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Mei Ling, May WONG

Lingnan University, Hong Kong, wongml@ln.edu.hk

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Women's Employment Status
in Two Japanese Retail Stores
in Hong Kong

May M. L. WONG
Department of Management
Lingnan College

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May 1997

**Women's Employment Status
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May M. L. WONG
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Abstract

This study examines the employment status of women employees working for two Japanese department stores in Hong Kong. Empirical evidence reveals that Japanese expatriate managers bring sexist cultural values which discriminate against women in the host-country environment because a majority of local female employees are employed in lower hierarchical positions at the bottom of the organisational and managerial pyramid, whilst male employees occupied most of the professional and managerial positions at the top. This paper discusses the situation in which female employees are likely to be discriminated against for senior management from the perspectives of horizontal and vertical job segregation. Four major categories of constraints arising from the company's human resource management (HRM) policies and practices leading to the subordinated employment position of women are identified - recruitment and selection, job assignment and promotion, training and development and remuneration. These HRM policies and practices are influenced by the Japanese preconception of women and the characteristics of the retail industry.

Introduction

In retailing, women are considerably more “visible” than men on the sales floor since almost all women are assigned to the first line sales or customer service jobs. Furthermore, evidence suggests that women are not readily welcomed into managerial ranks in retail stores although retailing is viewed as favourable for a woman’s career (Lam, 1992). Therefore, sexual division of labour is relatively more dominant in the retail industry. The employment pattern of sexual division of labour within the retail industry can be traced back to the history of the retail revolution occurred during the 1940s, which introduced “self-service” selling and sales technology. The technology “affected the labour market by deskilling the retail labour force and enabled the retail industry to use inexperienced labour” (Maguire 1991, p.130). For example, the career opportunities for the lower level staff in the sales and buying departments decreased as their jobs were either replaced by advertising and sales technology or taken up by the more unskilled part-time female employees whose wages were less costly (Bluestone, 1981). On the other hand, more men monopolised the managerial and technical positions which were regarded by management as central to strategic decision-making. The division of labour as a result of the retail revolution led to a polarised wage structure, with a majority of low-skilled high-turnover female workforce occupying the bottom, and a highly trained male professional-managerial group occupying the top of the pyramid (Manson, *et al.*, 1993).

The aforesaid pattern of women subordination in retailing can be found in Japanese department stores in Japan (Lam, 1992). The purpose of this research is to find out whether the Japanese department stores in Hong Kong practise a similar model of women subordination. This article reports the employment status of women in Japanese department stores in Hong Kong. It sheds some light on how women are employed in different hierarchical positions and functional responsibilities, and how the company’s human resource management practices have affected women’s employment status in the Japanese department stores in Hong Kong.

Research Methodology

The research employed a qualitative case study method. Two Japanese department stores - Co.A and Co.B were chosen for this study. The case study of these two department stores was conducted by in-depth interviews with a total of 10 Japanese expatriates - 7 male and 3 female, and 40 local employees - 10 male and 30 female (see Table 1 and Table 2 for their profiles), supplemented by secondary data collected from newspapers and the companies' documents and reports. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured approach. The researcher overcame a possible drawback of an outsider in the case companies as pointed out by Whyte (1984), since she has had a total of three years working experience in the two case department stores, and thus was not a stranger to the way of retail store life. The researcher attempted to share the view, adopted the perspectives of the interviewees in the workplace and discovered the meaning of social relations of the members in the case companies, but had not assumed a "native identity by striving to maintain a consciousness and respect for what she is and a consciousness and respect for what her hosts are" (Wax 1983, p. 241).

