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

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Chapter 4

Women's Notions of Careers and Situated Agency in Advancement

As I was from science field, I wanted to be a specialist in research rather than a manager... I wanted to get recognition for my experience and knowledge that I gained but not necessarily a manager or director. I couldn't dream that big... I was not sure about my career. Being a specialist had been my motivation. But when I came here [HR department], after four job transfers, I felt I wanted more power. I realized I could impact more people if I had more power... I have two motivations now. First, I would like to develop the company by improving this field. Second, I would like to set the stage for everyone in the company... There might be different purposes for working. I am working because I think it is important to contribute to society. If it is necessary to get a higher position for doing what I want to do I would like to go up, but it is not to gain a reputation.

(Asako, a 58-year-old department head)

As Asako's case illustrates, women's careers can be very different from the male-oriented linear path⁴⁰ and women's career ideas and behaviors are fluid. How then do corporate women themselves make sense of their careers and choices in life? This chapter provides an analysis of career advancement from the perspective of individual female employees of Korean and Japanese organizations. It explores women's *situated agency* in career decisions building on the fundamental idea that what women eventually choose to be or do is very much dependent on their perception of options considering dominant gender norms and expectations imposed on them by institutions like the workplace and family and society at large (Sen 1995). As I will show in this chapter, women's actions to improve their functioning at work or home are context specific, relational, and rarely just reflect personal preferences or economic calculations. This chapter aims to offer more complete explanations for women's actions by contextualizing the

⁴⁰ Careers are traditionally defined in the literature as a changing sequence of jobs throughout adulthood and career advancement is understood as progress in terms of place in the hierarchy, wage increase, freedom to pursue one's goals, and respect from colleagues (Gutek and Larwood 1989a).

decisions of female employees as they shape their own version of a meaningful career and valued life.

Since we need broader conceptualizations to capture the complexities of women's careers that also consider the subjective dimensions of success and relationships with others (Powell and Maniero 1992; Sullivan 1990), this chapter starts by clarifying how women define career success in their own words. After having established what a corporate career and success means to women in both countries, I will examine women's fluid career attitudes and actual career trajectories. The combination of personal interpretations and observed trajectories provides the backdrop for the subsequent analysis. By comparing women's own stories of what happened to them including regrets, triumphs, and response to opportunities and constraints, I will flesh out the interplay between key factors at varying career and life stages and show the significance of gender in workplace relations. This insider's view on the social embeddedness of women's career choices informs the last part of the chapter that explores women's diverse responses to (blocked) opportunities and networking behaviors.

4.1 DEFINING WOMEN'S CORPORATE CAREERS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Women's Interpretations of a Corporate Career

What exactly does a corporate career worthwhile pursuing look like in the words of individual women? The ideal version can be different from the realistic one, but the women interviewed generally referred to a succession of job transitions through adulthood within the boundaries of one or two firms. Their notions appeared to be largely informed by pre-existing

societal expectations⁴¹ or the influence of family members⁴² rather than individual preferences. Although impossible to ascertain if they were internalized external or personal definitions, they were clearly one shared by diverse groups of female professionals in both countries. Indeed, except for some millennials in the Korean sample, women understood it as a lifetime (in Japan) or long-term (in Korea) accumulation of work experiences within the firm they joined after graduation, preferably without changes of employers. On face value, this conceptualization resembles the so-called “traditional career” in career development literature (Sullivan 1990). However, it is important to note Korean and Japanese firms are conglomerates and comprise of multiple subsidiaries and affiliated companies with their own working conditions and cultures. This means corporate careers often involve company changes as their years of tenure increase but do so within the formal boundaries of the business group. Sometimes such transitions offered opportunities to progress on the generalist path/carve out a specialty while other times they were more like demotions to jobs in the periphery. As such, women’s careers in Korean and Japanese large firms are neither “traditional” nor “boundaryless” and do not fit neatly into conventional categorizations in the North American literature⁴³.

As shown in chapter two, the nature of the contract between employer and employees has fundamentally changed, particularly in Korean society, and women and men can no longer expect job security or seniority-based rewards in exchange for their loyalty to the firm until

⁴¹ Historically employers, and employees, in Korea and Japan preferred graduate recruits over experienced workers as core workers and future managers. This cohort, trained internally as generalists, was used as a reference group for performance evaluations and organizational roles (Bae 1997, p. 90).

⁴² Cross-cultural studies relying on surveys indicate Korean and Japanese youths’ early career ideas are still particularly influenced by family members and their traditional preferences for securing long-term jobs at prestigious companies over choosing jobs based on personal interests in work contents (see Choi and Kim 2013; Kim et al. 2016; Yamashita et al. 1999).

⁴³ A boundaryless career is defined as “a career that unfolds unconstrained by clear boundaries around job activities, by fixed sequences of such activities, or by attachment to one organization (Robinson and Mine 2005, p. 78).”

retirement. How then has this increasingly precarious reality impacted the career ideas and attitudes of corporate women? The interviews with younger cohorts of women (40 years and younger) clearly indicated the meaning of career is shifting more towards boundaryless on the scale. These millennials had different understandings of a career than the generation of their parents. The 37-year-old Min-ji articulated the broader career orientations of other members of her generation who were exposed to work values outside their country of birth.

If I stay in one job in one place too long, it becomes a routine. That's why I left my previous company. I want to have a versatile career and experience different things. You never know when your career in a company may come to an end. In Korea most people dislike that. They want the security to stay in one workplace until retirement. But it is my life and I only live it once. I want a variety of life and work experience... When I returned from the UK, I was already 34 years old and married. At that time, it was so difficult for me to find a job at a big company. They [large employers] were concerned about the interruption in work experience due to my studies in the UK and also the risk of me having a baby soon. That is why I took that job at a small trading company and learned about sales and export. I used it as a platform to find a job at a larger company. I don't think of my changes in employment as random. They were steps towards a goal.

In contrast to the notions of older generations, changing jobs outside one's larger organization was no longer considered career suicide and opportunities elsewhere were entertained when vertical and particularly horizontal mobility is hampered. The stronger emphasis on versatility of (international) work experiences over traditionally valued extrinsic rewards (job security, prestige) was also noticeable in the accounts of Japanese women in their twenties and thirties, but also in their forties such as Hitomi (48-years) who changed companies three times.

I job-hunted without considering the size of companies. I entered a company selling lighting equipment and visited housing makers. I enjoyed the challenge very much. It was a small [about 1,000 employees] company. There was a big earthquake in the Kansai

Region and a lot of houses equipped with our products collapsed. I was shocked at the sight and wanted to change my job. Then I moved to a mobile phone [larger] company. I moved from Osaka to Tokyo with my previous company... My previous company was a precision device maker. But the company was bought out. I had several options, to stay there, go to the buyer, or change my job. I decided to take the challenge of starting a new job... And I have been working at this company for 11 years. I feel fulfilled now. I feel my experiences in different companies have led to what I am doing now.

Hitomi's case was not unique among her peers working at her current company. In fact, she mentioned later in the interview that many of her close coworkers already moved to other companies. This made her wonder whether she should do the same and choose a company where she can do what she wants to do, whether it is small or big in size. These examples, which occurred more frequently than expected, suggest newer interpretations of careers are emerging in both countries among younger women but also increasingly among women in their fifties as they approach retirement age and have fewer chances to develop themselves in breadth within their organizations.

In sum, while corporate careers are still largely understood by Korean and Japanese women as a series of jobs within one extended work organization, this appears to be an external definition shaped by the opportunities for intrafirm mobility. Despite recent changes in employer-employee relations in both countries, women still preferred to develop within the same institutional setting in which one starts her career and is socialized, unless there was a particular reason to change employers (e.g., problematic working relations with superiors/coworkers, lack of horizontal and vertical mobility within the larger organization, or pursuit of a different/specialized field). In that sense, women's career notions mirrored the life/long-time careers of salaried men (at least in general terms) within the relatively secure boundaries of one firm. However, as we will see later in the analysis of work life stories and personal reflections, alternative trajectories (changing companies, career paths, or functional fields) and flexible

career attitudes are apparent, especially among women in their forties and younger in both country samples.

Women's Notions of Career Advancement

For all women (but also some men as I will show later) there was much more to career advancement than monetary rewards and rank increase. When asked about their ideas about career progression, women in both countries foremost thought of expanding their role within the organizations in a qualitative (freedom in projects) not quantitative (prestige/status) sense. “Being a valuable member to one’s work group,” “making a valuable contribution to society,” or “creating positive change in the organization” came to mind before individual achievements, prestige, or getting promoted by a certain age. Although career success meant different things to different women, it was strongly tied to their role in relation to other group members. “Being indispensable for the organization by delivering on your promises...” and “managing smooth working relations with superiors and subordinates...” were deemed more important than “doing one’s own job diligently to the best of your abilities” or “outperforming others” and “getting ahead.” Even the women in Korean firms, with far more competitive environments than Japanese firms, had such strong group-orientation in their interpretation of career success.

Pay increase or performance-based bonuses were rarely mentioned by women as important measures of progress. They understood career advancement more in terms of longevity (Japanese case) or survival in the firm (Korean case). For women in both countries, career was more about “feeling satisfied at work,” or “anticipated fulfillment in the future,” than a matter of “working for income.” To be clear, the women did value financial security that comes with salary increase throughout their career. A 48-year-old Japanese department head clarified:

I don't think about title or salary that much when evaluating my development and progress... I want to do what I like. It would be not good if my salary goes down, but it would be better if I can do what I like even though my salary [or rank] stays the same.

For several Korean women interviewed, there was a distinctive gap between what career success meant through the eyes of others and their own personal interpretations. The narrative of a 37-year-old HR manager who worried about an upcoming promotion illustrates such duality.

