Gender and agency in careers: the work-life experiences of women employed by Japanese and South Korean firms

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Introduction

> I think for me to become a department head will be hard... They still have the notion that men can dedicate themselves fully to their work and the company. Women have family responsibilities so they cannot be as committed to the work. Women need to leave early or have obligations at school. This line of thinking seems to influence promotion decisions for top positions. We have two or three female directors, but they are not married, divorced, or don't have children…It is sad but if women want to achieve career success they have to work just like men. I see many women with children, who can only spend time with them during weekends. That is the reality. The team leaders and senior managers at the top favor candidates who work until late at night and make frequent business trips. One female deputy chief told me she hired a babysitter for during the week and only saw her child in the weekends so she could get good performance evaluations. That story was so sad.
>
> (Young-Hee, 31-year-old married section chief)

How do women in South Korea (hereafter referred to as "Korea") and Japan navigate corporate careers amidst changing normative and workplace contexts? Women's inability to break the glass ceiling is not simply about lacking in confidence, experience, qualifications, dedication, or skills. Nor is it merely a practical matter of having too little time or energy for work and informal networking due to family responsibilities. As Young-Hee's narrative illustrates, the issue is complex and multifaceted with various (external) factors culminating together in women's daily lives. My project takes a qualitative approach based on the interpretation of life story interviews about what happened to them at work and home. It starts by exploring how women themselves view careers and success since we cannot assume they mean the same as existing conceptualizations based on the experiences of (predominantly male) employees in North America and European countries. Hereafter, it unravels how women's agency interacts with multiple factors in their pursuit of a corporate career while often juggling family responsibilities. I apply a modification of the comprehensive interactionist Gender-Organization-System approach (Fagenson 1990) that considers country-specific factors at the individual, firm/workgroup, and societal level. Rather than treating them in isolation or as static,

I consider gender-, organizational-, and structural dimensions to identify constellations that continuously shape the choice freedoms of female employees as they conduct day-to-day business at varying career and life stages. I will examine why women approach the specific dilemmas they face along the way differently and show that we can only fully understand women's work-family behaviors and attitudes by contextualizing the intricate forces that shape an individual's perceived constraints and opportunities in walking a path to a meaningful work and life over time.

In all industrialized societies, there is a cultural lag when it comes to the emancipation of women and men at work and home. Contemporary Korea and Japan make particularly interesting cases for examinations of gender in career advancement and work-family balance from a comparative perspective. In contrast to the fast-paced economic development, progress on gender equality in employment has been slow despite serious efforts of government and big business to utilize the ever-expanding group of university educated women since the mid 2000s. Both countries remain at the bottom of international comparisons of gender equality indicators feeding the tendency in older scholarship from abroad to lump these countries together (see table 1-1). However, the countries have diverged, particularly after the burst of the economic bubble in the early 1990s (in Japan) and 1997 financial crisis (in Korea), in terms of internal labor market (ILM), quality and availability of part-time jobs, and job security/wages for regular employees, social policies[1] to facilitate work-family balance (Nishimura and Kwon 2016) and the country

[1] Korea has made greater strides in socializing childcare facilities whereas in Japan a great number of parents who wish to use them in urban areas are unable to enroll them because they reached full capacity. Parental leave policies appear similar in both countries in that employees can take a one-year leave (can be extended to 18 months in Japan if they cannot find a day-care center by the time the child is one year old), however, the wage replacement level is much higher in Japan (67% for the first 6 months and 50% for the remainder of the leave period) than in Korea (40%). The Japanese government has also been more active promoting work-life balance policies to facilitate reduced working hours for parents with young children since 2010. These measures, in part,

scores on separate indicators are no longer as similar as they used to be. For instance, the gender wage gap (32.5 % in Korea; 22.5% in Japan), female employment rate (59.2% in Korea; 71.9% in Japan), and share of female managers (15.6% in Korea; 13.3% in Japan), suggest Japan is doing slightly better on wages and labor force participation while Korea has made greater strides in increasing the share of female managers in recent years (OECD 2022). It is now time to explore women's realities in a qualitative sense and delve into the multi-layered gender dimensions in career behaviors, the changing social reality of corporate employees in the workplace, and the diversity within this group of women (and men) workers. My dissertation will show that similar systems can work differently at the micro-level and statistical reality says very little about the realities experienced by female employees in both countries.