Table 1
The Profile of Interviewees in Co.A

<u>Hierarchical Levels</u>	<u>Departments</u>	<u>Nationalities/Gender/Number</u>
1. Top Management	-	Japanese (Male:1)
2. Managerial		
-Operational	Apparel, Household, Food	Japanese (Male:2) Local (Male:5, Female: 1)
-Administrative	General Affairs, Accounting, Personnel, EDP	Japanese (Female: 2) Local (Female: 4)
3. Supervisory		
-Operational	Apparel, Household, Food	Local (Female: 3)
-Administrative	General Affairs, Accounting, Personnel, EDP	Local (Female: 3)
4. Sales	Apparel, Household, Food	Local (Female: 4)

Total number of Japanese male interviewees: 3, total number of Japanese female interviewees: 2, total number of local male interviewees: 5, and the total number of local female interviewees: 15.

Table 2**The Profile of Interviewees in Co.B**

<u>Hierarchical Levels</u>	<u>Departments</u>	<u>Nationalities/Gender/Number</u>
1. Top Management	-	Japanese (Male:2)
2. Managerial		
-Operational	Apparel, Household, Food	Japanese (Male:2) Local (Male:5, Female: 1)
-Administrative	General Affairs, Accounting, Personnel, EDP	Japanese (Female: 1) Local (Female: 4)
3. Supervisory		
-Operational	Apparel, Household, Food	Local (Female: 3)
-Administrative	General Affairs, Accounting, Personnel, EDP	Local (Female: 3)
4. Sales	Apparel, Household, Food	Local (Female: 4)

Total number of Japanese male interviewees: 4, total number of Japanese female interviewees: 1, total number of local male interviewees: 5, and total number of local female interviewees: 15

The Employment Pattern of Women

The empirical evidence from the case study of Co.A and Co.B shows that both the Japanese and local female employees are subjected to job segregation. Job segregation is a tendency for women to work almost exclusively in either particular functional departments or hierarchical levels. The job segregation for women occurs in an organisation both horizontally (applying to different functional departments), and vertically (applying to hierarchical levels and responsibilities). First, both department stores, Co.A and Co.B, employ a large number of part-time sales staff - 1,900 in Co.A, and 670 in Co.B - at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy. The ratio of part-time and full-time employees is nearly 1 to 1 in Co.A and 1 to 2 in

Co.B¹. Furthermore, the management of both department stores expressed that they intend to increase the number of part-time employees.

Second, both department stores employ a large number of full-time female employees in the lower level jobs such as sales and buying. Co.A employs 1,620 (81 percent), and Co.B employs 902 (82 percent) local full-time female employees in the lower level jobs. On the other hand, most of the senior managerial positions which have the power of decision-making and control are occupied by the Japanese male expatriate managers - 35 Japanese male expatriates of Co.A occupy 76 percent of the 46 senior managerial positions, and 10 Japanese male expatriates of Co.B occupy 28.5 percent of the 35 senior managerial positions. The remaining 11 senior positions of Co.A are occupied by 9 (81.8 percent) local male managers, and 21 (84 percent) local male managers occupy the remaining 25 senior positions of Co.B. In other words, few women work in senior managerial positions - only 2 (18.2 percent) senior positions in Co.A, and 4 (16 percent) senior positions in Co.B are occupied by women.

Last but not least, women dominate in functional areas of sales promotion, display, publicity, advertising, personnel, training and buying among the non-sales related jobs; and underwear and baby sections in the apparel and household departments among the sales related jobs. Women are a minority in food operation, accounting, finance, real estate, security, electronic data processing and marketing. Essentially, women are segregated into functional departments which have been regarded as traditionally suitable for women. Furthermore, the women occupying managerial positions tend to dominate lower-level managerial positions such as buyers or assistant managers.

The above employment pattern of women in Co.A and Co.B shows that both horizontal and vertical segregation exist in the case department stores since most of the lower level jobs in the flat-pyramid organisational structure are occupied by women, topped by a pinnacle of men in senior management positions. According to empirical evidence, the job segregation among women can be traced to the company's human resource management practices (HRM) which cause constraints in women's career.

¹ In 1996, the total number of full-time employees is 2,000 in Co.A, and 1,100 in Co.B.

