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Shining Women: Representations of Women and Work in  
Contemporary Japanese TV Dramas

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## Abstract

This thesis considers the increasing visibility of working women in Japanese TV dramas by analysing three recent dramas from 2016, *Nigeru wa Haji da ga Yaku ni Tatsu*, *Jimi ni Sugoi: Kōetsu Gāru Kōno Etsuko*, and *Eigyō Buchō: Kira Natsuko*. It situates them within the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context to examine contemporary discourses of women's labour force participation in Japan. It pays particular attention to the Abe government's Womenomics initiatives which aim to boost women's participation rates and representation in the workforce in response to significant demographic challenges and a stagnating economy. The government's rhetoric of empowering women through 'creating a society in which women shine' has been critiqued as a form of neoliberal feminism. This thesis supports such a contention and argues that it is worth considering the interconnectivity of neoliberalism and post-feminism in contemporary articulations of women's work. It argues that each of the three dramas demonstrate elements of post-feminism through a complex interweaving of discourses of women's empowerment through paid work with traditional gender norms that reinscribe female caregiving and domesticity. It also contributes to a growing body of work that demonstrates that it is both necessary and worthwhile to consider post-feminism beyond the 'Western' context. Through analysing dominant discourses of women's labour force participation, this thesis considers what subjectivities are included in the construct of a 'shining woman'.

## Preface and Acknowledgements

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Japanese names are written following the Japanese convention of surname preceding the given name.

Japanese terms are written in Romanised script according to the Hepburn system which uses macrons to indicate long vowels.

Full titles of the three analysed dramas are provided at first mention in the introduction and once more at the beginning of each of the case studies in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Otherwise, they are referred to by their shortened titles.

For supplementary dramas, the original title is provided in Romanised script with the English translation and year of production in parentheses in the first instance.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction: Creating a TV Drama in Which Women Shine

Speaking at the Sixty-Eighth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in September, 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced the government's intention to "create a society in which women shine" (*josei ga kagayaku shakai wo tsukuru*, 女性が輝く社会をつくる) through the implementation of 'Womenomics', premised on the idea that "the more the advance of women in society is promoted, the higher the growth rate becomes" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013b). As part of Japan's Revitalisation Strategy, the Abe Administration has promoted women's empowerment and gender equality as a key objective, with one focus being on increasing the rate of women's labour force participation for the sake of economic growth. Alongside increased participation rates, the government has also set targets for improving the quality of and access to childcare, to further support working parents in the hopes of boosting the nation's low fertility rate. At first glance, the government's emphasis on gender equality in employment seems promising, considering that in 2016, Japan ranked 111 out of 144 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index. The gender disparity is particularly apparent in Japan's rank of 'economic participation and opportunity' and 'political empowerment' (WEF 2016). However, it is worth reading Womenomics as part of a wider global trend for governments and corporations, in particular, to promote female empowerment in order to capitalise on women's so-called 'economic potential'. Sydney Calkin describes this as the 'co-optation of feminism', whereby "much of the gender equality policy discourse is so closely tied to the advancement of a neoliberal economic policy agenda" (2015). Abe's Womenomics agenda seems a likely candidate for such critique with its focus on labour force participation and economic growth.

This attention to women's employment can be seen beyond the political realm as evidenced by the recent proliferation of TV dramas with working female protagonists within the last five or so years. In particular, the year 2016 saw a record number of primetime dramas with working female characters, accounting for over half of all prime time dramas aired that year (She 2017). This increased visibility of working women in TV dramas

suggests that these subjectivities are coming to occupy a greater space in the Japanese cultural imaginary. As Alisa Freedman and Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt contend, Japanese TV dramas “provide evidence of the widespread circulation of media discourses about women’s life choices,” and are thus a useful means of analysing “macro-level discourses on social change” (2011, 297-301). Following their argument, this thesis undertakes a close textual analysis of three of these recent dramas to examine the discursive negotiation of women’s labour in contemporary Japanese cultural texts. The three dramas analysed in this thesis were aired by commercial broadcasters in 2016 and each of them engaged with women’s employment differently. *Nigeru wa Haji da ga Yaku ni Tatsu* (‘Running Away is Embarrassing but Useful’, 逃げるは恥だが役に立つ, herein ‘*Nigehaji*’) which enjoyed widespread popularity in Japan in 2016, depicts a young university graduate who enters into a ‘contract marriage’ and earns a salary for carrying out the work of a housewife. *Jimi ni Sugoi: Kōetsu Gāru Kōno Etsuko* (‘Simply Great: Proofreader Girl Kōno Etsuko’, 地味にスゴイ! 校閲ガール・河野悦子, herein ‘*Jimi ni Sugoi*’) follows the trials of a 28-year-old woman whose aspirations to work as a fashion editor lead her to work as a proofreader, a job she initially scorns but learns to enjoy and thrive in as the drama progresses. The last drama, *Eigyō Buchō: Kira Natsuko* (‘Department Head: Kira Natsuko’, 営業部長：吉良奈津子, herein ‘*Eigyō Buchō*’), the least commercially successful of the three, depicts a woman in her forties who returns to work after maternity leave and struggles to balance her personal and career commitments. While it would be problematic to claim that these three texts can be read as representative of the wider body of recent dramas about women’s work in contemporary Japan, I contend that the close reading in this thesis contributes to the mapping of discursive patterns that appear in working women TV dramas.

Considering that producers strategically encode their dramas with what they anticipate will resonate most with viewers, the increased visibility of women’s work in TV dramas is a testament to its perceived widespread appeal as a source of entertainment and increasing presence in the wider cultural imaginary. These commercially driven products provide examples of sites of hegemonic discursive practice in that they serve the ideological

function of making, maintaining and reproducing dominant discourses. At the same time, working within this understanding that these dramas tend towards hegemonic discourse, they do allow space for contention and renegotiation. In her work on Japanese dramas, Kelly Hu acknowledges the skill of scriptwriters in the industry to work “within a framework of social norms that implicates the shows with particular power structures or... certain ideologies,” while also “creat[ing] alternative possibilities for resistance, or suggest[ing] ways of being outside existing social norms” (2010, 212). Thus, these dramas provide interesting examples of the way that recent dramas have reproduced and negotiated hegemonic discourses of gender and labour force participation. This is especially important given the current political context wherein the government is actively promoting women’s participation in the labour force in response to population concerns and a stagnating economy. Given that ideologies of female domesticity and caregiving continue to inform social practices and women’s identity negotiations, this emerging political discourse of women’s empowerment as ‘smart economics’ since Abe’s return to office in 2012, has the potential to disrupt the hegemony of such gender norms by realigning women’s ‘worth’ with productive labour outside of the household. That said, it is imperative to consider that in the process of this disruption, hegemonic discourses can be rearticulated in new forms which require further attention for critical analysis. In other words, the increased visibility of women’s work seems to destabilise and renegotiate the boundaries of hegemonic gender models without directly challenging traditional norms. This renegotiation seems to be enabled by post-feminist discourses which allow for the coexistence of traditional norms and the notion of women’s empowerment through paid labour, without seeming overtly contradictory. While the concept of post-feminism has seldom been used within the Japanese context, this thesis contends that it is a useful framework through which to analyse current gender discourses in TV dramas. Further, due to post-feminism’s imbrication with neoliberalism, analysing TV dramas within this framework allows for a consideration of how normative or ‘traditional’ gender roles for women are being maintained and also renegotiated in relation to the economy.

Following on from here, Chapter 2 provides an overview of relevant Cultural Studies theories on the relationship between cultural texts and the contexts within which they are



situated. It proceeds to a discussion of post-feminism and its applicability to the Japanese context when understood as transnational discourse, as well as the similar concept of neoliberal(ised) feminism. Subsequently, Chapter 3 discusses the recent history and current situation of women's employment, including the government's Womenomics initiatives and critique of its efficacy and limitations, to establish the social and political context in which recent TV dramas are being produced and consumed. Chapter 4 establishes the '*oshigoto*' (women's work) drama genre by first providing a brief overview of general trends in Japanese dramas since their inception. The second section conducts a review of the relevant literature on representations of women and work in Japanese TV dramas. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 each conduct close textual analysis of the three case study dramas. Chapter 5 analyses *Nigehaji*'s conceptualisation of the housewife model in relation to paid and unpaid labour, and draws on Angela McRobbie's notion of the "double entanglement" so as to consider how the drama interweaves a complex mix of traditional and progressive discourses in its consideration of women's work. Due to the complexity of this entanglement and the drama's importance as a 'social phenomenon', I have chosen to commit greater space to its analysis. Chapter 6 analyses *Jimi ni Sugoi* as an updated version of what Gabriella Lukács termed a 'labour fantasy' in her reading of the early work drama *Shomuni* ('General Affairs Section Two', 1998). It explores the relationship between hard work, pleasure, and consumption in the drama to consider how this fantasy is created. Chapter 7 analyses *Eigyō Buchō* as a feminisation of the corporate warrior narrative and considers how the role of motherhood is reified in its depiction of the challenges faced by working mothers. Lastly, Chapter 8 ties these three dramas together in a discussion of their wider significance. I argue that they are all characterised by what Rosalind Gill deems a 'postfeminist sensibility', in particular through a language of choice and empowerment that fits well within a neoliberal rationality and underplays the social structure that might constrain women's participation in the labour force. The discussion concludes with the contention that future research into the reception of women's work dramas would provide further valuable insight into how audiences are engaging with gendered discourses on women's employment in contemporary Japan.

## **Chapter 2. Constructing Meaning Through Cultural Texts**

### **2.1. Cultural Studies Theories**

This thesis examines TV dramas as cultural texts and seeks to examine their meanings in relation to the wider context in which they are situated. Cultural Studies provides a useful body of theory for this study, as much of its concern is with the relationship between power and culture as seen through discourses, texts and social context. This research is primarily concerned with analysing what Stuart Hall (1973) terms the “programme as ‘meaningful’ discourse,” in other words, examining the TV dramas as sites where meaning is created and negotiated. I contend that these three TV dramas are situated within the wider context of the Abe government’s Womenomics discourse and potentially play a role in restructuring the relationship between women and work in the current neoliberal economy. That is, these media texts do not merely reflect discourses on women and work, but they can both produce and support relevant ideologies.

The concept of ‘culture’ is in itself contested and difficult to clearly define, with varying approaches amongst disciplines, though Hall defines culture as, “the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society” (1986, 26). Cultural Studies engages with an “inclusive definition of culture” so that culture constitutes human practices and processes through which we make shared meaning, and the ‘texts’ are both products of and produce, these shared meanings (Storey 1996, 2). Thus, the notion that culture is essential, stable or fixed is rejected in favour of an understanding that it is fluid and in a constant process of renegotiation and rearticulation. Texts are “literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense,” and TV dramas are one form of this (Hall 1975, 17). Cultural Studies places emphasis on reading a text within the wider context in which it is situated—both the context that it is produced in and the context it produces. As John Storey notes, Cultural Studies “insists that the meaning of something always depends on context...it insists on multiple contexts, knowing that an object of study will look very

different in different contexts” (1996, 173). This is an important consideration in critical qualitative research which “draws on the relevant social, historical, political and/or economic context as well as...knowledge of the text’s place within the broader culture to understand the most likely sense-making strategies” (Brennen 2012, 206). Brennen reminds us that while there is never one ‘true’ way to read a text, meaning making is also not completely arbitrary so that grounding an interpretation of a text in the wider cultural context allows for a more ‘reasonable’ interpretation of its meaning.

Since the introduction of Antonio Gramsci’s formulation of ‘hegemony’ into Cultural Studies in the early 1970s, popular culture has been understood as a site where power is produced, negotiated and contested. Earlier conceptions of popular culture, most commonly associated with the Frankfurt School, perceived of it as a form of culture imposed upon the people by capitalist industries, and denied the agency of the consumer by assuming that audiences would read the same meaning that was intended by the producers, effectively being ‘cultural dupes’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972). However, this conception of popular culture has been extensively challenged and has since been rejected in favour of an understanding that popular culture functions as a complicated site where power is negotiated.

### ***Representation and Discourse***

Representation is one of the key processes within what Du Gay (1997) terms the ‘cultural circuit’, that is the process of using language to produce and exchange meaning amongst members of a culture. Language, in this sense, is understood broadly and can, therefore, include sounds, images, words and objects that function as signs (they signify something and thus convey a meaning). Hall (1997) notes that constructionist approaches to representation have been particularly influential in Cultural Studies. Put simply, the constructionist approach relies on the idea that things themselves do not have meaning unless we *construct* meaning using representational systems through concepts and signs. In this sense, the material world must be understood as separate from symbolic practices which seek to make meaning of the world through language, meaning and representation. The two major strands of this approach

are Saussure's semiotic approach and Foucault's discursive approach, of which the latter is more relevant to my research for its focus on discourse.

Foucault's concept of discourse is crucial to the development of Cultural Studies' understanding of meaning-making and communication. In Foucauldian terms, discourse is not purely linguistic but is a system of representation that includes both language and practice. Hall explains Foucauldian discourse as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment," recognising that "since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do... all practices have a discursive aspect" (1997). Ultimately, Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse is concerned with the relationship between knowledge and language and recognises that knowledge is constructed through discourse. According to Foucault, nothing which is meaningful exists outside of discourse. In other words, meaning and meaningful practice can only be produced within discourse. When a pattern of discursive events that refer to the same object exists across multiple sites, this is referred to as a 'discursive formation'.

Foucault emphasises the historical specificity of discourse, representation and knowledge. He argues that they are specific to particular societies and times so that a phenomenon that might occur at one point in history would not necessarily appear at another point. In other words, discourses are determined by the historical and material conditions in which they appear and are subsequently regulated by these conditions. This is exemplified in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), wherein he argues that discourses of 'homosexuality' could only have appeared within the context of late nineteenth century discourses and practices of morality, legality, and psychiatry. Working with this understanding of historical specificity, this thesis locates recent TV dramas about working women as discursive formations that have arisen in a specific historical and social context where discourses of women's paid labour have received significant attention. These dramas are products of their time and could not have been produced fifty years ago in a context where the ideology of women's domesticity had stronger cultural currency than today. Rather, over the last thirty or so years since the

Equal Employment Opportunity Law and subsequent laws and initiatives, discourses of women's paid labour have become more dominant and legitimated. Within this context, TV dramas as a form of mainstream, popular culture have increasingly incorporated relevant discourses and are creating new subjectivities for working women.

### ***Hegemony, Ideology and Power***

The concept of hegemony is extremely useful in recognising how power is not fixed or permanent. It must be maintained through processes of seeking consent, or otherwise can be challenged or rearticulated. Popular culture is often understood to be a site of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate social groups. The conception of ideology in current Cultural Studies and Media Studies is rooted in the Marxian notion that all systems of meaning, values and ideas are produced through social and economic structures. Because society is structured by relations of power, these systems of meaning are embedded in and circulated through social, cultural and media institutions, the most powerful and dominant of which are imbued with ideological power. Thus it is ensured that those particular systems of meaning structure our lived experience. According to Louis Althusser, ideology, "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," and this operates through 'Ideological State Apparatuses', such as religious, educational and media institutions ([1971] 2001, 109). While not necessarily state-controlled, these institutions often serve the interests of the state and maintain its power through systems of values, beliefs and ideas which affect concrete practice. For Althusser, ideology "hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects," thus suggesting that subject positions are constructed through ideological discourse (117). However, this conception of ideology does not allow much space for the subject's contestation and struggle against ideological power, and as such, since the 1970s, Cultural Studies has seen a turn to Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' so as to recognise ideological struggle. Hegemony is understood as the process of making, maintaining and reproducing dominance, which allows for an understanding that social power is never fixed, but can be gained through seeking and ensuring consent. In other words, hegemony is not a given but must be renegotiated and won for the maintenance of social

power by the dominant group. It can thus be challenged and opposed and rearticulated in alternate forms. Further, the role of pleasure and affect in this negotiation of power is important, as Foucault argues that “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted,” is not that it “weigh[s] on us like a force that says no” but that it “produces things, induces pleasure” (1980, 119). The role of pleasure in securing power is particularly relevant to the analysis of TV dramas, given that they are designed for viewers’ entertainment and enjoyment.

Stuart Hall proposed an important model of encoding and decoding televisual communication in 1973 which pays attention to the way in which meaning is transmitted and circulated, passing through three distinct phases from production to consumption. Hall discusses this model primarily in regards to news media, but his insight into the transmission of meaning is useful in analysing TV dramas. The first process of encoding is the transmission of meaning by the producer, as their interpretation of a ‘raw’ event is ‘encoded’ in discourse. That is, they cannot transmit the event in its original form, but make decisions around how to signify this event through televisual discourse. In the second stage, this transmission takes the form of ‘meaningful’ televisual discourse as a text, for example in the form of a television drama or a news report. This is the ‘meaning’ that was encoded in the process of production, as Hall reminds us that “[r]eality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse” (1980, 121). The third stage is the process by which the consumer ‘decodes’ the discursive interpretation of the original event to make meaning of it. Hall’s model proposes three hypothetical decoding positions from which audiences make meaning of the text: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated code, and the oppositional code. This acknowledges how audience decoding can range from drawing meaning similar to the producers’ intended ‘preferred’ or dominant code, to an oppositional reading.

This thesis pays particular attention to the second stage of this model by focusing on the text as meaningful discourse. Of course, since the 1990s, research by scholars such as

David Morley and Ien Ang has encouraged a turn to audience studies, or reception studies, which is particularly interested in the decoding process and the way in which audiences make meaning of a text. Regardless of the recent focus on reception, it is still essential to recognise the ways that the text as 'meaningful discourse' guides the reader and proposes 'preferred' meanings. Readings of texts will differ by the subject position of the decoder (Morley 1980), but meaning is not infinite and textual analysis remains useful to analyse the way that the dominant discourses in texts can prepare particular subject positions for the audience. This thesis critically engages with TV dramas at the textual level to consider how they function as sites of hegemonic discourse.

While acknowledging the polysemic nature of texts, Hall (1980) argues that there are strands of meaning in texts that are 'preferred' or 'dominant', in that they are privileged over other discourses. In this regard, the dominant discourses in the texts prepare and invite the audience into specific subject positions. In particular, the "hegemonic project" of popular TV series, "is to organise consensus around both dominant ideological conceptions...and dominant ideological responses to contemporary anxieties" (Thornham and Purvis 2004, 80). Further, Colin MacArthur makes the argument that all television, including TV dramas, serves an ideological function, considering that "there will be a relationship between the popularity of a programme and the extent to which it reinforces the ideological position of the majority audience" (1981, 288). Similarly, John Fiske acknowledges that popular culture is generally produced by capitalist culture industries, but also insists that "the power of audiences-as-producers in the cultural economy is considerable" (1987, 313). Fiske proposes that the tastes and demands of the consumers of cultural commodities affect the production of products, as producers must work hard to appeal to their audiences (1989, 8). Grossberg further emphasises the inextricable relationship between text and context, and the importance of understanding the codes and meanings communicated in mass media and popular culture. Such texts "play an important role in producing the shared codes and maps of meaning that come to define the world we live in." Grossberg (2006, 160). In other words, the significance of analysing popular texts goes beyond understanding how they represent the cultural context

in which they are produced or intend to reflect, but have implications in producing the reality that we live in.

### ***The Social and Cultural Imaginary***

The concept of the social or cultural imaginary is also useful in considering the role that cultural texts play in the way that we make meaning of our social surroundings and conceptions of social belonging, as well as in recognising the affective capacity of imagination. Early work by Cornelius Castoriadis on society's imaginary nature suggests that 'social imaginary significations' "create a proper world for the society considered—in fact, they are this world; and they shape the psyche of individuals. They create a 'representation' of the world, including society itself and its place in this world" (1994). According to Castoriadis, society is primarily made up of complex processes of social imaginary significations that make both collective and individual life meaningful (2007, 216). Similarly, the work of Benedict Anderson (2006), despite being primarily concerned with notions of national identity and nationalism, has also contributed to an understanding of the role that imagination plays in constructions of society. In this regard, Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' posits that nations are socially constructed through the imaginings of people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Charles Taylor conceives of the social imaginary as the ways that "people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others,... the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (2004, 23). Taylor emphasises that the process of imagining is often expressed through the transmission of images and stories, and that that the social imaginary comes to be shared by large groups of people. In other words, the social imaginary shapes a common understanding of society which legitimises common practices, so that it "begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things," so that they seem perfectly natural (29). Similarly, Graham Ward emphasises how "the imaginary realm is culturally conditioned," meaning that people's perceptions of social belonging, their relationships with those around them and their sense of community are all mediated through the cultural imaginary (2005, 160-2). Ward



suggests that the cultural imaginary is a “creative resource for the formation of images of sociality,” which attests to the role of cultural images and texts in the way that we imagine our social surroundings (216).

Furthermore, the notion of the imaginary also goes beyond meaning creation to acknowledge the role of affect in this process, as is expressed in Gabriella Lukács’ analysis of dramas as ‘emotional products’. Lukács contends that dramas are “highly emotionalized products whose appeal lies...in their capacity to serve as vehicles to communicate a sense of belonging to a community...a sense of membership in lifestyle and attitude communities” (2010, 119). This point recognises viewers’ emotional engagement with TV dramas, where these texts incorporate affective devices to create an imagined feeling of intimacy amongst viewers. Lastly, the concept of the imaginary is helpful in understanding how TV dramas are never simply cultural representations but are involved in processes of meaning production beyond the text, in that while they “expose real contexts, they also propose a fantasy or ‘possible new reality’” (Poerwandari, De Thouars, and Hirano 2014, 122). This sentiment is echoed by Lisa Yuk Ming Yeung who suggests that Japanese TV dramas offer “space for viewers to take flight, to escape, to slip into fantasy from the routine of mundane life,” as well as allowing space “for transferring from this fantasy into reality” (2004, 95-6). In this regard, because processes of the imagination have the potential to condition reality, it is important to consider how dominant discourses in cultural texts guide viewers in (re)imagining society as well as their own place in it.

## **2.2. Post-feminism in Popular Culture Texts**

*“Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’, these elements [of feminism] are then converted into much more individualistic discourses, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism.”*

-Angela McRobbie

This thesis draws on the notion of a post-feminist sensibility as a useful tool to better understand the three chosen TV dramas’ complex and often contradictory engagement with discourses on women and work in twenty-first century Japan. In examining the discourses of

working women in Japanese popular culture, specifically television dramas, I have begun to sense a curiously complex mix of discourses that both affirm and undermine feminist approaches. This could be described as a kind of selective use of feminist discourses in a way that fits with McRobbie's description of a "new guise", and a "kind of substitute for feminism" (2009, 1). McRobbie is referring here to post-feminism, a term which has been understood and applied in multiple ways. While post-feminism can and has been understood as a 'backlash' to feminism, as proposed by Susan Faludi, or as a culturally specific historical shift, the understanding of post-feminism that I am working with is what Rosalind Gill (2007) has termed a 'sensibility'. Rather than considering post-feminism as an analytical perspective, Gill argues that it is more productive to work with this concept of post-feminism as a sensibility that characterises an increasing number of contemporary media products. She suggests that "postfeminist media culture should be our critical object—a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire" (148). Post-feminism is generally understood to refer to what McRobbie (2009, 13) has termed the 'double entanglement' of feminist and antifeminist ideas so that a post-feminist text might incorporate elements of traditional gender norms and celebrate particular strands of feminism. In particular, post-feminist discourse is constituted by a number of stable features that include the notion of femininity as a bodily property and natural sexual difference; a focus on (often sexual) subjectification over objectification; an emphasis on self-surveillance and monitoring; the notion that individualism, choice and empowerment are of paramount importance to women; the idea that gender equality has been achieved making activism redundant; a 'makeover paradigm'; and lastly the promotion of consumerism and commodification of difference (Gill 2007; Butler 2013). Critically, post-feminist discourse has been noted by a number of feminist scholars to share much in common with the neoliberal logic of individual responsibility, free choice and autonomy (Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009; Tasker and Negra 2007).

Particular media texts have received considerable attention as articulations of post-feminist discourse: *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Bridget Jones*. What seems to signify these texts as post-feminist is their subjects' complicated negotiation between feminism and femininity, their simultaneous avowal and disavowal of feminist discourses, and a celebration

of female sexual liberation, empowerment, individualism and economic independence (Southard 2008; Moseley and Read 2002; Arthurs 2003). As McRobbie asserts, these post-feminist texts invoke “feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved...that it is no longer needed, that it is a spent force,” therefore allowing characters like Bridget Jones to choose ‘old-fashioned femininity’, despite the advent of feminism (2004, 255). Unsurprisingly, this focus on a very narrow set of texts with mostly middle-class, white, heterosexual women, has been challenged and there is a call for an increasingly intersectional and diverse critical analysis of post-feminist discourse in popular culture (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016, 619-20).

To date, much of the scholarship on post-feminist discourse has focussed its attention on the American or British context. Furthermore, Projansky asserts that “the central figure of postfeminist discourses is a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman” (2001, 12). While scholars have acknowledged the often exclusionary construction of femininity in post-feminist discourse, comparatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which this discursive formation affects and is negotiated by non-heterosexual, non-middle-class and non-white subjects. Jess Butler (Butler, 48-9) is particularly critical of this tendency for feminist scholars to focus on the exclusionary nature of post-feminism and argues for greater intersectionality, especially in relation to Western women of colour. Moving beyond the ‘Western’ context, it becomes increasingly difficult to find literature engaging with post-feminism, though Michelle Lazar, Simidele Dosekun, and Joel Gwynne, in particular, provide valuable contributions to the field which have informed my research. Lazar (2006, 505-17). recognises the historical origins of post-feminism and media culture as having developed in the ‘West’ (America and Europe), but contends that it has since become a global discourse, in part due to the circulation of such discourse by international media. Her research exemplifies that post-feminism can be articulated at the “glocal” level, by considering how the global circulation of post-feminist discourse intersects with and is localised in the culturally specific Singaporean context (2009, 371-400). Dosekun notes that because the majority of literature on post-feminism has been informed by the notion of post-feminist culture as Western culture, “the possibilities of its emergence elsewhere have not

been sufficiently imagined, theorized or researched” (2015, 961). She makes a strong argument for reconceptualising post-feminism as transnational culture, considering its discursive and material nature is “fundamentally mediated and commodified”, therefore rendering its easy transmission across borders (961). In a similar vein to Lazar, Dosekun argues that globalisation, and in particular, “global neoliberal institutions and connectivities”, have facilitated the transnational consumption and localisation of post-feminist discourses (2015, 968). Crucially, post-feminism is understood as a ‘hollowing out’ of and commodified version of feminism—one which does not necessitate the consumer’s explicit consciousness of feminism and its historical origins. In other words, its very nature as a depoliticised adaptation of feminism allows post-feminism to be readily consumable to a transnational audience, even in cultural contexts which have not witnessed or been directly influenced by widespread feminist movements. Thus, Dosekun’s understanding of post-feminism as transnational culture is useful to my reading of Japanese television dramas because it provides me with an analytical framework with which to “better broach, and problematize, certain aspects of the new gendered cultural phenomenon” with which this research is concerned, while still recognising the specific cultural, social, historical and political context within which these texts have emerged (972). While there is literature that critically engages with twentieth-century feminist activism in Japan, there is scant engagement with post-feminist discourses within Japanese popular culture. Gwynne’s (2013) analysis of the manga, *Sundome*, as an “important cultural inscription of postfeminist Japan,” seeks to address this gap in the literature and consider the status of contemporary young women. Gwynne argues that because post-feminism is so “imbricated with global neoliberal ideologies,” it is common for its discourses to operate in wealthy neoliberal nations, such as Japan (2013, 330). As I will argue, elements of a post-feminist sensibility can indeed be identified in contemporary Japanese television dramas about women and work. Furthermore, Chapter Two will demonstrate that the current government’s Womenomics agenda draws on similar discourses of women’s empowerment and choice while being driven by a neoliberal economic agenda.