The title is not important. It matters whether someone is capable and experienced to do the job. Being called a section chief or team leader by rank has no meaning. My job is to possess the know-how and experience to get good results and pass this on to my juniors... Although I mentioned earlier that the title is not important to me, to others it will make me look incompetent. This is the opposite of how I think, but I don't want to be the object of judgement from my colleagues. I want to be selected as team leader or director based on my competencies, not because of my years of tenure.

Other women similarly found objective measures (job title, promotion, rank increase, years of tenure) important but not for reasons of prestige or power per se. These individuals saw them as vehicles to achieve subjective career goals such as “doing more challenging projects”, “professional growth”, “fulfilling a developmental role for juniors”, “becoming an expert in one's field”, and “gaining organizational recognition.” This confirms earlier studies in North American/European (Dyke and Murphy 2006; Sturges 1999) and Korean (Cho 2017b) context that established women's tendency to have broader definitions of career success (combination of objective and subjective properties) and fluid career orientations focused on development and human relations. The influence of transformational events (motherhood, return from leave, illness in the family, changes in spouse's employment situation) on women's career orientations, personalized definitions of success, and subsequent decisions will be discussed later.

An observed difference within the Japanese sample indicates that a woman's appreciation of rank seniority tends to shift with hands-on experience in a managerial role. The older, but not younger, Japanese women considered higher ranks important so they could make meaningful changes, have greater personal discretion in decision making or allocation of resources, and gain access to information. Like most Korean women, job titles did not define their professional identity but were primarily valued for their instrumental function. Some may be quick to interpret this preoccupation with status as reminiscent of a shared tradition that stresses hierarchical relations. However, such a cultural essentialist explanation seems to be overly simplistic. A sociological and gender-sensitive reading seems more appropriate here. I see women's partial internalization of male-oriented yardsticks of career success as an involuntary cognitive adjustment to a male-oriented environment. Given such constraints, it is noteworthy that for most women, despite strong rank-consciousness, organic (not restricted to chronological age and seniority) accumulation of various experiences, feeling stimulated (not overwhelmed) by their responsibilities, and nurturing valuable relations with others featured more prominently. Whether this is also the case for younger men with different work-life values falls beyond the scope of this dissertation but is worthy of further exploration.

The narratives of women at varying work-life stages revealed they do not have fixed notions of what career success means and how they define it is both context-specific and connected to hegemonic notions of winners and losers in their organizations. Age, work experience, perceived glass walls/ceilings⁴⁴, and pivotal work-life events play a role whether

⁴⁴ The proverbial glass ceiling is a term first coined by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) in a Wallstreet Journal report on corporate women. The concept is mostly used in reference to barriers faced by women when they pursue higher positions in corporations, government, education and nonprofit organizations but can also refer to the barriers to advancement experienced by racial and ethnic minorities or men (Lockwood 2004). More recently, the literature on women at work used the concept of glass walls. Even when there is no glass ceiling, there are

more weight is placed on external (objective, materialistic, and achievement-oriented) vis-a-vis internal (subjective, relational, and process-oriented) measures at a certain time or given situation. As others (Dyke 2006; Sturges 1999) pointed out, women (and men) may reject traditional notions of success when hierarchical success seems unattainable in favor of more personalized interpretations that match their values and interests (work-life balance, enjoyment in work, personal growth, maintaining good relations with others inside and outside the workplace).

Women who matured in their professional roles, and working mothers, placed greater emphasis on intangibles related to the nature of jobs they can choose from throughout the life course and the freedom to do them on their own terms. These included (not in order of importance) increased personal discretion over work and time, influence on group members to perform duties, close working relations with coworkers (superiors, subordinates, and peers), and opportunities for continuous improvement of skills or expansion/deepening of expertise. The subjective criteria outweighed the more traditional ones such as wage increase, job rank, and status per se. Even the most ambitious high achievers spoke about success in intangible terms of “taking on challenges”, “making positive change”, or “becoming a role model for junior women” rather than specific goals (job ladders, pay grades). This resonates with research on Korean female executives that observed a transformational process from objective to subjective criteria in their definitions of career success (Cho 2017b).

In sum, I established women’s conceptualizations of career success are multifaceted and fluid (with room for unconventional career moves at different work-life stages for professional development) in contrast to the standardized corporate trajectory model of seniority/age bound

glass walls that divide men and women in work contexts rooted in corporate culture, socialization, and societal expectations (Unerman and Jacob 2016).

increases in salary and rank. This indicates women's careers in Korean and Japanese context can also be understood as a combination of Powell and Maniero (1992)'s four dimensions: emphasis on career versus relationships with others, success in career, success in relationships with others, and time⁴⁵. Thus, a broad, interactionist, and dynamic notion of career advancement in qualitative terms will be used in the following examination of how women developed a professional identity and approached their career trajectories.

4.2 WOMEN'S CAREER ORIENTATIONS AND TRAJECTORIES

Fluid Career Attitudes and Generational Differences

We now know women's ideas about careers and professional identities are not static nor mere products of socialization. They tend to change during the adult life-cycle due, in part, to daily experiences (past, present, and future) in the workplace and home (Powell and Maniero 1992). Moreover, transforming experiences may force women to reconsider what they value in their careers/lives or perceive as success (Cho et al. 2017b). Considering the timing of the EEOL (late 1980s), most Korean and Japanese women with a considerable track record today probably did not grow up with mothers having full-time corporate jobs or parents who could imagine their daughter being able to work alongside men. How did these first cohorts, pioneers without precedents to look up to, develop their own professional identity since first employment? How did their career attitudes change and, more importantly, what part did social expectations play in altering their aspirations? Lastly, how does this compare to younger women who came of age in

⁴⁵ The four dimensions constitute what the authors term a "river of time" approach to women's career decisions. In contrast to older career or life stage models, it places individual women on a continuum between emphasis on career versus relationships at which they experience different levels of success at any point in time. Timing plays an important role in the model based on the assumption that women's decisions at present are guided by past experiences and anticipated success in each realm (Powell and Maniero 1992, p. 221).

a very different normative environment with greater awareness for gender-equality and more employment opportunities than their predecessors? These questions will be addressed next.

The red thread running through the stories of Korean and Japanese interviewees was the gradual development of ideas regarding one's role in the organization and professional identity. Women in both countries, irrespective of period when entering their firm, started their corporate careers without concrete expectations or aspirations. Unlike young men who learned from their fathers or media reports what life as a "company man" entails, they had no normative model of a "career woman" and had to invent their own version of a female professional in face of uncertain/unpredictable futures. Aronsson (2015) similarly observed that Japanese female professionals are continually defining a new archetype of career woman in juxtaposition to the predictable trajectories of salarymen and negotiate between their autonomous sense of selves and horizons of available career paths. The main priority after graduation was finding an employer over a job matching personal preferences. Even some younger women with elite university degrees in specialized fields had only vague notions of the possible directions their careers could take after joining their firms. This is understandable considering the top-down internal staffing practices of Korean and Japanese business groups that compel regular employees to accept job transfers and relocations according to functional demands and economic tides (Cho 2005; Inagami and Whittaker 2005). For junior members in companies, male *and* female, there is a great deal of uncertainty where they will end up next and what they will be doing. As such, there is not much point in planning career steps in the formative years. Women's initial outlooks were neither pessimistic nor optimistic but shaped by apprehension about company life.

Nonetheless, the interviews with women in both countries revealed a noteworthy generational difference in early career attitudes and internalization of (pre-existing and new)

gender-roles related to a changing workplace environment. The women in their forties and fifties joined their firms when companies were in a transitional period from a gender equality employment standpoint (gradually offering career-track positions to female college/university graduates). Early exposure to environments hostile to women shaped their outlooks as young professionals. Natsuko, a former Japanese senior manager at a high-tech firm described her mindset when she started working 28 years ago:

I liked computer engineering and possessed the skills. Sometimes I felt it was an honor to be a regular employee. At times, I thought about quitting. But I thought if I quit and change my job to another company, the situation would not change. It would be the same so it is better to stay with my current company.... At that time, I had no ambition. I just thought about continuing to work and work hard. I couldn't imagine that I could advance higher in my career because I had no role model. There were few women. The women who worked generally stayed at the non-career track level but not managerial.

A similar degree of ambivalence in early career ideas was expressed by Soon-Ja, a Korean department head (HR) at a fashion company in her late 40s:

I, myself, did not plan my career either, especially in the early stages. It was not until about ten years ago that I started to think about that. In Korea, it is rare for entry-level employees to plan their career or set a clear goal. They just go where an opportunity arises. If the work environment and relationship with co-workers are good, they just continue working at that company for the rest of their career.

An important reason for the delayed development of a stronger professional identity was related to daily interaction on the work floor. Frequent reminders by male coworkers of their secondary status obscured their long-term vision and lowered their confidence. Experiences of exclusion by male colleagues, together with the absence of female role models, curbed the

aspirations of women in early adulthood. This was particularly evident in the recollections of women in male-dominated fields.

In some cases, however, differential treatment in the formative years of a woman's career increased her determination and commitment. Kayoko, a 56-year-old Japanese general manager of finance (the highest-ranking female in her technology firm) shared how it motivated her to climb the corporate ladder.

I went to the office, served tea and cleared ashtrays every morning. Male university graduates of the same age and educational level were given challenging jobs. I was dissatisfied with that... I was very angry and definitely wanted to get those jobs. I worked much harder than others to get those male jobs. The men often passed on their own work to me... Japan was a male-dominated society. When I took phone calls, they always asked, "Is anybody there?" I felt I was not acknowledged as person... I was frustrated and decided to work hard to go up in the company.