Constraints of Human Resource Management on Women Employment

The female employees of Co.A and Co.B are employed in a subordinated position to men. The major constraints in women's career in these two companies can be attributed to the Japanese HRM practices which include recruitment and selection, job assignment and promotion, training and development and remuneration. Since the existing literature neglected the factors of HRM practices and their constraints which have led to the subordinate employment status of women (Collinson, et al., 1990), these HRM constraints imposed on women in the case department stores will be examined in detail.

Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment and selection are the key aspects of management purchase of labour power. There are two sources of power within organisations - management power over labour and men's power over women. Nevertheless, existing studies fail to recognise men's power over women in which "some groups of male workers have organised either intentionally or unintentionally to restrict women's entry into employment" (Collinson, et al., 1990, p.14). The men's power over women is usually related to non job-related factors which place limitations on female applicants during the recruitment and selection process (Yunker, 1990). The non job-related factors are access discriminations which can be rooted in society at large. For example, the stereotyping of women is one of the non job-related factors which tends to impose selection and placement limitations on women, and makes female employees occupy certain organisational positions because these positions are believed to be more compatible with the male's view of the female role.

In the process of recruitment and selection, the empirical evidence shows that both case companies take the first step to screen the appropriate candidate through recruitment advertisements. From the 100 recruitment advertisements of Co.A and Co.B placed in job agencies, newspapers and recruitment posters collected during 1993-1995, 74 advertisements indicated the preferred sex, age, marital status, mobility and experience for certain positions. This clearly shows that the management tends to impose sex-typing and stereotyping to the initial recruitment process. When the management of Co.A and Co.B were asked why they

indicated sex preference in the recruitment ads, a majority of Japanese interviewees stated that it is natural for particular jobs to be carried out by a particular sex (sex typing), and some of the Japanese interviewees mentioned that there are sex differences in physical and temperamental characteristics and abilities (stereotyping). A Japanese manager of the food department of Co.A explained, "We need male staff who can perform dirty jobs such as lifting heavy food items, cutting fish and butchery because these dirty jobs can only be performed by men". A Hong Kong manager of the apparel department of Co.B said, "Women have good fashion sense and know what the housewives - our major customers - want. Therefore, we tend to employ women as the buyers in fashion and household departments, especially for the underwear and baby products".

Furthermore, when asked how the stereotype of women have affected their employment status, 23 (76.7 percent) female interviewees commented that they were offered jobs with either a lower initial salary, a dead-end career ladder or less responsibilities. For example, a female assistant manager of the administration department of Co.A explained:

I have worked for the company since 1984. I joined this company because I wanted a change in my work environment since I had worked for Wing On [a local department store] for 10 years before. When I joined this company, I worked for customer services because of my past experience. However, I requested a transfer because I think there were not many opportunities for career development in the department. In my sixth year with this company, the personnel department transferred me to the administration department. Although I had been transferred to another department and have been promoted two times in the last 12 years, I feel that I am working in a dead-end department since I do not think I can get further promotion. My immediate superior has a degree, and I don't think I can go back to school in my age and with my family responsibility. I think I have to work in the same position for the rest of my life here.

The recruitment preference based on age and marital status is another form of access discrimination especially for the middle-aged married women. It is because the decision of recruitment and selection is not only based on the criterion of suitability which is measured by

job requirements and qualification, but also on the criterion of acceptability which is measured by personality and characteristics such as age and marital status of the job applicants (Collinson, et al., 1990, p.61) A majority (95 percent) of the local interviewees recalled that they were explicitly asked by the recruiters of the two case companies to explain their marital and family conditions during their recruitment interviews. When the management was asked why they need the information about job applicants' marital and family conditions, many Japanese managers explained that the information helps them to make selection decisions. A Japanese personnel manager of Co.B stated:

A married male applicant with children and home mortgage can be considered as more reliable and stable. Nevertheless, this family condition is considered a burden for a female applicant because for a woman, family obligation may mean a burden as she may not be able to work overtime when required, and she is more prone to leave her job to raise her children.