Table 1: Gender gaps in employment Japan and Korea 2019

Gender gaps				**Occupational details**		
Country	**Labor force participation rate**	**Earnings**	**NEET rate**	**Female share of managers**	**Female share of skilled occupations**	**Top occupation for women**
WORLD	-16%p	-1.4%	18%p	27%	43%	Elementary occupation or skilled agricultural worker
Japan	-19%p	-27%	1%p	12%	44%	Service or sales worker
Korea	-21%p	-46%	16%p	13%	47%	Professional

Source: (ILOSTAT 2020)

The emancipation of women and men and erosion of traditional gender ideologies are not captured by mere labor market attainments such as wage levels, job rank, or employment status. The 1998 Nobel Prize winner for economics Amartya Sen made a compelling case to shift our

appear to have created the difference in female employment rates during childbearing years as it incentivizes Japanese women to stay in the labor market (Nishimura and Kwon 2016).

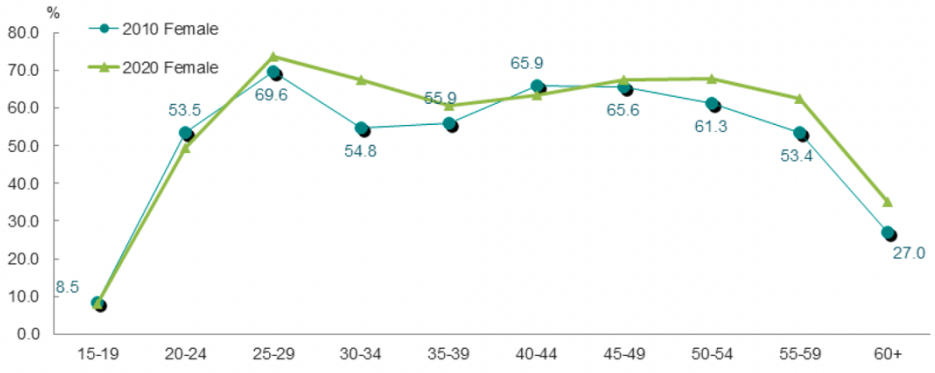
focus from mere achievements of women and men to the actual choice freedoms individuals have to do or be in the analysis of inequalities (Sen 1995). This is a powerful message for sociologists and feminist economists studying gender in the context of work and family. Perceptions of personal wellbeing, entitlements, and autonomy in self-actualization are very different for each person (Ibid.). Besides, work-related norms and values are increasingly diversifying in Korea and Japan shifting towards greater priority on leisure time than work among younger people (Haerpfer et al. 2022). This means we need a more comprehensive long-term oriented approach that examines how human agency responds to changes in social relations and work-family contexts.

Employers are now making serious efforts to accommodate employees with different work-life needs and desires but do individuals really feel the difference in their daily lives? Polarization between older generations who experienced hardship in the postwar period but had access to lifelong employment amidst rapid industrialization and economic growth (1980s-1990s) and post-bubble generations (since the late 1980s in Japan; after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis in Korea) with fewer secure employment opportunities while being exposed to cultural influences from abroad is increasing. Surveys and in-depth studies of work-life attitudes consistently show a widening gap between the aspirations and desires of male and female young adults and their parents' generation (Brinton 2011; Honda 2005; Kim 2005b; Lee 2003b). Fewer men aspire to become salarymen and chase the dream of their fathers (securing a lifelong career at one employer) at all costs (Dasgupta 2013; Pliassova 2011). Young women increasingly postpone marriage or stay single in pursuit of a different life than their mothers who sacrificed their own dreams for the family (Lee 2003b; Tsuya and Bumpass 2004). To keep up with recent developments, we need a more contextualized picture of the lived experiences of corporate

employees across generations over time. Thus, my research project aims to capture the more subtle processes of change at a micro-level that quantitative studies do not observe.