This resonates with the results of a Korean analysis of a survey about women's career aspirations to become senior managers (Lee 2009a). Contrary to the common belief, discriminatory practices (unequal wages and promotion opportunities) were found to be a source of motivation for women to pursue senior manager positions within their firms. We need to be careful, however, not to exaggerate the positive influence of such experiences given empirical evidence that they often have undesirable effects on other career attitudes (e.g., intention to leave company, commitment to group)⁴⁶. In fact, most Korean women interviewed from section chiefs to senior managers said they "must go where [another company] they are needed" and that they

⁴⁶ The most recent results of the same Korean women manager panel study used in Lee and colleagues' analysis showed that the foremost reason female assistant managers left their companies was, in fact, dissatisfaction with working conditions and perceived discrimination (Lee et al. 2021). Thus, we cannot assume junior female employees with less to jeopardize by leaving their companies will turn unfavorable working conditions and perceived injustices into a source of motivation like the observed responses among senior women managers. A more precise examination whether the divergence in responses stems more from generational or career maturity differences is beyond the scope of my research project but is worthy of further exploration.

“would look for another company if they didn’t feel acknowledged for their work anymore.” At the same time, they expressed preference to stay with their current organization where they had invested in workplace relations and had at least some sense of what their remaining career trajectories could be like. This confirms women are not naturally less attached to employers, but some can be pushed to look beyond company boundaries when perceived opportunities are lacking.

The pioneers were certainly not lacking in ambition. As shown above, their mindsets mainly reflected obscure futures. Women from the post EEOL cohort in both countries were in no position to dream big or plan their corporate careers. Without female precedents, they started their journeys with low expectations due to working environments hostile to women. The Japanese women in their fifties anticipated they would only work a few years at their companies until marriage despite their desire to work long-term. Social pressure from coworkers and family members shaped their understanding how to fulfill dual roles and this created internal conflict. Like many women of her generation, Fumiko (a 51 year old working mother) struggled reconciling her professional identity with her caretaker role.

I felt the pressure [to be a good wife and wise mother] from both [family members and coworkers]... I accepted that marriage would affect my professional life. I didn’t think much about my career advancement, but I didn’t think of quitting the job either... I spent too much time supporting my daughter. I was very busy. I took paid vacation and participated in PTA, Parents’ Day, and children’s gatherings. I have been trapped by fixed ideas on women. I hope younger women give priority to what they want to do. It can be work, family or anything.

What helped older women develop stronger professional identities and visualize their career paths? At the organizational level, normalization, and greater numbers of women in career tracks were certainly beneficial. However, positive male role models particularly enabled some

to embrace their professional role and mature earlier than peers. The turning point typically occurred much later in the career/life course (on average in their late 40s) when favorable internal (self-confidence built through various work experiences, realization of a professional niche within reach), situational (alleviation of care-taking responsibilities at home, spouse's employment situation), and external (encouragement from a superior to take a promotion exam/accept a leadership position, job change to a new department/member company) conditions came together.

Adjustment to the many challenges of company life left little room for female career starters to contemplate about future career development. Like in the Japanese sample, the oldest Korean women were late bloomers in visualizing what future role they could play in the organization. For those with children, in an era before institutionalized childcare provisions, the main priority was keeping their full-time jobs. Considering the excessively long working days for women and men in those days (Lee 2007), it is understandable working mothers had no time to entertain thoughts about career progression. A similar observation was made in Japan by anthropologist Aronsson (2015). The career women in her sample (with age groups between 20s and 90s) typically first started to reflect on their own career/life achievements and hopes for the future in their mid-40s when the rollercoaster of company life (and family life for those with children) slowed down. The late maturation of Soon-ja's (47-year-old mother of two) professional role likely represents the reality of many of her peers in Korean firms.

My oldest child is now 12 years old and I cannot remember how I managed to live through the past ten years... After gaining more work experience, I started to think more about the future direction of my career... Perhaps, I should develop myself more broadly and change to another department. This is still my concern... Now that my children are getting older, I have more space to think about my career goals. I am now at the age that I wonder if I can do more meaningful work and if I can succeed in other positions.

Women's vague visualizations of future career path stand in stark contrast to the calculated mindsets of Korean men interviewed with similar seniority. These team leaders in had very concrete ideas about realistic career scenarios and strategic plans how to attain their goals within the "safe" boundaries of their organizations. This contrast, however, should not be interpreted as a gender-specific trait. As I will show, it stems more from men's greater access to information and (powerful) individuals throughout their organizations. The following account of a 42-year-old deputy general manager illustrates men perceive and approach their career options more deliberate and utilize social capital to steer their careers in the desired direction within the little control they have.

I wanted to eventually fulfill a role as CFO. I preferred to work in accounting related fields rather than change to completely unfamiliar divisions. As I gained work experience, I became more strategic in my thinking. I thought about what I can do, what I have to do. I asked around whether there were job openings at other member companies as well to broaden my work experience. But they did not give me a chance to move. I am now in the stage of my career that I probably have 7 or 8 years left in the company. Instead of moving to a completely different field, it is better to stay in accounting, accumulate good scores, and try to become promoted to CFO. That is probably the highest position I can achieve. When I become CFO, it will be possible to rise to director level. Most CFOs become directors.

Other senior Korean managers similarly showed a thorough understanding of how to navigate the corporate environment and strategically secure long-term employment in an increasingly precarious job market. A general manager (45), and expecting father, said:

I need to succeed within this organization. I will probably have to work until I am seventy. There are two ways. One is to achieve some special results in my current department and get promoted to executive rank. Another is a horizontal move and become general manager of another department. The latter is a more secure and long-

term path. These days, many executives get fired very quickly. They recruit them from outside by headhunters and when the results are not good, they get fired. Most of the executives resign within three years. If you get fired from an executive position, it is the end of your career in this company. But the company cannot fire regular staff, only in extreme cases. The horizontal move seems more appropriate for me now. Otherwise, there is the risk of getting fired all the time.

Another interesting difference along gender lines pertained attitudes towards flexible (less conventional) careers extending beyond one's company. All Korean men interviewed had conservative attitudes and preferred stable employment even when stuck in their current roles/ranks until retirement or earning less over "risky" moves to another company. In contrast to the female managers, they were not let down by the company's imperfect implementation of merit-based performance evaluations to the extent that they considered changing employers. Instead, they accepted the subjective aspects of relative grading and ended up practicing them in a similar fashion as their supervisors did earlier in their careers as if they had forgotten how unfair they once perceived them. These men in their late forties and fifties, who easily found jobs after graduation in the economic heydays, now witnessed their employment opportunities wane in a mature stage of their careers. In response, they became more risk adverse and inward looking much like Japanese counterparts observed in anthropological studies of salarymen (Gagné 2021, 2020a, 2020b). In contrast to some of the Japanese salarymen in Okura Gagné's works, disillusionment with their companies' treatment of employees did not make the Korean men in my sample alienated. Rather, they grew more attached to their firms and increased efforts to prove their loyalty by going the extra mile. This narrowing/defensive career outlook may, however, be a behavioral adjustment to the unfulfilled promises of neoliberalism ("you can achieve anything based on your own merit") and erosion of corporatism ("company as family that takes care of employees") rather than a gender-specific tendency (Borovoy 2010).

Moreover, it is likely that the observed gender differences in visualization of ways to secure a lifetime career in a volatile job market as well as attitudes towards unconventional career moves in the mature career phase, in part, reflects men's advantaged position within their organizations. Men appear to have a greater awareness of the unspoken "rules of the game" drawing from a combination of learning experiences (e.g., early socialization, conditioning in the army/sport teams, interaction with peers in the competition for survival, and informal socializing with superiors). Men's higher integration in organization-wide informal networks allows them to capitalize on human relations, also referred to as social capital (Park 2002a), and position themselves carefully to prolong their careers inside one firm. In contrast, women's more isolated position and weaker ties beyond their immediate work groups (Cho 2017a) narrows their perceived scope of career paths within the organization propelling them to entertain external job opportunities. Unlike breadwinner salarymen, senior women married to employed spouses have more financial leeway to make drastic changes in their careers beyond the boundaries of their firms to find meaningful jobs. Thus, it is the combination of women's situated agency (spouse's employment) and workplace environment (perceived opportunity structures) that sway them to look elsewhere. Women's own notions of what organizational roles are attainable are also shaped by what others consider appropriate positions for women. As Kanter (1977a) puts it "Behavior in organizations is adaptive. What people do, how they come to feel and behave, reflects what they can make of their situation." Unlike Kanter, I believe the way individuals see themselves or manage situations is often less strategic and conscious. My findings will show that in most cases attitudinal/behavioral responses to (blocked) opportunities are involuntary and unconscious at the time.

Now I will return to a closer examination of women's fluid professional identities across different age groups. The youngest Korean and Japanese women were far more explicit about their aspirations than the older cohorts. Despite their junior status in the organization⁴⁷, these women did somewhat articulate goals and different possible career scenarios. While members of previous generations could hardly imagine having a long corporate career or becoming manager, university graduates in their thirties felt entitled to their privileged jobs as core workers and had higher, yet mostly vague, expectations of their future in their companies. They showed far more optimism than their predecessors about their career prospects which allowed them to visualize a path earlier on. For instance, Ha-eun (34) believed "If I just work hard and don't make any big mistakes, I think I will rise to team leader without many problems." Even Yuka (38), an assistant manager in a male-dominated space technology firm, said "I can become *kachō* [section chief], but it will be difficult to become *buchō* [department head] in this company. However, the next 10 years could be different from the last 10 years." University educated women like Ha-Eun and Yuka, who started in the career-track, clearly evolved in their professional roles at an earlier stage than their predecessors without educational credentials or early recognition as core workers.

These women of "post-bubble" generations often had a desired professional field in mind when choosing their majors in university. As career-starters, they had an idea what sort of job they wanted to do. Several had a change of heart within the first ten years after realizing the job was not what they imagined it to be. They prepared themselves to make a "career switch" (to a

⁴⁷ This contrasts with accounts of HR informants in both countries that younger employees irrespective of gender mature slowly and typically start their careers without concrete ideas of where they want to end up long-term in the organization. It could be possible that the HR officials due to their centralized position in the organization are largely unaware of the diversity among young cohorts of workers. Another explanation for the discrepancy may be that the women in my sample were unusual cases. This remains an open question but I lean towards the latter.

new functional field) and thought strategically about how to achieve their new dreams. These frequently included non-conventional steps (changing from a prestigious large firm to a medium size company) which will be discussed in more detail later. Minji (37), a mid-career recruit, was a case in point.