Furthermore, since Japanese department stores tend not to have specific and detailed job description for most of the managerial jobs, this makes access discrimination easier to impose on women when they apply for the senior managerial positions. It is because when there is no clear-cut job description, the recruiters tend to use more subjective acceptability criteria based on sex, personality, age and marital status to select candidates. For example, a Japanese personnel manager of Co.A explained why they prefer to recruit male graduates in the graduate trainee programme:

Through my 25 years with the company in Japan, Singapore, United States and Hong Kong, I have seen many employment problems with women. They either leave the company after getting married and pregnant, or as a result of being too aggressive and impatient with their career development in the company. Therefore, the basic problem of women is related to their higher labour turnover rate.

From the above empirical evidence, women are regarded as having lower stability or higher mobility, lower motivation and ambition due to their perceived role in the domestic labour market. Therefore, they have to face many constraints and barriers in the recruitment

and selection. Nevertheless, even after women have overcome the initial barriers of recruitment and selection, they have to face many other barriers for their career development in the company. These barriers are related to the treatment discriminations which is defined as non job-related limitations placed upon women once they are employed as organisational members (Yunker, 1990). Women tend to be subjected to treatment discrimination in the following HRM practices - job assignment and promotion, training and development and remuneration.

Job Assignment and Promotion

The rationale for discriminating women in the job assignment and promotion are similar to those in the recruitment process. Women are usually assigned or promoted to jobs according to first, the nature of the job - the requirement of physical strength, external contact and overtime; and second, the acceptability criteria - sex, age, marital status and mobility. When asked why there were few women working in the senior positions in the departments of food, accounting, finance, real estate, security and electronic data processing, all Japanese and some local male managers replied that it is attributable to the fact that few women are good at these functional areas.

This sexual division of labour in different functional areas between male and female employees in Japanese department stores can be illustrated by the job assignment for the graduate trainees in Co.A. According to a local assistant training manager and two local female floor-in-charge who received the graduate training programme in 1994, there were 3 male and 5 female graduate trainees recruited in 1994. All the trainees were recruited and selected, trained and paid on the same basis initially. Nevertheless, although the female trainees started off at the same employment condition as their male counterparts, the male and female trainees were assigned to different career tracks. After the one-year graduate training, the 3 male trainees were assigned to work in the merchandising department at the head office, and the 3 (2 resigned during training) female graduate trainees were assigned to store operations on the sales floor. The local assistant training manager commented:

The division of assignments is based on the Japanese perception that the female trainees are more suitable to supervise the sales staff and supervisors who are predominately women. However, this has deprived the female trainees from the basic knowledge training of merchandising which is a prerequisite for further career development in the company. In this case, because of the management's stereotyping in the job assignment, the male trainees has an advantage over their female counterparts.

The two ex-graduate trainees reiterated:

We appealed to the personnel department in 1995 expressing our desire to join the merchandising department. However, the local personnel manager told us to be patient in our jobs because we may be able to transfer to the merchandising department when there are vacancies. As the personnel department cannot help us, we appealed to the Chairman. However, we haven't heard anything since then.

Furthermore, many female interviewees pointed out that the Japanese management practice of cross-functional job assignment has led to unfair job assignments. A female sales promotion manager of Co.B said, "I have worked in this company for 10 years. During the peak seasons of Christmas and Chinese New Year, Japanese managers always told the female staff working in the office to work on the sales floor. However, the male managers are exempted from the chores".