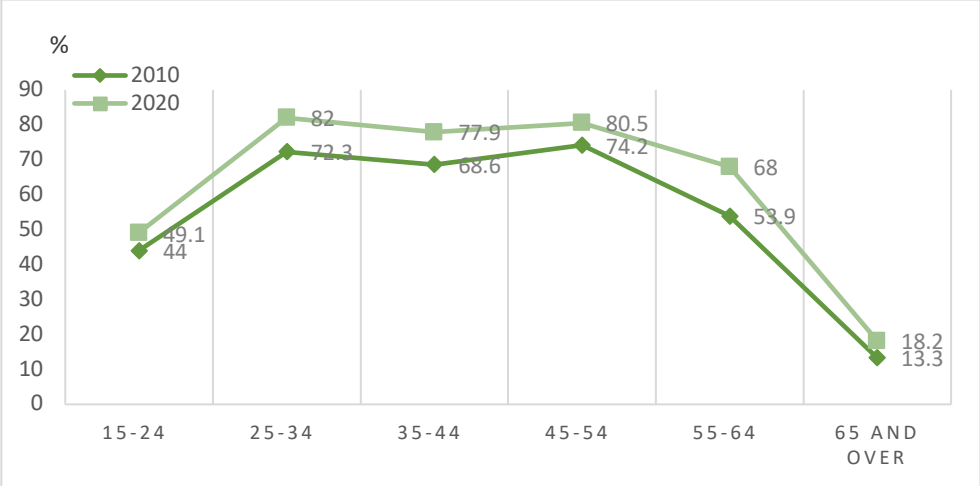
What exactly happens to younger generations of highly educated women once they start a corporate career over time? Female labor force participation rates in Korea and Japan historically showed a distinct M-shape. The shared tendency of women to quit work after marriage and childbirth in the 1990s (*M-curve*) reinforced the belief the labor market situation in these countries is similar. However, the pattern has flattened significantly in Japan in recent years while in Korea many women still exit the labor market at childbearing age without returning (see figs. 1-1 and 1-2). Comparing the organizational and personal journeys of female corporate employees at different career and lifecycle stages in each country can help us interpret this diverging pattern in a qualitative sense, that is the lived experiences of individuals in their organizations.

Figure 1-1: Female employment rate by age group in Korea



Source: Korean Women's Development Institute (2020)

Figure 1-2: Female employment rate by age group in Japan



Source: Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2022)

How comparable are the realities faced by Korean and Japanese female career track employees when we look beyond the labor statistics and what stands in the way of progress? A closer look inside Korean and Japanese organizations shows female and male employees face very different realities on the work floor. Brinton (2001) points out that the work culture, interpersonal dynamics, and practices *within* organizations in these countries are worlds apart in her comparative work on women's working lives in East Asia. This means we need to focus more attention on recent developments that are taking place at the localized level, the work floor of organizations. Major corporations are still central social institutions in both countries that offer identity and relatively stable jobs to career starters. An in-depth exploration from the perspective of individual employees, female and male, can provide a more nuanced, cultural-sensitive, and up-to-date picture of the changing significance of gender at work, family, and society in Korea and Japan today.