### **2.3. Neoliberal(ising) Feminism**

Another relevant concept for this thesis is ‘neoliberal feminism’ or ‘neoliberalised feminism’ which describes the integration of select feminist discourses into neoliberal rationales and logics, such as the uptake of gender equality initiatives by governmental institutions and businesses as a form of ‘smart economics’. Undoubtedly, neoliberalism is conceptualised in divergent and complex ways making it a slippery object for definition but has been understood in academic literature in three main ways. The first of these is as hegemonic political and social policy characterised by privatisation, deregulation, and the scaling back of state influence over markets and withdrawal of social welfare such as that associated with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Harvey 2005, 3). It is also conceived of as an economic ideology or doctrine driven by the free market, as a “valorization of private enterprise and suspicion of the state” (Ferguson 2010, 170). Lastly, scholars such as Nikolas Rose have drawn on Foucault’s conception of ‘governmentality’ so as to understand neoliberalism as a form of governance which constructs citizens as self-governing and self-reliant subjects. In Rose’s words, neoliberal governmentality employs “techniques of government that create a distance between the decisions of formal political institutions and other social actors, conceive of these actors in new ways as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, and seek to act upon them through shaping and utilising their freedom” (1996, 53). Within this conception of governmentality, neoliberal ideology extends beyond the market, into the private sphere and can work to shape and reconfigure individual subjectivities.

According to Elizabeth Prügl (2015, 617), the neoliberalisation of feminism has taken place at each level of these three meanings, leading to the ‘co-optation’ of feminism in neoliberal economic projects, the integration of strands of feminism into neoliberal ideology, and incorporation of feminism into rationalities and technologies of neoliberal governmentality. Often in response to economic instability, women and girls have been positioned as ‘solutions’ and under-utilised resources, leading to the widespread uptake of gender equality policies and rhetoric of women’s empowerment, “characterized by an

instrumental focus on the economic impact of gender equality” (Calkin 2015, 300).

Neoliberal feminism relies on the rationality of individual freedom, choice and empowerment while retaining “ideological commitments to rationalism, heteronormativity, and genderless economic structures,” thus expecting the female subject to fit themselves within models of “economic man” (Prügl 2015, 619). Within this understanding, the neoliberal feminist subject is highly individuated and entrepreneurial, seeking to optimise her resources through processes of self-regulation while responding to market principles. The incorporation of individual responsibility in this rationality disavows the various cultural, social and economic factors that produce gender inequality, thus transforming it from a structural problem to an “individual affair” (Rottenberg 2014, 420). Ultimately, this form of feminism privileges notions of individual agency and effort, while affirming the logic of neoliberal capitalism and reformulates gender ‘empowerment’ as providing individuals with merely access to opportunity. This emphasis on agency downplays the significance of structural inequality, such as race and class hierarchies which secure the social stratification between women, so as to fit within the logic of neoliberal governmentality.

Delving into literature on post-feminism and neoliberal feminism, one is introduced to a range of other relevant terms and conceptions which include, but are certainly not limited to ‘corporate feminism’, ‘trickle down feminism’ (Foster 2016), ‘profit-oriented feminism’ (Gill et al. 2016, 726-36), and ‘fantasy feminism’ (Hooks 2016). Despite the specific applications of each term, they are all characterised by the intertwined discourses of feminism and late capitalism, as well as a general masking or obscuring of inequalities born from capitalist systems, and an incorporation of traditional family values. In this regard, Susan Hopkins queries how it is that “this bland formula of happy heterosexual families, wealth accumulation and powerful corporate elites came to be sold to us, not just as female empowerment, but as feminist politics itself” (2018, 5). Hopkins’ object of analysis here is American celebrity culture, and terms such as ‘corporate feminism’ have been used thus far to refer to American entrepreneurs such as Sheryl Sandberg, thus suggesting a degree of cultural specificity. Despite this, as previously contended in relation to post-feminism as transnational culture, the neoliberal logic of governance extends beyond the American

context and it is thus worth keeping in mind that these other strands of ‘feminism’ that bear much in common with post-feminist discourse, can also be read within the Japanese context, particularly in the rationale of Womenomics.

## **Chapter 3. Putting it into Context: Women and Work in Japan**

This chapter aims to establish the social context in which recent work dramas have been produced and consumed, in order to understand how they discursively engage with the issue of women and work in Japan. Since the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) return to government in 2012, governmental initiatives to mobilise women into work have become increasingly visible, through their promotion of Womenomics—a scheme aiming to support the economy by increasing female participation. Gender equality in employment has been officially addressed by the government since the 1980s, with the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) functioning as the first major legislation attempting to address the gender inequality in Japan's employment practices. The EEOL has had two subsequent revisions since its enactment and has been accompanied by other policy implementations, The Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society (1999), and The Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality (2010), which more broadly seek to improve gender equality at all levels of society. Before examining these legal initiatives in any more detail, I will first locate Japan's ranking of gender equality within an international context, before establishing the key trends and features of women's employment patterns. Following this, I will turn to a focus on the previously mentioned legal measures to address gender equality, before situating Abe's Womenomics initiative as the latest governmental engagement with women's employment. Finally, this chapter will identify some of the limitations of Womenomics as well as ongoing challenges that continue to prevent women's economic participation and hinder genuine gender equality.

### **3.1. The Gendered Labour Force**

Beyond domestic considerations, Womenomics can in part be considered a response to international pressure over Japan's low rankings in gender equality. Linda Hasunuma suggests that Womenomics has developed into a “foreign relations strategy” after receiving pressure from organisations such as the United Nations and OECD, in an attempt to improve Japan's international reputation (2017, 6). Japan's ranking in The Global Gender Gap Report



by the World Economic Forum has been gradually worsening over the past ten years. While in 2006, Japan ranked 80<sup>th</sup> out of 115 countries, ten years later in 2016 it ranked 111<sup>th</sup> out of 144 countries and by 2017, has slipped to 114<sup>th</sup> due to poor rankings in political empowerment (WEF 2017). In the categories of educational attainment and health and survival, Japan's scores suggest that it has achieved near gender equality while economic and political participation fare much worse. What is especially notable about Japan's ranking in the report is that despite the near equality in educational access and achievement, this still does not guarantee women's economic equality, suggesting that there are other factors continuing to impede their equal participation. The 2016 report points to especially low empowerment in politics and minimal representation in leadership positions such as legislators, senior officials, and managers. Though not so severe, the report also indicates the ongoing inequality in regards to labour force participation and income distribution (2016, 210). Overall, when compared to other high-income countries, Japan ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> out of 51, coming ahead of countries such as Korea, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. This suggests that for a country with a comparatively strong economy it is lagging in closing its gender gap (25).

The number of women in employment has been increasing since the 1960s, and almost half of Japan's labour force is women. For example, in 1985, the year before the EEOL was officially implemented, 53% of women between 15 and 64 years old were working. Thirty years on in 2015, this percentage was up to 66%. However, this seems less significant when compared to men's employment rates which have remained consistent around the 80% mark (MHLW 2015c, 6). Women's labour force participation in Japan is characterised by what is commonly referred to as the 'M Curve' due to its resemblance of the letter M. The M Curve reflects the trend for women to enter employment for a short period in their early adult life, before leaving employment for marriage and childrearing. The second peak reflects the trend for women to return to work after a period of childcare. It does not, however, take into account the nature of employment which is often part-time and supplementary to the household income. In comparing statistics from 1985 and 2015, it is clear that the dip in the rate of women's employment is becoming less pronounced, reflecting

the decreased impact of marriage and childbirth on women's employment patterns. In 1985, the first peak was between the ages of 20 to 24, with 72% of women in that age bracket employed in paid work. In 2015, this first peak was seen between the ages of 25 to 29, with an 80% employment rate (26% higher than 1985), showing that a majority of women in Japan are tending to stay in employment into their late twenties (MHLW 2015c). It is clear that the overall participation rate has risen and while the dip in participation still occurs, it is markedly shallower and occurs at a later age. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, it is important to recognise that the style of employment between the two peaks is different and that employment in Japan for both men and women is becoming increasingly precarious and irregular.

Following the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, Japan's labour market underwent significant restructuring and saw many job losses. The government withdrew from regulating the market, which led to a diversification of employment types. Prior to this, Japan's employment system was known for its lifetime employment and age seniority system within which (mostly male) employees worked for a single company throughout their career. This loyalty to a company ensured job stability, was accompanied by a pension, insurance and bonuses, and promotion was based on years serving the company. However, this model became increasingly untenable after the recession and as Hiroshi Ishida and David Slater contend, a point that ought not be underestimated, "the stability of the firm as a marker of social identity for individuals has receded as the institutional commitment from the firm has been withdrawn" (2010, 7). Instead, Japan's employment conditions have become increasingly non-regular, meaning that more people are employed in part-time, fixed-term work that is often characterised as precarious, lowly paid, and symptomatic of post-recessionary Japan's shift towards social stratification (8-9). In 1985, 16% of Japan's workforce was employed in non-regular work, whereas in 2016 non-regular workers made up 38% of the workforce (MHLW 2015d, 97).

While the rate for both men and women in this form of non-regular work has increased, this pattern of employment remains distinctly gendered, with 56% of employed

women in this category, compared to 22% of men. Positioned differently, of all those in non-regular work, 68% are women, and 32% are men (96-7). Non-regular workers are excluded from the many benefits of the lifetime employment system and the age seniority system. There is less job security as they are the first to be let go of by companies during a recession, and fixed-term contracts mean that one is not guaranteed employment the following year. Not only are entry-level wages lower but as companies are less willing to invest in non-regular workers through training and upskilling, there is less chance of promotion and subsequent wage increases. As mentioned in relation to the M-Curve, it has been common for women to quit work for child-rearing and later return to working in a part-time position, which tends to see poorer working conditions such as lower pay and less stability (Macnaughtan 2015, 12). As fewer households are able to sustain themselves on a single income, housewives' part-time work as a form of supplementary income has become more common. Importantly, this does not necessarily threaten the wife's role in maintaining the domestic sphere but can be read as an extension of this duty by supporting the finances of the family unit—so long as such external work does not compromise one's commitment to caring for the family (Kondo 1990, 280).

Furthermore, women's part-time work remains incentivised by the current spousal tax system which was introduced in 1961 to allow housewives to supplement the family income with part-time work while still protecting the male breadwinner-housewife model. In the current system, married women who earn below 1.03 million yen annually are classified as 'dependents' and are thus exempt from paying income tax and social security. This also makes their husband eligible for an income tax deduction (Ōsawa, Kim, and Kingston 2012, 321-2). Therefore, the fact that women continue to be over-represented in part-time work and underrepresented in full-time work can be read not only as a consequence of the persisting ideology of female domesticity but also as a pattern that is legitimised by governmental tax laws. A more comprehensive discussion of the key challenges to women's equal participation in employment can be found later in the chapter. However, before moving on to this, the following section touches on the main governmental policies and initiatives that have been implemented since 1986 to address gender inequality in employment in Japan. This then

allows for a consideration of their efficacy and limitations, so as to identify what factors continue to impede women's economic participation.

### 3.2. Government Policy and Initiatives

#### ***Equal Employment Opportunity Law*** (*danjo koyō kikai kintōhō*, 男女雇用機会均等法)

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was passed in 1986 to amend earlier labour laws and was an attempt to discourage gender discrimination in the workplace. Its implementation was also in partial response to international pressure from the United Nations to address gender equality (Starich 2007, 556). Prior to the EEOL, there was minimal legal provision addressing gender inequality in employment. The 1947 Labor Standards Law only addressed gender discrimination in the form of wage discrepancies, and Article 90 of the Civil Code was used to nullify employment practices such as forced resignation of women upon turning thirty, pregnancy, or childbirth, with limited success (554-5). The 1986 EEOL vastly expanded the law's scope by establishing provisions that banned gender discrimination in regards to recruiting, hiring, transfer, promotion, education, training, resignation, dismissal, mandatory retirement, and benefits. This expansion was substantial as it finally made gender-specific conditions and practices of employment illegal.

One of the major limitations identified by critics of the EEOL is that it functioned as a guideline for employers and non-compliance was not punishable by law. Instead, the law only mandated that companies must 'make an effort' (*doryoku gimu*, 努力義務). Furthermore, Japanese companies developed new systems to circumvent their obligations specified in the EEOL by developing a dual career track, which offers new employees the option of either the clerical track (*ippanshoku*, 一般職) or the managerial track (*sōgōshoku*, 総合職). Developing this two-track system meant that at the surface level, employees could not be accused of establishing gender-specific employment patterns, but in practice, the requirements for these tracks were extremely gendered (Assmann 2014, 9). The clerical track was mostly filled by women and often considered a temporary phase preceding marriage, which largely involved menial tasks, such as serving tea and photocopying. On the other hand, the managerial track

was an automatic or assumed route for men when entering the workforce and came with the chance of promotion, various job benefits, higher wages, job security, and higher economic status. Few women were able to meet the specified requirements that came with this track. One such example is the ‘mobility clause’ which stipulated that an employee must be prepared to accept a transfer to one of the company’s other locations. The mobility clause was particularly obstructive to female applicants as childrearing responsibilities would make it extremely difficult if not impossible to accept a transfer (Starich 2007, 558). This and other requirements such as a degree from a top-ranking university, at a time when the majority of graduates were male, and additional examinations for female applicants, inadvertently allowed companies to maintain gendered practices thereby circumventing the law. Thus, the EEOL was not only unable to prevent such forms of indirect gendered discrimination but was further limited due to its lack of penalty for non-compliance.

After much criticism and concerns of a weakening workforce due to population decrease, the EEOL was further revised in 1997. One major change from the original document was that gender discrimination was now prohibited (*kinshi*, 禁止), which allowed punitive action to be taken. In actual practice, this punishment, which saw the names of non-compliant companies published in an effort to shame them, was too weak to have any significant effect. Furthermore, the revision failed to address the dual track system which thus allowed indirect discrimination without punishment. It did, however, introduce affirmative action policies and stipulated the duty of employers to address sexual harassment in the workplace (MHLW n.d.). However, as Starich (2007, 560) notes, the punitive measure of publishing the names of non-complying employers, its focus on women rather than gender, and its inability to target indirectly discriminatory practices, were key factors that limited the efficacy of the 1997 revision.

In order to address these inadequacies, and under increasing pressure from the United Nations, the EEOL was revised once more in 2006. With this revision, the law now applies to all workers subject to gender discrimination, rather than only female workers (MHLW 2007). Another important change is that this revision now bans indirect discrimination which

challenges the dual track system. As such, employers are prohibited from including criteria that are particularly disadvantageous to a particular gender, such as the mobility clause as part of the managerial track hiring (Assmann 2014, 9-10). As it was not uncommon for women to be encouraged to quit their jobs upon becoming pregnant, the 2006 revision also strengthened protection for women taking maternity and childcare leave by making it illegal to fire female employees during pregnancy or the child's first year (Starich 2007, 564). On the whole, the EEOL has played a significant part in legally addressing gender inequality in the workplace, but progress has been slow. The latest 2006 revision is still criticised for its weak enforcement, suggesting that the EEOL remains more of a guideline than a strong and effective legal measure for ensuring gender equality in employment.

### ***The Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society***

**(danjo kyōdō sankaku shakai kihonhō, 男女共同参画社会基本法)**

The Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society of 1999 addresses gender equality throughout society and acts as a foundational law or framework upon which further legislation at more local levels can be based. It states that achieving a gender-equal society is “the most important issue in determining the framework of 21st-century Japan,” alluding to the demographic challenges faced by Japanese society, such as an ageing population and declining birth rate, as reasons for such necessity (Gender Equality Bureau 1999). Because of its function as a basic law, it does not offer concrete plans for achieving gender equality goals, and lacks a means of enforcement, instead relying on voluntary compliance. The Basic Act focusses on ‘equality of opportunity’, rather than ‘equality of outcome’, which disregards the obstacles that women might face in achieving similar outcomes to men. For example, Yuki Huen notes that the ongoing social role of women as primary caregivers makes it difficult for women to “compete on a par with men in the labor market,” and stresses the importance of affirmative action needed to achieve equal outcomes (2007, 372). In this sense, The Basic Act is limited in its efficacy, but it is significant in that it provides a general framework within which current initiatives and more concrete plans are subsequently established.

***The Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality***

**(daisanji danjo kyōdō sankaku kihon keikaku, 第3次男女共同参画基本計画)**

In 2010, the Democratic Party issued The Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality, which proposed concrete goals for achieving gender equality in society. The document focussed on establishing clear numerical targets and deadlines, reforming gender-based social systems and structures, and engaging with ideas on gender equality at an international level. It aims to revitalise the economy through ‘women’s active participation’, and promote an understanding of gender equality to men and children at the community level. Finally, it stipulates four crucial issues to be addressed over the next five year period. These are: 1) strengthening efforts to achieve positive action targets such as 30% of leadership positions filled by women by 2020, 2) reviewing social systems that reinforce gender roles, 3) ‘Rebuilding employment and safety nets’, which includes eliminating the ‘M-Curve’ pattern of female labour force participation, 4) Enhancing systems that forward gender equality, including a consideration of gender equality throughout government policies (Gender Equality Bureau 2010). Despite the change in government, these are still targets of the Abe administration and are part of Womenomics initiatives.

## Womenomics



Figure 1. The Official Twitter of the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet: “If women shine, Japan will shine more and more.” Source: Shushō Kantei (@kantei), “josei ga kagayakeba, Nihon wa motto motto kagayakeru,” Twitter, June 23, 2014, 7:00 p.m., <https://twitter.com/kantei/status/481255400893739009>.

Since his return to office in 2012, Abe has campaigned for women’s “active participation” (*katsuyaku suishin*, 活躍推進) in society, with the now ubiquitous tagline “a society in which women shine,” (*josei ga kagayaku shakai*, 女性が輝く社会). This is also known as ‘Womenomics’, a term coined by Kathy Matsui of Goldman Sachs who first suggested it as a strategy for Japan in 1999 and has since been picked up as a key part of Abe’s economic growth strategy, ‘Abenomics’ (Matsui et al. 2014). In explaining the rationale behind his intention to “mobilize the power of women,” Abe stated that “creating an environment in which women find it comfortable to work and enhancing opportunities for women to work and to be active in society is no longer a matter of choice for Japan. It is instead a matter of the greatest urgency” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013b). Abe’s sudden



insistence on ensuring women's economic participation and his subsequent rhetoric of achieving gender equality seem incongruous with his earlier stance, considering that during the push for more equal gender policy in the early 2000s it was, in fact, Abe who led the LDP's conservative backlash in a bid to protect 'traditional' cultural values (Kano 2011, 43). Indeed, it may seem that Abe is a curious figure to spearhead the government's commitment to gender equality, but as Ueno Chizuko points out, he is not the first conservative politician to do so. In fact, according to Ueno, both the Koizumi government (2001-2006) and the Fukuda government (2007-2008) are earlier examples of neoliberal governments who promoted gender equality because they recognised that it made economic sense. Ueno (2014, 6) refers to such governments, including the Abe Administration as "femocrats", that is "feminist bureaucrats" (*femokuratto*, フェモクラット), and argues that their push for female economic participation is driven by the foreseen economic challenges of population decline—women are "Japan's last resource," (*saigo no shigen*, 最後の資源). Abe has made statements reflecting the notion that women's labour can be used as a resource to support Japan's economy, such as in a 2013 speech outlining his economic growth strategy, 'Abenomics', during which he suggested women were Japan's most underutilised human resource (*jinzai shigen*, 「人材」資源) (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013a). This notion of women as a 'resource' is essential to keep in mind in relation to Abe's promotion of Womenomics, precisely because it reminds us that it is largely driven by economics, rather than being premised on the idea of genuine gender equality.

As has frequently been documented, Japan is struggling with a decreased fertility rate and rapidly ageing society (*shōshi kōrei ka*, 少子高齢化), and this population decline is expected to put serious strains on social infrastructure and the economy. National concern over Japan's low fertility rate has been growing since 1990 when the media began to report that the country's fertility rate had been measuring below 2.1 which is the level of replacement required to sustain the population (Piroto 2016, 19). Since then, there has been an increase in focus on the issue, with substantial research and policy change addressing Japan's low fertility rate. This rate hit its lowest point in 2005, recorded at 1.26, triggering

concern of a ‘fertility crisis’, but has since stabilised and in 2015 was 1.46 (MHLW 2015b). Considering that childbirth outside of marriage remains uncommon in Japan, with only 2% of children being born outside of wedlock, the trend of prolonged singlehood, delayed marriage and an overall decrease in marriage is perceived as a significant factor in the decreased fertility rate (Dalton and Dales 2016, 5). Furthermore, according to projections by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2017), even if Japan’s fertility rates increase, the proportion of the population within the working-age group (15 to 64 years) has been decreasing since 1995 and will continue to decrease, while the percentage of the population over 65 years is expected to grow substantially and account for 35 to 41% of the population by 2065. Lastly, the overall population of Japan is forecast to decrease significantly from 127 million to between 88 and 95 million by 2065. Ultimately, these statistics evidence the major demographic shifts that Japan is facing and make clear the increasing burden that these will place on the country’s economy and social infrastructure. With a growing number of the population dependent on a shrinking workforce to support the economy and fewer children being born to subsequently enter the workforce, the Japanese government must find ways to increase its working population. While other countries have turned to immigration to address population decline, facilitating the increase of migrants in Japan “lacks public support and remains a politically taboo subject” (Schieder 2014, 54). Within this context, increasing the economic participation of Japan’s ‘shining’ women has become a key strategy of recent governments, most clearly the current Abe-led government, in order to address such serious demographic issues and their economic consequences.

### **3.3. Ongoing Challenges to Achieving Equal Participation**

When compared to women’s working opportunities prior to the EEOL in 1986 and subsequent governmental measures towards achieving gender equality, it cannot be denied that substantial progress has been made. However, there are key barriers that continue to hinder women’s equal participation in the workforce. These will need to be further addressed if the government is serious about achieving gender equality in the workplace. In particular, social attitudes and systems that reinscribe traditional gender roles, masculinised workplace

culture and practice, and insufficient childcare have been identified by scholars as significant issues that limit the efficacy of Womenomics. Furthermore, Abe's brand of Womenomics has also been criticised for a few major shortcomings. Critics claim that it is not only based on a 'misguided' premise that seeks equality for the sake of economics but also has an elitist and exclusionary tendency to focus on a certain class of women. Moreover, Womenomics fails to consider the ambivalence that many women feel about working 'like men' and should instead consider how to change the employment system to better support all workers.

Although changing, the traditional model of male worker-female dependent continues to affect social expectations of gender roles in Japan. According to research from the Cabinet Office (2014), when people were asked in 1992 their thoughts on the statement, "The husband should work outside and the wife should look after the home," 60% of respondents agreed (at least to some extent), while 34% disagreed. In 2016, 41% of respondents said they agreed, while 54% disagreed (Cabinet Office 2016). While this demonstrates that perceptions of women's roles are becoming more flexible, less than one-fifth of those polled disagreed completely with the statement, which suggests that there remains little challenge to this gender model. In particular, the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother, 良妻賢母), which emerged in the late nineteenth century during the Meiji period, dictated that women's contribution to nation building was primarily through their domestic support of their husbands and children (Koyama 2014, 85-91). After World War One, the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* expanded to allow for women to participate in the outside sphere of paid employment, but as an extension of their role of wife and mother. Koyama Shizuko notes that such employment "had always to be compatible with her household duties, and it was absolutely imperative for women not to tarnish their 'femininity'" (98).

Social norms and workplace culture reinforce the expectation of women as primary caregivers and the concept of '*sansaiji shinwa*' (三歳児神話), that mothers should care for children until the age of three, makes it difficult for women with children to continue in regular employment, and for fathers to be involved in childcare. Public opinion surveys conducted by the Cabinet Office between 1992 and 2014 suggest that an increasing number

of women prefer the idea of continuing to work after childbirth instead of quitting work until their child has grown (Gender Equality Bureau 2016). In actual practice, however, statistics from 2010 to 2014 indicate that just under half of first-time expectant mothers in employment will quit their jobs before the birth of their child (MHLW 2015a). Those who continue to work following childbirth are more likely to be in full-time, regular positions at large companies and have greater access to childcare leave than those in irregular work. The ongoing influence of *sansaiji shinwa* is reflected in the rates of employment for women with young children: for women with children under three the rate is approximately 50%, while by the age of four the rate is up to 70%, and by ten, is roughly 80% (JILPT 2017). This expectation for women to act as primary caregivers for young children also affects male workers, of whom less than 3% took childcare leave in 2015. This is a minor improvement compared to 1996 when it was almost unheard of for fathers to take parental leave. The government is hoping to raise the rate further, with a target of 13% by 2020 (Office for Work-Life Balance 2016). However, this rate is still low considering that in a 2015 survey, 30% of full-time male respondents stated that they would like to take leave but are unable to do so (MHLW 2015a).

Furthermore, gendered expectations of housework and family-care contribute to the ‘double burden’ of paid and unpaid labour for women in employment. According to the National Survey of Households with Children, the overall average of housework done per day by wives was 210 minutes, while for husbands it was merely 25 minutes and over a third of husbands did not contribute to housework. In dual-income households, the amount of time spent by wives on housework decreased, while the husband’s input barely increased, with the wife still spending more than four times as long on housework as the husband (JILPT 2017). This double burden is further evidenced by Anne Aronsson’s (2015, 30) findings that in interviews with 120 career women, 60% claimed responsibility for all of the housework, and 70% for all of the childcare. Makita (2010, 82-8) claims that Japan’s welfare system is based on a strong familial model in which female family members are expected to be responsible for all aspects of family-care, which impedes women’s participation in the labour market. Accordingly, because of the state’s reliance on women to provide care for younger and elder

members of the family, “Japanese women’s family-care obligations continue to be reinforced by social and employment policies,” despite recent political, demographic and social trends (90).

Insufficient childcare facilities are a significant barrier for working women with children, and I would argue a potential deterrent for women hoping to have children. The issue gained substantial media traction in early 2016 after a working mother published an anonymous blog titled ‘I couldn’t get daycare. Die Japan!!!’ (*hoikuen ochita. Nihon shine!!!* 保育園落ちた。日本死ね!!!), in which she challenged the efficacy of the Abe administration’s initiatives to boost workforce participation, claiming that Abe’s aim to “promote dynamic engagement of all citizens” (*ichiokusō katsuyaku shakai*, 一億総活躍社会) was failing (Sasagawa 2016). The post highlighted for many the ongoing problem of insufficient childcare for working parents, and led to not only demonstrations outside the Diet, but also an online petition of 28,000 signatures which was used by the opposition Democratic Party member, Yamao Shiori, during Diet proceedings to criticise the Liberal Democratic Party’s measures on childcare. A year on, in February 2017, when challenged on their progress again, Abe defended his party’s measures, claiming that while they have increased funding for childcare, the target to eliminate waiting lists is extremely difficult, considering that their economic policies had been so successful that the number of working women had increased beyond expectations (Mainichi Shimbun 2017). This increased demand for childcare is reflected in the statistics, as between 2013 and 2015, the government opened up an additional 219,000 childcare slots, yet perhaps because this encouraged more parents to apply for spaces, the waitlist numbers also increased (Weathers 2017, 109). In April 2016, there were already over 23,000 children on waiting lists for day-cares, and by October this had risen to just under 48,000, reflecting the dramatic fluctuation of demand throughout the school year (MHLW 2016).