The company offers stable employment for its employees. Some even get married to co-workers. My personality is that I like new challenges. If I stay in one job in one place too long, it becomes a routine. That's why I left my previous company. I want to have a versatile career and experience different things. You never know when your career in a company may come to an end. In Korea most people dislike that. They want the security to stay in one workplace until retirement. But it is my life and I only live it once. I want a variety of life and work experience.

More than a handful of women from Minji's generation expressed such concern for self-actualization and individual freedom. This attitudinal shift was also noticeable among the Japanese women in their thirties. Surprisingly many were open minded about changing companies if the job was interesting to them and did not prefer to work for one employer until retirement. Like Minji, Ayako (40) had a much wider horizon of career alternatives than older employees:

My previous company was so big and Japanese owned. The salary was high and so were the allowances and pay increases. It was a nice company, but I never regretted quitting. My parents often asked if I was okay working for a small company without such conditions. I saw it as a nice challenge...If the job is very fascinating to me, I would change even though the working conditions are more demanding. I don't think I will stay at this company forever. I worked for this company for over ten years now in the same department.

The outlooks of these younger women are in stark contrast to those of the older women. Women in their late forties and fifties were far more hesitant to change employers for various

reasons (e.g., social capital built within their firms, sense of job security, and emotional attachment to coworkers) in their younger years. These generational differences in women's career attitudes confirm previous observations in Japanese context that "the company" is no longer the central institution in the lives of younger corporate employees as it was for postwar generations (Brinton 2011).

The case of Korea is more extreme where corporate responses to the 1997 Financial crisis (downsizing, mass lay-offs, squeezing more productivity out of fewer employees) severely damaged the social perception (and credibility) of "the company" as stable provider of welfare and lifetime careers that enable employees to lead affluent livelihoods (Shin 2013). A study based on surveys shows that core workers responded to the loss of job security by becoming more self-centered and competitive ("I versus you attitude" instead of "me versus them") in the workplace, and voluntarily forfeit careers at conglomerates to pursue better working conditions elsewhere (Kim and Song 2006). It stands to reason that this gap is rooted in both changing labor market conditions (tight job market at the time of career start, increased flexibility/short-term orientation in corporate staffing practices) and shifting work values of Japanese and Korean youths towards self-actualization and individual freedom.

In closing, the accounts of female employees from different social generations show an attitudinal shift is taking place regarding what makes the pursuit of a career worthwhile and fulfilling. The growing tension between old (doing what's right for the group or firm) and new (achieving individual satisfaction in work and life) attitudes may reflect a fundamental change in *ikigai*, one's purpose or meaning in life (Mathews 1996). It seems that dominant conceptions (sense of oneness with, or commitment to, group and role) are losing ground to new forms (self-actualization, individual freedom) in Korea and Japan today. This widening gap between the

anticipated and harsh reality of company life, may very well be largely responsible for the growing numbers of disillusioned career starters, male and female, to quit their corporate jobs in the first few years after joining in both countries, the declining appeal of jobs at conglomerates to Korean job seekers (Chang 2012), and the recent rise of male *freeters* who willingly pursue alternative work-lifestyles allowing for more individual freedom in Japan (Cook 2013; Genda and Kurosawa 2001; Hidaka 2010).

Diversified Career Trajectories

Since women's career ideas develop gradually, and their horizons are shaped by everyday experiences and interactions with others at work, it is meaningful to verify *if* and *how* their career trajectories diverge from those of most company men. As discussed in chapter two, the typical trajectories of salarymen in Korea and Japan follow a predictable course of gradual vertical (and periodical horizontal) moves with a combination of seniority (tenure) and merit-based promotion in rank, responsibilities, and salary level. Although there is evidence that male careers are becoming more diversified and uncertain in recent years (Gagné 2021; Hidaka 2010), regular workers who started as graduate recruits can still expect to some degree to ascend the corporate ladder (from staff, assistant manager, section chief, to deputy general manager) and become department heads or team leaders after twenty years of loyal service and accumulation of firm-specific skills if they don't make any grave mistakes⁴⁸. The following section investigates the work histories of Japanese and Korean women to establish to what extent and why their career

⁴⁸ All HR informants of the surveyed companies in both countries admitted despite corporate reforms to increase staffing flexibility, management still primarily relies on internal advancement of core workers based on the traditional *nenko/hobong* system and prefers to level the promotion of peers to avoid any harmful consequences on group dynamics associated with individualistic/competitive merit-based systems in the West.

trajectories converged or diverged from the conventional corporate career path of salarymen (see appendix 10 and 11 for more details on the career trajectories of women interviewed).

Generalist and specialist pathways of Japanese women

The careers of 30 Japanese women followed the typical linear corporate path. They started their first jobs as fresh recruits in the career-track, received on-the-job training, and still worked for the same employer at the time they were interviewed. Their careers mirrored those of *organization men*, that is an uninterrupted succession of jobs within one business group with periodic rotation (including relocation) and gradual increase of responsibilities, salary, and rank. A common pattern in the women's career trajectories was the timing of job transitions (approximately every four years) and late promotion to entry-level managerial positions (on average after 20 years of tenure).

For most specialists, the pathway resembled that of Nanako (45-year-old IT engineer). As many Japanese university students, she went job hunting in her final year of graduate school. She passed the entrance exam of a major IT firm, accepted the offer, and started her career as an engineer. Her first job assignment was at a factory outside Tokyo where she worked for about five years before being relocated to the headquarters. The transition from the periphery to the core of the organization came with a change in work responsibilities. Her new job became her niche and her career progressed in a rather standardized way since then. With accumulation of tenure and technical skills, her job rank went up and she was promoted to section chief when she reached her forties as expected.

In contrast, the generalist pathways were far more diverse and irregular. After joining their firms, many were assigned to fields unrelated to their majors in university. Some had

worked for some years in small companies or started in the non-career track before switching to full-time regular employment. The women moved frequently from one functional field to another and relocated to different companies within the group without carving out a niche even in the mature career phase. The job transitions did not always result in higher ranks. In fact, it frequently occurred that the new position meant a reduction of responsibilities (and loss of subordinates). Unlike specialists, the timing of promotion to section chief (entry-level manager) varied widely from case-to-case and was rather delayed (most were promoted in their mid-to late forties). Some had been offered promotions and declined (see the next section on reflections), however, most women waited patiently and took the promotion exam/offer when management deemed them qualified. It is important to note that several women already managed subordinates and responsibilities associated with a managerial position despite not having the formal job title. A common feature in the work histories was that each step up the corporate ladder generally occurred after involvement in a special group project (crossing functional departments) and not as a consequence of above average individual work performance appraisals by immediate superiors. This indicates social capital, rather than individual merit, still remains a major prerequisite for Japanese employees to get promoted in large organizations. Not surprisingly, there was a distinctive difference in pace of rank increase between the women with and without children.

Gender roles and chronological age played a part in the timing of women's promotions. The career progression of women without children, married and single, showed a remarkable resemblance to the typical male trajectory. Their work histories with frequent horizontal moves and relocation across companies reflected a high degree of intra-firm mobility. In most cases, the women were transferred every four years and promoted on par with their male counterparts.

They were assigned to core business positions (sales, finance, strategic planning, product development, etc.), not business support, and stretch projects on top of their day-to-day duties that enabled them to interact with members outside their immediate work group and get noticed as management potential. By their late forties, most attained formal managerial job titles (section chief, deputy department head) and led work groups with sometimes as many as 20-25 members. Those who were able to break through the glass ceiling (according to HR informants there generally is a threshold at department head level for women in Japanese organizations) were in their late 50s⁴⁹.

Educational attainment and prior work experience also made a difference in women's corporate career trajectories. The few Japanese women (only six out of 39) with changes to completely different occupational fields (arts, law enforcement, education, consultancy) or types of firms (SMEs/business groups, foreign/domestic) show this group is particularly disadvantaged by the combination of gender and outsider status based on recruitment type. Their higher age but lower educational credentials than fresh graduate recruits, meant they often started out in irregular employment (fixed-term full-time contract) or in the non-career track. The transition to a regular career-track employee generally took more than 15 years of tenure and, thus, under seniority-based rules of promotion they became section chiefs at a much higher age than others who started straight out of college/university. The few cases who joined large domestic firms with transferable skills reveal that while their mid-career transition did not disadvantage them in their starting position on job ladders, it thwarted their long-term trajectories similar to those of Korean mid-career recruits. In some unfortunate cases, women such as Hitomi (48-year-old sales

⁴⁹ The difficulty for women to rise from deputy to general manager and above is corroborated in a comparative study published by the Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI) on the utilization of female human resources in large corporations in Korea, Japan, and China (Ishizuka 2014).

manager) found themselves being shuffled around departments at random before they could learn the ropes of their new positions with little prospect of vertical advancement.

Although the scarcity of mid-career changes of employers among the Japanese women confirms observations that the internal labor markets of firms based on long-term employment remain largely intact (Keizer 2009; Matanle and Matssui 2011), there appears to be leeway for some women with experience outside to attain managerial positions within (changing from the non-career to career-track) and across (hired for regular positions after a period of unemployment, recruited based on transferable skills mid-career) these structures. This shows increased intra- and inter-firm mobility can be both beneficial and detrimental for women's long-term career progression.