The problem has many facets, so a sociological multi-level approach seems befitting. My research pays particular attention to the interaction of women's situated agency (to be discussed later) with cultural-specific subtleties in workgroup dynamics and unspoken rules that guide the behavior of members. Placing the organization in the middle offers an avenue to connect broad macro- to specific micro-level factors. Previous studies of Japanese and Korean organizations illustrated the merit of multi-level interactionist approaches to women's career advancement. The literature on managerial women revealed similar structural, (organizational) cultural, and gender-specific barriers exist that complicate the upward mobility of female employees in corporate Japan and Korea. Recurrent themes are the long working hours, lack of predictability and individual control over time, gender-specific allocation of tasks and responsibilities, shortage of female role models and male sponsors, ideal worker image modeled after the male-breadwinner with full-time wife, and managers' bias in evaluating the performance and commitment of female subordinates (Cho and McLean 2017; Hadley 2006; Ho 2020; Kang and Rowley 2006; Lee and Rowley 2009; Nemoto 2013a, 2013b, 2016; Yuasa 2009). Studies of work-life balance in Japan and Korea found another parallel: female and male employees fear becoming a burden to coworkers when exercising their rights to extended childcare leave (Takahashi 2013; Joo 2017). This concern often weighed heavier than the anticipated negative career consequences (delayed promotion, relegation to the mommy track). However, we cannot simply assume such conditions always impact individuals in their decisions the same way in one organization or country. Some women may respond to constraints by compromising on their desires while others negotiate better conditions depending on their reading of the situation. Therefore, I will compare and contrast women's choice freedoms in relation to coworkers, superiors, and family members

to identify constellations of factors that enable or constrain women in their pursuit of a more balanced work and family life.

Gender role norms and work attitudes are changing as both societies are moving towards a dual earner reality, so we can expect that the processes and dynamics unfolding within organizations will differ qualitatively from older observations. The available case studies of Japanese organizations with family-friendly or gender diversity policies reveal that although the share of female managers is growing gradually, issues related to the workplace atmosphere prevent full-time women workers (and men) from using childcare leave or other family-friendly services (Takahashi et al. 2013; Yuasa 2009). These findings indicate gender plays a critical role in how policies and utilization are interpreted by members of organizations.

What policies formally offer says little about people's ability to benefit from such services. Brinton and Mun (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with human resource managers in 25 large firms addressed another pertinent issue that constrains the potential of generous parental leave to generate meaningful opportunities for a larger group of women workers. Japanese managers on the work floor interpret these policies merely as a business strategy to retain long-term commitment by career-track women on the premise that the firm is entitled to a core workforce of fully dedicated employees. However, they do not challenge the assumption that childrearing is mainly the responsibility of working mothers. In such a configuration, women can go on leave but are expected to work like their male counterparts without heavy family responsibilities once they return. This implies that the way policies are understood and practiced collectively is connected to their accessibility for individuals.

With this in mind, my dissertation looks specifically at localized processes of progress not mere *achievements* of women workers on a national level to gain a more nuanced

understanding of the current status of gender equity in the workplace of these countries. It moves beyond the conventional focus on organizational structure and its impediments to women's career advancement and, instead, uses the perspectives of individual employees who create organizational cultures as analytical units to explore how women's agency freedoms interact with implemented gender diversity policies on the actual work-floor. More specifically, my analysis uses the narratives of female regular employees at different life and career stages to reveal when legal entitlement to gender equal opportunities and work-life balance can be converted into a sense of entitlement that allows women to make use of the services available to them. My findings will show that it is not the organizational structure/context in the broadest sense nor personal characteristics of women, but the social dynamics and relations within work groups that make the most difference.

Organizational cultures are not static but constructs of collective human behaviors and attitudes. A study on the competing devotions of women executives shows the behavior of individual employees can influence the collective culture within organizations over time when challengers inspire powerful actors to implement a new way of evaluating employees that is not measured in time spent in the office (Blair-Loy 2003). My dissertation confirms that middle managers or direct supervisors are central gatekeepers of gender diversity and employee wellbeing who exert the most influence on the agency freedoms of their subordinates. Moreover, it illustrates that female leaders with alternative career paths and work-life values are uniquely positioned to drive positive change in their work groups and organizations. How such interactive processes unfold within major corporations in Japan and Korea, and what this insight into the "black box" means for fundamental improvements in the lived experiences of a broader group of female employees and changes in larger socio-structural gender relations, is the main objective

of this dissertation. Applying theoretical insights from scholarship developed in Northern America and Europe to the Korean and Japanese case (in comparative perspective) allows us to challenge our assumptions about what it truly means to be successful or agentic in each country's context. By exploring the meaning of frequently used concepts (gender equality, career success, and work-life balance) as they emerge in the stories about the daily lives of Korean and Japanese women, I also wish to test our assumptions and re-examine some theories that have dominated the Anglo-Saxon literature. As my research shows, women's own conceptualizations are context-specific, fluid, and rarely fit into narrow (binary) categories or outdated notions of a lifelong career in one company.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION AND CONCEPTS