In response to the growing demand, Abe announced in May 2017 that the government would create another 220,000 spaces to reduce the number of people on the waiting list to zero by 2020. Based on the prediction of achieving 80% female labour

participation in the coming five years, he further announced that an additional 110,000 spaces would be funded, bringing the total to 320,000 additional childcare positions by 2022 (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2017). However, critics argue that the low quality of childcare facilities must be addressed alongside the insufficient quantity, citing poor working conditions, low wages and non-regular employment of childcare workers as significant issues that need to be considered with such a rapid increase of facilities (Weathers 2017, 116-7).

Legislation and policy designed to increase women's participation in the workforce will only go so far without substantial changes to current workplace culture and practice that remain highly gendered. Helen Macnaughtan argues that Abe's Womenomics is not viable because it is based on the expectation that "core male employment is normative" and expects women to support this model by adapting to the existing workplace environment (2015, 3). This point is significant as the continuation of such an environment can indirectly exclude women from equal participation in a way that current gender equal policies fail to address. In particular, limited flexibility, long hours, and company expectations of continuous employment, especially in medium and large private sector organisations, remain major obstacles for female workers (and I would argue male workers), especially those with childcare responsibilities. Nemoto suggests that the lack of women in positions of authority in companies leads to the organisational privileging of masculinity and gender stereotyping which "reward[s] only a handful of women who are willing to emulate masculinity," and "legitimizes the workplace exclusion of women who are seen as unwilling to work and incapable of working like most men" (2013b, 161). It is also worth considering here that this form of normative male work culture can be exclusionary and detrimental to other workers, regardless of their gender, if they cannot or are unwilling to participate in this male-coded behaviour.

As mentioned previously, the current spousal tax system incentivises married women to earn below 1.03 million yen annually, as this classifies them as economically 'dependent' on their husband and thus exempts them from paying income tax and social security. Unsurprisingly, there is resistance to abolishing the system from policymakers and firms due

to the financial and structural costs, but there is also resistance from some women who have enjoyed the benefits of flexible, non-regular untaxed income (Macnaughtan 2015, 14). Yet, the labour market has witnessed major structural changes since this system's implementation in the 1960s, affected by globalisation, demographic changes, and a weakened economy since the 1990s. This current tax system, which relies on the assumption of a core male workforce and supplementary female labour, exemplifies how gendered social practices and systems act as a barrier to securing gender equality in the workforce. While the government has talked of changing the system, such as suggesting that they would raise the income threshold to 1.5 million yen in 2016, these remain small-scale adjustments (The Japan Times 2016). Instead, such systems that incentivise a gendered division of labour need to be significantly redesigned if not abolished if the government wishes to accommodate the changing realities of Japanese women's participation in the labour market.

As long as Japan's working culture continues to demand long hours and work-centred lifestyles, it is not surprising that many women feel ambivalent about pursuing careers. As Emma Dalton notes, the Abe government's approach to gender equality inadequately reflects the fact that many women are "unable or unwilling to participate in the masculinised long-work-hours culture that characterises corporate Japan" (2017, 101). Dalton further points out that some women feel "somewhat threatened by recent gender policies, believing that their way of life is now being frowned upon," (102) which speaks to the notion that Womenomics is focused on a select group of women. Dalton, along with others such as Ueno Chizuko and Chelsea Szendi Schieder posits that women's 'peripheral' labour has long been used to supplement Japan's economic growth, from their work in textile factories in the late 1800s, to contemporary Japan with many women working in temporary, non-regular forms of employment (Dalton 2017, 100). The current government's encouragement of women's labour participation must be read within this context, especially so as to understand the rationale behind critiques of Womenomics as elitist and exclusionary. So long as state policy is informed by an economic logic, Womenomics will only benefit a select group of 'elite women', such as those who might benefit from the government's aim to have 30% of leadership positions filled by women. As Schieder contends, "Japanese women are already

working, and most of them never get far enough up to glimpse the glass ceiling” (2014, 58). In fact, Ueno suggests that a mere 10% or so of women in Japan would fit within Abe’s criteria of women able to ‘shatter the glass ceiling’ of corporate leadership, and are hardly likely to become role models for the majority of other women whose realities exclude them from such narrow criteria (2014, 12).

Ultimately, major revision of Japan’s current work culture and reconsideration of gendered social models is necessary if Womenomics is to benefit more than this minority of ‘elite’ women. This notion is supported by Helen Macnaughtan, who argues that while Womenomics is theoretically viable for Japan, continuing gender norms such as the male breadwinner-female dependent model impede significant progress in achieving greater gender equality in the workforce. She posits that Abe’s Womenomics only offers surface-level change as it fails to address the “gendered status quo of an employment system that allocates productive roles to men and reproductive roles to women” (Macnaughtan 2015, 2). Accordingly, unless this model is done away with, legislative and policy change will only have limited effect in achieving progress for women in employment. In the case of childcare, for example, as long as caregiving continues to be naturalised as women’s work, then the increase of facilities will only go so far to support women’s equal participation in work. Along with a further reconsideration of gendered childcare responsibilities, shorter working hours for all employees could facilitate more equal distribution of childcare duties by parents.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that despite the increasing number of both men and women involved in precarious, irregular employment, the ‘core male regular employment’ model remains a normative ideal. Such a model, which is underpinned by the notion of the male breadwinner, is no longer viable in an economic environment which is largely dependent on its non-regular and temporary workforce. This raises two points. Firstly, as Macnaughtan contends, this model has effected the “entrenchment of gender-segregated employment that is modelled on ‘conventional’ Japanese gender norms and perpetuated in business, society and in popular culture” (2015, 15). However, unless this model is replaced with one that accommodates more flexible and diverse models of employment for all genders,



then the current push for gender equality will have limited effect. Secondly, gender equality initiatives that do not consider the unequal distribution of power and wealth inherent in neoliberal economies are limited in their scope and application. Currently, Womenomics promotes the kind of ‘gender equality’ and ‘female empowerment’ that includes the corporate executive but excludes the convenience store clerk. It is therefore imperative to consider the “larger implications of liberalized labor policies and...the widening socio-economic gap in Japan today” (Schieder 2014, 58) in considering the limited female subjects who are being encouraged to ‘shine’.

## Chapter 4. Tracing the *Oshigoto* Drama

The first section of this chapter begins by establishing a basic overview of Japan's current television broadcasting system and television dramas. It proceeds to trace a brief history of television dramas in Japan, beginning in the early 1950s and charts some of the key developments leading through into the twenty-first century. In particular, it examines the genres of the 'home drama', NHK's 'morning dramas', the 'trendy drama', and lastly the '*oshigoto drama*' (work dramas, お仕事ドラマ). It is important to note here that the 'o' before *shigoto* is an honorific which feminises the term for work, as this genre primarily applies to working women. After establishing this wider context, the second section reviews the relevant academic literature and notes the quantitative increase of working women dramas since 2000. Through these secondary sources, I demonstrate that there has indeed been a shift in depictions of working women in Japanese television dramas, both in terms of changing narratives and depictions, as well as in increasing visibility. This thesis contributes to the current body of literature by analysing how recent TV dramas are engaging with women's labour within the current context of Womenomics and its push for women's 'empowerment'.

### 4.1. Television Broadcasting and Dramas in Japan

Japanese broadcasters are divided into public and commercial, with the public broadcaster being the *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, (Japan Broadcasting Corporation; NHK). While legally independent of the government, NHK is publically owned and generates the bulk of its funding through viewer subscription fees, which under the Broadcast Law of Japan all those who own a TV set are obliged to pay (though this is difficult to enforce). There are five main commercial networks: Fuji TV, Nippon TV (NTV), Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), TV Asahi, and TV Tokyo, with which most of the smaller networks nationwide are affiliated. These terrestrial networks broadcast almost exclusively domestic content, and Lukács contends that this "self-contained televisual culture," is in large part due to serialised television dramas which have "been the backbone of primetime entertainment throughout the

postwar period” (2010, 33). More recently, online streaming services such as Hulu, Netflix, U-Next, Abema TV, dTV and Amazon, have diversified how viewers’ access televisual content. These services contain both domestic and international content that viewers can access for a subscription fee. Broadcasters also offer On Demand services, both through their websites as well as through third-party providers such as Hulu.

All corporate networks rely on advertising revenue and the dramas that they broadcast receive corporate sponsorship. This means that commercial networks are more sensitive to viewer ratings than NHK, in order to secure revenue. Of the commercial networks, Fuji TV, in particular, has been struggling in the last few years to maintain viewer ratings, with some of their recent dramas averaging around 5%. In fact, in 2017, the five lowest rating dramas aired were all produced by Fuji TV, a far cry from its earlier success as a station which produced many extremely successful shows such as *Tōkyō Rabu Sutōrī* (‘Tokyo Love Story’, 1991) and *Hīrō* (‘Hero’, 2001) (Excite News 2017).

TV dramas are divided into four seasons and air weekly for around 10 to 12 episodes, mostly during the evening primetime slots between 8 pm to 11 pm. Different slots for each station carry different connotations, for example, TBS’s Friday 10 pm slot tends to screen dramas that deal with social issues, while its Tuesday 10 pm slot is for love stories, and NTV’s Thursday 10 pm dramas have been known to focus on women’s issues. These serialised dramas are designed to be broadcast once and are seldom rerun, although ‘special’ follow-up episodes are occasionally made for popular shows. Episodes are filmed only a few weeks before screening which allows the production team to adjust the narrative after reading online viewer responses as each episode is broadcast. This strategy of tailoring dramas to meet viewer expectations and desires is an example of more recent responses by producers to secure ratings in an era of significant structural change to television viewing patterns (Isoyama n.d.).

According to research by NHK, the average time spent viewing television is three and a half hours a day, which shows very little change since 2007. This accounts for time spent viewing both satellite and terrestrial television although the majority of this average was

spent watching terrestrial broadcasts (NHK 2017b). In another survey from 2017, 97% of those interviewed answered that they had at least one television set in their household. Just over 91% of the people claimed to watch at least thirty minutes of TV a day, while less than 9% claimed to barely watch TV, suggesting that TV viewing remains a feature in many people's daily lives (2017a). It is worth noting, however, that viewing patterns do vary based on age. Research suggests that the general number of viewers between twenty and fifty who watch TV in realtime has decreased since 2010. What is particularly striking is that the number of respondents in their twenties who watch no TV has doubled to 16% and those who watch less than two hours a day has risen from 40% to over 50%. This is significant given that this age range has been the target demographic of serial dramas since the advent of trendy dramas in the early 1990s. This is also the demographic which is said to be engaging with media in a variety of ways, especially online. NHK's research shows that viewing patterns indeed differ by age. Older viewers tend to mostly watch real-time TV while younger viewers are more likely to watch a mix of real-time TV, online videos and recorded programmes (NHK 2016).

### ***Early Years***

The first Japanese television drama, *Yūgemae* ('Before Dinner') was broadcast in Japan in 1940 by NHK before television sets were available to the public for purchase. However, with the onset of World War Two, television broadcasting was halted soon after and was not reintroduced until around the end of American Occupation in the early 1950s. The first commercial network established was Nippon TV in 1953, followed by KRT in 1955, which is now known as Tokyo Broadcasting Systems (TBS). Many of the television dramas screened in Japan during the 1950s were imports from America with bigger budgets and higher quality productions than those made in Japan. These American dramas, such as *I Love Lucy*, influenced the production of Japanese 'Home Dramas' which initially modelled themselves on American productions and followed family, home-based narratives (Clements and Tamamuro 2003). During the latter half of the 1950s, TV sets became more affordable and thus more accessible to the public, resulting in the increased ownership of TV in private homes. In 1959, Fuji TV and Nihon Educational Television (NET, now known as TV Asahi)

joined the ranks of NTV and KRT as commercial networks. NHK introduced morning ‘TV novel series’ (*renzoku terebi shōsetsu*, also known as *asa dorama*) in the early 1960s, which continue to be broadcast every morning but Sunday, with each story spanning a six month period. Around this time, Taiga Dramas were also developed by NHK which are period dramas broadcast every Sunday over the course of a year. These dramas, which follow the tales of historically significant heroes and heroines, continue as an “institution on Japanese television,” as Philip Seaton notes that their announcements are “arguably *the* flagship event of the Japanese television drama year...” (2015, 84), a sentiment which attests to their ongoing cultural value. Due to the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, TV ownership increased rapidly, with the purchase of many colour sets resulting in a widespread audience for Japanese broadcasters. In fact, since the 1960s, Yoshimi Shunya suggests that the “privileged value accorded to television has been a consistent feature of postwar Japanese society” (2014, 127). Furthermore, he emphasises the role of television in this period as a mediating agent within families as “family time in the space of the postwar family was created through and has operated via the medium of television” (138). In other words, the act of viewing television together became an integral part of family routines and social practice. As television viewership grew, domestic shows replaced foreign shows in popularity, and primetime slots became dominated entirely by Japanese productions, which remains the case today. From this period, too, the average length of dramas increased from 30 minutes to one hour, which also remains the case for the majority of regular single season shows. The mid-sixties saw an expansion of ‘Home Dramas’ that went beyond the nuclear family to consider the extended family, as well as the development of ‘youth dramas’ (*seishun dorama*), with a particular focus on students and their mentors. The 1970s saw the development of the mini-series and movies made for television, in an attempt to draw a largely male movie audience towards television viewing. The late 1980s mark the introduction of the ‘trendy drama’ which focused on the glamorous, consumer-oriented lifestyles of young urbanites and were targeted primarily at young, unmarried women with disposable incomes. The 1990s saw a hybridisation of earlier genres, such as police romance and school comedy, as well as the ongoing popularity of particular stories like “tough detectives, cheating couples, ghost stories,

and samurai dramas” (Clements and Tamamuro 2003, xxvii). Due to the rising popularity of Japanese TV dramas in other parts of Asia, producers began to create internationally themed dramas in the early 2000s, which included starring non-Japanese Asian talent, and the co-production of shows between, say Japan and Korea. There are also examples of recreations of popular Japanese shows, such as the school-based 2007 hit, *Hana Yori Dango* (‘Boys Over Flowers’), which was remade in both Taiwan and Korea.

According to Okamuro Minako, before the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, the majority of dramas (excluding those based on manga) were detective or hospital-based dramas, with a focus on life and death, and an element of hopelessness. Following the disaster, television fiction began to grapple with how to deal with the sudden loss of so many lives, and as such, the number of ghosts in dramas increased. She notes that these ghosts tend not to be frightening, but rather are deceased family members who are keeping an eye on loved ones, and effects a sense of closeness between the living and dead, as well as suggesting the continuity between life and death (Okamuro 2017, 32). In our discussion about the changing role of television since the advent of online content, Okamuro acknowledged that the tradition of sitting down to watch television at a set time is disappearing. Yet, she pointed to recent dramas, such as TBS’s *Nigehaji* (2016), and *Karutetto* (Quartet, 2017) which through their transgressions from the conventions of TV dramas have revived the sense of anticipation between weekly airings that is specific to television. Thus, regardless of the changing format of television viewing, Okamuro is optimistic that Japanese television dramas are experiencing a period of prosperity, with many high-quality productions yet to come (Okamuro, personal communication, July 7, 2017).

### ***Home Dramas***

Early Japanese home dramas of the 1950s tended to depict the everyday lives of close and loving families. By the latter half of the 1960s, however, these dramas began to depict households with largely absent fathers, reflective of the period’s high economic growth in which men were expected to commit long hours to their work. The housewives or mothers of these families became the main protagonists, shown to support the functioning of the family

unit, with the primary target viewers of these shows being housewives themselves. While these earlier mother-centred dramas emphasised familial harmony and celebrated the ‘reliable mother’ (*tanomoshii haha*) such as in *Kimottama Kaasan* (‘Brave Mother’, 1968-72), home dramas from the mid-1970s began to depict the family in a state of crisis, such as *Kishibe no Album* (‘Photo Album on the Shore’, 1977), in which the mother is having an affair and the father is made redundant (Gössmann 2000, 208-9). According to Hilaria Gössmann, this shift towards familial dysfunction and dissatisfaction was in response to viewers losing interest in the harmonious, idealised narratives of home dramas, and this focus on crisis has remained a common aspect of dramas (211).

### ***NHK Morning Dramas (Asa Dora)***

NHK productions require a different reading from commercial dramas due to the network’s nature as a public broadcaster. While all networks aim to produce popular productions with high viewer ratings, commercial productions rely more heavily on popularity so as to be financially lucrative, whereas NHK has secured national funding. Precisely because *asa dora* are produced through a nationally funded broadcaster, their ideological function is more closely tied to nation-building, and Paul Harvey contends that the female protagonists of *asa dora* are vehicles through which “a meditation on the modern identity of Japan” takes place (1998, 147).

To date, more than 90 *asa dora* have been aired since their beginning in 1961 (NHK n.d.). These short 15 minute morning serials screen at 8:15 am over a six month period and are largely aimed at housewives or at least a mostly female audience. *Asa dora* tend to follow female protagonists in their pursuit of a dream outside of the home (although they are simultaneously often concerned with the family unit). They are set in particular periods of Japan’s modern history within which the heroine struggles to “overcome traditional restraints, in a sense to rewrite tradition, and to succeed in her chosen role” (Harvey 1998, 140). Harvey suggests that the ideological messages in *asa dora* are a complex mix of discourse of social progress through women working outside the home, yet reinforce more socially conservative

values such as filial piety and that the conservative “packaging” of the drama allows for the more progressive elements to “gain currency” (1995, 75; 1998, 133).

### ***(Post) Trendy Dramas***

The production of trendy dramas began in the late 1980s towards the end of the bubble period, and as such reflect the materialist consumerism of young urbanites’ lifestyles in that period. Ōta Toru (2004, 72), a producer for Fuji TV who is responsible for many popular dramas, including *Tokyo Love Story*, notes that early trendy dramas focused on ‘lifestyle oriented’ narratives of urban youth, without much in the way of plot, but rather sold a ‘package’ of glamorous urban living. They were designed at a time when the mass culture of earlier broadcasting could no longer capture the diverse interests of TV audiences (Lukács 2010, 40). Viewer ratings were falling, and the ‘audience’ itself was becoming increasingly fragmented, leading broadcasters to strategically produce youth-oriented dramas. These were especially marketed towards young women, at a time when this audience segment was considered to have largely disposable incomes to partake in lifestyles of consumption. These dramas proposed a very specific lifestyle as desirable to female viewers, who could read the shows as lifestyle and consumer guides for their own lives. Eva Tsai notes that these dramas were known for their “excessive use of idols, fashion, pop music, narrative formulas, and emotionality. Such excess resonates with Japan’s burst bubble economy, the imploded boundaries in popular culture, and the aesthetic pursuit of overstatement typical of the period” (2010, 99). Particular strategies were employed in the production process to secure viewership, including extensive research into viewers’ desires and the hiring of popular actors and actresses, known as ‘*tarento*’ (talents), for their wide marketability across the entertainment and advertising industries. Later dramas from 1991 turned to more ‘classical’ narratives of love and human relationships, which are also termed ‘pure love dramas’. Ōta notes that these dramas, marked by the production of *Tokyo Love Story*, are classified as ‘post-trendy dramas’ for their slight return to narrative (2004, 72). Due to the general similarities in production style, however, both scholars and the public often use the term



‘trendy dramas’ to refer to those produced throughout the early 1990s as well, which is useful here for the sake of consistency.

Within these trendy dramas appeared protagonists whom Itō Mamoru reads as television’s hegemonic construction of the “new woman” or “contemporary woman” (2004, 29). These protagonists were characterised as independent, strong-willed, and sexually uninhibited—a departure from the protagonists in home dramas who more readily conformed to the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo*. These ‘new’ women worked and were financially independent, although the work environment was rarely depicted and work was often a temporary source of income until marriage. Those who chose to pursue their career at the expense of a romance were often transferred to the United States, suggesting the difficulty of this lifestyle choice in 1990s Japan (Freedman 2015, 121). Itō emphasises that these constructions of independent women were “constituted by an intricate discourse pregnant with contradictions.” (Itō 2004, 32). Thus, the women of trendy dramas marked a departure from earlier televisual models that reinscribed women into the domestic realm, in a way that did not undermine or conflict with existing more conservative notions of women’s roles in society.

### **Oshigoto Dramas**

As previously mentioned, depictions of working women became common in the 1990s with the advent of trendy dramas. While the majority of these dramas were situated outside of the workplace, *Shomuni* stands out as an early example of work-placed female dramas. Since 2005, there have been a number of notable dramas whose heroines pursue both a career and romance. Between 2005 and 2007, popular shows such as *Anego* (‘Older Sister’, 2005), *Sapuri* (‘Supplement’, 2006), *Hotaru no Hikari* (‘Glow of Fireflies’, 2007), *Hatarakiman* (‘Working Man’, 2007), and *Haken no Hinkaku* (‘Pride of the Temp’, 2007) introduced successful career-oriented heroines who are ultimately forced to choose between work and romance. Curiously, these shows tend to position career success as an obstacle to romance which is often impossible to overcome, leading to a ‘pattern of failure’ wherein protagonists struggle to lead all-rounded, fulfilling lives (Darlington 2013, 29-31). This proliferation of

career-oriented shows in 2005 occurred during a period in which women's choices to work were discursively framed as responsible for the national fertility crisis and socio-economic stability (Freedman 2015, 118; Darlington 2013, 26). Women's decisions to work have been constructed in much media discourse as a selfish privileging of individual happiness at the expense of the family or the nation. TV dramas' engagement with these discourses can offer various interpretations of women's choices in ways that are accessible to a wide audience (Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011, 297-310). According to Freedman (2015), since the 1990s, dramas have begun to reflect wider media discourses on working women, especially in regards to this purported privileging of personal happiness and freedom by engaging in paid rather than reproductive labour.

In the dramas since 2005, career-women tend to be engaged in particular roles, and are seldom in leadership positions. Instead, they tend to be in freelance or creative roles, editors, journalists, office ladies, doctors or detectives. The latter two careers can be seen in shows such as the immensely popular and long-running *Dokutā X* ('Doctor X', 2012-), and the detective series *Bosu* ('Boss', 2009). Gutierrez Massiel separates work based dramas into two tropes: the Office Lady (OL) and the 'specialist'. OL tropes tend to have romance at their core, and the protagonists are often unable to meet expectations of femininity in their personal life. On the other hand, protagonists in 'specialist dramas' are often competent, confident, and seldom show weakness, such as the protagonist of *Doctor X*, whose catchphrase is "I never fail" (*shippai shinai node*). Specialist dramas often reject traditional femininity and work is prioritised over family if they have one (Gutierrez 2015, 68).

The proliferation of work-based dramas since the early 2000s is supported by quantitative analysis by Yasheng She, whose thesis analysed female-oriented workplace dramas. She conducted quantitative analysis of primetime serial dramas aired on terrestrial television networks between 2000 and 2016 to track both general female representation as well as the representation of working women. Between 2000 and 2005, the number of shows with working female protagonists was capped at 10 or below, in more recent years, the numbers have been much higher, with 16 in 2014, 22 in 2015, and 28 in 2016 (She 2017, 76).

Of all the shows She identified as primetime serial dramas with female protagonists in 2016, more than half of these included working women. Despite fluctuations in between these periods, She's data demonstrates that there has been an increase in the number of dramas that represent working women.

#### **4.2. Literature on Representations of Women and Work in Japanese TV Dramas**

This section maps the current body of literature on representations of women and work in Japanese TV dramas to situate this thesis's contribution within existing scholarship. An important recurring theme in the literature on Japanese work dramas is their role in reconciling the tensions between the breakdown of Japan's post-war employment system, and the economic restructuring and consequent employment precarity in the post-bubble period of the 1990s. Gabriella Lukács, Alisa Freedman, Tania Darlington and Chris Perkins, in their analyses of work dramas since the late 1990s onwards, have contended that these dramas play an important role in encouraging labour force participation and promote the notion of self-actualisation through employment. Both Lukács and Freedman argue that working women dramas offer their viewers labour fantasies by depicting the protagonists engaging with their work in enjoyable ways. They claim that the shows encourage the audience to seek self-satisfaction from employment so as to come to terms with, and even possibly embrace, the economic restructuring and changing work patterns in Japan. Darlington considers whether the underlying discourses of working women dramas encourage the acceptance of career-focused women in popular culture or whether they limit women's progress in the workforce through their portrayal of the female characters.

Gabriella Lukács argues that work based dramas that developed in the late 1990s strategically introduced notions of pleasure and individualism into the realm of labour, so as to "make neoliberal initiatives for individual responsibility more digestible," at a time when Japan's economy was increasingly being shaped by free-market principles (2010, 149). She focuses her analysis on the popular 1998 work drama *Shomuni* which depicted young Office Ladies (OL) in a corporate environment, and whose protagonist Chinatsu insists on the

importance of having fun at work. *Shomuni*'s young female protagonists not only introduce fun into the workplace but also challenge their older male bosses, which Lukács suggests reflects the tension between Japan's post-war employment system and the increasingly neoliberal economy which saw the breakdown of lifetime employment and job security. Lukács claims that the protagonists, who celebrated autonomy and individualism in the show, were representative of this changing social order. Despite their rejection of earlier work patterns signified by their male bosses, Lukács notes that *Shomuni*'s protagonists still demonstrated loyalty and commitment to their jobs. She argues that workplace shows such as *Shomuni* were thus able to bridge a gap between earlier work patterns and the new social realities of increasing job precarity and restructuring, while still emphasising the importance of loyalty and perseverance in work. In this sense, Lukács suggests that the protagonists of *Shomuni* "represented a new breed of workers," whose ability to connect work and pleasure "resonated with neoliberal initiatives to push individuals to become autonomous and entrepreneurial" (162). Lukács is critical of the show's naturalisation of neoliberal discourses that not only suggest that individuals can achieve freedom and autonomy through their participation in the labour market, but also that it is their responsibility to do so. While recognising Chinatsu's epitomisation of a "new worker subjectivity," Lukács maintains that the show merely offers an uncritical "labor fantasy" which imagines individual subjects to have the autonomy to survive and thrive in precarious economic conditions.

Alisa Freedman (2015, 118) also recognises the role that work dramas have had in encouraging women to enjoy their careers during a period of economic restructuring. She notes that since 2005, there has been a proliferation of dramas in which female protagonists pursue satisfaction in both their professional and personal lives, while in earlier dramas from the 1990s, women were often faced with the dilemma of having to choose between a career and a family. Alternatively, she identifies the 2007 drama *Hatarakiman* as an example in which the female protagonist eventually chooses to continue in her job at the expense of her relationship. Freedman notes that the final scene, which shows the protagonist happily accompanying her colleagues to an evening of karaoke, exemplifies the show's emphasis that

women ought to recognise the limitations of the life courses available to them and can seek sufficient satisfaction from work (123).