The birth of a first child delayed women's career progression even when they returned to work either directly after maternity leave (three months) or after a period of childcare leave (less than one year). Although they continued working full-time in the career-track, their temporary absence at work and early years of motherhood marked a major turning point in their trajectories. After return, generalists were moved to different departments with lighter workloads and predictable work hours. The come-back for specialists and "time bind" (Hochschild 1997) during early motherhood also affected the course of the rest of their careers. As several system engineers explained, rapid technical developments in the industry require specialists to constantly update their skills through self-study. If women with young children stay "flat" too long (in skills/professional development) due to time constraints, their ascendance in rank and future chances of getting promoted are constrained due to *ageism* (corporate practice to promote younger employees to managerial positions with enough years of service left to capitalize on the invested resources to develop them). Women like Hiroko (54) who used the period of

maternity/childcare leave for self-study (and lost sleep over late night studying during early motherhood) were able to keep up with their peers and kept rising in rank and salary at a similar pace as before motherhood. The fate of other women like Chie (48) and Fumiko (51) who placed their spouse's careers above their own and took sole responsibility over childcare was less fortunate. Their childrearing responsibilities (picking up children from daycare/nursery, taking children to school, visiting doctors) made it impossible to find time to study or have the same output as the male engineers who worked late every night, and as a consequence, they were left behind.

For generalist and specialist women without informal support systems, life changing events (birth of a child, children's school entrance exam preparation, illness/death of a parent) were followed by prolonged periods with limited horizontal and vertical mobility. In most cases, women with heavy caretaking responsibilities stayed within the same department for a longer period than usual under the job rotation system, only changing work teams, and broadened their work experiences after their child entered elementary school. Not surprisingly, women married to spouses with a corporate career and sole breadwinners were particularly affected by such events. This confirms insights from previous research that women's career development cannot easily be explained by stage-based models and should be viewed as an unfolding process along the adult lifecycle with attention to non-work/relational concerns (Diamond 1989; Gutek and Larwood 1989b; Powell and Maniero 1992). More importantly, lifechanging events such as motherhood or illness/death of family members are not single points in time and may derail the direction of women's corporate careers on the long-run under inflexible seniority-based promotion systems that stress age limits in job ladders. It appears that "slow promotion" (Ishizuka 2016) particularly reduces the chances of women, who were fostered within one single

company and for personal reasons cannot keep up with the standardized pace of professional development expected from core workers in the career track, to rise above the glass ceiling (department head/general manager threshold).

Versatile and unpredictable career journeys of Korean women

The work histories revealed two developments in the internal and external labor market of special interest. Graduate recruits enjoyed less mobility and fewer opportunities for alternative trajectories leading to promotion within firms. At the same time, some women found ways to make job changes that prolonged their careers beyond the companies they started out in. On the whole, the career trajectories of Korean women resembled those of the specialists in the Japanese sample. Like the Japanese, most started their corporate jobs straight out of university as fresh recruits and applied for entry positions related to their majors. For these women with high educational credentials (at least equivalent to a BA degree), it was natural and expected to enter the regular career track (Korean firms generally do not recruit women with university degrees for support staff/non-career positions anymore). In the formative years (within the first decade) of their careers, they either changed their specialization through external education and changed functional departments within their companies or committed to their current field and deepened their knowledge by self-study. Being nudged to focus on a specific functional field early on was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gave women with a set vision on what kind of profession to pursue the rest of their adult life a head-start to accumulate specialistic skills that could be transferable to other companies in the future. On the other hand, it delayed the ascend on job ladders for those who had a change of heart and changed fields as they had to acquire new skills while working on-the-job.

Progress in job rank of the graduate recruits was highly standardized across companies up to entry-level management (section chief) and followed the so-called *hobong* table typical of Korean organizations (discussed in chapter two). Most women, like their male peers, were promoted to assistant-manager after four years of tenure and it took another four years to become section chief within their departments. As such, many assumed the role of managers for the first time before the age of 35. This is notably earlier than the Japanese women for whom it generally took another decade to get promoted to section chief level⁵⁰. From section chief onwards, however, progress in rank was less straight forward. Performance grades, special output, and work attitude replaced years of tenure as the main yardstick for promotion. In reality, many women eligible for promotion based on their tenure were passed over for promotion to deputy chief during their careers for vague reasons. Similar to the Japanese cases, the step up to department head was still particularly hard for the Korean women⁵¹. Whereas the chances of Japanese women changed with every new superior, the situation of Korean women who carved out a niche over the years was more deterministic without firmly established job rotation systems. Gender dimensions (masculine notions of leaders and tacit assumptions of work devotion) clearly played a part in whether women were able to penetrate this glass ceiling as “department heads appoint their own deputies/successors” and “put forth their own candidates for promotion.” In exceptional cases, women with highly specialized expertise deemed

⁵⁰ An empirical analysis of women’s promotion based on corporate surveys on the human resources utilization of men and women (2015 for Japan; 2013 for China & Korea) corroborates the “slow promotion” in Japan. The average age of female section managers (42.3 years) and department heads (53.2 years) at large companies in Japan is indeed higher when compared to Korea where the averages were estimated by the author as 36.5 years for section managers and 44.7 years for department heads (Ishizuka 2016).

⁵¹ Although the slowdown in vertical progression may not be representative of the work histories of corporate women outside my sample, there is evidence from female manager panel studies (2007-2014) that the percentage of women who were promoted decreased significantly from section head level (17.1% *kwajang* to *ch’ajang*; 10.9% *jajang* to *bujang*; and 4.3% to *imwon*) and actually dropped since the first wave in 2007 (Kim et al. 2015).

invaluable to the firm were promoted ahead of their male and female peers. These women, like the vice president/lawyer Chung-ja (44) or HR specialist/general manager Soon-Ja (47) were recruited mid-career with an established track record outside the firm. Most women, however, were not in such a privileged position. They were primarily dependent on their immediate supervisors to appoint them as successors or advocate for them elsewhere in the organization. The reflections on career decisions later will show that this is a pivotal period for women in mid-level managerial positions facing the ceiling to recalibrate their goals and assess options inside and outside their firms more strategically.

Korean women's careers, especially after maturation, showed far less mobility than those of even the Japanese specialists. For junior women, it was common to still work in the same team and department when they joined their firms. Only in exceptional cases, someone changed jobs or was relocated to other group companies more than once or twice. However, they did not move voluntarily but were re-assigned due to reorganization, downsizing, or strategic changes. These women like Jung-Hyun (36-year-old manager at a fashion company), who had no time to adjust due to frequent moves (three times) within a short period after joining the firm mid-career, were not free agents in the job transitions but "considered a transfer to be better than to be fired." Only a handful of women who had relocated or changed functional fields in the formative years made the request themselves. The reasons were many but seem to fall into either problematic relations with superiors or coworkers or disillusionment with the chosen professional field. For these women, job transfers were deliberate choices and if they would have been denied they'd probably had quit. Other implications of "voluntary" and "involuntary" job rotation for women's career choices will be explored further later.

The absence of gaps in work histories reveals the rigidity of corporate promotion ladders. Like the Japanese mothers, virtually all Korean women with children had uninterrupted careers. Only one woman had quit her full-time job before childbirth, in a time before institutionalized childcare leave, but joined the same firm within a few years as a regular employee again. Most went on a three-month maternity leave followed by parental leave (shortest: one month; longest: one year). Unlike the Japanese mothers, they generally returned to the same position and resumed the work they had left before going on leave. Although they continued to work full-time, most women experienced a delay in promotion to the next rank. The interviews with HR officials and the women themselves unmistakably pointed out that it had everything to do with the way their performance was evaluated after becoming a mother by superiors. As an HR manager in charge of women's policies explained:

In case of maternity and parental leave it is inevitable that team leaders give lower grades to women who were on leave since the male team members did more work during that period... Many share the opinion that it is an unfair aspect of performance evaluations... they often give lower than that [B], in many cases they give a C. It is against company regulations. From the HR department of each member company, we persuade the leaders to follow the rules. However, the directors and executives don't think it is important. Since the evaluations are done by individual leaders, it is hard to influence their decisions.

This example of *motherhood penalty* is of a more obvious kind than the subtler forms documented in studies on the career consequences of parental leave uptake in Japan (Brinton and Mun 2015). Lower performance evaluations, whether due to downgrading practices and gendered perceptions of superiors or lower output than childless peers, often continued several years into early motherhood. As a long-term consequence, these women did not formally qualify for promotion and found their career progress stalled. Although some were promoted eventually,

they nonetheless fell behind their peers in the fierce rat race common in Korean organizations today⁵². Unlike their Japanese counterparts with more job security into middle-age years and job rotation options, the older Korean women with blank periods (parental leave) and below average grades were relegated to so-called “mommy track” with little horizontal mobility. In spite of their formal status as career-track/regular workers, several were stuck in jobs with short job ladders and low (often impenetrable) glass ceilings. On the whole, the period until their children entered elementary school was characterized by less agency on behalf of the women (only a few raised their hands to request a job transfer or take on a new challenge) which seems to reflect an altered perception of realistic options considering their dual role in a competitive hypermasculine environment that expects employees’ willingness to “sacrifice personal time for the sake of business performance when necessary” and constantly “go the extra mile and achieve more beyond formal responsibilities”.

It is noteworthy that about one third (eight out of 24) of the Korean women varying in age (34-47 years) did have more versatile trajectories than the typical linear corporate career. These mid-career recruits had worked for small and medium sized companies or other major domestic firms. Some had non-corporate jobs for several years or interrupted their careers temporarily to study abroad before joining large firms. For instance, Min-ji (37-year-old assistant manager) worked as a designer for five years at a fashion company with 500 employees, quit her job to study in the UK, and used her international experience and language skills to get a corporate job in management that “suits her better”. Soon-hee (37-year-old manager) also worked several years for a medium sized company (in the field of education and HR) before

⁵² After the 1997 Financial Crisis, the workplace environment of major corporations became harsher. Surveys conducted in the early 2000s show that many workers feared being forced to retire or laid off, experienced continued job insecurity, work overload, stress from working in unfamiliar settings, and intensified competition in the workplace (Kim and Song 2006).

joining a large firm where she pursued a new role in sales. For women who changed jobs during early adulthood, the transitions were deliberate steps in pursuit of work they personally considered worthwhile doing. For the more experienced women, changing employers was not planned ahead. Such women like the corporate lawyers Mi-kyung (38) and Chung-ja (47) or the HR specialist Soon-Ja (47) were “surprised by a call from a headhunter” and seized the opportunity to revive their careers by regular employment at a major industry player. Both groups, nonetheless, were able to capitalize on their previous work experience and qualify for full-time regular employment at mid-level ranks in a major domestic firm.