How can we disentangle the myriad of factors that shape women's work-life choices? The analytical approach of this dissertation is largely inspired by two conceptual frameworks (Gender-Organization-System; Agency and Capabilities) with an established record for their use in gender inequality in employment and work-life balance studies. Both were developed in the US but have been applied to East Asian societies including Korea and Japan in recent years. The first contributed to a deeper understanding of the connections between large socio-institutional mechanisms, organizational context, and individual's behavior in sociological studies (quantitative and qualitative) on the significance of gender in women's career advancement. The second contributed to gender inequality studies in different fields (feminist economist, welfare states, and work life balance) by focusing on gender differences in agency freedoms and processes that enable someone to choose alternative options in self-actualization and well-being rather than achievements of socio-economic status per se. Although each framework originated

in different fields, they share the fundamental idea individual choices reflect what one deems possible considering the normative environment, institutional context, and situational conditions, and not what one actually prefers to do if things were differently. Since both conceptualizations focus on processes rather than outcomes, they leave room to examine change and persistency in women and men's behavior at work and home.

Gender Organization System Framework and Gendered Organization Approach

To fully understand women's work-family behaviors and real options amidst structural constraints and opportunities, we need an approach that considers a multitude of factors occurring at different levels of analysis. GOS is such a framework that examines the continuous interaction between factors occurring at the individual-, organizational-, and societal level. The comprehensive yet focused analysis enables me to find out under which specific circumstances women turn to action and identify larger processes of change and continuity that connect the macro- to micro-level. Women's behaviors and attitudes are not mere reflections of socialization or gender-specific traits. Because the GOS model (Fagenson 1990) combines insights from gender-centered and organization-centered perspectives, it can offer explanations with a greater balance in emphasis on factors internal *and* external to women. This rests on the assumption that individuals are influenced in their work behaviors by their gender (traits, personal characteristics), situations (work context), organizational structure (and culture), and the larger institutional environment in which people and organizations are situated. In other words, it views women as active agents within structural boundaries from multiple angles and can identify particular conditions that motivated decisions at one point in time. As such, it provides a multilayered lens through which we can see individual action (and inaction) in situations

perceived as real by women themselves. More generally, the gender-sensitive (but not deterministic) approach focused on continuous interactive processes can help reveal constellations of specific individual variables, work-family situations, and larger organizational- and normative environments that in combination explain some of the observed differences in career behaviors and outcomes of women and men as a group.

I also use Acker's conceptualization of the Gendered Organization that posits bureaucratic organizations, their structures, and practices are not gender neutral (Acker 1990). This widely used theory in studies on gender and work issues assumes gendered assumptions are built in the structures of work organizations. Indeed, many seemingly gender-neutral bureaucratic practices now perceived as fair or merit-based are in fact shaped by individuals collectively and dominant gender beliefs. Therefore, it stands to reason gendered practices and bureaucratic structures, not individual characteristics, are primarily responsible for different career outcomes and behaviors of men and women. Acker makes a compelling case that organizational logic, power hierarchies, and the ways employees are evaluated are all based on gendered assumptions that reproduce gender inequalities in the workplace. This notion is meaningful for my exploration of women's lived experiences since it can also reveal subtler forms of exclusion/gender discrimination and identify the specific contexts in which gender becomes salient. More importantly, it can reveal the conditions and opportunity structures perceived as real (often beyond a women's immediate control) that constrain or broaden their agency in navigating a corporate career. In my dissertation, I will show that this gender sensitive perspective leads to a more nuanced cross-cultural understanding of the interaction between agency and structure of women employed by major firms in Korea and Japan that debunks some common myths of employers ("women themselves do not want to be promoted", "mothers lose

job commitment when their children are young", "men are more determined in their pursuit of a corporate career."