Tania Darlington (2013, 28) uses the term '*josei* drama' to refer to Japanese television dramas that are mostly based on *josei* (women's) manga, and focus on young, independent career women living glamorous urbanite lifestyles. She focuses her analysis on work-based dramas, such as *Hatarakiman*, *Anego*, *Hotaru no Hikari*, and *Sapuri* (2005-2007), that aired ten years earlier than the three dramas that this thesis examines, and argues that such dramas offer potentially detrimental messages about women and employment. Darlington suggests that the female characters in *josei* dramas continue to be reinscribed into traditionally feminised caregiver roles in their workplaces or are portrayed as anomalies. In this sense, despite being removed from the domestic sphere, female characters are still limited by gender roles in the workplace which in turn limits their career success. She takes *Anego* as an example of this narrative, as the protagonist, whose nurturing role has proved to be a source of her power in the company, is forced to resign at the discovery of her affair with a married man. This behaviour negates her colleagues' perception of her as the asexual female caregiver, and she is subsequently vilified for her transgression (30). Furthermore, Darlington identifies in these dramas a pattern of failure, in which the female characters often fall short of their career goals or are unable to achieve personal satisfaction. On a superficial level, she contends, these shows represent women's changing roles in Japanese society, yet they suggest that career-oriented women must settle for less than their male counterparts. These characters often choose careers at the expense of their relationships or find themselves in relationships with younger, less 'successful' men, which, according to Darlington, patronisingly suggests the career woman's inability to maintain a mature relationship. The third detrimental aspect of *josei* dramas that Darlington identifies is the use of humour to belittle the female characters. She notes that they are often mocked or teased for their failure in their interpersonal relationships, which consequently undermines their professional success. In forsaking marriage and children, even temporarily, the characters have "in a sense, married the workplace, and this misplaced 'familial' allegiance, paired with social inadequacy, becomes the source of teasing and humiliation" (32). One such example that Darlington

discusses is *Hotaru no Hikari*, whose protagonist, Amemiya, is successful and competent in the workplace but on returning home becomes a *himono onna* (dried fish woman), whose domestic incompetence is portrayed as she dons dirty sweatpants and subsists off beer and takeaway food. The contradiction between Amemiya's professional and private personas is established as a source of humour, and she is often teased by her manager with whom she shares a house for her supposed failure 'as a woman' in the domestic sphere. Darlington notes that this "teasing infantilizes women, reasserts men's dominance over them and mockingly decontextualizes women's legitimate pursuits" (33). Ultimately, she claims that while on a surface level, the narratives of *josei* dramas may suggest that women are able to succeed outside of the domestic sphere, one can also find negative discourses which reinscribe traditional gender roles and undermine women's autonomy. Darlington argues that despite the government's initiatives to make the workplace more welcoming to women, the contradictory discourses evident in these dramas may have a potentially detrimental effect on achieving female participation in the workforce.

Chris Perkins (2015) analyses the representation of precarious living in the 2010 so-called 'socially conscious' drama *Furiitā, Ie wo Kau* (Part-timer, Buy a House), which sought to critically engage with contemporary discourses of employment precarity. He employs Boltanski and Chiapello's concept of 'the spirit of capitalism', which is defined as an ideology that justifies people's participation in capitalism by making it seem attractive. According to Perkins, television has played a part in justifying such a 'spirit of capitalism', and *Furiitā, Ie wo Kau* is an example of how in relation to discourses on freeters<sup>1</sup>, television dramas "helped reconcile these contradictions by supplying new sets of justifications for participation in a workforce that is being rapidly casualised" (65). Perkins argues that *Furiitā, Ie wo Kau* justifies participation through its protagonist Shinji, who finds work as a manual labourer and embodies "stoicism in the face of an uncertain future," while seeking excitement and self-actualisation through work (70). Perkins challenges the drama's claim as 'socially conscious', as it focuses on the depoliticised moral experiences of a middle-class individual,

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<sup>1</sup> Freeter refers to youth (15-34) who are in part-time, and often low-paid, low-skilled work.

rather than on the systematic and structural challenges facing Japanese society. He posits that this inattention to the wider social structure that accounts for precarious employment shifts the focus to individual responsibility. This then reinforces the “Japanese state rhetoric extolling the virtues of a self-(state)-responsibility,” which is part of a “process of offloading social risk from the state to the individual in contemporary Japan” (80). Although Perkins’ analysis does not consider the role of gender in drama’s representation of employment, it offers another critical example of how TV dramas can encourage and justify labour force participation in the context of economic restructuring and precarious living.

In their analysis of the television drama, *Araundo 40* (‘Around 40’, 2008) Alisa Freedman and Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt (2011) argue that while the drama depicts a variety of life courses for women near the age of forty, they are still ultimately limited by traditional gender roles. Their analysis is situated within current media discourses about women’s roles in Japanese society, and the context of Japan’s falling birth-rate and government initiatives to increase female participation in the labour force. While recognising the role of television dramas as a form of entertainment, “rather than a means of edification,” the authors argue that dramas also offer an emotional face to these discourses and can educate viewers about wider social issues (301-2). The authors point to how the show was created after numerous interviews with women around the age of forty about their life experiences. They suggest that the drama acts a sort of self-help text which embeds itself in current discourses, such as through the use of statistics about women’s marriage and childbearing patterns in the opening sequences. Despite the diversification of life courses depicted by the female characters—the high-earning psychiatrist Satoko, the fashion journalist Nao, and the unsatisfied housewife Mizue—they are still limited by narratives that tend to reinscribe them into more traditional roles and force them to choose between pursuing their careers or relationships and family. Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt identify this conflict in *Around 40* and suggest that the drama allows female viewers to “imagine new options opening up for them in Japan while showing them the painful limitations of having freedom of choice” (311). They further suggest that *Around 40* encourages its viewers, many of whom are presumably ‘around forty’ themselves, to reconsider what aspects of their life are most likely to provide

satisfaction and help them achieve self-actualisation, and thus be content with what they have. In this sense, they note that dramas not only reflect but can also “promote socioeconomic change” (310). Regarding the relevance of analysing television dramas, they posit that *Around 40* “demonstrates the continued influence of television in classifying women’s roles,” and suggest that dramas provide a lens through which to examine the emotional impact of social change (297).

Two recent Masters’ theses engaging with contemporary TV dramas about women and work in Japan provide some further insight into how women are represented in TV dramas. Massiel Gutierrez (2015) conducts discourse analysis of work dramas, with a particular focus on speech patterns and the use of women’s language, to examine how these dramas’ representations of working women reflect societal expectations of women. She identifies two main working women tropes—the Office Lady and the ‘specialist’, the former of whom are more concerned with romance, while the latter prioritise their careers. Gutierrez contends that the protagonists of OL dramas are often portrayed as unconfident and lacking in some aspect of their personal life, while ‘specialist’ protagonists are generally confident, strong and may reject traditional femininity in favour of their work. Yasheng She’s (2017) thesis is concerned with feminist discourse in Japanese work dramas and argues that the shows’ female protagonists sacrifice self-actualisation for the sake of group harmony and ‘group-actualisation’. Accordingly, She identifies that such dramas tend to conclude with harmony-oriented endings which “weakens the feminist ideology they are trying to present” (68). She’s thesis identifies a conflict between ‘Western’ feminist discourse and the ‘inherently’ Japanese notion of group harmony which risks a reductive or essentialist reading of such media texts. Her attention to the privileging of harmony as a narrative pattern of Japanese TV work dramas is useful in acknowledging how such a pattern can limit critical engagement with current discourses on women and work.

While less focused on the theme of working women works by Hilaria Gössmann and Itō Mamoru provide valuable analysis of gender representation in Japanese dramas. Gössmann (2000) traces some of the major shifts that have taken place in dramas’



representation of gender roles since the 1960s by comparing earlier key works with twelve serial dramas that were broadcast between 1992 and 1995. She notes that dramas of the 1960s tended to play on a dichotomy between women in the domestic sphere and those outside of it, the latter of whom were depicted as ‘suffering women’ (208). On the other hand, the depiction of domestic life in these 1960s dramas was often idealised which Gössmann suggests reinforced the continuance of traditional gender roles by encouraging women not to stray from the domestic sphere. By the 1970s, however, viewers began to find depictions of family life too idealised and removed from their realities. Thus dramas depicting problematic aspects of family life began to appear, including the discontented housewife, a feature which Gössmann notes continued until the present 2000s, at the time of writing. In her analysis of gender roles in early 1990s dramas, Gössmann identifies two types of couples who appear at the beginning of the drama: in Type A couples, the wife is a housewife, and the husband works outside the home, and in Type B couples both husband and wife work outside of the home. Of the type A couples, a common pattern is for the housewife to leave the relationship, at least temporarily, to seek independence or pursue a career. In Type B dramas, Gössmann notes that the working wives commonly abandon their careers to care for the family and support the husband’s career. Furthermore, she notes that regardless of whether or not the female characters in these dramas are employed, they are almost always responsible for childrearing, and housework. Gössmann suggests that while these dramas tolerate the female characters working outside of the home, it is only plausible so long as it does not compromise her family duties (215). Compared to earlier dramas, she notes that “the range of role models for both men and women found in Japanese television dramas has broadened greatly and that dramas which advocate and help to legitimize social change have increased in number” (219). She argues that while popular culture such as TV dramas are recognised to be generally conservative, the way in which they can reconceptualise gender roles suggests their potential to encourage social change.

Itō puts forth a similar argument that in the 1990s, as “the once considered self-evident nature of values and perceptions surrounding gender and sexual roles in Japanese society...came to be widely known as cultural constructions created in the process of

modernization,” television dramas offered the possibility to depict new gender roles (2004, 27). Yet, he contends that these new depictions of women found in love dramas—the independent urbanite balancing relationships and work—can be read as “sites of hegemonic discursive practice” (27). In order to secure high ratings, Itō argues that producers strategically crafted dramas based on a “complex selection and negotiation process of encoding,” in which they predicted what would most resonate with viewers (27). The ‘new woman’ depicted in these 1990s love dramas, is inconsistently articulated through both traditional values and new constructions of femininity. Itō gives the example of Minami in *Rongu Bakēshon* (‘Long Vacation’, 1996) and Rika in *Tokyo Love Story*, who are portrayed as assertive and sexually uninhibited independent women, yet also occasionally display traditional feminine traits, such as deference or shyness in the presence of their love interests. According to Ito, elements of traditional femininity counteract the potentially deviant nature of the ‘new woman’ so that these characters may seem realistic to viewers. On the other hand, he notes that the protagonist of *Yamatonadeshiko* (‘Ideal Japanese Woman’, 2000), Sakurako, is represented as deviant and twisted, through her preoccupation with money, promiscuity and manipulation of men, which reflects her “deviation from the logic and common sense of patriarchal society” (35). This causes her to be the object of derision by other characters, and in a similar way to what Darlington noted in *Hatarakiman*, Itō suggests that her deviance provides a comical element that invites the viewers to laugh both at and with Sakurako. The conclusion of *Yamatonadeshiko* sees Sakurako marrying her love interest and following him to America, which Itō argues hails her back into the existing patriarchal gender structure, signified as her understanding that emotion is of greater value than money. In this sense, while love dramas of the 1990s present new models of femininity, the female characters are still encoded with traditional patriarchal values so that they do not stray too far from existing social realities.

More broadly, it is important to consider mainstream media’s negotiation of gender norms within the context of wider social rhetoric that promotes gender equality. Referring to channels such as government welfare policies, employment practices and media representations, Yuen Shu Min argues that hegemonic notions of gender “regulate (and

normalize) gender and sexual identities along the lines of marriage and reproductivity, which are in turn channelled back to producing and maintaining the Japanese family” (2011, 393). Further research (Yamamoto and Ran 2014; Saito 2007) has examined Japanese television from the cultivation perspective which is conceptualised as a ‘gravitational’ process through which TV viewers’ attitudes and conceptions of social reality are gradually ‘pulled’ towards a position after extended exposure to stable patterns of imagery and messages. Both of these studies found that Japanese television’s system of messages tends to reinforce traditional gender roles which decelerate progress in effecting social change towards greater gender equality in society. Yamamoto and Ran argue that despite the governmental promotion of gender equality and other forms of systematic change such as increased childcare facilities and legal measures, the continuation of television’s mainstreaming process favours a gendered division of labour of “men as providers and women as homemakers” (2014, 937). Saito’s (2007) study supports this contention, although he adds that while television tends to cultivate traditional views amongst viewers, it can cultivate more ‘liberal’ views amongst particularly conservative viewers.

The literature on representations of women and work in Japanese TV dramas has so far tended to focus on economic restructuring or the negotiation of gender norms. Literature on the former has provided useful insight into how dramas have sought to reconcile the tensions of economic recession and changing employment conditions since the 1990s, and encourage viewers to reconsider the meaning of work. Literature on dramas’ negotiation of traditional gender roles and work has generally recognised the ongoing influence of such norms on the way that female protagonists engage with work. Both dramas of the early 1990s and those of the mid-2000s have received particular attention within this literature so far, while dramas created in the last ten years remain underexplored. This thesis seeks to address this gap by closely analysing discourses of women’s employment in three TV dramas from 2016. Furthermore, while earlier literature has alluded to government initiatives and discourses on increasing women’s labour force participation, this thesis actively locates recent dramas within the current context of Womenomics and Abe’s bid to mobilise women into the workforce. It proposes a consideration of post-feminist discourse as a framework

through which to analyse current articulations of women's employment in order to further understand the complicated negotiation between traditional gender norms and economic rationalities that are being played out in contemporary *oshigoto* dramas.

## Chapter 5. Escaping Labour and Finding Love in *Nigehaji*

*What is marriage? Is it the combination of love and housework?  
A strange relationship in which the husband= employer, and wife= employee!  
The 'job' called marriage... do you agree?*

So reads the introduction to the self-proclaimed romantic comedy, *Nigeru wa Haji da ga Yaku ni Tatsu* (‘Running Away is Embarrassing but Useful’, 逃げるは恥だが役に立つ, herein ‘*Nigehaji*’) on the show’s official website. *Nigehaji* is a television drama broadcast by TBS between October and December 2016. The 11 episode show was aired between 10-11pm on Tuesdays, one of TBS’s prime slots for dramas. Based on the manga by Umino Tsunami that was first serialised in the magazine *Kiss* in 2012 and published by Kodansha, *Nigehaji* was adapted as a television drama by the scriptwriter Nogi Akiko. At first glance, *Nigehaji* might not appear to be a work drama. It is not set in an office or institution, but, rather, in the home. In mentioning to people familiar with Japanese popular culture that *Nigehaji* was a chosen case study to explore women’s work, I have often been met with confusion and surprise—“is it really about work?” In fact, *Nigehaji* stands out precisely because it takes place mostly outside of the traditional workplace, and precisely because it explores the nature of work within the domestic realm by positioning the unpaid labour of housewives as a form of paid labour.

I suggest that *Nigehaji* can be read as an example of what Angela McRobbie terms a ‘double entanglement’ “the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life...with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations...” (2004, 255-6). This chapter seeks to unravel, or indeed to ‘untangle’ the coexisting ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ discourses at play in *Nigehaji*. To clarify, ‘conservative’ discourse in this context tends to refer to the reinscription of women’s roles as primarily domestic and that which reinforces a patriarchal system. On the other hand, the use of ‘progressive’ here, refers to discourses which undermine and challenge patriarchal systems and seek to progress gender equality. Further, I explore the dynamics of ‘choice and diversity’ as measures of progressive gender equality by questioning

the extent to which the diversity of women's life choices depicted in *Nigehaji* are 'liberalising'. This chapter will explore the coexistence of these multiple, conflicting discourses in three particular ways. Firstly, I 'untangle' *Nigehaji*'s engagement with the unpaid labour of a housewife as a form of paid labour. The drama's potential to challenge the norm is undermined by positioning Mikuri's subversions as abnormal, by seeking recognition for the work of housewives rather than questioning it as a social model, and by failing to recognise the degree of emotional labour required by Mikuri to manage the household. The second section is concerned with the way in which *Nigehaji* explores notions of identity and meaning in relation to work and romance through Mikuri, and her career-driven aunt, Yuri. It suggests that while work is framed as an important factor in identity formation, the show still privileges romance as a necessary condition for women's happiness. Finally, the third section is concerned with choice. *Nigehaji* proposes a variety of life choices available to the contemporary subject, which marks a shift from earlier dramas in which women often had to choose between work or marriage. These two life choices are made compatible and various other identities are validated through tropes—the single mother, the gay colleague, the career woman, the full-time housewife. Here again, we can critique this plurality of life choices for its tokenistic diversity and hierarchy of choices. While *Nigehaji* accepts, for example, the single mother, free of vilification, there is far less celebration or reification of this form of motherhood compared to the full-time housewife, thus leading to a hierarchy in which the show privileges some life choices over others. I also argue that *Nigehaji*'s emphasis on the diversity of women's available choices is reminiscent of 'choice feminism', wherein women's 'empowerment' can be measured by their freedom of choice, a sentiment that can fail to recognise the potentially patriarchal or gendered nature of some of these choices. This coexistence of discourses allows for multiple, potentially contradictory readings so that rather than isolating segments of the audience, might contribute to its widespread appeal and popularity.

The drama's protagonist, Moriyama Mikuri is played by the popular actress, Aragaki Yui, who ranked number one most popular actress in Nikkei Entertainment's (2017, 10-24) 'Talent Power Ranking', with the magazine citing her role in *Nigehaji* as the reason for her

latest rise in popularity. According to the magazine, Hoshino Gen, who plays Aragaki's love interest, Tsuzaki Hiramasa, saw the steepest rise in celebrity popularity, due to his role in *Nigehaji*. While the viewer rating of episode 1 was recorded at 10.2%, the season finale drew in a crowd of 20.8%, reflecting *Nigehaji*'s sudden and immense popularity. The show received the Grand Prix for best serial drama at the 2017 International Drama Awards in Tokyo, an award that recognises Japanese dramas with the potential to succeed internationally.

*Nigehaji* centres on the 25-year-old protagonist, Moriyama Mikuri, who despite holding a postgraduate degree in psychology, has been unable to find suitable employment and is working for a dispatch company (*haken*, 派遣) in an administrative role. The importance of employment as a source of satisfaction and self-actualisation is introduced early on in the show. Mikuri makes this explicit when she says "the sense that I am needed by the company and by society is a source of daily encouragement." However, due to the precarious nature of such employment, when the company she has been dispatched to goes through restructuring, Mikuri is made redundant, thus finding herself unemployed, 'unneeded' and consequently unfulfilled. She is then offered weekly employment as a house cleaner for Tsuzaki Hiramasa, a shy 35-year-old salaryman and self-proclaimed 'pro-bachelor'. Surprised to find herself enjoying this new job, Mikuri begins to imagine what it might be like to be a professional housewife (*sengyō shufu*, 専業主婦) who receives a salary for her work. So begins the major plot of the show—Mikuri convinces Tsuzaki to enter into a de-facto marriage and employ her as a housewife while masquerading as a legitimate couple to those around them. They struggle to conceal the business-like nature of their relationship which is further complicated by the developing romance between them, gradually weakening the distinction between professional and personal. In a turn of events, Tsuzaki is made redundant, which provokes him to suggest to Mikuri that they marry officially and enter her into the Tsuzaki family register. Mikuri is initially upset as she imagines that he is motivated by the prospect of no longer having to pay her a wage. She makes it clear that she is against such 'love exploitation'. This leads them to theorise on the role of the full-time housewife

and the potential for exploitation. They finally decide to restructure their relationship by thinking of the household as a single company, with the two of them as “joint management representatives” who share domestic responsibilities. Despite the ensuing challenges from their renegotiations, the two decide to pursue a future together, though what form their relationship will take is left unclear.

### **Wages for Housework**

By positioning the domestic labour of a housewife as paid labour, and in turn, exploring the concept of marriage in employment terms, *Nigehaji* seems to challenge the traditional model of the housewife and breadwinner husband. It draws on discourses similar to feminist theories on unpaid labour that recognise the economic value of such work and make transparent the potentially exploitative nature of this model. Yet, I argue that with further examination, this is closer to “feminism undone”, in that “a spectre of feminism is invoked” only for it to be subsequently undermined (McRobbie 2004, 259). In particular, *Nigehaji* undermines its challenge to the traditional marital model by positioning its protagonist, Mikuri, as abnormal. By doing so, Mikuri’s protestations against what she perceives as exploitative in this model, as well as her propositions for a more equal distribution of labour and power, become individualised, and her subversion is thus less effective. In other words, rather than allowing for a direct critique of the housewife and breadwinner model as a social institution, the show inadvertently reinscribes this as a normative model, from which Mikuri’s stance becomes a deviation. Furthermore, the show makes visible the extent to which domestic labour by housewives goes unnoticed, through allowing space for other characters to voice their discontent. However, rather than challenge the structure of the housewife model itself, the characters merely seek recognition, suggesting that a re-evaluation of the dynamic is unnecessary. Once more, this reinscribes the housewife model as normative, which in turn undermines the show’s potentially progressive consideration of the economic value of this unpaid labour. One other aspect that limits the drama’s subversive nature is that the labour that Mikuri is financially compensated for is limited to physical tasks such as cooking and cleaning. What remains unrecognised, however, is the degree of



emotional labour which is required in the arrangement to manage the emotional wellbeing of her employer, Tsuzaki. As emotional labour is frequently ascribed to women, I suggest that the show's neglect of this aspect of Mikuri's work naturalises the association between emotional care and femininity by taking it for granted. In this section, I will first situate *Nigehaji*'s treatment of housework as paid labour within feminist approaches on the economic value of housewives' work, before turning to a critique of how this potentially subversive stance is undone.

Women's unpaid domestic labour has generally been understood to indirectly support the reproduction of capitalism and the working class through their work to support the family unit (Glazer 1984, 61-3). Drawing on arguments by Marx and Engels on the reproduction of capitalism and society, Marxist-feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s argued that this domestic work by women was a form of exploitation, in that it not only benefits men and supports the patriarchy, but it also produces "surplus value to capital by enabling reproduction of wage labor at a lower cost" (İlkkaracan 2017, 39). Led by Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* was a canonical text in 1970s feminism and spurred the international domestic labour debate and wages for housework movement. Their central argument was that housework deserved monetary payment. This position distinguishes them from other Marxist-feminist perspectives because they saw the family or household as a site of not only reproductive labour but also productive labour. Thus, they challenged the way in which the capitalist system relied on this 'invisible labour' by getting two sources of labour for the price of one (Bracke 2013, 626-8). Another key member of the movement, Silvia Federici (2012, 18) argued that the naturalisation and feminisation of housework and familial care was "a fraud that goes under the name of love and marriage," and posited that demanding a wage for housework was a first step towards exposing it as a form of exploitation and liberating women from having to perform this domestic role. In this sense, wages for housework was proposed as a tool for challenging the capitalist structure that exploited not only men's paid labour but women's unpaid labour as housewives. The idea of putting this into practice,

however, was criticised for its potential to institutionalise women's role in the domestic sphere, and make entry into the labour market more difficult (Bracke 2013, 635-6).

Similarly, feminists have argued since the 1970s that measurements of national economic performance must recognise the contribution of unpaid domestic labour, rather than simply measuring the productive labour in the market sphere. These arguments eventually led to the United Nations recommending the evaluation of unpaid labour in national accounts which inform calculations of a country's GDP (İlkkaracan 2017, 32). In her seminal 1988 book, *Counting for Nothing*, Marilyn Waring proposed that by basing their accounting systems solely on productive market-based labour, the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA), which informs the calculation of a nation's GDP, was institutionalising the invisibility of women and their unpaid labour. While distancing her argument from the wages for housework campaign, Waring acknowledged that she too hoped to propose a "tool for raising consciousness and mobilising women" (1988, 5). However, rather than suggesting an actual wage for housework, her emphasis was on recognising the monetary value of unpaid work which is done primarily by women, and making it visible in national accounts, while challenging the male dominance in economic systems. Caroline Saunders and Paul Dalziel (2017, 213) have argued that while satellite accounts that calculate the value of unpaid housework are now included in the UNSNA, Waring's challenge remains relevant as long as the system excludes such work within its central framework. This attests to the notion that there is still work to be done in increasing the visibility of unpaid housework.

### ***Economic Value of a Housewife***

Within the dynamic of paid employment, wherein Tsuzaki pays Mikuri a wage to carry out the socially productive labour of a housewife, the drama is primarily concerned with making visible the value of such labour. Shirakawa Tōko and Koreeda Shungo (2017, 5) who co-authored a book about the economics of marriage as seen in *Nigehaji*, emphasise that one of the key social influences the drama had was in increasing the visibility of domestic labour. This dynamic is established as Mikuri who, unable to find regular employment, recognises

the potential to align ‘supply and demand’—she will supply her labour to meet the demands of Tsuzaki under the guise of marriage. Tsuzaki, whose corporate job is time-consuming and demanding, realises that the arrangement would be a cost-effective way of easing his lifestyle and decides to employ Mikuri on a contract, thus effectively establishing a dynamic that can be read as the “commodification of intimate life” (Hochschild 2013, 12). Lisa Adkins and Maryanne Dever contend that the devices of a post-Fordist social formation have “worked to relinquish the costs of social provisioning and the costs of social reproduction from the state,” so that the “costs and risks of such have been redistributed across the social body,” thus leading to the reordering of social reproduction as a form of labour (2017, 56). Within this context, domestic services as forms of paid labour have emerged to meet the ongoing demand of social reproduction, which according to Arlie Hochschild, has affected the permeability of the wall between market and non-market life. In other words, such domestic work as cleaning and cooking that was once marked private has become marketised, leading to the creation of “jobs which are a commercial extension...of wife” (2003, 205). This renegotiation of social production as economic labour provides a space within which *Nigehaji* can conceptualise the housewife category as a form of employment. Mikuri’s wages are calculated based on the government’s Economic and Social Research Institute’s System of National Accounts 2011 measurement of the average value of unpaid labour by fulltime housewives (Nogi and Umino 2017). This equates to 3,041,000 yen annually, which Tsuzaki is to pay in monthly instalments, organised within the contract that further stipulates that Mikuri will work Monday to Friday for seven hours each day. The extremely detailed contract includes health insurance and bonuses while taking shared living expenses into account. Within this market arrangement, the transaction of money allows both parties the freedom to withdraw services or payment whenever they feel it no longer serves their interests, allowing for a level of flexibility and clarity that would be generally unfeasible within the context of marriage. This is articulated by both characters, as Tsuzaki claims that “with money as our mediator, our positions are more clear,” while Mikuri suggests to her friend, Yassan, that in a marriage without love, one can “give up on a lot of things and just think of it as a business.” Both characters recognise the value in conceptualising of the social production carried out in

marriage within economic terms. Following this logic, it could be argued that *Nigehaji* does promote the visibility of housewives' labour, and is, therefore, in the terms of Marilyn Waring, functioning as a 'tool for raising consciousness'. According to Arlene Daniels, who coined the term 'invisible labour', one way to draw attention to women's invisible labour is "to show how it is constructed, what effort it involves, and what it would cost if it were purchased in the market" (1987, 405). In this sense, *Nigehaji*'s attention to the level of work required by a fulltime housewife and its economic value does make explicit the way in which this social reproduction goes unrecognised and is undervalued both financially and in regards to social importance.

### ***Love exploitation***

While framed as employment, *Nigehaji*'s engagement with wages and housework is primarily concerned with increasing the visibility of its worth. However, when this framework becomes untenable due to the characters' ensuing romance, the show turns to a consideration of the potentially exploitative nature of the normative marital model. This consideration is made possible when Tsuzaki proposes that they marry legitimately so as to save on expenses by no longer having to pay her a wage. Mikuri contests that this is a form "love exploitation" (*suki no sakushu*, 好きの搾取) in that he can therein "use [her] for free". Firstly, this scene exposes the limitation of their earlier arrangement and suggests that the monetary compensation of labour would be unfeasible in a 'legitimate' marriage, especially one that involves love and affection. However, what is particularly interesting is that Mikuri challenges the logic that love governs women's engagement in reproductive labour, effectively destabilising the notion that the work of the *senryō shufu* is a 'labour of love'. Mikuri suggests that for a woman to get married and become a housewife is a guarantee of living expenses, which she deems to be the equivalent of the minimum wage. Hence, she proposes that in the case of a company, there are various forms of compensation and recognition for hard work, yet in marriage, if a wife is not valued by her husband then she "won't be valued by anyone." Thus, the couple's theorisation of exploitation within traditional marriage is concerned with the extent to which the wife's labour is recognised and

valued by the husband. In this regard, *Nigehaji* suggests that due to the unstable and unquantifiable nature of love, the housewife is vulnerable to exploitation, yet without the affective element of love, her work is the equivalent of a minimum wage job—precarious and minimally recompensed.