However, not all the stories of women who changed companies throughout their careers had positive outcomes. In several cases, they had difficulty establishing rapport with coworkers and remained “outsiders” in the first years after joining. For instance, Mi-kyung (38) who joined her firm five years ago felt she was personally and professionally scrutinized by core employees, male and female, for assuming a department head position with limited years of service.

I am still rather young to be department head looking at the company’s ranking system... I always hear that from my co-workers. You are too young and haven’t been with the company long enough to be in such a high position. From the beginning people have commented on that. Instead of congratulating me. Especially male deputy heads and managers don’t like it.... I must be very sensitive and careful about how to approach others. If I don’t use the right words, they will say I am arrogant and that I don’t know about the company’s business that well either. If I make a small mistake, they will say “see, it’s because she is too young and has little experience.” I often hear the criticism that I only know law and miss the big picture lacking deep knowledge of the company’s operations.

The contrast in career outcomes of women hired from the external labor market graphically illustrates how changes (neo-liberal reforms, deregulating labor, cost-cutting measures, flexibility in staffing) and continuities (greater reliance on internal promotion of core

workers, utilization of mid-career recruits for temporary demand-side adjustments, resilience of seniority-based systems) in large companies, and the harsh corporate environment they are situated in, intersect differently in the work lives of women who pursue alternative career trajectories. When comparing the work histories of women nurtured within one single company (*kongch'e*) with experienced workers from outside (*kyongnyŏk*), the variation in within company job transitions and vertical progression confirms a process of fragmentation among regular workers observed by others (Kim and Song 2006).

Concluding remarks on Japanese and Korean women's work histories

In sum, the comparison of women's career trajectories across countries shows labor market developments and altering employment relations since the turn of the century have indirect and diverse consequences for the career pathways of individual women in their firms. The Korean cases reveal rationalized corporate practices (e.g., greater flexibility at the expense of job security, reliance on external labor market) are a double-edged sword for gender equality initiatives in firms. On the one hand, the corporate strategy indirectly offers more possibilities for some women with transferable skills to pursue a career on their own terms by changing companies. On the other hand, it limits women's options to develop professionally at their own pace turning workplaces into pressure cookers where promotion becomes a zero-sum game polarizing men and women. A life history study of Japanese salary men provides anecdotal evidence of men's resistance against the growing presence of women in managerial and executive streams⁵³. The Japanese cases indicate more bureaucracy (e.g., differentiated career

⁵³ The male participants in Hidaka (2010)'s in-depth study continued to defend their elite status in large firms amidst an increasingly volatile job market and marginalized women as a whole describing them as unfit for managerial jobs because of maternal responsibilities, lack of work devotion, or unpredictable temperament.

tracks, top-down control of centralized HR departments, tightly regulated wage setting and promotion systems, systematic job rotation, etc.) is not necessarily a disadvantage for the agency freedoms of female regular employees as it creates more options to switch jobs and locations when personal circumstances change. At the same time, however, the practice of job rotation is prone to marginalize (and potentially exploit) experienced employees hired from the external labor market when practiced solely from the perspective of the employer to mitigate temporary staff shortages within the larger organization. We have seen the cases of Mi-kyung (38) who was told “You are too young and haven’t been with the company long enough to be in such a high position” and Hitomi (48) who kept being transferred to different teams before growing into her new role or mastering the work. It is no coincidence both women worked for organizations with a highly skewed workforce (majority of graduate recruits and a small minority of mid-career hires). Examples like these also show that mid-career recruits can be in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis employees who were socialized entirely in the company from the start of their careers. They provide anecdotal evidence that there is a widening gap between employees from the internal labor market (insiders) and external recruits (outsiders) in Korean and Japanese workplaces. For women who join a company mid-career, it means they have a double disadvantage as they are perceived as outsiders *and* have a marginalized status due to their gender especially in skewed organizations or male dominated fields. After having mapped women’s (a)typical career trajectories, I will now explore how individual women construct meanings of the paths they took and reflect on the constrained choices they made along the way.

4.3 MAKING SENSE OF CAREER DECISIONS

Women's Diverse Responses to Blocked Opportunities

The following section provides richer insights that help interpret the observed fluidity in career ideas and diversity in career trajectories of Korean and Japanese women thus far. The vivid stories told by the women while recollecting their career journeys from past to present revealed some interesting patterns in their response to blocked/unexpected opportunities and perceived injustices. Just for the sake of clarity, I grouped them in three categories of approaches which I named the “maverick, go-getter”, the “patient pathfinder”, and the “reluctant acceptor” phase. However, it is not my intention to simply put labels on the women in my study or reduce their behavior to fixed typologies. As I will show in this section, in most cases it is more like a process of development, hence the addition of “phase” to the name of the categories. The same woman may have started her career enacting a “maverick go-getter” but evolve into a “patient pathfinder” over time as she matures in her professional role and learns how to navigate office politics. Transition can also be in the reverse direction, for example when a woman grows increasingly bold as she realizes her career goals are unattainable in her firm. My main point is that women seem to go through phases in which they display varying levels of agency in response to blocked (or unexpected) opportunities. Their behavioral inclinations are context-specific, temporal, and rarely indicative of static personality traits.

The “maverick go-getter” phase

In this phase, a woman is the most agentic in pursuing individual career goals and confrontational when she perceives work practices and behaviors as irrational or unfair. She is willing to speak up and risk social sanctions when convinced practices are morally corrupt (e.g.,

obscure promotion decisions, performance evaluations based on personality, gender-differentiated task assignments, etc.). She does not take no for an answer and fights for what she values in career and life even when it means overstepping hierarchical boundaries or antagonizing relations with coworkers.

Most women who went through such an “empowered” period at some point in their careers were found in the Korean sample across all age groups. For example, Young-mi (34) had problems with her team leader at a regional factory. Against his wishes (and to his dismay), she followed through and requested a job transfer from to the corporate headquarters anyway. Soon-hee (37) changed companies to escape from a “military-style” working environment but found a similar hierarchical culture in her new workplace. In the first few years, she had excelled at her job until she unexpectedly received an average performance grade. She could not understand the reason and asked her team leader for clarification.

Contrary to the common perception of Japanese women being more subdued, there were quite some pioneers with a “maverick go-getter” mindset during certain periods or throughout their entire careers. To name a few, Natsuko (49) repeatedly asked her boss to be included in key projects requiring client visits like her male peers until he finally caved in. Natsumi (51) went straight to the department head for a stamp of approval when her boss showed no interest in her project proposal. Her bold act crossing hierarchical boundaries proved effective as her boss immediately gave her the green light.

During this phase, Korean and Japanese women are also most likely to create opportunities instead of waiting until they presented themselves. Itsumi (44) who took matters in her own hand when her male boss denied her request to be dispatched abroad is a case in point.

She changed functional fields after an entire career as sales agent (and was sent to Sydney shortly after the interview).

The “patient pathfinder” phase

In comparison to the above, women in the patient pathfinder phase are more reactive and display agency in indirect ways. They exert caution in ambiguous workplace situations but still find creative ways to work within the system to reach their goals. When faced with glass ceilings or walls, they prefer to wait patiently until superiors change and new windows of opportunities arise. For instance, Chiharu (50) found herself stuck for two decades working under five different presidents as secretary. In those twenty years, she regularly felt inner conflict but persevered. In the end, her patience (and perhaps close relation to the presidents) was rewarded when she was selected to take a promotion exam and finally became manager of the HR department at the age of 48. Many of the same generation had a similar “wait and see” approach. It took Fumiko (51) 25 years at her company to get promoted to a first managerial position while watching her male peers get promoted within ten years. During this time, she didn’t complain about her delayed promotion but accepted it because she took childcare leave and worked less hours than them. Fumiko didn’t perceive significant improvements in her company’s efforts to develop women, so she became more active herself taking on more and more challenging projects after her children grew up and became manager.

Patient pathfinders are heavily invested in their organizations and its members and finetune their behavior to what they think is appropriate in a situation. This makes them avoid actions that may hurt harmonious workplace relations and occasionally turn a blind eye when

they perceive unfair practices. Patient pathfinder behaviors featured most prominently in the stories of junior and senior women in both countries.

The “reluctant acceptor” phase

As the name suggests, the reluctant acceptor is the least agentic of the three. Often disillusioned by persistent unfavorable workplace conditions, women in this phase gradually give up being active creators of their own future inside their firms. They have come to terms with their narrowing palate of options to develop themselves and recalibrate what they find meaningful in work. Their blurred visualization of career progression can make them inactive and reluctantly acceptant of constraining circumstances. This is not to say women are lacking in agency altogether during this phase. They accept having little control over their career paths (or harmful behaviors to women in their organizations), yet also engage in small acts of resistance such as leaving work on the clock or refusing to do overtime. Disappointed accepters with strong professional identities who find themselves in a career impasse for extended periods tend to detach themselves from the organization and look for opportunities elsewhere. They occurred in both country’s samples, but the detached type was more common among the Korean women such as Ji-Eun (33). She used to succumb to pressures working late everyday but stopped doing so after realizing it was pointless with the looming downsizing of her department. A more explicit example of an exit approach is that of Da-eun (31). After eight years at her company without being able to take a long holiday, she thought about quitting every day. She planned to opt out corporate jobs altogether and start a small business (coffee shop) of her own soon.