Agency and Capabilities Conceptualization

Having legal entitlements to work-life balance services is not the same as being able to really benefit from them. This dissertation draws from an adaptation of Sen's work on wellbeing, agency, and freedoms suitable for sociological gender research (Hobson 2013). Hobson's interpretation of Sen's Capabilities Approach provides a multidimensional, dynamic, and process-oriented model to study underlying mechanisms that influence *if* and *how* individuals convert legal entitlements to a better work life balance into a real sense of entitlement strong enough to act upon. This touches on the issue of situated agency in gender studies. Are women and men really free in their work life choices considering the normative environment? By viewing an individual's actions as the result of a careful evaluation of possible scenarios influenced by one's relation to others inside and outside the workplace, not rational choices solely based on economic reasons, we can find out how seeds for new norms are planted in workplaces with work-life balance and gender diversity policies. Rather than simply assessing the effectiveness of policies based on measurable achievements, this dissertation seeks to unravel social processes on the work floor focusing on signs of positive change in the organizational culture and agency freedoms of female and male employees in Korean and Japanese firms.

What constitutes a successful career to many men from older generations may not be the same to women (or younger men). Do women perceive their careers to be successful based on mere achievements (job rank, promotion, or wage increases)? Sen's ideas about agency freedoms, focused on capabilities not achievements and interpersonal variation in assessing one's

own accomplishments or well-being (1995) can also be applied when thinking about careers. There is ample evidence that intangible factors contribute more to women's valuation of work (Cho et al. 2017; Dyke and Murphy 2006; Gutek and Larwood 1989).

These insights warn us not to mistake women's career choices and outcomes as reflections of gender-based preferences. This is particularly important considering the many myths and stereotypical views of employers about Korean and Japanese women due to statistical discrimination. A Japanese woman who declines promotion should not be judged by employers as simply lacking in ambition. As I will show in my dissertation, her choice is often based on a combination of factors such as lower self-evaluation of capabilities, concerns about time constraints, doubts about being suitable for a leadership role. The tendency of Korean working mothers to opt out of full-time careers should not be interpreted as a personal or voluntary choice either. Their perception of actual freedom to choose alternative scenarios is the crux of the matter. In reality, a range of factors (support system for childcare, long commute times, cohabitation with husbands' parents, husbands' relocation, lack of opportunities for career growth and professional development, etc.) constrain the agency freedoms of women with children in their pursuit of a corporate career. Thus, it is important to first explore how women conceptualize career success on their own terms, perceive newfound formal entitlements, and gain real access to benefits considering inflexible power structures and unspoken rules in the workplace. I will show that when we start seeing the world through the eyes of women, not with an imposed researcher's lens, we can begin to fully understand why some women take action while others remain passive in certain contexts.

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

How do we ascertain with relative certainty what motivated someone's work-life decisions in hindsight? Whichever method one uses, it is impossible to be entirely sure. Having said that, I believe it is a good starting point to interpret the perspectives of the studied group themselves. Thus, my research project primarily relies on semi-structured individual interviews with female employees using a life story approach and embraces the idea that diversity in people's perceived realities of the social world is of analytical value. This allows me to compare and contrast women's own reflections on work and family life and illustrate the relevance (and limitations) of general theories or challenge concepts constructed by sociologists of gender and work (Plummer 2001). Such an in-depth analysis of personal accounts can also reveal linkages between individuals, organizations, and society at large that widen or narrow the agency freedoms of corporate women in Korea and Japan. The main concern in my project, as in most life story research on the topic, is to analyze women's lived experiences and address gender equality issues without restricting to a single theoretical orientation (Bertaux and Kohli 1984). As we do not know enough about how existing gender and work theories operate in each country's unique context, we cannot simply assume they are applicable. Therefore, my dissertation uses my own adaptation of the GOS framework that includes factors particularly relevant to the Korean and Japanese work context. It explores common conceptualizations from the perspective of women themselves to gain a deeper understanding of the complex processes that influence the choices women make along the lifecycle to realize their career aspirations and family desires. By applying this framework to each country separately, I will show that it is crucial to understand the specific contexts women deal with in explaining their work-family

behaviors. The subsequent cross-country comparison of findings can offer explanations for the diverging and converging patterns in women's career behaviors addressed earlier.