It could be said that *Nigehaji* reorganises the level of economic (re)production at which exploitation occurs within the capitalist economy. Following the argument that non-waged labour facilitates the accumulation of surplus value and the functioning of capitalism, the unpaid labour of the housewife can be understood to be supporting the husband's engagement in waged labour. This is, in turn, an "indispensable background condition for the possibility of economic production," allowing the company at which he works to benefit from this surplus of labour for which they need not pay (Fraser 2016, 102). Within this model, the housewife can be understood to be exploited by both the husband and the capitalist system, in that her unpaid work is located within the context that money functions as a "primary medium of power" (102). Therefore, Tsuzaki's act of paying Mikuri a wage destabilises this system, and the marketised nature of their relationship provides her with greater economic independence and flexibility. However, whether or not Tsuzaki financially compensates Mikuri for her domestic work, his employer, or more broadly the capitalist system, still benefits from this form of social reproduction without shouldering the cost.

### ***Renegotiating the Marital Model***

By positioning the traditional model of marriage as potentially exploitative, *Nigehaji* opens up a space to consider alternative models and renegotiate the system. Shirakawa and Koreeda (2017) term the object of the couple's critique the 'Showa model of marriage', which refers to the period of Japanese history between 1926 and 1989. They suggest that *Nigehaji* encourages viewers to imagine new models of marriage that do not carry the earlier distribution of gender roles and 'Showa bias', but one based on cooperation. Further, this earlier 'Showa' model of the breadwinner husband and financially dependent wife is no longer a viable 'survival strategy' (*seizonsenryaku*, 生存戦略) for women who consider marriage a form of future security (10-12). In fact, Adkins and Dever suggest that the

category of breadwinner has become unavailable to “*both* men and women,” as a consequence of “a lack of state and employer provisioning, precarious labour markets, non-standard employment contracts and the dismantling of the family wage” (2017, 55). This point can be applied to the social context depicted in *Nigehaji*. The couple’s renegotiation of the marriage ‘system’ occurs at a point when both have experienced the effects of corporate restructuring, and Mikuri is no longer employed by Tsuzaki, leading them both to seek new work outside the home. To counter the possibility of exploitation inherent in the structural subordination of reproductive labour to productive labour, they reconstruct their relationship as ‘joint managers’ (*kyōdō keiei sekininsha*, 共同経営責任者), a term that suggests they are equally responsible for the household economic unit. Despite their intentions to divide the share of domestic labour based on each partner’s time in paid work, the allotment of tasks is still disproportionately on Mikuri. This reflects the inability of wives “to trade their income for domestic services from their husbands,” suggesting “that the bargain implied by the conventional marital contract is gendered” (Tichenor 2005, 35). Despite their attempts to defy the conventional aspects of the marriage contract, tension arises as both have internalised to some extent normative expectations of gender roles. Tsuzaki laments his increased domestic tasks and Mikuri expresses guilt at being unable to fulfil her duties since beginning work outside the house: “the one that Hiramasa loved did the housework perfectly, always smiled, the ideal wife.” The couple renegotiate the marital model so as to allow for a dual-income household, which can be read as a response to the changing economic structure in which the breadwinner model is increasingly untenable. However, despite this renegotiated distribution of paid work, *Nigehaji*’s updated model still reflects the ‘double burden’ of paid and unpaid labour faced by women, and thus the tension of ‘ungendering’ domestic work within heteronormative marriage.

### **Softening Subversion**

While *Nigehaji* does make visible the unpaid labour of housewives and opens up a space to challenge and critique the ‘Showa’ era model, it simultaneously weakens its potential for critical engagement by reinscribing this model as normative, thus softening moments of

subversion. One such way this softening, or undoing, is achieved is through positioning Mikuri as ‘abnormal’, which in turn marks her renegotiation of marriage as transgressive. In particular, Mikuri often refers to herself as “pretentious” (*kozakashii*, 小賢しい), especially when she is challenging social norms. This is particularly apparent following her critique of Tsuzaki’s marriage proposal as a form of ‘love exploitation’. Reflecting on this moment, a gloomy Mikuri laments “it’s this pretentious women who spoiled such a special proposal.” Mikuri’s self-identification as a ‘pretentious women’ suggests that her acts of challenging social norms or standing up for herself are in fact pretentious, which has the adverse effect of reinscribing her object of critique as the norm. She further sets herself up in opposition to ‘normal’ women, in other words, women who would not seek to question the unpaid nature of a housewife’s work and are thus more deserving of happiness through marriage. She suggests to Tsuzaki that he ought to marry someone more suited to the traditional model: “not saying pretentious things like whether or not there’s compensation for a housewife’s work...There are a lot of girls out there who would be honestly happy about your proposal. That’s normal.” This sentiment also marks Mikuri’s critique as one of personal preference, rather than allowing for it to function as a challenge to the wider social structure and dominant ideology of the housewife. By positioning their arrangement and concern for the equal distribution of tasks as abnormal, *Nigehaji* is able to encourage some critique of social convention without ever fully committing to taking a subversive stance. I would suggest that this works in the show’s favour by appealing to a variety of audiences, allowing them to align themselves with the “normal girl” and thus dismiss Mikuri’s protestations as pretentious, or to align themselves with the “abnormal girl”, or of course a nuanced reading somewhere in-between. In other words, it allows for the coexistence of conflicting discourses within the ‘double entanglement’.

Despite Mikuri’s critique of the traditional marital model as a form of ‘love exploitation’, *Nigehaji* inadvertently naturalises the housewife model. Rather than challenging this as a social model, there are moments when the drama seems to simply challenge the lack of recognition and appreciation (*mitomeru*, 認める) for a housewife’s

unpaid labour. This is particularly evident in a scene where Mikuri's father attempts to take over domestic duties as her mum has broken a leg. Mikuri arrives at their house to find her mum extremely frustrated at her dad's incompetence at housework, as he sheepishly tries to serve the women tea, hang out the washing, and cook meals. Mikuri's mum laments the fact that she never made him help out with the housework before her injury, at which point Mikuri jumps in to suggest that he helped out slightly. Somewhat proudly, her dad says, "I took out the rubbish," which elicits a shared look of disbelief between mother and daughter. The scene is light and comical—despite the mum's exasperation, she seems resigned to her husband's domestic incompetence, and he is portrayed as almost charmingly naïve, wearing a pink apron and confused by their frustration. At this point, Mikuri's sister in law, Aoi, appears at the open door with her young child, murmuring about her own husband's inability to help around the house. She explains that not only is she responsible for all domestic responsibilities but that when her husband comes home, he requests a shoulder massage, demonstrating how he perceives his work as more strenuous. Mikuri's mum sighs, "we're the ones that want the massage, right!" which similarly signals a desire to be recognised for her invisible labour that supports the household. What is problematised here is not the gendered division of labour in their relationship so much as their husband's lack of appreciation. The scene further naturalises female domesticity though Mikuri's pained voiceover, "I could never tell people doing unpaid work (*mushō hōshi*, 無償奉仕) that I receive a salary for housework..." The sense of shame and guilt evoked in this statement further reinscribes Mikuri's demand for financial compensation as transgressive and abnormal which in turn legitimises the housewife model.

One aspect of labour that *Nigehaji* overlooks is emotional labour, which requires Mikuri to perform what Arlie Hochschild's calls, "the work of affirming, enhancing, and celebrating the well-being" (2003, 7) of Tsuzaki, often to the detriment of her own emotional well-being. Arlie Hochschild coined the term 'emotional labour' to refer to the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (7). 'Emotional labour' applies to acts that have exchange value, such as the smiling and warmth expected of a flight



attendant, while terms such as ‘emotion work’ or ‘emotion management’ apply to private contexts, such as within the family, where these acts have “use value” (7). Due to the conflation of Mikuri’s work as both domestic and market labour, both of these concepts have relevance to her management of feeling, though the term ‘emotional labour’ will be mostly be used for the sake of consistency. Emotional labour is often explored in relation to gender, as there is greater representation of women in jobs that require high levels of it, and women are often assumed to be more skilled in the management of feeling (Erickson and Ritter 2001). Mikuri’s ability to manage Tsuzaki’s feelings is in part recognised as a result of her degree in psychology, which obscures the gendered nature of the role. At the same time, because she is being employed to carry out the role of a wife, there are numerous occasions where she must expand her work duties to include various acts of emotional care and support that might be expected of a partner. Rebecca J. Erickson suggests that due to the ongoing association of femininity with “care, concern and connection to others,” performing emotion work as an extension of family work may be seen by women as an expression of self-identity, rather than a burden (2005, 340). This sentiment is supported by Hochschild who posits that “as a matter of tradition, emotion management has been better understood and more often used by women as one of the offerings they trade for economic support,” thus they take on the task of “creating the emotional tone of social encounters” (2003, 20). Through playing the role of wife, Mikuri adopts this responsibility, and while she does not receive financial compensation for this, it does enhance her performance which in turn guarantees her greater job security.

It could also be suggested that Tsuzaki requires this extra level of emotional care from Mikuri because of his inability to communicate his feelings and assert himself, especially in romantic situations. Tsuzaki’s passive personality encourages Mikuri to be forthright and allows her to challenge social norms. Put differently, her attempts to renegotiate the rules of marriage and challenge gender roles would be implausible if matched with a partner who embodied a hegemonic model of masculinity. Instead, it is precisely Tsuzaki’s passivity that makes this renegotiation possible but also requires her to perform acts of emotional labour.

Tsuzaki can be read as a ‘herbivore boy’ (*sōshoku danshi*, 草食男子), a term that was coined in 2006 to refer to gentle, unassertive heterosexual men who do not conform to the traditional image of masculinity (Deacon 2013, 134). Though the term has been interpreted to apply to various aspects of men’s lives, it is used particularly in relation to romantic relationships, or more specifically, applies to those who do not actively seek out sexual partners (Ogasawara 2016, 179). The shyness and lack of assertion associated with the ‘herbivore boy’, positions him as an alternative to the traditional male head of the household (*daikokubashira*, 大黒柱), thus allowing for an alternative conceptualisation for marriage. In the case of *Nigehaji*, this means that Tsuzaki’s ‘herbivore’ nature is a necessary condition for the two characters to challenge the normative model of marriage and reposition it as an economic exchange and form of employment. Tsuzaki’s embodiment of ‘herbivore’ masculinity also serves to mask the gendered performance of emotional labour.

### **Work Counts but Romance Reigns Supreme**

The negotiation between work and romance as sources of meaning and happiness is an important recurring theme for two of *Nigehaji*’s female characters—Mikuri and her aunt, Yuri. Both characters negotiate their self-worth in relation to work, but do so very differently. While work is established as important to both characters early in the narrative, they eventually find romance to be the key source of happiness, thus reinforcing dominant discourses of women’s life courses by suggesting that women are happier in (heteronormative) relationships.

Yuri’s character is of an age that she would have entered the workforce before the EEOL was implemented in 1986. Around this period women’s employment was generally understood to be a temporary state before marriage and women who continued with a career were somewhat anomalous (Shirakawa and Koreeda 2017, 27). Yuri’s staunch dedication to her career and strong identification as a ‘career-woman’ must be read within this context—work functions as a key source of identity and meaning for Yuri, and all other aspects of her life are negotiated in relation to it. However, while Yuri’s identification as a career-woman is fixed, she is painfully conscious of hegemonic discourses of femininity that ascribe value to

women's roles as wives and mothers, so that her sense of self-worth and happiness is largely constructed in relation to romance.

Yuri fits within the trope of the *arafō*, (around forty years old, アラフォー) or in her case *arafifu* (around fifty アラフィフ) as a single, career-driven woman who has prioritised work at the expense of a relationship and family. Yuri's singlehood is significant when considered in the context of Japanese "society where the ideology of family is unquestionable and minimizes the voices of 'others' such as single women" (Maeda and Hecht 2012, 61). In this sense, because her career remains an unnegotiable aspect of how she defines herself, even if it marks her as 'other', she can be read as a potential source of inspiration for working women and demonstrates "women's resilience against the dominant discourse" of women's life courses (61). Laura Dales further emphasises the importance of positive discourses of female singlehood by suggesting that they "can bolster the foundations of unmarried women's subjectivity, supporting everyday acts of resistance, independence and agency" (2014, 226). The question here is whether Yuri's singlehood, especially considering it is framed as a result of her career, is situated within a positive discourse of singlehood, or whether it offers a more problematic reading of female independence.

In many ways Yuri is framed as a positive role model for women—she is looked up to by her subordinates and colleagues, as well as Mikuri, all of whom vocalise their admiration for her determination and achievements. She leads a glamorous, independent lifestyle as a department manager in a makeup company and is quick to assure others that she is happy "in her own way," and enjoying her life, a sentiment that is destabilised in moments of vulnerability and self-doubt. Perhaps this internal conflict is most clearly expressed in an exchange with her love interest, Kazami, a younger man in his thirties, who challenges Yuri to reconsider romance as compatible with her career. Explaining an ad that she has fought for at work, Yuri *positions* her hard work and independence as a source of inspiration for other single women: "Women who feel like they're being crushed by the value given to them become free. It's a beauty that comes from freedom. For example, women like me, single and around fifty, we're necessary to society and can give courage to someone out there. Like, 'if

she's working hard, I can work a bit harder too'... That's why I have to live in a cool way.” Yuri appears fragile, her eyes glistening as she gazes up at Kazami, instantly transformed into an object of romantic desire who requires protection. Furthermore, this expression of vulnerability functions as a form of catharsis, as if Kazami's affection has finally allowed her to drop her strong career-driven exterior and accept romance as a path to happiness. This transition is similar to what Mandujano-Salazar (2017) noticed in her analysis of recent dramas, such as *Kekkon Shinai* ('I Won't Marry', 2012), and *Watashi Kekkon Dekinainjanakute, Shinain Desu* ('It is Not That I Can't Marry, But I Won't', 2016), which explore singlehood through the eyes of women over thirty. She found that while these dramas tend to initially suggest that women can find happiness and satisfaction from independence, outside of normative heterosexual relationships, they tend to conclude with the message that ultimate fulfilment comes from a romantic relationship (15). *Nigehaji*'s privileging of romance at the conclusion of Yuri's narrative reinforces heterosexual coupling as a normative (and ultimately fulfilling) life course. Yet, it is worth noting that it also offers an example of a female character who is able to maintain both a career and a relationship, or more accurately, pursue romance after having established a career, albeit beyond the age typically considered 'appropriate' for romantic pursuits.

Turning to Mikuri, let us consider what it is that she is 'running away from' as articulated in the title, "running away is embarrassing but useful." Mikuri enters into a contract marriage with Tsuzaki after a prolonged period of job-hunting (*shūshoku katsudō*, 就職活動) and subsequent redundancy from a temping job, and it is this quest for a fulfilling job from which she seeks refuge. That this refuge takes the form of a waged 'marriage' attests to the conflict she experiences in renegotiating her sense of meaning in relation to work and romance. Despite being highly-educated and eager to work, Mikuri is unable to find stable and fulfilling paid work in the public sphere. This prompts a gradual reconfiguration whereby marriage, rather than work, begins to offer her security and happiness. This reconfiguration is symptomatic of the phenomenon deemed the 'housewife 2.0' (*hausuwaifu* 2.0, ハウスワイク 2.0), which describes highly-educated, career-driven women who opt out of their careers to

become housewives in order to live a more “human lifestyle” (*ningenrashii seikatsu*, 人間らしい生活). It is important to note that this path is inaccessible to many women as it requires the husband’s income to be substantial enough to support the entire family unit. The wife’s engagement with work in this arrangement is out of interest rather than economic necessity. What differentiates the ‘housewife 2.0’ from the previous generation is that this (re)turn to the domestic sphere is often a response to being unable to sustain a ‘work-life balance’ given the persisting gender inequality in business, society, and the home. Within this context, Ōno Sakiko emphasises that these women choose domesticity because they perceive that it might offer them greater personal happiness than if they continued to pursue careers (2014, 21).

This realigned pursuit of happiness in the domestic realm is central to *Nigehaji*’s narrative, played out as Mikuri gradually comes to privilege marriage over work as a greater source of meaning and sense of belonging. By the end of the first episode, it is made clear that Mikuri has thus far positioned paid work as a natural and necessary succession to postgraduate studies and that her passion for work stems from a desire to be needed and recognised. These early scenes place value on work’s potential as a process for self-actualisation, rather than an economic necessity or even as a source of income to facilitate her lifestyle. Yet, testament to the increasingly insecure nature of Japan’s employment system, company restructuring sees Mikuri made redundant which leaves her feeling excluded from this path. The waged nature of her ‘marriage’ arrangement with Tsuzaki allows for a blurring of the boundaries between the market and private life, which I would argue facilitates her transition into the domestic realm. In other words, because Mikuri is framed as someone who has always privileged work over marriage, it would be anomalous for her character to transition so seamlessly into privileging marriage over work, thus being ‘hired’ as a housewife allows for this identity renegotiation to be a seemingly more natural process. However, just like the housewife 2.0, even as Mikuri repositions marriage as central to her sense of belonging, work is never totally rejected as a source of interest and meaning. Rather, having secured her happiness through marriage, work no longer needs to function as a necessary requisite in her life, but rather as a choice that can supplement her sense of

meaning. Marriage and work, in that order of importance, become her way of achieving a more meaningful 'human lifestyle'.

### **A New Generation of Diversity and Choice**

*Nigehaji* offers viewers a range of life courses through various tropes: the working woman, the dual-income couple, the housewife, the gay colleague, the single mother, the bachelor, the married man, to name just a few. Especially in the case of female characters, the availability of life courses available to the younger generation of women is much more diverse than the earlier 'Showa' generation. Mikuri's mother and aunt represent the binary of life choices available to women of this generation—the housewife and the 'career woman'. Yoko Tokuhiko has argued that due to the changing nature of productive labour that women engage in since Japan's economic growth, they have been forced to "select between the mutually exclusive roles of worker and housewife" (2010, 73). Mikuri's mother, Sakura, would have graduated high school during the early 1980s, at a point when only 12% of women went on to study at university as it was more common to go to vocational college. During this period, her decision to become a housewife would have been standard, while Yuri's pursuit of a career would have been unconventional (Shirakawa and Koreeda 2017, 27). Consequently, Sakura's identity as a housewife is constructed as relatively fixed and stable and as the more normative model of femininity, in contrast to Yuri's more internally conflicted identification as a single career woman. This 'Showa' binary as represented by Sakura and Yuri establishes the explicit limitations to the life courses of their generation of women.

Comparatively, Mikuri's generation, let us call them the late-Heisei generation, is afforded greater diversity of choice, suggesting that there now exists a greater plurality of life courses available to the contemporary woman. Mikuri represents a discursive renegotiation of marriage and work, whereby she has greater freedom to choose both, and neither negates the other. Similarly, her sister-in-law's decision to continue working after childbirth, and her friend, Yassan's decision to divorce the father of her child, further evidence an expansion of choices available to this generation of characters. Yet it is worth considering Rachel Thwaite's contention that there is a "strong choice rhetoric in popular feminism" which can

make it easier for feminists to avoid making difficult judgements under the idea that any decision a woman makes has the potential to be feminist (2017, 58). While ‘choice feminism’ aims to be inclusive of a variety of women’s life choices, this perspective can support a disengagement with the politics of gender inequality and support patriarchal systems by accepting participation as a viable feminist choice (66). Thus, within choice feminism, Mikuri’s decision to become a housewife becomes a signifier of empowerment, rather than an action that reinforces the structure of women’s economic dependence on male partners.

Furthermore, choice feminism’s emphasis on offering women opportunity and freedom of choice in how they live their lives and its tendency to celebrate individualised narratives of choice has received criticism for its “negative and anti-equality connections to neoliberalism” (57). This is worth keeping in mind when considering the expansion of choices available to Mikuri. Her middle-class social and cultural capital, coupled with that of Tsuzaki whose graduation from the prestigious Kyoto University increases his chances of high-income employment, has allowed her access to the Housewife 2.0 model. It would be problematic to celebrate this ‘empowerment’ without acknowledging that, for example, Yassan’s lower socio-economic position obstructs her from having this as an option.

Furthermore, while the diversity of life courses depicted in *Nigehaji* does attest to the expansion of socially legitimised subject positions, such as single motherhood, these are organised into what I call a ‘hierarchy of courses’ in that some models are privileged over others. Though *Nigehaji* presents a variety of possible life courses, they are not constructed as equally desirable: Yassan is ‘free’ to choose to separate from her husband but is left financially vulnerable and must return to her family home to work in their neighbourhood shop to support her young child. This lifestyle is constructed as possible but precarious, whereas Mikuri’s is not only possible but in fact preferable, given that marriage offers her both emotional and financial security, not to mention happiness. Considering that the pursuit of “[h]appiness (*shiawase*) is a ubiquitous subject in Japanese mass culture,” that is concerned with “locating the self in a modern society” (Hu 2010, 199), Mikuri experiencing marriage as a site of happiness is significant. Similarly, Sakura’s characterisation as a happy

housewife locates her life course in many ways as more desirable than Yuri's when situated within this understanding of the importance of happiness. In this sense, within *Nigehaji*'s 'hierarchy of courses', the combination of marriage and work is most desirable, while marriage remains privileged over the more problematised category of singlehood.

## Conclusion

*Nigeru wa Haji da ga Yaku ni Tatsu*. "Running away is embarrassing but useful." Does *Nigehaji* run away from a serious feminist engagement with issues faced by working women and work-driven women in contemporary Japan? I would argue so. While it cannot be denied that *Nigehaji* engages with a variety of current social issues—be it the complicated negotiation of work in relation to marriage, ongoing gender roles in the workplace, or the difficulty of entering the job market—this engagement is surface level. There is allusion to issues that continue to prevent women's active participation in the labour market, especially in regards to domestic responsibility. However, with each instance of potentially meaningful engagement, *Nigehaji* 'runs away', or in McRobbie's words, 'undoes' the feminist 'spectre' that was invoked. *Nigehaji* seems to employ techniques that allow for the coexistence of discourses which both challenge and support the housewife model, without seeming overtly contradictory. Instead, this coexistence allows the drama a level of renegotiation, such as in revising the marital model, without directly rejecting the earlier model in the process. This serves to soften moments of subversion for perhaps more conservative audiences, while simultaneously seeming to promote change so as to appeal to perhaps more socially 'progressive' audiences. *Nigehaji* interweaves seemingly contradictory discourses of women's social roles while celebrating notions of free choice and diversity. This may well have helped contribute to its widespread appeal and consequent success.



## Chapter 6. The Hard-working Heroine in *Jimi ni Sugoi!*

*Jimi ni Sugoi! Kōetsu Gāru Kōno Etsuko* ('Simply Great<sup>2</sup>: Proofreader Girl Kōno Etsuko', 地味にスゴイ! 校閲ガール・河野悦子, herein 'Jimi ni Sugoi') offers a distinctly twenty-first-century heroine—a self-optimising, entrepreneurial subject with career aspirations who carries out the typically unglamorous job of proofreading in a fun, playful and feminine manner. Kōno Etsuko, played by the popular actress Ishihara Satomi, could be a poster girl for the government's Womenomics campaign. Through her dedication to work, not to mention her copious consumption of fashion, she enthusiastically contributes to the Japanese economy. She embodies both the productive labourer and enthusiastic consumer and offers the fantasy of work as a means of pleasure and self-actualisation. This notion of fantasy is especially important to my reading of *Jimi ni Sugoi*, because of the show's conspicuous absence of any structural challenge—be it gender bias, or precarious employment patterns—that in reality might hinder one from engaging in productive, let alone 'meaningful' work. In this chapter, I appropriate Gabriella Lukács' concept of the 'labour fantasy', which she proposed as a way of understanding how early TV work dramas like *Shomuni* (1998) served to make neoliberal restructuring during the 1990s more digestible to workers. In this process, she claims that dramas like *Shomuni* "produced new labor subjects in response to the demands of the new economy," in other words, subjects who are "enterprising and autonomous," and no longer reliant on the company to secure their economic and emotional well-being (Lukács 2010, 173-4). Almost twenty years after the production of *Shomuni*, *Jimi ni Sugoi* seems to offer a similar, albeit updated, 'labour fantasy', with Etsuko as the face of a contemporary 'hard-working feminised labour subjectivity'. She is indeed both enterprising and autonomous like the characters of *Shomuni*, but what sets her apart as an updated heroine is that she is willing to work tirelessly to seek self-actualisation through work. In doing so, she naturalises the notion of individual responsibility so that it is cast as a requisite for the

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<sup>2</sup> The word '*jimi*' in Japanese denotes plainness and simplicity. In the drama, the term *jimi* not only applies to aesthetic simplicity, but also to work that might be considered mundane, commonplace and uninspiring. Thus '*jimi ni sugoi*' can be interpreted in two ways: 1) as slang for 'really great'/'simply great' 2) or less directly, to mean 'simple is great' to recognise underappreciated 'behind the scenes' work.

contemporary worker, but in a way that suggests that individualism is a source of freedom while obscuring the structural precarity of current employment conditions.

In this chapter, I argue that *Jimi ni Sugoi* creates this new ‘labour fantasy’ through its idealised interpretation of the workplace which emphasises fun, hard work, self-actualisation, individual responsibility, femininity and aesthetic pleasure. Firstly, I explore how the show creates a fantasy through its suggestion that even supposedly ‘dull’ work can be repositioned as fun if approached with enthusiasm and optimism. Furthermore, by suggesting that enjoyment of work enables and is a by-product of hard work, I argue that the show places responsibility for job satisfaction on the individual, thus offering the fantasy that with the right attitude and hard work, one can find meaning and pleasure in employment. For this fantasy to exist, the current structural challenges to employment access and security must be made invisible to create a space in which meaning and pleasure are accessible to anyone. Lastly, individual responsibility is framed positively, and the drama celebrates self-optimisation through fashion’s potential for transformation. Thus, fashion not only provides a source of aesthetic pleasure but also acts as a self-styling tool which can enhance one’s ability as a worker. Crucially, this is done in a way which emphasises femininity, therefore creating a new labour subjectivity which is feminised.

### ***Jimi ni Sugoi!* (2016)**

*Jimi ni Sugoi* was broadcast by Nippon TV on Wednesdays at 10 pm over ten episodes between October and December 2016. It scored an average viewer rating of 12.4% and starred Ishihara Satomi in the main role, an extremely popular actress who ranked third most ‘powerful’ actress in Nikkei Entertainment’s (2017, 10-24) ‘Talent Power Ranking’ survey. The drama follows the career aspirations of its protagonist, Kōno Etsuko, whose dream is to work as an editor for the fashion magazine Lassy. After enthusiastically interviewing with the company for the seventh time, Etsuko is finally offered a job, and it seems her dream may have at last come true. However, rather than the glamorous and fashionable offices of Lassy, Etsuko is instead employed by the proofreading department, located in the dim basement and staffed by seemingly drab employees. The bright and fashion-savvy Etsuko dramatically

stands out amongst such a plain and serious work environment, enhanced by her forthrightness and disregard for social conventions. Driven by the suggestion that this stint in proofreading will “open the door to her dreams” and see her transferred to Lassy, Etsuko works tirelessly and passionately to prove her competence. In each episode, Etsuko’s departure from convention lands her in trouble while proofreading an author’s work, only to be resolved with a moralistic message that tends to emphasise the values of hard work, persistence and integrity while still being ‘true to oneself’. Etsuko’s insistence that work can be fun as long as one tries their best (*ganbaru*, 頑張る) becomes contagious and inspires those around her to work harder and more passionately, leading ultimately to greater fulfilment. Etsuko’s love interest, the young aspiring author and model, Orihara Yukito, struggles to find the motivation to write fulfilling novels but is moved by Etsuko’s enthusiasm in carrying out seemingly plain and unrecognised work. This celebration of ‘plain’ work, articulated in the title ‘*Jimi ni Sugoi*’, meaning ‘simple is great’, runs throughout the show and is expressed most clearly at the end when Yukito writes a book of the same name, hoping to recognise all those people whose background work tends to go unnoticed in everyday maintenance. While Yukito regains his motivation in thanks to Etsuko, she, on the other hand, misses an opportunity to prove herself to Lassy. In a final emotional scene, Etsuko tells Yukito that until she becomes someone who is ‘satisfied with herself and able to move to Lassy’, she does not want to risk losing her dream by becoming further involved with Yukito. The series ends with all characters committed to their career aspirations which are privileged over romance as a source of self-actualisation.