With the above differentiation of phases, I tried to demonstrate women’s agency in Korean and Japanese context is best conceived as a broad spectrum of actions on a sliding scale

between independent to constrained choices. A woman's approach during certain periods in her career and life is largely based on a personal reading of the situation (*nunch'i pogi* in Korean; *kuki-wo yomu* in Japanese). At times, she may find it more appropriate to float like a "patient pathfinder" until personal circumstances or workplace conditions allow her to go against the current like a "maverick go-getter". When disillusionment becomes more than a fleeting moment, she may transform into a "reluctant acceptor" who adjusts her own expectations or plans an exit strategy. In the lives of women, these phases often overlap and alternate quite frequently. The following story of Hye-jin illustrates that most women are not simply born as "passive" or "assertive" types, or products of socialization during a historical period, but transition through phases in both directions in tandem with life events and experiences in the workplace.

Hye-jin's career journey

Hye-jin (38-years old) started her career believing she could achieve anything as long as she worked hard. Her university studies in a STEM field had prepared her to perform in a male-oriented environment. As assistant manager, she was largely unaware of the disadvantages being female in a male-dominated workplace could have for her career advancement. Hye-jin's confidence grew as she was praised for her work devotion and so did her aspirations to become a leader in the company one day. During these early years of her career, she was goal-oriented, took great pride in her work, and felt in charge of her career. Like a "maverick go-getter", she requested a job transfer which was denied and, in hindsight, set the precedent of a deteriorating relationship with her team leader. However, she was not discouraged and kept working arduously even when she married and had her first child.

After she was promoted section chief things changed. Hye-jin felt her team leader gave higher performance evaluations to male coworkers who obviously worked less hard because they bonded over drinks. She then realized being diligent and good at work were not enough to get promoted. The neutral working relation with her boss thus far became increasingly problematic when her vision on how to manage her subordinates collided with his. He wanted her to control them more so they wouldn't make any mistakes while she didn't believe micro-managing was the right way to get the best out of them and gave them more freedom. Their relationship reached a low point when she and her juniors stayed in the office until 10 PM to finish a report instead of joining after-work dinner and drinks with the boss. Her unintended act of resistance was not appreciated by her boss who thought "socializing over drinks is more important than doing actual work", and she was reprimanded the next day. There were several occasions in the following years that slowly eroded Hye-jin's agency. Dependent on her superior, Hye-jin had no choice but to compromise her own values and desires and, for the time being, meet his expectations. During this confusing period, she became more of a "patient pathfinder." She carefully weighed her options and decided to take courses at a graduate school in the evening hours (her boss denied her earlier request to leave earlier two days a week) so she wouldn't "hurt the company". At this time, Hye-jin had become deputy head but now faced a glass ceiling since her boss apparently favored a male successor who didn't object to bonding with male union leaders over drinks. By learning a new expertise, she paved the way for a job transfer and a possible way out of a dead-end job situation.

The continuous lack of recognition and mistrust of her team leader took its toll and Hye-jin grew more detached from her work and isolated from her male seniors. Without any prospect of having a fulfilling career in her current department, she eventually became a "reluctant

accepter.” She looked for opportunities elsewhere and refused to engage in any activities not directly related to job contents.

The story of Hye-jin exemplifies the evolutionary process many of the women interviewed went through. Their professional identities were as fluid as their responses to blocked opportunities and contingent on their direct working conditions. Gender was not always salient in their early experiences of company life, but certainly became of greater significance once they assumed managerial jobs.

Missed opportunities: More about timing than lack of agency

A paradoxical theme that recurred in the work-life stories of Japanese, but not Korean, women was not having seized the opportunity when promotion was offered to them earlier in their careers⁵⁴. What is intriguing about these cases is that these women also explained their delayed promotions by their disadvantaged status in the organization. At first glance, the seemingly inactive stance echoes the popular belief Japanese corporate women don’t want to get ahead⁵⁵. A closer examination of women’s rationalizations, however, reveals the act of declining promotion (or hesitating) reflects apprehension whether they could live up to the expectations of managers rooted in a culture of overwork among the senior men in their firms (Cha 2013, Nemoto 2013a, 2016b). Some women like Natsumi (51) had actually declined promotion offers several times throughout her career.

In my 40s, I rejected an offer to be promoted to manager three times... I didn’t have enough self-confidence... I didn’t think I would get more motivated if I was promoted. I

⁵⁴ It is possible that this observation partially reflected the higher ages of the women in the Japanese sample.

⁵⁵ Newspaper articles frequently address that Japanese women with university degrees don’t seem interested in leadership positions or having more responsibilities at work. See for example “Japanese Women Don’t Want to Lead” in *The Diplomat* (2015) and “75% of Japanese women not interested in management” in *Nikkei Asia* (2015).

saw many of my bosses work very hard, they were very tired. Now, they say women should work as women. But 10 years ago, if you are promoted to manager, you had to work like men. Some people say, "You have no children, so you can work hard."

Natsumi's rationalization of these decisions, which she now came to regret deeply, reveals these were not simple matters of personal choice or lack of confidence. It had everything to do with the standard set by male precedents (practice of excessive and habitual overwork). With no senior women serving as positive role models with alternative interpretations of their managerial role, women like Natsumi inevitably compared themselves to the male standard and felt overwhelmed by what they *thought* was expected from them after promotion. Their low confidence was more in their capacity to adjust to the dominant way of work (overwork norm) among male managers in their organizations than in their own abilities to succeed in the job. Experiences of others like Keiko (49-year-old D&I specialist) suggest that women would have risen to the challenge with more encouragement from superiors.

I had never hoped to become manager on my own initiative. But my superior told me, "If you don't accept a managerial position, you cannot give the young women a chance." So I decided to take a promotion exam... I have not yet felt confident in myself since I first became manager. But I have been fortunate to have good superiors and seniors who gave me honest advice. I am doing my best to live up to their expectations.

Once the Japanese women worked as team managers their outlook and desire for upwards mobility changed. By experiencing first-hand what managerial jobs entailed, particularly the increased discretion over one's time and task planning, climbing the corporate ladder became something worthwhile pursuing. As Natsumi later realized:

The good thing is that it gets easier to control my own schedule. And, I am often considered as just a young woman because of my young-looking face, but now I can tell

them that I am a manager... Now I know the advantages of being manager. If I get a chance, I would like to get promoted to a higher position.

Although impossible to ascertain whether some women would have seized promotion opportunities if things were differently, a common problem referred to as counterfactual reasoning, I believe it is meaningful here to entertain the possibility. As Sayer puts it “the interest in potentials does not entail a leap from empirical research into mere speculation. What people need or are capable of doing but have not yet been able to realize has something to do with their constitution now... Acknowledgement of this is vital to any progressive thought (Sayer 2000).” Indeed, insights gained from the interviews with HR informants indicate such hypothetical alternative scenarios are plausible and worthy to conceive essential conditions that increase the ratio of women in managerial jobs. For instance, several informants confirmed younger female employees’ hesitation to dream of becoming manager stems more from inability to visualize themselves in such a role when female role models in the vicinity are scarce than lack of ambition. Natsuko (49-year-old D&I consultant) clearly articulated that the myth about Japanese women not wanting to be promoted is indeed a misinterpretation of their inner deliberations in a male-dominated environment.

When there were hardly any female managers, we [women] said we cannot do management or don’t want to. But if we look at it another way. What we actually mean is that we could not imagine becoming manager. We made a network internally [focused on professional learning and development]... It is difficult to think about becoming a manager but it is easier to imagine to be bright... women have ambition but we are not aware of it. If we find it, we can be a manager and be bright. After such discussions, so many female employees became manager. It is like conditioning or a sort of homework.

This resonates with Hamada’s case studies that found *sōgōshoku* (career-track) women in several companies initially would rather stay doing the same work (in their current job, division,

work location) and did not feel confident to take on demanding higher positions (Hamada 2018). However, after receiving seminars that encouraged women to think about long-term career choices several *ippanshoku* (general/non-career track) women decided to switch to the career-track and some *sōgōshoku* women accepted section-chief positions⁵⁶. Indeed, the rationalizations by Japanese and Korean women of indecisiveness and loss of vision during their careers showed a strong connection to their awareness of having a lower status and lack of social capital to move out of peripheral jobs. With reference to Hobson's model, "hidden affordance" provides a deeper insight as to why some women perceive alternatives to their current situation and take action while others may not.

Unlike the Japanese, most Korean women did not speak about "having declined promotions." Rather, they were very adamant about their desire to attain higher positions. My interpretation of this between-country difference in women's work behavior is that it stems from a difference in perceived job security. The competitive and precarious reality faced by employees irrespective of gender in Korean organizations appears to pressure women to join men in the rat race for promotion in their organizations. Since promotion in rank seems to be the only way to have a longer career within the same company, declining it would be self-sabotage for Korean women. Without a certain sense of job security (*anshinkan*) that Japanese regular employees still have, Korean women have little choice but to emulate the hypermasculine (and increasingly individualistic) performance driven workstyle and reaffirm their value to the organization by constantly raising their output. This has larger implications for gender segregation in managerial

⁵⁶ Hamada (2018) explains this process using Norman's concept of "hidden affordance" (not-yet-perceived possibilities for action) to explain that a steep corporate ladder prevents women from seeing possibilities to climb it as real or imagining alternative career outcomes by the actor.

positions (leaking pipeline) as the overwork effect (attrition of women) has been found only present among overworking mothers in male-dominated occupations (Cha 2013).

The following account of Eun-joo (32-year-old assistant manager) illustrates that the dominant ideal worker image can also make women in early career stages self-conscious about their femininity and lead them to *perform* normative behavior in the workplace.

I didn't want others to treat me differently because I am female. I worked the same way as my male co-workers. I tried to give them no reason to say: "she cannot work late, go drinking, meet customers or go on business trips because she is a woman." So I worked even longer hours, always stayed until the end at drinking sessions even though I cannot drink much, and visited the stores frequently.

Other women also made a conscious decision to hide feminine traits in the workplace and not "act like a sensitive woman" or "get affected by words or being bossed around." These behavioral adjustments to avoid social sanctions indicate the extremely competitive working environments of Korean corporations with fewer managerial positions available to all employees intensifies gendered practices on the work floor that can be harmful to women's professional and personal identities.