People's own perceptions of work and family life, with all their inconsistencies and contradictions, are meaningful sources of data because these, rather than some imposed version of the truth, guide individual behavior. In line with the interpretive research tradition in the social sciences, my approach assumes we live in a world in which multiple intersubjective realities exist and the potential differences in interpretations of actors are of analytical value (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). In order to understand observed patterns in behavior and beliefs, it does not look for "scientific explanations" or universal laws but examines human agency in webs of relations and structures as they emerge in people's interpretations of what happened to them (Bevir and Blakely 2018). By examining women's own notions of the social world, I will be able to infer what motivated the decisions they took throughout their careers and how the changing workplace and normative environment informed them.

What appears real to researchers is not always how individuals on the ground perceive it. Similar to the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm, my dissertation uses a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities or truths), a subjectivist epistemology (knowledge is never objective, the knower and subject create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). This means the rejection of the positivist (realist) idea of an "objective truth" external to the studied group and focus on what subjective meanings individuals attach to events or experiences they consider significant in their daily lives as they emerge in their stories. A careful analysis of contrasts and similarities in multiple accounts moving between different contexts can identify shared antecedents and make

moderate claims[2] about connections between human beliefs/practices and wider structures or relations (Altheide et al. 2021; Williams 2000). Thus, the goal is to use the way individuals make sense of their world and choices to refine conventional theories constructed by researchers to explain human behavior. As Musson recommends (1998), I consider the individual as a creator of its own work-family life within structural boundaries beyond one's control and use people's reflections on actions, outcomes, and circumstances to logically infer larger connections and patterns in gender relations and practices.

Researchers, whether quantitative or qualitative, are inevitably somewhat influenced by their own assumptions when studying group behaviors. However, this does not have to be problematic if we take systematic measures during data analysis and are transparent about how we came to our conclusions. I employ a flexible approach to research design and applied methods that rests on the fundamental belief social reality is continually and collaboratively constructed by the people in it through human activity which encourages a circular process ("hermeneutic circle") of understanding empirical findings (Bevir and Lakely 2018). Therefore, I appreciate the active role informants play in creating knowledge and will engage in open conversation instead of a quest for answers that confirm taken for granted beliefs. I will also be particularly self-reflexive during the interviews and systematic when extrapolating major themes to make sure my interpretations are, in fact, closest to how my informants see their world. This also means challenging preconceived notions based on the literature when confronted with unexpected or contradicting accounts. In doing so, I can be fairly confident that my interpretations are as authentic as possible.

[2] These authors argue that a specific type of generalization in interpretive research is possible. Such *moderatum* generalizations, or hypothetical notions of structure or outcome, can serve as focal areas of robust investigation in quantitative studies (surveys/experiments).

DATA COLLECTION

The main data used for the analysis in my research project are face-to-face interview transcripts (verbatim) with women and men employed as career-track employees at major firms in Korea and Japan. For the Korean sample, I conducted interviews between December 2016 until May 2017 at the headquarters of a major business group and two member companies (fashion/sports apparel company and chemical manufacturer) in the Seoul Metropolitan Area. The fieldwork yielded 24 individual in-depth interviews with female employees at different stages of their careers (9 assistant managers and 15 managers) and ten with senior male managers (8 general managers and 2 deputy general manager). In addition, I designed and distributed an on-line survey with open-ended questions to all employees (male and female) of the sampled companies. The answers of 104 respondents were used to establish a baseline of employee attitudes and perceptions of policies and corroborate whether the interview data reflects (or diverges from) the general sentiment organization-wide. Lastly, I engaged in observation to witness social dynamics as they unfold in formal (meeting with women's policy officers) and informal (public spaces/coffee shops) spaces on company premises.