### ***Jimi ni Sugoi! DX Special (2017)***

In September 2017, Nippon TV released a special hour and a half follow-up episode which sees Etsuko in her dream job, working as a fashion editor for Lassy. While still driven by a work narrative, the special is significantly more concerned with the romance between Etsuko and Yukito, who have presumably been together since Etsuko’s transfer to Lassy. Woven into this narrative, Lassy is at risk of closure due to decreased magazine sales and is taken over by a fierce, profit-driven editor in chief whose suggestions threaten the integrity of the Lassy

that Etsuko knows and loves. Through a turn of events, Etsuko finds herself temporarily back in the proofreading department and more absorbed in her work than she has been in her ‘dream job’ as an editor. It is clear something is wrong when the company’s literary editor, Kaizuka asks a confused Etsuko to tell him honestly which role was more fun and Etsuko proclaims, “It’s not a matter of fun!”—a sentiment incongruous with her usual attitude to work.

Conflict arises when she is offered the role of deputy head editor of Lassy. However, in true Etsuko style, she realises she cannot accept a role she is not passionate about and announces her desire to eventually return to proofreading, saying “It was so exciting and fun!” The special briefly toys with the possibility of separating work and fun. It seems the process of self-actualisation may still be possible in a job that is not fun but can have other forms of meaning, such as the realisation of a ‘dream job’, or satisfaction from hard work. Yet, in accordance with the series’ emphasis on the mutual reliance of fun and hard work (it is fun to work hard, and in order to work hard one must make it fun), Etsuko is thus offered the job of proofreading for Lassy, allowing her to redefine her ‘dream job’ as one which involves both fashion and her new-found passion for proofreading.

### **Fun at the Office: From *Shomuni* to *Jimi ni Sugoi***

This chapter draws on Gabriella Lukács’ analysis of *Shomuni* in *Labor Fantasies in Recessionary Japan: Employment as Lifestyle in Workplace Dramas of the 1990s*. This is a useful framework in which to place my reading of *Jimi ni Sugoi*, as she explores how the incorporation of pleasure in work dramas served to mobilise workers during the economic recession in the 1990s. She argues that “by reintroducing values such as fun and individualism into the realm of wage labor, workplace dramas such as *Shomuni* offered labor fantasies that served as sugar-coating to make neoliberal initiatives for individual responsibility more digestible” (149). This notion of a ‘labour fantasy’ which blurs the “line between the world of wage labor and the world of pleasure” (149) is especially relevant to *Jimi ni Sugoi*, in which the protagonist, Etsuko, teaches those around her the importance of enjoying work, a sentiment similarly held by *Shomuni*’s protagonist, Chinatsu. Here, I will

briefly establish Lukács' key arguments about *Shomuni* in order to situate my own reading of *Jimi ni Sugoi* in relation to it. During the post-bubble economic recession throughout the 1990s, Japan saw profound neoliberal labour restructuring, resulting in increased flexibility, the end of the lifetime employment system and consequent precarious employment conditions. Lukács argues that *Shomuni* capitalised on this socioeconomic shift in which labour subjectivities were being reformulated, by drawing on such neoliberal ideologies as individual responsibility and autonomy, to suggest that it was the worker's responsibility to ensure job satisfaction and security. Furthermore, it suggested that these new forms of irregular and flexible work offered freedom, as opposed to the earlier models of lifetime employment that expected loyalty and sacrifice. These earlier models would have been inaccessible to the vast majority of women already but were now becoming less accessible to male workers too. *Shomuni*'s protagonist, Chinatsu, embodies the values of fun, freedom and individualism, and emphasises that work must be fun otherwise it has no value while rejecting the post-war ethic of loyalty and sacrifice. Unlike *Jimi ni Sugoi*, *Shomuni*'s OL characters reject the idea of work as a source of identity, rather "transpos[ing] their 'true' fun-seeking selves into their jobs," while maintaining their individualism and autonomy (162). It is precisely because earlier models of secure lifetime employment that were once available to male workers were no longer viable that the show's emphasis on fun and individualism can be read as a fantasy, and Lukács argues that the show demonstrates "ideological efforts to provide the individual with a feeling of autonomy in relation to work ...to compensate for the waning meaning of work for the worker" (149). One of the key differences between the two dramas, however, is that while *Shomuni* recognised and responded to the wider structural issue of shifting work conditions, these conditions in *Jimi ni Sugoi* seem to be naturalised. In other words, twenty years on from the post-bubble recession, the neoliberal expectation for workers to be self-reliant and adapt to the market almost seems common logic. Moreover, while women's participation in the workforce is still impeded by structural barriers, it has also become more naturalised since *Shomuni* aired. *Jimi ni Sugoi* reflects this change—it not only suggests that it is natural for women to work but also that this work can be meaningful, which marks a departure from *Shomuni*'s OL characters.

I would like to extend Lukács' theorisation of a 'labour fantasy' drama to *Jimi ni Sugoi* as I argue that its incorporation of pleasure, consumption and autonomy in the workplace can similarly be read as an attempt to make work seem more appealing and rewarding within the context of neoliberal employment conditions. Furthermore, by combining this with a privileging of femininity in the workplace, *Jimi ni Sugoi* creates a specifically feminised labour fantasy, which in turn supports Womenomics initiatives to encourage women into the workforce. While Lukács is not explicit in her definition of 'labour fantasy', I read 'fantasy' as an idealised imagining of reality, and thus 'labour fantasy' as a reimagining of a more desirable work experience which ignores the problematic aspects of the 'reality' depicted, thus serving a masking function.

### **Labour as Leisure**

*Jimi ni Sugoi* incorporates elements of fun and pleasure into the workplace, therefore breaking down the boundary between labour and leisure. The show suggests that not only is it possible for work to be enjoyable but that it is up to the worker to make it so—a sentiment that echoes what Lukács identified in her reading of *Shomuni*. Etsuko's arrival to the Proofreading Department introduces the notion of fun as a central theme in the workplace. Her bubbly, enthusiastic personality and insistence on fun seem initially out of place in the somewhat subdued department, where diligence and serious, concentrated work is expected. However, it is Etsuko's disregard for such norms and rules as she eagerly completes each proofreading project that is celebrated in the show. Gradually, this new work ethic with fun at its centre rubs off on Etsuko's colleagues, who are thus inspired to seek enjoyment from their work. For example, Etsuko and her colleagues are often found jovially recreating scenes from novels to check accuracy or heading off on 'fact checking' missions to restaurants or sightseeing destinations, activities traditionally associated with leisure. This celebration of pleasure in the workplace is further reinforced in one of the final scenes, when the department head replaces the simple plaque that reads 'Proofreading department' with a gaudy, flashing sign on the office's front door, to acknowledge the changed atmosphere of the

department thanks to Etsuko. He passionately announces:

All of you, who previously in this dark, underground, dreary office worked timidly, have now developed confidence... By seeing Kōno being herself and enjoying her beloved fashion, you became more self-assertive, realising that you do not need to repress yourself in the workplace... That is the Proofreading Department that I am proud of. Such a plain sign no longer suited the wonderful group of individuals in this department.

This comical recognition of Etsuko's ability to introduce pleasure into the office is significant as it reinforces the notion that fun and enjoyment are valuable in improving one's capability as a worker. With humour, light banter and a playful approach to work, *Jimi ni Sugoi* breaks down the distinction between work and leisure, as it reconstructs the workplace as a site of leisure and entertainment.

### **Ganbaru, Girl!**

In contrast to *Shomuni*'s suggestion that fun is achieved through freedom from work responsibility, *Jimi ni Sugoi* emphasises that fun is *sourced* from hard work—it is fun to *ganbaru*. The notion that fun is sourced from hard work is woven throughout *Jimi ni Sugoi*'s narrative but is particularly apparent in a scene in which Etsuko's high school junior, Morio, is expressing her lack of motivation and disillusionment with work at Lassy. The always positive Etsuko initially tries to encourage her but is gradually worn down by Morio's pessimism that no job is fun, proclaiming, "You're not enjoying it because you're not trying...If you think it's boring, then it will end up being boring. Whether you have fun or not, isn't that limited by how the person feels?" This reflects how *Jimi ni Sugoi* suggests that individuals are responsible for finding satisfaction and pleasure through work. Fun is not something to be expected from the workplace, but something to be worked at by the individual. Morio cannot be accused of underworking—she is constantly shown working overtime and taking work home with her—but this exchange illuminates the idea that hard work is only fulfilling when accompanied by a *ganbaru* attitude. Etsuko's response is reflective of the sentiment that individual subjects must actively labour at having fun and

apply this to their attitude to work. If they approach work with a *ganbaru* spirit and put in their best effort (*zenryoku*, 全力) then work will become enjoyable. Etsuko embodies this attitude and is a source of inspiration for her colleagues who learn to *ganbaru* by going beyond what is expected of them and learn to enjoy their jobs in the process. Morio's efforts are rewarded with her boss's praise, "You tried hard, didn't you" (*yoku ganbarimashita ne*, よく頑張りましたね), and over the course of the show, her dispiritedness is transformed into an eagerness to work. This enthusiasm for work, by both Morio and other supporting characters, is revealed through an almost visceral excitement, and the infectious pleasure of *ganbaru* permeates the workplace, creating an appealingly energised atmosphere.

Furthermore, not only is work fun, but it also provides characters with a sense of identity. *Jimi ni Sugoi* suggests that self-actualisation can be achieved through hard work, passion and dedication and the drama's central characters all negotiate their identities in relation to their work and work ethic. Rather than acting as a mere backdrop for personal dramas, the workplace is a crucial site for the process of self-actualisation, a concept which can be understood as the realisation of an individual's potential that "entails the whole process of moral imagination and moral choice, as well as the resulting activity" (MacLagan 2003, 334). This process for Etsuko is regulated by moral choices, as her career aspirations never compromise her moral values. Work is the core source of self-actualisation in the show, which is articulated in the final scene between Etsuko and Yukito when she asks him to wait until she has become someone that she is happy with who can transfer to Lassy. This is expressed as "*jibun ga nattoku dekiru jibun*" (自分が納得できる自分) which literally translates to 'a self that can be satisfied with the self'. By positioning work as central to Etsuko's identity formation, *Jimi ni Sugoi* emphasises that hard work can not only provide one with enjoyment but also with meaning. This is an appealing sentiment in the context of employment instability and contributes to the production of a 'labour fantasy'.

The potential for self-actualisation through work is also expressed by the supporting characters. As a writer, Etsuko's love interest, Yukito, is less physically situated in the 'workplace' but his identity negotiation is still largely dependent on work. Furthermore, even



their romance is developed and negotiated in relation to work. It is Etsuko's work ethic that inspires Yukito to persevere with his writing career after a period of hiatus and uninspired writing. In this case, the importance of *ganbaru* goes beyond being a source of pleasure and is articulated as a necessity for self-actualisation on Yukito's part. That is, having shaped his identity in relation to his writing, Yukito's sense of self is threatened by the possibility of no longer being able to write and develop creatively. Etsuko's inspiring work ethic and ability to *ganbaru* in what might be typically considered a less 'meaningful' form of work empowers him to regain his motivation to write, allowing him to continue pursuing this source of meaning and identity.

This emphasis on work as a source of identity and self-actualisation is a clear deviation from the *Shomuni* 'labour fantasy' where the protagonists formed their identities through their rejection of work. *Shomuni*'s protagonist reminds her male colleagues that the 'frame' in which employees identify themselves in relation to their occupation and institution "no longer offers a stable sense of belonging and a scenario for a meaningful future" (Lukács 2010, 168). Whereas, in *Jimi ni Sugoi*, the search for belonging (*ibasho*, 居場所) and a meaningful future is explored primarily in relation to one's work. What is similar, however, is that it is up to the individual's effort to create meaning in the workplace, suggesting that one cannot rely on external structures, such as the company, to provide this. While the earlier drama focused on individualism as a response to the waning meaning of work, *Jimi ni Sugoi* suggests that meaning is available to all workers if they approach work with a positive attitude. In fact, Etsuko's ability to convert a seemingly plain (*jimi*) role into something amazing (*sugoi*), encourages this sentiment of individual responsibility to shape one's surroundings, situation and future. I would like to point out that *Jimi ni Sugoi*'s emphasis on individualism in this regard does not negate the concept of collective hard work, or *shūdan shugi* (集団主義). While it does draw on the concept of "entrepreneurial, self-optimising subjects" (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016, 5) which can be read within the context of neoliberalism and a celebration of the individual, *Jimi ni Sugoi* also demonstrates the importance of the group. It is not a tale of ruthless individualism achieved at the expense of

others, but rather navigates individual responsibility in relation to the group. It is the individual subject's responsibility to work hard and ensure pleasure and satisfaction from this effort, but never at the expense of seriously damaging group harmony or privileging the self.

In keeping with the creation of a 'labour fantasy', *Jimi ni Sugoi* makes invisible structural challenges such as employment precarity and gender bias in the workplace. Anne Allison discusses the increased precarity of Japanese employment in relation to a loss of hope, in that the earlier employment system offered people a sense that their current productivity would lead to a future of security, stability and hope. She argues that this "futurity...lingers as a lost fantasy for many today," because of the "economic precaritization starting in the 1990s" (Allison 2015, 37). Put simply, the lack of job security afforded to people in the era following neoliberal reform can rob people of a sense of hope for the future. This notion is further supported by Yamada Masahiro's research into freeters and NEETs<sup>3</sup>, where he noted a profound lack of future hope in many of his subjects' narratives. According to Yamada (2004), the social disparity between those in regular, stable work, and those in more precarious, non-regular work, goes beyond economic disparity, as it has led to a society of 'hope disparity' (*kibō kakusa shakai* 希望格差社会). *Jimi ni Sugoi*'s labour fantasy becomes all the more powerful within this context. Not only is employment precarity invisible in the drama, but Etsuko, who has applied for the same 'dream' job for seven years in a row, is relentlessly hopeful, a hopefulness which eventually pays off as she finds a sense of belonging and meaning in the proofreading department. It is a fantasy which encourages hope, or perhaps more cynically, one that conveniently does away with any structural barrier that might cause one to lose hope.

The ease with which Etsuko navigates her position in the workplace is a somewhat surprising deviation from many other work dramas which seek to expose instances of gender bias or moments of struggle experienced by women in the workplace. In fact, I would suggest that it is the very absence of struggle which allows the creation of a fantasy in *Jimi ni Sugoi*, inviting viewers to enjoy a vision of work where women can participate fully and

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<sup>3</sup> NEET is an acronym for youth (15-34) who are 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training'.

‘freely’. In particular, the show facilitates this by constructing Etsuko’s male colleagues outside the bounds of normative masculinity—articulated through characteristics such as introversion, self-consciousness, or enthusiasm for fashion. One colleague, Yoneoka, is constructed as a young, gay, fashion-savvy male who appreciates Etsuko’s striking outfits and enjoys the performativity of fashion, while their boss is somewhat of a ‘herbivore’ who has experienced a prolonged state of singlehood. Despite being tactically constructed, this makes the absence of gender inequality appear natural and suggests that as a structural issue it is thus not necessary to address. This offers an appealing alternative to the reality in which there is ongoing gender disparity regarding economic participation. In particular, workplace culture that is based on the assumption of a core male full-time workforce is one example of how women are obstructed from equal employment. Of course, issues of insufficient childcare or the ongoing hegemony of the full-time housewife as an ideal of femininity are other major obstacles to women’s participation in paid labour. However, due to Etsuko being relatively young and effectively single, neither of these latter issues would obstruct her from working. These are unavoidable for Kira Natsuko, the protagonist of *Eigyō Buchō* in Chapter 6, but Etsuko occupies a subject position that of the young single, early-career woman to whom such concerns do not apply. Even *Nigehaji*, which I have suggested offers only a very light critique of current obstacles faced by young career-minded women, playfully incorporates instances of gender discrimination in the workplace—such as male superiors allocating female staff menial tasks. It would be difficult to call Mikuri subversive, and she accepts the assumption of female domesticity even in the office, following orders to clean her boss’s dirty water bottle to maintain office harmony. The conservative and patriarchal behaviour of these male superiors is made visible, while remaining normative, and more of a ‘nuisance’, rather than behaviour to be actively challenged. In contrast, Etsuko is never offered the opportunity to critique such behaviour, despite being cast as a character who is eager to critique normative social practices and is unafraid to challenge her peers and colleagues. Instead, gender bias in the workplace of *Jimi ni Sugoi* is invisible and her performance of femininity through the likes of fashion, makeup and speech do not detract from, but rather seem to enhance her ability to work. In this sense, it is not that gender itself

is made invisible, but that gender-based discrimination is conspicuously absent from the show's negotiation of gender in the workplace, all of which helps support the creation of a feminised labour fantasy.

## Fashion is Fun: the Self-optimising Subject



**Figure 2.** The Official Instagram of Jimi ni Sugoi: “Etsuko’s Clothes from Episode 1.” Source: Jimi ni Sugoi (@jimisugo), “Etsuko no yōfuku,” Instagram photo, October 6, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BLZzOifjnOY/?taken-by=jimisugo>.

Fashion is a central feature of *Jimi ni Sugoi*, both visually and thematically. Etsuko is able to draw on the cultural capital of fashion knowledge and utilises fashion in constructing her identity. Each episode is peppered with numerous outfit changes which are often recognised by a brief snapshot image of Etsuko posed in her new outfit between scenes. Not once is an outfit repeated throughout the course of the drama, offering regular aesthetic pleasure through the visual consumption of each new outfit. I would suggest that fashion functions as a form of entertainment for the audience, and Etsuko’s outfits emphasise the pleasure of aesthetics and consumption. However, this pleasurable consumption extends beyond the boundaries of the

drama itself as the official social media sites upload these snapshots of Etsuko's wardrobe for fans to engage with. Commentary on the Instagram posts, as can be seen in the figure above, include requests for brand names and details on where one can purchase Etsuko's clothing, reflecting the desire of some fans to emulate her look. In this sense, consumption extends beyond the visual and audiences can engage with the show through their own consumption practices—they too can transform themselves through the powers of fashion. *Jimi ni Sugoi*'s privileging of agentive potential over structural limitations suggests that it is possible to improve one's situation through self-optimisation, with particular attention paid to the role of fashion as a tool for self-transformation. Fashion is also a marker of Etsuko's difference, in contrast with the subdued outfit choices and the environment of the Proofreading Department. It is a visual representation of that which is *sugoi* (great or amazing), while the *jimi* (plain) atmosphere of proofreading is suggested by both the workers' clothing and the drab office. The tension between aesthetics and professionalism is explored in particular through exchanges between Etsuko and the serious, conventional, pantsuit-clad Fujiwa. Fujiwa rejects fashion as a frivolous indulgence, claiming that it is unnecessary to decorate her outward appearance as she is not "empty on the inside." She further suggests that it compromises one's professional performance. This sentiment is evocative of second-wave feminism's critique of feminine performativity through dress as a form of female oppression, marker of difference, physically restrictive nature, and economic cost (Donaghue 2016, 233). This position has since been challenged by many feminist scholars for its privileging of masculine dress and how it reinscribes masculinity as normative (Henry 2012, 20-2). There has also been a shift by third wave feminists towards "engag[ing] with beauty and fashion in terms of playfulness and pleasure rather than coercion" (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016, 21). This latter emphasis on fashion's potential for self-expression and enjoyment is evoked by Etsuko whose professional capability is in fact *enhanced* by her playful attire and knowledge of fashion. In anticipation of a party, Etsuko convinces Fujiwa to replace her pantsuit with a personally choreographed outfit. This episode is particularly telling of how fashion functions in a multiplicity of ways in the show. Not only is fashion a source of pleasure and tool for glamorising the workplace, but it is also intimately tied to identity and self-expression. Helen

Warner notes that “[t]he narrative and thematic terrain of fashion programming is largely concerned with the relationship between fashion and identity, and consequently visual and narrative tropes are employed primarily to explore the ways in which identity can be made and remade within contemporary culture” (2014, 73). In refashioning Fujiwa, Etsuko is able to encourage in her a new self-confidence, and Fujiwa gratefully acknowledges how looking fashionable lifted her mood at a work event, reinforcing the notion that professionalism and playfulness can be made compatible. This also implies that fashion functions as a source of Etsuko’s optimism and positivity.

Furthermore, I suggest that fashion’s function as a self-styling tool in *Jimi ni Sugoi* draws attention to the process of renegotiation of and improvement on the self. In their examination of aesthetic labour, Elias, Gill, and Scharff suggest that the contemporary attention towards appearance is symptomatic of the neoliberal context “with its relentless exhortation to be active, entrepreneurial, self-optimising subjects” (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016, 5). They note that young women, in particular, are being “increasingly positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects,” whose active improvement and transformation of the self extends into the regulation of appearance through beauty practices (23). When read within this context, Etsuko’s constant self-regulation of appearance and identity expression through fashion can be considered a form of self-transformation towards an optimised self. This possibility can be extended into the realm of work, suggesting how the neoliberal subject can actively work towards self-optimisation. It is useful here to refer back to the example of Fujiwa, whose steadfast adherence to rules and convention is visually represented through the pantsuit she purchased ten years ago and wears daily as if it were a uniform. The fixed nature of her attire implies the fixed nature of her approach to work and denies her the process of self-optimisation. That said, after recognising the transformative power of fashion, Fujiwa incorporates elements of Etsuko’s playful work ethic into her own and begins to justify leisure practices as part of her job. This suggests that she too has the potential to remodel herself as a more adventurous worker. In contrast to Fujiwa’s representation of the relatively ‘fixed self’, Etsuko’s appearance is constantly transformed through fashion and

self-styling, which is in congruence with the notion that she is a self-styling, self-improving worker who can enhance not only her appearance but also her productive ability.

Lukács noted that while in trendy dramas their provision of “information on consumer trends was a key source of pleasure,” early work dramas marked a divergence from this towards a more ‘social-realist’ form of entertainment, where workers were shown in uniform instead of fashionable outfits (2010, 149). This seems to mark a separation of consumer culture with productive labour and maintains the distinction between leisure and work. On the other hand, *Jimi ni Sugoi* aligns pleasure with *both* consumption (leisure, lifestyle and fashion) and production (paid labour). Furthermore, it weakens the distinction between these realms by incorporating elements of consumption into the world of work. Anthony Lloyd (2012) argues that with the increase of precarious, low paid forms of work, young people are less able to rely on work as a source of identity construction and source of satisfaction, seeking these instead through such leisure practices as consumerism in an attempt to seek catharsis from meaningless, unrewarding work. While his study was carried out within the English context, this is still relevant considering that youth in Japan are similarly affected by the neoliberal restructuring of work patterns which has led to increasingly unstable, competitive, and precarious forms of work. While for Lloyd’s participants, and many young workers, there is a clear distinction between the realm of paid work and consumer pleasure, work dramas such as *Jimi ni Sugoi* cleverly reconcile the two, and reinstate meaning and identity into the world of paid work. Etsuko epitomises both the productive labourer and the capitalist consumer, combining both of these aspects to construct her identity. Reminiscent of Lukács’ claim that early work dramas “reconciled a deepening conflict between the old work ethic of the postwar period and the new spirit of consumerism of the 1990s” (2010, 150), *Jimi ni Sugoi* is able to align the value of hard work with pleasure and consumerism, suggesting that the contemporary subject is capable of embodying all of these as both producer and consumer. This is especially important when placed within the context of Abenomics discourses, which require citizens to be both active consumers and active producers to sustain and strengthen the national economy.

The way in which fashion is intricately tied into Etsuko's self-identification and self-expression is intriguing because of the association between fashion and femininity and how it is enacted in the traditionally 'male' realm of the corporate workplace. In this sense, *Jimi ni Sugoi* is able to reinscribe the workplace as 'feminine' by privileging traditionally feminine traits and naturalising them in the workplace. This is in stark contrast to earlier female work dramas such as *Hatarakiman* (2007) in which the protagonist 'transformed' into a seemingly more masculine version of herself at the height of her productivity. While this reinscribes paid labour as masculine, in *Jimi ni Sugoi*, the performance of femininity in the workplace is construed as an asset that enhances Etsuko's ability to be a productive worker. This can be situated within the discourse of *joshiryoku* (女子力) which roughly translates as 'girl power', but has different connotations from the English term, especially due to its strong association with typically feminine traits. According to Kikuchi Natsuno's research into university students' understanding of the term, '*joshiryoku*' is most commonly associated with competency in fashion, makeup, hairstyling, housework, and manners (2016, 27). These first three traits are especially applicable to Etsuko and are the most visible signifiers of her femininity. Significantly, Kikuchi aligns the term *joshiryoku* with post-feminism, suggesting that it most clearly expresses a post-feminist rearticulation of gender and sexuality that is premised on the notion that feminism has been achieved. She argues that this notion of girl power in the Japanese context articulates a gender order that combines new elements of meritocracy and independence, with traditional notions of heterosexuality (21-47). When framed in such terms, Etsuko can be understood to embody such girl power, as her performance of femininity generally fits within the bounds of heteronormative femininity, and complements her ability as a self-sufficient, empowered worker.

## Conclusion

*Jimi ni Sugoi* proposes an appealing fantasy of work which aligns meaning, pleasure, and self-actualisation with paid employment. In the imagined world of this drama work is not a financial necessity but rather a means by which to make one's life meaningful. Yet, for this fantasy to exist the drama obscures the various structural challenges that in reality make



access to ‘meaningful’ work difficult for many workers, particularly women. Instead, by encouraging people to actively work on finding fun and meaning at work, the drama effectively places responsibility back on the individual and off the state or corporation. The hard-working protagonist, Etsuko, shares much in common with the self-optimising, self-reliant neoliberal subject who actively regulates herself in relation to the market. The fact that this subject is markedly feminine demonstrates a considerable shift from the era of *Shomuni*. *Shomuni* was primarily reacting to the decreasing employment security for male workers, a position that was already largely inaccessible to women. Through Etsuko, *Jimi ni Sugoi* integrates the traditionally masculinised work ethics of sacrifice, perseverance and hard work with elements of *joshiryoku* (girl power) to create a new feminised hard-working labour subjectivity. Not only does it naturalise individual responsibility, but it reincorporates meaning into the workplace in a distinctively feminised way. In *Jimi ni Sugoi* one need not compromise one’s femininity to actively participate in the economy.