When asked why most of the lower positions are occupied by women and most of the top management positions are occupied by men, a majority of the interviewees explained that it is a general situation in retail industry. A local male department manager of Co.A used an example of a female sales supervisor of his department to indicate the difficulty for lower level staff to be promoted to more senior positions:

I have an intention to promote the long-serving staff to more senior positions. I have a female sales supervisor who has worked for us since 1984, and she has been working in the retail industry for the past 19 years. Three year ago [in 1993], I suggested to her

to develop her career by taking up the merchandising jobs. I told her that she can be promoted further up in the organisational hierarchy on the condition that she acquires broader retail knowledge including merchandising. Nevertheless, after one month of her transfer to the merchandising department, she came to ask me whether she could go back to work on the sales floor for the following reasons: "I acquire the knowledge of sales through experience. I am very happy to work on the sales-floor because this is my expert area. I am proud of my sales job because I work better in sales than the new graduate recruits although I only studied up to Form Three (the minimum compulsory education level). However, after transferred to the merchandising department, I feel that I am a stupid person because I find it difficult to learn new things such as doing forecasting which involves all the calculation jobs. I am told to take up some crash courses on maths in adult learning school in the evening. However, I cannot make it because I have to look after my children . . ."

As a result, the local manager had to report the case to his Japanese superior. The manager recalled, "My Japanese manager ridiculed me to trust female subordinates have the ability for career development, and told me not to waste my effort on women in the future. I think this incident has reinforced the Japanese belief that women are less likely to be trained and developed due to their assumed high priority placed on their home lives". The above empirical evidence clearly indicates sex role segregation exists in the job assignment and promotion in Japanese department stores.

Training and Development

It is a general trend that the retail industry provides minimal training to the lower sales staff which are mainly occupied by women. The sales staff of both department stores receive a half-day induction only, and mainly on-the-job training through consultation with their supervisors during work. They receive off-the-job training mainly from the regular morning meetings. On the other hand, the local staff above general/sales grades have more training opportunity such as supervisory workshops, training in Japan and graduate training programmes. The training manager of Co.A explained, "The company places less training for the lower level sales staff because they have a high labour turnover rate. In the early 1990s

when labour shortage was very serious in Hong Kong, the turnover rate for the sales staff was higher than 55 percent in our company although the industry average in Hong Kong was 40 percent". The polarised training opportunity for men at the higher level jobs and women at the lower level jobs seems to have intensified with the introduction of retail technology such as electronic point-of-sale (EPOS) in Co.B. The managing director of Co.B explained:

Due to the shorter life cycle of retail business, the business has become extremely competitive. We have to introduce retail technology based on electronic information in 1994. In order to facilitate the implementation of the new retail technology, we have recruited many qualified staff from professional associations and institutions, and send them to Japan many times to learn our system in Japan. Due to the requirement of frequent training trips to Japan, we tend to employ men who are believed to be better able to handle these overseas trips than women.

Remuneration

The high labour turnover among the lower level sales staff has not only refrained many department stores from providing training to them, but has also induced a low wage vicious cycle among them. This phenomenon is called the vicious cycle of retailing (Wong, 1994) which is related to the characteristics of the retail industry. Regarding this phenomenon, the local personnel manager of Co.B explained:

Generally, junior sales staff receive low wages - an average of HK\$5,000 which is not much higher than the minimum wage in Hong Kong. Thus, many of the more capable and attractive staff are induced to other industries which have more pay and training. The relative low wages in the retail industry can only attract women who have either less experience or domestic obligation, which perpetuates the low-wage vicious cycle of retailing. Therefore, we think it is sensible to employ more part-time sales staff because they are not only less costly, but also easier to recruit during the labour shortage period, and easier to adjust their number during recession.

The part-time sales staff who are predominately women who are less costly since their income is based on an hourly rate. They may be given a bonus depending on the company profit, and they enjoy very limited fringe benefits. They are only entitled to go to company party and free lunch after working for eight hours continuously in a day. Therefore, compared to the full-time staff who are entitled to a monthly salary, an annual bonus and many fringe benefits including medical, retirement plan, paid vacation, company party, free lunch, transport and attendance allowance and off-the-job training, the part-time female staff are employed with a inferior condition and a lower remuneration package. The local personnel manager of Co.B continued, "Since almost all part-time employees are married women with children and have domestic obligations, they have to accept the inferior employment condition".

