GENDERED-NECESSITY AND GENDERED-OPPORTUNITY: WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN JAPAN (SUMMARY)

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SUMMARY

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Principal Topic

It is a common observation that normative gender roles in contemporary Japan are a hurdle to female participation in the male-dominated business world. Japan’s modern gender norm, constructed and institutionalized by the state in the late 19th century, can best be described as a system of complimentary but binary sexes in which normatively male roles are performed in the public sphere (soto) and normatively female roles are performed in the private sphere (uchi). Women’s normative role as “good wife and wise mother” (ryosai kenbo) was deeply internalized by middle class women in the post-war period. As such it represents a powerful institutional barrier to their entrepreneurial energies.

Method

However, our research demonstrates the potential for human agency to transform limits into opportunities, a process that is, in fact, one of the hallmarks of the entrepreneur. Japanese women entrepreneurs typically articulate a strong personal identification with the dominant gender norm. Using data from extensive first person interviews, we examine the ways in which some Japanese women entrepreneurs leverage the concept of Motherhood to locate and exploit specific market niches, to develop brand identification, to create employee solidarity, and to build organizational structures and practices that preserve their strong identity as mothers, thereby privileging work-family balance over profit margin or market share, typical measures of entrepreneurial success.

Results and Implications

As we will show, Japanese women entrepreneurs leverage gender as part of their business practice for many reasons; all of these pertain to either the necessity or an opportunity to press the boundaries of normative womanhood into the male-gendered business world. Their very success can be a two-edged sword, however. Male competitors have both the resources and propensity to appropriate women’s lucrative market niches, product lines, organizational structures and practices, the result of which would be a defacto re-segregation of the desegregation female entrepreneurs by necessity or opportunity, are forging. Sustained success will obtain if and only if Japan’s women entrepreneurs move beyond the leveraging of normative gender and contribute to the complete destabilization of those normative roles at other socio-institutional levels within the broader culture.

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