## Chapter 7. The Good Worker, Wise Mother in *Eigyō Buchō*

*Eigyō Buchō*: Kira Natsuko (‘Department Head: Kira Natsuko’, 営業部長：吉良奈津子, herein ‘*Eigyō Buchō*’) sets itself the ambitious task of engaging in current discourses on women’s employment and highlighting the difficulties of achieving a ‘work-life balance’ for working mothers. The drama’s Chief Producer, Makino Tadashi explicitly referenced the government’s goal to ‘Create a Society in Which Women Shine’ as the reason behind *Eigyō Buchō*’s production. He emphasised that despite companies being obliged to support government targets for women to fill 30% of leadership positions by 2020, such initiatives still do not solve the problems faced by working women, particularly those returning to work after childbirth who want to achieve a work-life balance—an issue that he hoped to address through *Eigyō Buchō* (Oricon News 2016). This potential for critical engagement seemed promising, coupled with the star power of the lead actress, Matsushima Nanako. Matsushima rose to fame through her role in the NHK *asa dora*, *Himawari* (1996), and featured in the 2011 hit, *Kaseifu no Mita*, which garnered extraordinary average viewer ratings of 40% (Nikkei 2011). Yet, *Eigyō Buchō*, broadcast by Fuji TV at 10 pm on Thursdays, suffered an average rating of just under 8%. Despite the producers’ intentions to create a socially engaging drama, *Eigyō Buchō*’s low ratings were accompanied by criticisms of a lack of realism and relatability, due to the protagonist’s middle-class, financially secure subject position—one that in reality is inaccessible to many working women (Livedoor News 2016a). Furthermore, while the drama does engage with elements of attitudinal and structural gender bias that obstruct working mothers’ equal participation in the workforce, *Eigyō Buchō* develops a narrative that reinscribes women as naturally maternal and the nuclear family as normative. This chapter will demonstrate how discourses of traditional gender norms coexist here with discourses of women’s empowerment through paid work, an ‘entanglement’ that is symptomatic of a post-feminist sensibility.

*Eigyō Buchō* follows the various trials faced by its protagonist, Kira Natsuko, who returns to work at an advertising agency after three years of childcare leave. Prior to motherhood, Natsuko was a successful Creative Director of commercials, but after returning

to work, she is surprised to be transferred to Business Development as the new Department Head. Natsuko struggles to gain the trust and support of her subordinates, who initially perceive her to be somewhat arrogant, obstinate and out of touch. She is furthermore met with much scepticism, as many doubt that a working mother in her early forties is capable of running a department. Similarly, Natsuko's husband, Kōtaro, is doubtful that she will be able to adequately care for their son, Sōta, and is uneasy about hiring a babysitter. Thus, Natsuko must navigate the complicated terrain of balancing home and work with tension rising as both spheres of her life begin to compromise the other. As Natsuko comes to understand the value of teamwork, she gains the trust of her subordinates only to discover that the department is scheduled to be closed down so as to cover up embezzlement. Determined to expose the corrupt bosses and save the company, Natsuko works tirelessly to the point of collapse. Tension at home comes to a head after Natsuko learns that her husband has developed a romantic relationship with the babysitter during her frequent absences. Feeling unable to balance the double burden of home and work, Natsuko decides to resign, though not before she leads her team to victory, winning prize money for a successful ad campaign that draws inspiration from her being a mother. The money awarded allows the company to regain its losses and avoid the planned merger and consequent major job losses. Natsuko and her husband eventually reconcile. In a final emotional scene, Natsuko is seen watching a video made by her department convincing her how much they need her and encouraging her to retract her resignation. Seeing her tears, Kōtaro says to her, "Go! We're along for the ride" (*issho ni hashiru kara*, 一緒に走るから), and the final shot shows Natsuko back in her office contentedly returning a framed picture of Sōta to her desk, optimistically suggesting that from here on she will be able to enjoy both work and home life.

This chapter argues that *Eigyō Buchō* transplants a female protagonist into the typically masculine narrative where a salaryman takes on and fights the corruption in their corporation. By doing so, the show feminises this narrative and aligns the virtues of loyalty, sacrifice, and dedication so often associated with the salaryman with traditionally feminine traits such as nurturing and care. The corporate warrior (*kigyō senshi*, 企業戦士) takes on

another meaning in *Eigyō Buchō*, where Natsuko must battle (*tatakau*, 戦う) not only corruption but numerous instances of gender discrimination directed towards her. In this regard, *Eigyō Buchō* consciously makes transparent how masculinised the environment of corporate culture is and the various challenges faced by women—especially mothers—in such spaces. The show explicitly engages with both gender bias in the workplace and the double burden of maintaining a career alongside the domestic responsibilities required of a primary caregiver. This aspect of *Eigyō Buchō* sets it apart from the two previously discussed dramas precisely because of its consistent engagement with Natsuko’s struggle to balance both family and career, highlighting the structural challenges and social attitudes that impede her ability to function successfully in both realms. Crucially, it is Natsuko’s ‘mothering’ qualities that eventually break down the demarcation between work and family, as her role as ‘wise mother’ is extended into the realm of work. Here, I argue that the show reifies motherhood by suggesting that Natsuko’s experience as a mother is responsible for her success as a Department Head, as she is able to draw on her newfound nurturing qualities to support her subordinates. The workplace is inscribed as an extension of the family, suggesting that it is ultimately possible to pursue a career without undermining one’s role as a mother. Finally, while *Eigyō Buchō* does directly engage with corporate gender bias and challenge elements of gender roles in the family, it simultaneously reinscribes the nuclear family as normative and emphasises the importance of women as maternal figures. In this regard, the show draws on discourses of women’s ‘empowerment’ through work as well as more traditional discourses that position women’s central role as mothers.

### **Feminisation of the Corporate Warrior**

Through *Eigyō Buchō*’s tale of Natsuko’s corporate maturation, she comes to embody qualities such as loyalty, self-sacrifice and endurance which are associated with samurai and have been similarly connected to conceptions of the corporate warrior, or the ‘*kigyō senshi*’. While the image of the corporate warrior is nothing new to popular culture, it tends to be articulated through the salaryman and thus associated with masculinity. In Natsuko’s case, her determination to “fight the enemy” and embodiment of such values, coupled with her

ability to draw on feminine traits of care and nurturing, mark her as a feminised reinterpretation of the corporate warrior.

Corporate culture in Japan is widely understood to be masculine (Dasgupta 2003; Nemoto 2013a; Hidaka 2010). Furthermore, the salaryman (typically white-collar middle-class male employees of large companies) has come to signify the ideal form of masculinity in the Japanese collective imaginary. Drawing on Raewyn Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', Romit Dasgupta has argued extensively that salaryman masculinity was considered the hegemonic form of masculinity throughout much of the post-war period, and despite structural changes to employment since the 1990s, continues to be "ideologically hegemonic in contemporary Japan" (2012, 8). The salaryman is often understood to be responsible for Japan's 'economic miracle' in the 1950s and 1960s and has been attributed values such as "loyalty, self-sacrifice, and mental and physical endurance", similar to values associated with samurai, or bushido code (2003, 120-2). This is further reflected in the term '*kigyō senshi*' (corporate warrior) that came about in the postwar period, suggesting the salaryman's status as the "archetypal citizen" and "replacement of the soldier as masculine ideal," which "underscores his important role in contributing to the postwar Japanese nation-state's objective of economic (rather than military) strength" (2012, 29). If the salaryman is understood to be the embodiment of 'hegemonic masculinity', his female counterpart is the full-time housewife who supports his engagement in paid work by maintaining the domestic sphere and is understood to embody 'emphasised femininity' (29). Emphasised femininity is defined by Messerschmidt as "a form of femininity that is practiced in a complementary, compliant, and accommodating subordinate relationship with hegemonic masculinity" (2011, 206). It is the subordinate position in the relationship that means this dominant form of femininity is 'emphasised' rather than hegemonic, due to limited access to power. According to Hidaka Tomoko, the ideal family unit of the working husband and supportive wife that developed during the postwar period "created a distinct division of labour based on a heterosexual complementarity" (2010, 2). Awareness of the gendering of productive work as masculine and domestic work as feminine is crucial in reading Natsuko's navigation between the two realms. By taking on the role of the 'corporate warrior', Natsuko destabilises the

gendered demarcation of work and home, effectively feminising this typically masculine role in the process.

Images of the ‘corporate warrior’, or the hardworking salaryman, are evident in Japanese popular culture such as manga, anime, and dramas, as well as in advertising. In fact, Dasgupta contends that the “very visible presence in popular culture spaces... attests to the salaryman’s continuing presence in the collective national imaginary” (2012, 4). The genre of salaryman manga emerged around the mid-1970s and became particularly popular amongst urban dwelling white-collar workers (Skinner 1979, 141-60). Peter Matanle et al. contend that salaryman manga of the 1980s and 1990s centred on protagonists who “uphold the codes of the post-war corporate warrior in order to save their organizations from corrosion from within, as Japan’s success begins to turn in on itself” (2008, 641). In their analysis of two popular manga series, *Sarariiman Kintarō* and *Shima Kosaku*, they suggest that both protagonists are presented as “idealized masculine role models” who restore ‘Japanese work values’ such as “honesty, pride, integrity and sheer grit into the battered salaryman’s self-identity” (646-60). According to the authors, salaryman narratives such as these encourage the reader to re-evaluate their role and identity in their company, potentially offering strategies for survival in the corporate world (660). Akie Arima’s (2003, 88) research into gender stereotypes in Japanese television ads noted that many ads constructed male office workers (salaryman) as ‘strong’ and ‘robust’, depicting them as dedicated to their job no matter how sick or how exhausted they might be—so long as they consume the relevant supplement or energy drink of course. Unsurprisingly, Arima also noted that ads tended to reinforce the stereotype of men at work and women at home.

One example of a drama in which a salaryman fights corruption in the corporation is *Hanzawa Naoki*, a 2013 TBS adaptation of the novel series by Ikeido Jun. Attesting to the popularity of the show, viewer ratings for the final episode were 42.2%, the highest for any drama aired since the Heisei period began in 1989 (Oricon News 2013). The show’s protagonist, Hanzawa Naoki is an employee at a large bank who fights to expose upper management for fraudulent and unethical business deals. The drama’s director Fukuzawa

Katsuo said he hoped that through watching a character like Hanzawa Naoki confront his boss, viewers who hated their boss or the idea of going to work the next day, might feel better. He further explained how the story conceptualised the company like the old feudal system, within which the worker is like the subordinate samurai who belongs to the clan (BBC 2015). It is important to note that in such narratives, the ‘corporate warrior’s’ sense of subordination and loyalty does not negate the need to challenge corruption. Loyalty is to a code of ethics and the company system rather than to unethical company heads whose actions threaten the integrity of the company and wellbeing of its employees. These examples demonstrate the way in which the salaryman work ethic and bushido code have been linked in Japanese popular imagination.

While Natsuko is initially introduced to the viewer as a “queen” who had to “leave her castle” to raise her child, the notion of battle is soon incorporated into the narrative. Challenges are frequently described as ‘battles’ (*tatakai*, 戦い) and those who threaten the security of Natsuko’s position are referred to as ‘enemies’ (*teki*, 敵). In these ‘battles’, Natsuko never compromises her principles and draws on qualities similar to those identified by Matanle et al. in earlier salaryman narratives. Natsuko consistently demonstrates honesty and advocates for an ethical, truthful approach to business deals. Natsuko’s strong work ethic puts her at risk in a corporation where profit is valued above all else, but she demonstrates integrity and maintains the trust of employees and clients. *Eigyō Buchō* incorporates these characteristics with a narrative of fighting corruption, all of which bear similarity to traditionally masculine tales of salarymen in manga and television.

### **Battling Corporate Gender Bias**

Natsuko’s battle extends beyond challenging corruption as she also challenges the gender bias evident in the corporate environment. In particular, *Eigyō Buchō* engages with what might be deemed the ‘cosmetic diversity’ of Womenomics initiatives. Upon discovering that she has been reassigned the role of Department Head in Business Development, Natsuko is informed that the decision was made for publicity purposes (*apiiru*, アピール), in order to “promote [them]selves as a woman-friendly company” (女性の活躍に熱心な企業としていいアピ

ールになる)。Natsuko responds, “so my selling point is that I’m a forty-year-old mother? In other words, I’m a figurehead?” The term Natsuko uses here is ‘*okazari*’ (お飾り) which also translates to ‘decoration’ or ‘ornament’, both of which suggest aesthetic charm but a lack of utility. This early scene establishes the conflict for Natsuko that she must prove herself as capable, rather than merely a figurehead for ‘cosmetic diversity’ and tokenistic affirmative action. It also signals the show’s conscious engagement with contemporary discourses on women in the workforce. In this scene, it is made clear that the company is aware of expectations to increase the number of women in leadership positions but is driven by the commercial value of achieving government targets rather than by a commitment to gender equality. This point is made clearer throughout the development of the show, particularly in a scene during which the company heads are discussing how to make Natsuko appear responsible for the collapse of the Business Development Department, so as to disguise their fraudulence. They decide that it will be easy to scapegoat her as she is merely a decorative head. The original wording is important here as it draws on the term ‘shining woman/women’ that is closely associated with the Abe Administration’s Womenomics initiatives. One member states, “After all, she’s a ‘shining’ female head, not to mention a mother” (なんといつでも輝く女性管理職、それも子持ちですからな). This statement relies on the assumption of Natsuko’s incompetence and draws on the sentiment that affirmative action to achieve gender equality privileges underqualified women over more ‘deserving’ men. Other male company members further express this sentiment, challenging Natsuko’s legitimacy as Department Head, and belittlingly referring to her as a ‘clueless woman’ (*kanchigai onna*, 勘違い女) and an ‘*okazari*’. To a limited extent, *Eigyō Buchō* highlights the limitation of Womenomics’ initiatives to increase female representation in managerial roles. Unless these initiatives also address the attitudinal bias and social assumptions about women’s capabilities in the workplace, their efficacy will be compromised. However, *Eigyō Buchō* tends to pay lip service to these issues without exploring them in much detail, and Natsuko is never given space to explicitly challenge the pretence on which such assumptions are based, thus limiting meaningful engagement.



Rather than an explicit challenge to the wider structural bias, Natsuko is constructed as a strong female character willing to take on individual males in the workplace and ‘beat them at their game’. This allows her to highlight the male-centred culture of the company. Natsuko’s willingness to challenge male colleagues at an individual level is especially apparent in an exchange with the Head of the more highly ranked Second Business Department. Responding to Natsuko’s request for a favour, the fellow Department Head says that he will consider it if she prostrates herself to him (*dogeza*, 土下座), an act that requires her to lower herself to the ground, signifying extreme deference. Natsuko’s silence allows him to continue, stating that he got to his current position through prostrating himself for the sake of business (*dogeza eigyo*, 土下座営業), a path that “every man takes at some point.” His contempt and disregard for Natsuko are made clear through both his dominant stance and patronising manner of speech, going on to say, “You couldn’t possibly understand this, having been appointed as Head without any hard work just because you are a woman” (何の苦勞もなく女だからって部長になったあなたには到底わからない). Having previously voiced his embarrassment at being bowed to by her in an earlier scene, his discomfort at Natsuko’s disruption of male corporate culture is made further transparent when Natsuko begins to kneel, and he swiftly urges her to stand up. Natsuko is quick to suggest that his embarrassment stems from a concern for losing his ‘pride as a man’ by being bowed to by a woman—a sentiment he does not deny. This scene indicates Natsuko’s awareness of the gender dynamics at play which she must carefully navigate to prevent further alienation from male colleagues. In a second attempt to persuade him, Natsuko suggests that they continue to help each other out as Heads of Departments, drawing on the discourse of *kigyō senshi* which links corporate ethics with bushido code: “don’t they say that ‘samurai should help each other out’” (武士は相身互いというんですね<sup>4</sup>). This is framed as a light-hearted, almost comical challenge and an attempt to redress the balance of power between them without being too direct. Natsuko demonstrates her ability to draw on the ‘codes’ of masculinised corporate

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<sup>4</sup> This proverb suggests that because samurai are of the same standing or in the same position, that they must assist each other (Nihon kokugo daijiten n.d.).

culture by using the highly masculine term '*bushi*' (warrior/samurai) to apply to her too. In doing so, she subtly reduces the potency of his gendered exclusion.

### **Double Burden of the Working Mother**

To analyse the show's navigation of work and motherhood, it is essential to recognise the historical and social context in which current understandings of women's roles as mothers and as wives have emerged. It is particularly important to recognise the ongoing ideological influence of *ryōsai kenbo* that locates women's roles as wives and mothers as central to their worth and performance of femininity. As noted in Chapter 3, women's engagement in paid work does not necessarily negate this ideology, but can instead be read as an extension of their duties by contributing to the household's finances. That said, within this framework, if paid work begins to compromise a woman's duties to the household, then it can no longer be conceived of as compatible with *ryōsai kenbo* and as Koyama claims, will "tarnish their 'femininity'" (2014, 85-91). The feminisation of domesticity is similarly noted by Susan D. Holloway and Ayumi Nagase who contend that "the ideology of care in Japan has been closely and exclusively linked to the role of mother," since the post-war period, which excludes others from much of the responsibility of childcare (2014, 73). For example, the 'myth of the first three years' (*sansaiji shinwa*, 三歳児神話) relies on the idea that the care of a child should be exclusively carried out by the mother until the age of three. Hidaka Tomoko noticed in ethnographic interviews with salaryman fathers, a trend to draw on discourses of maternal care as "natural, right and best for children and therefore, mothers should devote themselves to their children regardless of the self-sacrifice entailed" (2010, 157). Within this context, Hidaka contends that many full-time working mothers who internalise this discourse feel guilt for spending less of their time on childcare, so that rather than expecting their partners to participate, they may overcompensate for their absence (152).

The influence of such ideologies extends beyond individual attitudes and practices and continues to inform the practices of institutions and government policies (Mackie 2003, 193). In this regard, the ideological underpinnings of the current social structure further obstruct working mothers' equal participation in the workforce. For example, as discussed in

Chapter 3, because Japan's welfare system has been based on a model that assumes women's responsibility for all aspects of familial care, state provisions for childcare facilities have rapidly become inadequate as more women have entered the workforce. Even those who can secure childcare are faced with the challenge that work hours often exceed the number of hours of available childcare. Coupled with the expectation of a core male workforce, the ideological influence of the male worker and female dependent makes it difficult for working women to balance childcare with work when employers expect their employees to regularly work overtime—a tension that *Eigyō Buchō* pays particular attention to.

Furthermore, this notion of a gendered binary between reproductive and productive labour demarcates the realms of home and work, meaning that one's childcare responsibilities can become problematic if they encroach into the workplace. This is exemplified in public debates on the appropriateness of women bringing their children into work (*kozure*, 子連れ), an issue that came to the fore of media debate in 1987, with what was known as the 'Agnes Controversy' (*agunesu ronsō*, アグネス論争). By bringing her young baby along with her into the television studio where she was scheduled to work, the idol, Agnes Chan, unwittingly sparked a major scandal that led to widespread debate around women, work and its compatibility with childcare. Those who criticised Chan, including the author Hayashi Mariko, claimed that Chan had done a disservice to working women in that bringing a child to work proved women to be less dedicated to work and unable to compete with men (Hambleton 2012, 160). Accordingly, such criticism followed the logic that allowing the personal to interfere in the workplace would cause disruption and compromise professionalism. If women wanted to work, then they must clearly separate their childrearing responsibilities with their responsibilities to the workplace (Fujita 2017). However, feminist scholars such as Ueno Chizuko publicly supported Chan's conduct, claiming that what made it so difficult for working mothers to separate childcare duties from work was the lack of responsibility that was placed on working fathers to help with raising the child. Other examples of support included one newspaper's contention that Chan was simply a 'working good wife wise mother' (*hataraku ryōsai kenbo*, 働く良妻賢母) which Shirai Chiaki notes,

demonstrates how these debates, even the arguments in support of Chan, were generally premised on the assumption of a gendered division of labour (2008, 64).

More recently, the issue of children at work has found its way back into media debate in November 2017 after the Kumamoto Municipal Assembly member, Yuka Ōgata, brought her young baby into an assembly session and was subsequently urged to remove him. Ōgata claimed that she had done so in the hopes that the assembly would be more accepting of female workers balancing childcare with their careers but conversely this prompted the assembly to enforce stricter entry criteria (Japan Times 2018). Once again, this ignited debate over the appropriateness of bringing children into the workplace, with members of the public taking to platforms such as Twitter to express their support or opposition. Tweets in support of Ōgata included the hashtag #kozurekaigiOK ('it's ok to bring children to meetings', #子連れ会議 OK), while those against children in the workplace took up the hashtag #kozurekaigiNG (#子連れ会議 NG) to express their opposition. Media coverage included allusions to the earlier criticisms that were directed at Agnes Chan in the late 1980s, noticing that once again women's childcare responsibilities were being constituted as a disruption to the workplace (Yamada 2018). Both of these media debates evidence the ongoing challenges for working women in balancing the still largely feminised responsibilities of childcare with engagement in paid employment and are a testament to the ongoing influence of gendered ideology on individual attitudes and institutions.

*Eigyō Buchō* pays much attention to the double burden of work and motherhood and the struggle of managing both spheres. Yet, by not challenging the social norms and ideologies such as *ryōsai kenbo* that inhibit Natsuko's ability to fully engage in both spheres, this engagement remains superficial. The show examines the tensions of running a dual-income household in which both parents work outside the home and must renegotiate their division of domestic duties. However, despite both Natsuko and Kōtaro being in full-time work, the majority of the domestic tasks—housework, cooking, and childcare—are assumed to be Natsuko's responsibility, and Kōtaro's participation is framed as assistance, while Natsuko's is taken as a given. Natsuko's negotiation of this dynamic is multi-layered as she

both challenges Kōtaro's complacency without being able to separate herself from the internalised sense of responsibility for the domestic realm and childcare. There are multiple instances where Natsuko returns home late from work to find the kitchen in a state of disarray. In one such scene, she arrives home after drinking and reluctantly begins to wash the pile of dirty dishes, while Kōtaro defensively explains how he has gone to the effort of picking up, feeding, bathing and putting to bed their son. She laments, "it would be nice to be a man. You think you're great for doing what you should be doing" (*atarimae*, 当たり前). Kōtaro indignantly responds, "you think I should be doing this? You think it's a given that I will help you out?" Wearily, Natsuko refutes this but points out that she has until recently been carrying out all of these tasks. Kōtaro retorts that a father and mother have different responsibilities. Natsuko is clearly unconvinced by his argument but rather than challenging Kōtaro's assumption of gender roles, merely says, "if that's what you say... I'll have to be quiet," (それ言われたら黙るしかないよね) and continues to scrub the dishes. This exchange exemplifies the way in which Natsuko's character slightly deviates from her role as 'good wife' by critiquing the assumption that women are primarily responsible for the domestic sphere. Perhaps similar to *Nigehaji*, the show seeks recognition for the invisible domestic work carried out by women, without providing an alternative model that shows a more equal distribution of labour. Instead, Natsuko voices her discontent but is ultimately bound by a dual responsibility—that is, she is allowed to work outside of the home, only so long as she continues to maintain the domestic harmony and not 'burden' her husband. In this regard, *Eigyō Buchō* frames the negotiation of duties carried out in heteronormative relationships to be the responsibility of women. For instance, whenever Natsuko's work compromises her ability to carry out the daily running of the household that includes both cooking and cleaning, and the care of their son, she must request help from her husband, which is constructed as a 'failure' as wife and mother. This notion of 'failure' exemplifies Koyama's point that women's paid work is acceptable only so long as it does not compromise the 'feminine' responsibility of maintaining the household. Within the normative framework that expects mothers to be primary caregivers, fathers are generally exempt from caring duties so as to prioritise paid work. Thus, when Kōtaro does help with childcare at Natsuko's request, his

modest assistance is celebrated and worthy of acknowledgement, such as being called an ‘*ikumen*’ (a complementary term for fathers involved with childcare, 育メン) by other mothers at daycare. Beyond domestic chores, it is ultimately Natsuko’s supposed neglect of her ‘responsibility as a mother’ (*haha no sekinin*, 母の責任) that destabilises the security of her home life. As work commitments grow, she is increasingly compelled to rely on the young professional babysitter whose domestic competence, love of children and emotional vulnerability initially charm Kōtaro, thus threatening the stability of Natsuko’s marriage. Each instance in which Natsuko ignores Kōtaro’s urges to stay with Sōta and to ‘be a good mum’, escalates the domestic tension and exacerbates Natsuko’s sense of deviation from her role as a good wife and mother. This eventually provokes her to resign from her job, hence suggesting the incompatibility of the roles of mother and paid worker. In this regard, *Eigyō Buchō* makes clear the ongoing influence of *ryōsai kenbo* ideology, exemplifying the way in which structural changes to increase women’s participation in the workforce, such as recent government policies, have limited efficacy so long as these norms continue to be naturalised through social practices.

Just as work compromises the stability of Natsuko’s home environment, her responsibilities as a mother initially cause her subordinates to doubt her capability and jeopardise her position as a department head. She is doubted for her decision to return to work instead of ‘nurturing her child’, yet when her responsibility to Sōta forces her to leave work early, she is criticised for her lack of dependability. Having a small child limits Natsuko’s availability to work overtime, making it difficult for her to prove her commitment and loyalty to the company where hard work is measured by perseverance and self-sacrifice. Of course, the negotiation of work and home requires self-sacrifice on Natsuko’s part, yet this seems not to be recognised due to the clear demarcation between the two realms, both of which expect her full participation. Natsuko’s inability to commit fully to either role addresses both the unrealistic expectation of corporations on working parents, especially in regards to time and flexibility. This highlights the ongoing masculinised corporate culture

that assumes a worker's lack of domestic responsibility due to the system still privileging the construct of the working father and domestically supportive mother.

*Eigyō Buchō* does make visible some of the structural challenges that are faced by working mothers as well as the ongoing ideological influence of *ryōsai kenbo* and the 'three-year myth'. By emphasising the challenge of balancing work and family and locating the narrative within current discourses on women's empowerment in the workforce, *Eigyō Buchō* functions as a form of social critique. Yet, the extent of its critique is limited by its superficial level of engagement, which too easily solves the challenges that have made Natsuko's labour-force participation so difficult. One such example is the way in which Natsuko's engagement in work is eventually reformulated to be compatible with the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo*. Kōtaro acknowledges that while at times her work compromised her ability to care for Sōta, it has also offered her opportunities to teach him, thus suggesting that work experience can contribute to her ability as a 'wise mother'. This sentiment may appease Natsuko's guilt for having let work interfere with her familial 'duties' but downplays the significance of the various structural issues that will continue to create friction in maintaining a so-called 'work-life balance'. This conversation sees no renegotiation of domestic responsibilities and curiously negates all of Kōtaro's previous assertions that work has undermined her role as a mother. Furthermore, this conversation exemplifies the way in which Natsuko's negotiation between traditional ideologies and a desire to work is regulated through interactions with her husband. Not only are her decisions to return to work after parental leave and to rescind her resignation regulated by her husband's permission, but so too is her identity negotiation. Be it as a 'wise' mother, or a negligent mother, discussions about Natsuko's maternal responsibility and capability are consistently directed by Kōtaro, which reinforces an unbalanced power structure that locates the husband as the head of the household, and the wife's position in relation to him.