The low-wage vicious cycle does not only occur among the part-time sales staff, but also among the full-time female sales staff. A female sales supervisor of Co.B who is in her late-thirties explained how her income was cut as a result of her age:

I used to work for Mitsukoshi Department Store in Tsimshatsui since it opened in 1988. However, I was made redundant as a result of its closing in mid-1995. I used to earn more than HK\$10,000 each month. After I was made redundant, I tried very hard to look for another job in other retail stores for about half a year. In many job interviews, I was told that I am too old to ask for the income I used to earn in Mitsukoshi. Therefore, I have to lower my salary to HK\$8,500 when I applied for jobs. Even I have done so, many companies told me that they prefer younger applicants who just ask for HK\$5,000 only. Eventually, I am fortunate to find a new job in this company with only 15 percent cut in salary. I heard from many of my former colleagues that they have to accept a substantial cut of income (20 to 40 percent) in their new jobs.

On the other hand, due to the introduction of electronic information technology, Co.B has to pay higher salary to the male professionals because of their short market supply. This further widens the wage gap between the male management at the top and female sales staff at the bottom of the company's hierarchy.

Implications

Japanese Preconception of Women

Historically, social conditioning, overt and subtle discrimination and prevailing stereotypes and notions of male/female (sex) roles have all combined to keep women out of the senior managerial positions. Nevertheless, from the human resource management practices adopted by the two Japanese department stores, women seems to have many organisational constraints which either confine them to lower level jobs, or limit them from occupying senior managerial positions which can be attributable to the low employment status of women in Japan. When the Japanese male expatriates are assigned to work overseas, they are so used to the Japanese employment system in which women are employed as “office ladies” who perform clerical and supporting jobs for men. The Japanese male expatriate managers often have difficulty in accepting local female employees to take up more responsible positions. In the US and European countries, many Japanese expatriate managers are forced to become sensitive to the norms of behaviour in the Western countries because they have had tough experiences with the sex discrimination and anti-harassment legislation in these countries. Nevertheless, in Asia, the Japanese male managers still have an assumption that Asian women are like the Japanese women who defer to men (Thome and McAuley, 1992). Therefore, this has partly caused the lower employment status of women in the case Japanese department stores.

Characteristics of Retail Industry

Another factor leading to the lower employment status of female employees in the two Japanese retail stores and their employment pattern, such as discriminatory job assignment, promotion and polarised wages is related to the characteristics of the retail industry. The retail industry has gone through the retail revolution which has deskilled the lower level sales jobs, and facilitated women who have a domestic obligation to take up part-time jobs at the lower level. Nevertheless, once women enter this type of job, it is difficult for them to take up an assignment in other functional areas, and thus limiting their promotion opportunities. This phenomenon can be attributable to first, the job specifics in each functional area of retailing

which differ greatly from each other (Lusch and Dunne, 1993). Second, jobs are very specialised in the lower hierarchy in retailing especially for the sales and supervisory levels (Lewison, 1994). Therefore, it is more difficult for the lower level staff to adapt to new day-to-day operations in different lines of trade or functional areas. In this respect, women in the lower level jobs find it more difficult to develop their career by working up the hierarchical levels which involve acquiring broader knowledge of the department stores.

Conclusion

Japanese investment in the Hong Kong retail sector has contributed to providing many local job opportunities. Japanese department stores employed over 7,800 in Hong Kong by June 1995 which accounted for 42.5 percent of the total number of 18,242 in department store employment in Hong Kong (Tremblay, 1991). Nevertheless, the local people do not want the Japanese to bring in any discriminatory practices such as sexual segregation of women along with the investment and job opportunities. All female interviewees above the sales levels expressed that the sexual segregation of women from moving up to the managerial positions creates de-motivating effects for them to work in Japanese department stores. As Hong Kong women are working hard to change their employment opportunity and eliminate some of the barriers, real or perceived, that may have restricted their access to more senior managerial positions (Tijden, 1991), it is unwise for the Japanese not to be sensitive to the issues of women's employment status in their companies.

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