For the fieldwork in Japan (July 2017-March 2018), I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with 39 female regular employees in career-tracks (both generalists and specialists) of major firms in the Tokyo Metropolitan and Kanto area. After making a selection of suitable companies based on similar criteria used in Korea (i.e., size, industry, existence of policies), I called each company's HR department to gain access to interviewees. In addition to the "cold-calling" approach (purposive sampling), I also pursued a "snowball" strategy. The dual sampling approach resulted in a series of individual interviews with 39 women varying in age,

marital status, family situation, job, and rank. In those cases that the women were first approached in their capacity as diversity officers representing their organizations, follow-up interviews were held focusing on their own personal views and career experiences. I also conducted two panel sessions with six employees of the same IT company to gain a better sense of intra-organizational dynamics.

The mixed-method approach in data collection in both countries produced a variety of materials (i.e., personal narratives, HR informant perspectives, conversations among panelists, direct observations, survey data, and company documents) that each complemented one another. The combination of measurable and interpretive data allowed me to corroborate women's stories and gain a larger perspective of the organizational context. By going back and forth between different types of materials, I will be able to validate my findings and gain greater confidence in my conclusions more so than when relying on one type of data source.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter sets the stage by discussing what insights conventional sociological approaches to gender and employment have offered us thus far. It highlights the features of the Gender-Organization-System and Capabilities Approach which I use in combination as overarching frameworks. After clarifying the theoretical underpinnings, it concludes with a discussion of major themes in the existing literature on women's career advancement, gender diversity, and work-life balance in policy and practice focusing on Japan and Korea as well as insights from studies conducted in other countries. This explains my position in the field and the contribution I intend to make. Chapter two provides the broader socio-institutional and historical context of gender equality in employment in

comparative perspective necessary to interpret the findings. It addresses similarities and differences in employment systems and personnel management practices with special attention to the diverging path Korea took after recovery from the 1997 Financial Crisis. Since the GOS framework assumes that individuals and companies are also influenced by the larger environment they are situated in, it is important to identify the macro-level factors that shaped current workplace contexts. This background chapter also uses labor and gender equality statistics to illustrate general trends in women's employment, educational attainment, and union membership after Equal Employment Opportunities Legislation. The descriptive analysis of how it was before until the period I conducted the fieldwork will help the reader understand the different circumstances of women interviewed from older to younger generations. Chapter three explains the chosen methodology and shows that the life story approach can be instrumental to grasp what happened to women throughout their work and private lives. It explains the interpretive turn I took in the research process, the data collection/analysis procedures, and introduces background information of the interviewees and the organizational context of their companies to give the reader a sense of the working environment they are dealing with. The remaining chapters constitute the core of my dissertation, namely a thematic analysis based on observations, interview data, and panel sessions. Chapter four examines how women define career (and success) and, more importantly, how they make sense of their own career choices and trajectories in the past, present, and future amidst a changing corporate environment. It identifies the factors that enabled them or constrained them in their career choices when constructing their own version of a meaningful career. Chapter five focuses on working mothers and their interpretations of motherhood, work-life balance, and policy uptake. It analyzes how individual women interact with the broad range of services now formally offered to them

considering gendered assumptions about mothers, policy users, and ideal workers. It reveals constellation of factors that broaden or constrain the agency freedoms of women with family responsibilities to realize their dreams in work and life. Chapter six addresses the particular dilemmas managerial women face when trying to construct alternative leadership styles, manage their subordinates' requests for work-life balance policy uptake, and maintain a healthier work-life balance of their own. It also looks at the role these key actors (can) play in becoming positive role models to younger female employees in their firms in light of the many structural and cultural constraints due to their heightened visibility. The dissertation ends with a final chapter that discusses my contribution to the field, the theoretical and policy implications of my findings combined, the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the future of corporate employees' work-life balance, suggestions for future research, and the limitations of my study.