry Favor with Women.**

Since they depend on OLs in many ways, men try to keep them happy. They do so in various ways such as buying them treats, taking them to lunch or dinner, or bringing them souvenirs from overseas business trips. White Day gifts (gifts given in reciprocation of Valentine Day chocolate) are another obligatory type of present. If men do not give White Day gifts, they run the risk of irritating many women. It's interesting to note that men's wives are often more concerned than the men about their husband's reputation. They try to make sure that any gifts the husband buys are something the OLs will like. This is especially true if the wife has worked as an OL.

### **Conclusion**

This review gives many examples of how women "voice" their displeasure against the unequal system and men who treat them unequally. This is not to say that OLs do not work hard or professionally. They do. Therefore, the examples in this review

must be seen as acts that happen when they are mistreated.

By showing their anger, working according to their personal preferences, and refusing jobs, OLs often reinforce existing stereotypes of women as emotional or irrational. But these are only their ways of resisting men's power.

It is ironic that it is only because women are not given positions of authority or jobs with responsibilities, they are empowered to resist as they do. They can resist men's discriminatory actions, and men are forced to listen and change. Men

need OL's support if they are to hold managerial positions in Japanese organizations. A man who is disliked by a female subordinate tends to be given a black mark for not getting along with her. A man who alienates many women is regarded as having little aptitude for managing people.  
(p. 159)

However, the future may bring changes to women's situations. With the economic slump of the early 1990s, many companies want to use women employees more efficiently. Some companies have even started evaluating OLs more seriously and are basing salaries on both length of tenure and performance. In addition, companies are also employing more temporary employees than before. Therefore in the future, perhaps fewer and fewer women will be hired as OLs; instead they will work as temporary workers for less money and less stability. (p. 168) Finally, more women are being hired in the *sougoushoku* track. Since they are treated differently than their male counterparts (women are often assigned to a geographical area, whereas men are often transferred to various locations), it will be interesting to see what effect this has on their promotion and advancement.

## **Epilogue**

In the beginning of this article, I painted a picture of our students as being able to raise future leaders but not be future leaders. I asked what the realities they faced were. Yuko Ogasawara's book, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies* helps provide some insight into the realities and how women cope with those realities. I wrote that unfortunately the realities of society will not allow our students to become full-fledged members. Well, the conclusion brings some hope as companies are beginning to realize what they are missing by not utilizing their female employees fully. It also brings some concern as companies concerned with the bottom line begin to look for ways to cut expenses one of which is the use of temporary employees rather than OLs. When this is published it will be



the start of a new millennium. We can hope that the new millennium will herald the dawn of a new era in which women are treated as equals not only in business, but in all aspects of life

**End notes**

- 1 Yoshima is the site of a 3-day YMCA camp that some second year students go to in order to fulfill part of their physical education requirement.
- 2 Women in Confucian societies have traditionally had to obey their fathers when young, their husbands after marriage, and their sons when they are grown.

**Works Cited**

- Iwao, S. 1993. *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Ogasawara, Y. 1998. *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, gender, and work in Japanese companies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.