## Ode to a Working Mother

*Like a mother. Kind like a mother, strict like a mother, calm like a mother, joyful like a mother, and strong like a mother. A corporation that protects its consumers like a mother—that is what I propose.*

In an effort to secure the money required to regain the company's losses and avoid a merger, the Business Development Department proposes this slogan for an ad campaign competition that they are unlikely to win. The campaign is designed by Creative Director Takagi—Natsuko's old subordinate in the Creative Department who, having initially resented her earlier selfishness and poor leadership, has come to admire her both professionally and romantically. Takagi's proposal is centred on the notion of motherhood, inspired by Natsuko after witnessing her juggling her roles as mother and Department Head by bringing her son into work one weekend. Presenting his concept to the client, Takagi suggests promoting their brand like the 'gaze of a mother.' He explains, "I came up with this slogan because of a working mother I know. She used to be confident and shine at work, so I was shocked when she returned after maternity leave. She had become confused, hesitant and timid. But then I realised something. Are confusion and hesitation signs of weakness? Had she lost her shine? No, she had, in fact, become stronger from this new weight on her shoulders. And now she shines in a different way." Takagi's assessment of Natsuko's transformation is particularly intriguing because it suggests that motherhood has enhanced rather than detracted from her ability to work and celebrates the new qualities that she has developed since becoming a mother. Through Natsuko's developing maturation as a worker and gaining the trust and respect of her subordinates, her role as mother extends into the realm of work. Following Takagi's logic that the company can function as a mother, on the departmental level, this suggests that Natsuko fills this role for her staff, and embodies the 'wise mother' in the workplace.

Natsuko's character development is a key component of the drama's narrative, especially in regards to how her experience as a mother has transformed her. She is first introduced through narration as a capable and confident Creative Director of commercials who comes across as a combination of strong-willed and self-centred. Her inability to



recognise and support her subordinates' growth is identified as a key barrier to her succeeding in her new role as department head, and she is seen to be prioritising her own goals and achievements. Natsuko comes to understand the importance of teamwork and comes to nurture the growth of her subordinates, which is shown to make her a more capable and valued leader. This transformation suggests that motherhood, rather than being detrimental to one's career, is valuable and enhances one's ability as a worker. While this may be an appealing sentiment, it seems incongruous with the lived realities of working women, where parental responsibility is framed as a hindrance to one's commitment to and capability to work. Instead, this exemplifies the way in which *Eigyō Buchō* reifies motherhood. By framing motherhood as a valuable experience for women to the point that it may benefit their careers, the show effectively reinscribes women's primary roles as carers and nurturers.

Throughout the show, there is a clear demarcation between the realms of work and home, suggesting the incompatibility of the two. However, towards the conclusion, Natsuko is unable to secure childcare for Sōta and is forced to bring him into a weekend meeting. This destabilises the separation of work and home and allows Natsuko's colleagues to witness her performing her role as a mother. I suggest that this occasion is significant to the narrative development for two particular reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, it is what triggers Takagi to reconceptualise the corporation as a 'mother'. The association of 'nurturing' traits that are traditionally marked 'feminine' with the corporation which has been traditionally marked as a masculine sphere serves to reinforce the show's attempt to feminise the workplace. Secondly, because it allows for a breakdown of the boundary between work and home and repositions Natsuko as a 'working good wife wise mother'. Sōta's visit to work, and the reactions it triggers suggest that it may, in fact, be possible to navigate as a working mother between these two realms, implying that the two can be compatible. In this second regard, the show's conclusion does contain an element of fantasy—considering that it has worked to make visible a variety of structural and attitudinal challenges that obstruct women's equal participation in the workforce. The sudden suggestion that these obstacles are possible to overcome if one repositions the workplace as feminine may read as a tempting

fantasy. The story concludes with no significant structural changes regarding gender inequality and Kōtaro merely voices his support for her to continue working, without committing to greater participation in domestic chores and childcare. Thus, Natsuko's decision to rescind her resignation and continue as Department Head is reliant on work being positioned as an extension of her role as a 'wise mother'. She becomes not only a 'wise mother' to Sōta but can be read as a 'wise mother' to her subordinates, as she teaches them the value of hard work (shares her wisdom) and nurtures their growth as workers (an extension of mothering). This is expressed by Natsuko's subordinates, who acknowledge her influence as the reason that they have become more able workers and have come to value work as both enjoyable and worthwhile, also emphasising the value of trying one's best (*ganbaru*, 頑張る). Furthermore, the video that Natsuko's subordinates send her encouraging her return to work at the end of the show emphasises their dependency on her and seems to seek an affective, emotional response. The video uses the song "What the World Needs Now is Love Sweet Love" and shows an up-close shot of each member of the department, which provokes tears from Natsuko. Then the phrase "What we need now is you" appears, reinforcing the idea that her leadership is valuable and essential to them as employees. This contradicts earlier messages from Kōtaro and his mother who consistently emphasise that she is replaceable as a worker but irreplaceable as a mother. Instead, here she becomes irreplaceable as both a mother at work and a mother at home, signifying that she must continue in both roles. This shift is framed optimistically, suggesting that her participation in both roles will be less fraught with tension than before, which offers a fantasy conclusion. Despite the drama's potential to critically engage with the clear barriers that continue to obstruct women's equal participation in the workforce, this narrative solves too easily the challenges faced by working mothers.

## Conclusion

*Eigyō Buchō* draws on discourses of women's empowerment through paid work, while reinforcing more traditional discourses that emphasise women's roles as reproductive, rather than productive. It offers an example of a popular culture text that engages with

contemporary discourses about women and employment in Japan and can be read in part as a form of social critique. That is to say, it makes evident some of the structural and attitudinal challenges that make women's participation in the workforce more difficult, especially those with childcare responsibilities. Furthermore, it demonstrates the ongoing norm of corporate masculinity and uses Natsuko to challenge gender bias in various instances. Natsuko performs her femininity in this masculine space in a way that serves to both feminise the corporation and suggest that it is not necessary for women to 'perform masculinity' in order to succeed in their careers, as is demonstrated in earlier shows such as *Hatarakiman*. Similarly, it offers a narrative in which female protagonists are allowed to maintain both their career and their family/relationship, as opposed to earlier depictions of career women who were forced to choose between the two. In these regards, *Eigyō Buchō* does seem to offer an alternative depiction of working women that avoids some of the stereotypes of earlier shows. At the same time, however, I would like to problematise the extent to which it reifies motherhood. By suggesting that Natsuko's experience as a mother is responsible for her maturing as a worker, and by then positioning her as a 'nurturer' to her subordinates, *Eigyō Buchō* reinscribes women first and foremost as mothers and carers. Domestic responsibility including childcare remains primarily with Natsuko which limits the show's critique of gendered labour and supports dominant ideologies such as *ryōsai kenbo*. Thus, of the three dramas analysed in this thesis, *Eigyō Buchō* is both the clearest form of social critique and conscious engagement with contemporary discourses on working women, while also being the show that draws most on traditional ideologies that reinscribe women's roles as primarily domestic and reproductive.

## Chapter 8. *Kagayaku* Ambassadors

The recent proliferation of working female protagonists in TV dramas, especially those that explore their identity construction in relation to work, is a testament to an expansion in the variety of women's televisual representations in Japan. *Nigehaji*, *Jimi ni Sugoi*, and *Eigyō Buchō* offer three examples of the increased visibility of female labour subjectivities in the Japanese cultural imaginary. Further, by engaging with the notion that paid labour can offer women meaning and a source of self-actualisation, these dramas do seem to challenge normative gender roles, offering new, if not slightly radical rearticulations of contemporary female subjectivities. While they each engage with the concept of work differently, especially *Nigehaji* in comparison to the latter two, these dramas all destabilise the traditionally masculinised category of productive labour. In *Nigehaji*, this is most apparent through the blurring of the boundaries between reproductive labour and productive labour by reconceptualising of the housewife within market terms. In other words, by framing domestic work which is marked feminine as a form of economic participation, the initial premise of *Nigehaji* aligns feminised work with productive labour. By virtue of being set in the workplace, *Jimi ni Sugoi* and *Eigyō Buchō* more visibly disrupt the masculinised corporate space through their performances of femininity, albeit in divergent ways. This feminisation of productive labour is signified not only through performances of fashion, beauty, or maternal care but also through the way in which these protagonists draw on traits of perseverance and hard work (*ganbaru*) which tends to be gendered by what it is one strives for. In this regard, Lisa Yuk-ming Leung suggests that while male characters in dramas *ganbaru* primarily in relation to work, women's narratives tend to relocate this attitude towards relationships (2004, 92-3). However, Etsuko and Natsuko defy this trend by positioning work as a source of meaning and something to strive towards, thus feminising the trait of *ganbaru* in the workplace. In fact, both narratives suggest that feminine traits enhance the protagonists' abilities to *ganbaru*—whether it be that fashion and beauty practices increase Etsuko's perseverance and optimism in striving hard at her job, or Natsuko's capacity to nurture both

her family and subordinates that allows her to persevere despite numerous challenges— both narratives feminise *ganbaru* in the realm of work.

All three dramas are characterised by what Rosalind Gill deems a ‘post-feminist sensibility’ that is especially apparent through their contradictory and complex interweaving of elements of traditional gender norms and discourses of women’s empowerment through access to paid labour. Angela McRobbie, who has deemed this interweaving a ‘double entanglement’, contends that popular post-feminist texts reregulate young women within a new ‘gender regime’, through a language of choice, demonstrating how “relations of power are indeed made and re-made within texts of enjoyment” (2004, 262). Before turning to a consideration of the strands of post-feminist discourse that can be read in each of the shows, it is worth noting that each protagonist’s negotiation between traditional norms and paid work diverges based on their life stage. Maeda and Hecht contend that Japanese women’s normative life courses see “women’s identities develop relationally through their family roles as daughter, wife, and mother,” (2012, 46) while Laura Dales similarly suggests that despite the trend of increasingly prolonged periods of singlehood, “marriage and childbearing remain key markers of contemporary Japanese womanhood” (2014, 224). By reading the dramas along these lines of women’s normative life courses, I propose that each protagonist occupies a distinct subject position. *Jimi ni Sugoi*’s unmarried protagonist, Etsuko, is the ‘*kagayaku* girl’, whose singlehood enables her to ‘shine’ at work without this significantly conflicting with traditional norms. Etsuko shines first and foremost as an enthusiastic and dedicated worker. On the other hand, *Nigehaji*’s protagonist, Mikuri, transitions from singlehood to marriage, which positions her as the ‘*kagayaku* wife’. Despite proclamations of the importance of paid work, Mikuri comes to locate marriage as a site of belonging and meaning, thus ‘shining’ foremost as a wife, with work functioning as a source of additional satisfaction. Lastly, Natsuko in *Eigyō Buchō* is situated as a wife and a mother, and narrative tension is created primarily through her negotiation of the roles of mother and worker. A conceptualisation of Natsuko as the ‘*kagayaku* mother’ does not deny her success as a worker, rather the drama extends its celebration of motherhood and nurturing into the workplace, allowing Natsuko to ‘shine’ as a working mother. These shows suggest that as one progresses

through each of these normative life stages, traditional norms become increasingly influential in women's lives and thus further complicate their engagement in paid work. In particular, the ideology of 'good wife, wise mother' which inscribes female domesticity, is of little relevance to the *kagayaku* girl narrative, whereas the internalisation of these norms creates conflict in the cases of the *kagayaku* wife and mother, wherein paid work can jeopardise the fulfilment of their domestic roles. This conflict is expressed most often as guilt—Mikuri's guilt for receiving compensation for housework that has been naturalised as a woman's labour of love, or Natsuko's numerous instances of guilt for not being a fulltime caregiver for her son due to work commitments. Similarly, the protagonists' normative life stage also influences the way in which each narrative is feminised. For example, the *kagayaku* girl's ultimate expression of femininity is through image regulation practices, such as fashion and makeup, therefore emphasising her 'girlishness' through appearance. The femininity of the *kagayaku* wife is signified through competent domesticity and homemaking which extends to include practices of emotion management. In the case of the *kagayaku* mother, the feminine trait of nurturing becomes a required practice both in the domestic realm and at work. Her displays of femininity are not only through her domesticity, in fact, work often compromises her domestic responsibilities. Rather, in Natsuko's case, her competency at maternal care becomes the very trait that allows her to continue balancing both roles, through the suggestion that motherhood enhances her capability as a worker. In this regard, all three texts privilege elements of normative femininity and suggest that femininity need not be compromised to engage in productive work.

### **Elements of Post-feminist Discourse**

Whether through a process of obscuring and masking or through a narrative of individualism, these dramas underplay the significance of structural gender bias. In particular, post-feminist discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment facilitate these processes, where gender bias (if at all present) is reconstituted in individual terms. In doing so, they produce labour fantasies in which bias can be overcome by individual effort, the right attitude, and personal choice. In the case of the *kagayaku* girl in *Jimi ni Sugoi*, the workplace is

constructed in such a way that gender bias is made invisible, and its absence allows for the creation of a labour fantasy in which work is available to women as a source of fun, meaning, and space for belonging. If the workplace of *Jimi ni Sugoi* were constructed as a highly masculinised space, with heteronormative salaryman figures, the obscuring of gender bias might be made difficult, but instead, the male characters are cast outside of such normative models. Consequently, the absence of characters who embody hegemonic gender roles allows for the feminisation of the workplace to appear natural, and through this lack of gender bias, it may be suggested that gender equality has been achieved, thus rendering further action unnecessary. Gender bias for the *kagayaku* wife in *Nigehaji* becomes masked through the rhetoric of individual choice, in that she is empowered and free to choose to locate herself within (hetero)normative notions of femininity. To an extent, this relies on the notion of what McRobbie deems feminism as a ‘spent force’, again suggesting that gender equality has been achieved and that resultantly women are empowered through the expansion of choices made available to them. Within this conception, the choice to engage in normative gendered practices is understood as the exercise of autonomous freedom, rather than being implicated in an imbalanced power structure. Emphasis on autonomy and agency is similarly found in the conclusion of the *kagayaku* mother narrative which, despite the various structural constraints that have been evidenced throughout the drama’s progression, suggests that individual determination and attitude suffice to overcome such constraints. This individuates the challenges faced by working mothers which in turn downplays the extent to which persisting institutional and attitudinal gender bias obstruct women’s equal participation in the labour force. Through casting the protagonists as autonomous agents who are unconstrained by inequality, these narratives reflect a post-feminist sensibility that bears much in common with the “psychological subject demanded of neoliberalism” (Gill 2007, 154). Gill notes that both the post-feminist subject and the neoliberal subject are premised on the “notion of the ‘choice biography’ and the contemporary injunction to render one’s life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy, however, constrained one actually might be” (154). In each of these three dramas, the constraints of gender inequality are overcome by privileging the discourse of individual autonomy. This narrative is

problematic because, despite its potential to foster a sense of agency and ‘personal empowerment’, Shelley Budgeon points out that it also “requires a denial of the effects that external influences have on the realization of individual success and as such the classed and raced constitution of the ‘successful’ feminine subject is obscured” (2011, 285). Indeed, both in the rhetoric of Womenomics and these televisual narratives found in the three dramas analysed here, there is little consideration of class structure which privileges certain female subjects as ‘successful’, while paying little attention to the ways in which social structure obstructs many women from accessing such subjectivities. One clear example of this downplaying of class in the narratives of choice and agency is that for the *kagayaku* wife and mother, their decisions of whether or not to participate in the labour force are informed by personal satisfaction, rather than economic necessity. In both cases, the privileged class position they occupy allows for a single income to sustain the household and therefore locate the wife’s work as a matter of choice. These narratives fail to acknowledge the fact that their access to this ‘empowered’ subject position is facilitated by their classed position, creating the illusion that narratives of choice and agency are universally available to women. This supports the creation of a labour fantasy and inadvertently supports the logic of capitalism.

In many ways, the work fantasies created in these dramas support Abe government discourses of women’s empowerment that seek to mobilise females into the workforce, by making participation more appealing. This is significant given that many women are ambivalent about having careers and may feel disengaged from or even ‘threatened’ by contemporary gender equality policies that encourage them to work, especially when they do not want to emulate male work patterns or pursue work-oriented lifestyles (Dalton 2017, 2). Whether it be in response to ongoing structural barriers that make labour force participation difficult for many women, or a general ambivalence towards seeking the sort of paid work that the government promotes, such TV dramas which create ‘labour fantasies’ can act as a mediating force between government discourses and viewers. Lukács and Perkins have argued that earlier TV dramas provided new justifications and meaning for participation in an increasingly precarious and casual workforce, thus making participation in the system of capitalist accumulation attractive. It is within this understanding of TV dramas’ ideological



potential to reconcile social and economic tensions and reshape worker subjectivities that I suggest the protagonists of these three dramas help support the governmental discourse of ‘creating a society in which women shine’ (*josei ga kagayaku shakai*). In other words, we can imagine them as *kagayaku* ambassadors, all of whom embody ‘empowered’ women who are free to shine. This is, in part, through privileging the discourse of individual responsibility and determination, and obscuring, masking, or undermining the significance of structural gender bias.

It is worth remembering here that post-feminist discourse is imbricated with a neoliberal rationality, especially apparent through its celebration of autonomy, empowerment, individual responsibility and free choice. Diane Negra attests to this interconnectivity in asserting that woven into the logics of finance culture is “a very tricky blend of post-feminism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, all reinforcing each other” (Gill et al. 2016, 729). If we understand Abe’s Womenomics initiatives as a form of ‘neoliberal feminism’ and these contemporary popular culture texts as characterised by a post-feminist sensibility, then it can be suggested that these logics work within a system wherein they support each other. This interconnectivity of the notion of ‘women’s empowerment’ and neoliberal or capitalist rationality complicates critical engagement with post-feminist texts, as it requires one to separate a critique of gender norms from a critique of economic rationality. For example, in examining discourses of empowerment in *Nigehaji*, it would be problematic to simply consider women’s economic participation and independence as a marker of gender equality. Not only would this risk privileging paid labour as more valuable and legitimate than reproductive labour, but is premised on the assumption that participation in the current employment system is empowering for workers of any gender. Rather, what must be recognised about Mikuri’s choice to engage in reproductive or productive labour is its gendered nature. This discourse of choice, or of being ‘empowered’ to choose is only available to female characters. This discourse fails to challenge the notion of males’ paid labour as normative, wherein men’s participation in the labour force is assumed, while women can choose to opt in or out. Regardless of the extent to which each of the dramas privileges paid labour as a source of self-actualisation or meaning for its female characters,

they support the rationality of finance culture and legitimise the current economic and employment system.

### **Expanding on Post-feminism as Transnational Culture**

By recognising elements of post-feminist discourse in these Japanese TV dramas, this thesis supports Simidele Dosekun's contention that post-feminism, when understood as transnational culture, can be and is being transmitted across borders by neoliberal connectivities and institutions and consumed in local contexts. Indeed, Abe's Womenomics agenda must be read within an international context, in part responding to continuously low rankings in international gender equality indexes. As Liv Coleman suggests, the rationality behind Womenomics cannot be explained simply by materialist or domestic political considerations, but also as a national identity strategy which "flips the typical script of Japan as a laggard on women's empowerment by creatively crafting a new narrative of the country as a trailblazer and leader of a global movement to empower women" (2017, 496). Just as Womenomics can be understood as part of a globally circulating discourse on women's empowerment, post-feminist texts can be similarly located as part of a transnational discursive circulation due to post-feminism's mediated and commodified nature (Dosekun 2015). These dramas provide examples of how elements of a post-feminist sensibility can be recognised in 'glocal' articulations within the Japanese context. While works within the European and American contexts have identified an emphasis on femininity as a bodily property and sexual subjectification, these are two strands of post-feminist discourse that are much less apparent in the Japanese context, in part, I would suggest, due to the ubiquity of the cute rather than sexy aesthetic as a desirable trait for women. That being said, other elements of a post-feminist sensibility are more easily recognisable in these dramas, which as previously mentioned, include the rhetoric of individualism, empowerment and choice; the notion of feminism 'taken into account' which renders further action unnecessary; as well as self-regulation and improvement. Considering how little work has been done on post-feminist discourse outside of the American and European contexts, this thesis supports Dosekun's contention that further critical engagement with post-feminism as a globally circulating

discourse is worthwhile and necessary. Contemporary Japanese popular cultural texts engaging with women and work provide a fascinating space in which to examine the localisation of this discursive formation, while considering the culturally, socially and politically specific nature of its articulation. In particular, as the *kagayaku* wife and mother demonstrate, discourses of women's empowerment through paid labour are complexly interwoven with contradictory discourses of women's natural domesticity. When read within the wider social context, this negotiation between the domestic and worker subjectivity is significant, given that discourses of Japan's demographic challenges often place responsibility on women in particular. Not only that, but Abe himself "remains deeply committed to a traditional 'family values' agenda that belies full internalization of norms of gender equality and women's empowerment," despite his promotion of women's economic participation (Coleman 2017, 492). This contradictory entanglement of values in both popular culture and politics suggests the need for further consideration of how post-feminist sensibilities and neoliberal rationalities are playing out in discourses concerning women's social roles and 'value', especially in relation to the economy.

### **Engaging Viewers**

This thesis has analysed three Japanese TV dramas on working women as sites of hegemonic discursive practice and argued that they play an ideological role in maintaining and reproducing dominant discourses while allowing space for some level of renegotiation and contestation of gender norms. Since TV dramas are commercial products that are designed to appeal to wide audiences so as to secure revenue, analysing them allows insight into what discourses producers imagine will best meet the interests of the audience. In saying that, it is also worth acknowledging that the producers of cultural texts are also social actors whose subject position, life experiences, and exposure to political, cultural, and ideological influences means that they mediate, or interpret, rather than create the meanings that are encoded in these texts (Fiske and Hartley 2003, 62). Similarly, audiences are also situated within discourses whereby their readings of texts are informed by their particular subject position (Morley 1980; Ang 1990). Due to the polysemic nature of texts individual viewers

may interpret meanings in the same text in various ways—such as by decoding along the lines of the dominant and intended discourses, or from a negotiated or oppositional code (Hall 1980, 127).

Online viewer responses to the three dramas discussed in this thesis offer a glimpse at the potential for a gap between the producers' intended meaning and the meaning decoded by the viewer. Reactions to *Eigyō Buchō*, in particular, demonstrate this divergence despite the producers' expectations that the drama would resonate with many women through depicting the realities of contemporary society (Fuji TV n.d.). Instead, viewers responded with criticism, especially targeting the drama's lack of relatability due to its focus on an elite career woman who had access to resources and capital they could not imagine. Despite the drama's claims to speak to a wide range of women, many viewers felt alienated by the show's lack of realism and spoke of not being in a financial situation to afford a babysitter, or of having to return to work immediately after the birth of their child, further attesting to the classed assumptions of the drama (Livedoor News 2016b). Viewers felt a disconnect with the drama's depiction of a reality that they could not relate to or attain. Whereas *Jimi ni Sugoi* also creates a narrative of women's work that is largely inaccessible, but its excessive use of fashion and playfulness more readily mark it as a fantasy—one that viewers can even seek to recreate through making similar consumer choices. While many of the tweets following the show's last episode were in reference to Etsuko's cute appearance and great fashion, there were also numerous comments that commended its engagement with work and how it encouraged them to try their best (*ganbaru*). The tweets from these viewers suggest that they decoded the text closer to the intended discourse of the producers, who designed the drama so that it would inspire an enthusiasm for work in its viewers (Nikkei Style 2016).

The comments of viewers who suggested that *Jimi ni Sugoi* enabled them to reframe their attitude towards work offer just a small example of how the discourses in these TV dramas can shape the way that people imagine and engage with reality. Similarly, comments on *Nigehaji*'s official fan message board demonstrated the way in which the drama effected a reconsideration of the work of housewives that is taken for granted (*atarimae*, 当たり前). This

included comments ranging from husbands claiming that the show made them appreciate more fully the work that their wives do, to housewives thanking the show for challenging their husbands to rethink the work that they take for granted (TBS 2016). These comments demonstrate how the drama prompted self-reflexivity in some viewers, who drew meaning from the drama into considering their own reality. Further research into the audience reception of dramas' discursive engagement with women's labour force participation would offer valuable insight into the ways that these texts are being consumed and how audiences negotiate these discourses in reference to their own subject positions.

### **Conclusion: Women, Work, and Who Gets to Shine?**

Through analysing representations of working women in recent TV dramas, this thesis has explored contemporary discourses on gender and work in contemporary Japan. Specifically, I have located these readings within the wider context of the current government's Womenomics initiatives, while paying particular attention to how these dramas reflect elements of a post-feminist sensibility. Here, it is important to remember that the government's promotion of women in the workforce is informed by a neoliberal rationality which is intimately linked with post-feminist discourses of women's empowerment. Thus, these imbricated discourses must be read together as both are woven into the logic of current discourses of women's labour.

These dramas suggest that women's engagement in paid work is becoming increasingly naturalised in the Japanese cultural imaginary. Compared to earlier televisual depictions of working women who were often framed as anomalous, these recent dramas almost *assume* the importance of paid work in the lives of their female protagonists. This contention stands even in the case of *Nigehaji*, whereby Mikuri's 'escape' from the labour force can be understood as a response to the growing expectation of women's participation in the economy. While women's work in the peripheral labour market has supported Japan's economic development since the late 1800s, it has long been marginalised and undervalued (Dalton 2017, 100). Rather, hegemonic gender models have located men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, so that the dominant position of the paid labourer in the cultural

imaginary has largely been occupied by the salaryman. Might it be that the increased visibility of working women is destabilising this model and expanding its boundaries? This thesis has shown how TV dramas demonstrate a renegotiation of women's gendered roles where traditional gender norms are simultaneously reinscribed alongside discourses of women's empowerment through paid work. It suggests that articulations of women's 'worth' in these sites of hegemonic discursive practice are undergoing a shift, and being realigned in relation to their direct participation in the economy. In other words, neoliberal modes of governmentality, which construct individuals as self-monitoring, self-sufficient actors who regulate themselves according to market principles, seem to inform current discourses of women's empowerment. This thesis has considered how elements of this logic extend beyond the political and economic sphere into the realm of popular culture and can be read in depictions of working women in TV dramas.

Each of the three case studies have exemplified varying levels of tension between paid work and the ideology of women's domesticity. The privileging of paid work is most easily facilitated in the *kagayaku* girl narrative, but becomes increasingly complicated for the wife and mother, who must negotiate their engagement with work in relation to such ideology. These later narratives cannot obscure structural barriers and the influence of gender norms so readily, and yet, each female subject is re-regulated through post-feminist discourses of individualism, choice, and empowerment. Despite the ongoing influence of traditional gendered ideology in institutional and personal practices, this notion of women's agentic empowerment relocates responsibility onto individuals and downplays the need to address social structures. While the lived realities of many Japanese women attest to the profound contradiction and near-impossibility of realigning oneself within the ideals of both productive and reproductive labour, these dramas create a fantasy where the tension of these competing ideologies are readily solved. Once measured primarily by her capability as a homemaker and nurturer, it seems that the 'ideal feminine subject' of contemporary Japanese dramas ought also to be competent at productive labour. Previously located on the periphery, (select) representations of women's paid work are becoming more discernible in the cultural imaginary. Current articulations of this ideal, however, do not negate normative notions of

femininity and traditional gender norms, but rather, are allowed to coexist in these texts through a post-feminist ‘double entanglement’ of such complex and contradictory discourses.

These TV dramas sit within a wider, ongoing conversation about contemporary gender roles in Japan. *Nigehaji*, in particular, has spurred public dialogue on women’s social roles and the validity of the full-time housewife in the current economy. A little over a year since the drama finished airing, an article published by the Asahi Shimbun used *Nigehaji* to prompt further consideration of whether housewives qualify as ‘shining’ women. Some of the newspaper’s readers expressed that they saw appeal in being a housewife. However, this was accompanied by a sense of shame or guilt, resulting from the current value placed on labour force participation. Such sentiment speaks to the disconnect between the government’s promotion of women’s empowerment and the lived realities of many women. This thesis has explored contemporary discourses of women’s work within the realm of TV dramas to evidence of how women’s ‘value’ continues to be reregulated in relation to the economy. Whether through the lens of drama or otherwise, it is certainly worth considering who is left in the shadows as dominant gender discourses determine who gets to shine.

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