The hypermasculine work environment particularly constrained the decisions of working mothers. While most Japanese women felt they could develop at their own pace and have long careers in their organizations, many Korean women thought "the only way to achieve career success is to work like men." Unspoken rules about employees' time commitment pressured many new mothers to shorten the length of childcare leave and work harder upon return to their physical and mental limits to keep up with their peers without blank periods in their careers. These women went through great lengths making arrangements in the family sphere to prevent deviation from the traditional corporate career (linear progression by certain age/seniority

brackets). The deliberations of Eun-suh (33-year-old section chief), who worried about being pregnant again shortly after returning from leave, show how linear promotion systems force women to make continuous extra efforts to signal their potential for senior management after motherhood.

Since I have to compensate for my career-breaks in the competition with men for promotions to leadership positions, I need to develop some special skill or expertise. Otherwise, I will lose to male candidates who did not experience any career breaks. I worry a lot about that these days... What many women do is to get some kind of professional license. Or to increase my chances at other companies through activities outside the workplace and studying on my own. That is why I studied and got my masters degree last year... If I had a clear career goal, I could work out a specific strategy, but this is not the case. I do my best, but I cannot make a strategic plan. This makes me uneasy.

This brings me to a crucial facet of company life in Korea and Japan that poses serious challenges for women with time constraints. Formal and informal networking was a topic that evoked strong statements infused with gendered practices among the Korean and Japanese women alike and always surfaced in conversations about equal opportunities. Gender dimensions and women's agency in networking will be examined in the next section.

4.4 GENDER DYNAMICS AND NETWORKING

Networking plays a crucial part in navigating corporate careers. How does the way women are situated in organizations relate to networking activities of individuals? A common gender-centered argument is that women's lower participation in professional networking activities due to family responsibilities, difficulties to access male power networks, or limited social capital, is partially responsible for the gender imbalance in leadership positions (Baron 1984; Cho 2015; Ibarra 1992; Kang and Rowley 2006; Lee 2009b; Park 2002a). Organizational structuralists stress

women's weaker social ties to powerful (male) individuals and lower status within the organization disadvantages them when competing with men as gender bias influences informal rules of promotion, myths about effective leaders, and evaluations of women's work performance (Kanter 1977a; Reskin and Padavic 1994). While there is truth in both, I believe we should be careful overemphasizing factors internal to women as well as structural constraints and pay attention to the creative ways in which women nurture workplace relations that may not be as strategic or effective as those of men but indirectly serve similar purposes. To challenge our own assumptions and foster more balanced discussions, I will focus on the less conventional ways women go about nurturing workplace relations. Do Korean and Japanese women, for instance, define "networking" the same as men in corporate settings? My findings will show there are alternative approaches women take that indirectly serve a similar purpose that thus far have escaped our radar because the very definition of networking applied in surveys and empirical studies is based on male strategies to capitalize on personal connections. Women's narratives about networking strategies and interactions with others in and outside their companies bring more nuance in theorizations that exaggerate sex differences in disposition ("men are strategic actors receptive to organization-wide power dynamics while women have a narrow focus that doesn't extend beyond their own work and team", "men are good at navigating office politics while women are good at creating harmony among team members", or "men spend more time nurturing important relations on the green or other informal settings while women devote more time to domestic and family responsibilities").

Networking for Individual Gains or a Larger Purpose

The individual stories combined show women's dual attitudes towards networking, and ambivalence participating in it, has much to do with issues external to women (men mobilizing

masculinities over drinks and golf, blocked access to male power networks). Lack of awareness of the instrumental value of networking was clearly not the issue. In fact, all women interviewed believed professional networking was crucial for their career advancement. Overall, women in both countries were keenly aware they needed to make continuous and deliberate efforts to nurture relations beyond their immediate work groups and firms⁵⁷. The following statement of Hina (40-year-old working mother), a section chief in the insurance industry, indicates Japanese women in male-dominated organizations or fields cannot rely on the “organic” way of nurturing human relations among men when reaching entry-level managerial positions but need more active strategies to broaden social networks.

There are few female sōgōshoku [career-track employees] in every department, so we tend to be a maverick. I didn’t mind it. However, I was reminded by a woman that I must be active in nurturing a network. She is a former executive director of IBM. She told me that women must nurture networks consciously while men do it unconsciously, and that people with broad networks have more opportunities for promotion. So, I decided to nurture network with women and with people outside the company about 2 years ago... I hear that it’s important to have network with men. I will go out for drinks with buchō [department heads] and create a bigger network.

A reading focused only on women’s agency would interpret the comments of the former IBM director in Hina’s narrative (networking behavior that comes *natural* to men takes a conscious effort for women) as a gender difference in social capital (Ibarra 1992, 1997).

⁵⁷ Park (2002) makes a similar observation in a study comparing the networking activities of male and female managers. While the author found no gender difference in awareness of the instrumental value to maintain informal networks for promotion, the surveyed women managers did have fewer relationships with superiors, peers and subordinates and spent less time and energy on such activities. He argues structural constraints force women to give up on after-hour informal activities to maintain internal/external human connections and as minority members in the workplace they experience more difficulties to capitalize on essential alumni networks like male managers do in finding mentors, reciprocal information sharing, and gaining access to core departments in the organization.

However, Kanter's theoretical framework⁵⁸ about processes between dominants and tokens in groups with sex skewed ratios suggests forces external to women must be considered (Kanter 1977b). Women typically respond to "boundary heightening" behavior (exaggerating differences between dominants and tokens) by accepting social isolation and stereotypical views or trying to assimilate in the dominant group (Kanter 1977, 1980). The latter strategy, which increases chances to be in situations where informal socializing and political activity takes place, often involves psychological strain and self-distortion. Thus, it is understandable that for the women interviewed making the attitudinal and behavioral change did not come easy.

In the context of Korean and Japanese business culture, where informal socializing with colleagues and superiors typically takes place in drinking places, karaoke bars or room salons (in the evening hours) or during weekends on the golf green, women with family responsibilities and single women who feel uncomfortable in such settings are at a disadvantage (Park 2002b). Indeed, many managerial women in both countries were not as determined as Hina to join the "men's club" and shied away from such activities even though they knew it could help them find influential male mentors/sponsors. This is not to say that they lost motivation to expand their social networks altogether in the face of structural constraints. Many women turned to other strategies that did not involve exposing themselves to male bonding rituals relying on formal (bureaucratic) network structures and task-related interactions with powerful men beyond their work unit. Unfortunately, such strategies are found to be less frequent and not as effective in

⁵⁸ For instance, women (minority group) may not be at liberty to foster relations in the same "unconscious" or "effortless" way as men (majority group) because of their distance to other women and lower integration in the dominant group. Furthermore, men are more likely to learn effective networking strategies early in their careers by socializing with male seniors in informal settings so that it becomes a second nature. For women, socialized as "tokens" in male-dominated work groups with fewer female role models and male mentors, it takes considerably more efforts to create similar informal learning opportunities. Lastly, women typically respond to "boundary heightening" behavior (exaggerating differences between dominants and tokens) in two ways: accepting social isolation and stereotypical views or trying to assimilate in the dominant group (Kanter 1977, 1980).

building the type of strong (affective) human relationships that often preclude mentor-protégé transactions or sponsorship (Park 2002b).

Contrary to the common notion that junior women focus mainly on the job at hand, surprisingly many Korean women realized they needed to become “insiders” early in their careers to keep up with their male peers. Even the assistant managers who personally disliked socializing after work hours made sure to at least attend team dinners and casually converse with superiors in corridors, on-site coffee corners, or lunch places. Such interactions were deemed important to become aware about issues in the team and organization and, more importantly, to mitigate the tendency of male superiors to give higher performance evaluations to (male) subordinates closest to them. Young-hee’s (33-year-old section chief) candid response as to why she attends after work dinners is telling:

Since men like it, I don’t want to single myself out. Another reason is that I want to make a good impression on my team leader. By spending more time outside the office together, I increase my chances of a high grade at performance evaluations. I worry about the consequences for my position if I don’t go to those dinners.

Many others like Young-hee mirrored the networking activities of male peers to assimilate into the dominant group. However, these activities were mainly focused on strengthening the superior-subordinate relationship in their work unit and rarely extended beyond. This can be problematic for long-term career development as network analysis studies show that building networks entirely around one’s immediate supervisor/boss are unproductive (Burt 1995; Ibarra 1992). More precisely, for women (and entry-level men) establishing close connections with others in distant parts of the organization (other departments, member organizations) and external parties is associated with faster promotion rates in competitive

corporations because these offer strategic advantages (access to information, timing, referrals, and control) and are seen as cues (market signaling) of one's leadership potential (Ibid.).

Several cases indicated women who withdraw from informal socializing, for family but also work-related reasons, further reinforces the assumption "women are different" and could potentially alienate male superiors who are the first gatekeepers for promotion from section chief to deputy general manager. These women like the aforementioned Hye-jin felt "team leaders gave higher grades to male colleagues because they bond over drinking."

The personal accounts reveal informal socializing (over lunch, dinners, and drinking) continues to be an essential ritual for corporate employees, men and women alike, in spite of a general shift towards individualization and greater separation between work and private life among the younger generations. Women, whether they like it or not, feel pressured to engage in such practices to avoid negative consequences due to their minority status. Like Chung-ja (44-year-old vice president), women in the higher echelons often succumb to the hegemonic masculinity in managerial occupations.

I don't really network much with executives inside the company. Most of them are older males. I usually attend the official dinners with other executives and general managers, but don't go drinking with them too much. I don't personally socialize with them...Nurturing personal relations is important. You are a member of an organization. It is part of your job whether you are male or female. I don't feel okay with drinking, but you have an obligation to attend dinners.

Women with managerial responsibilities frequently stressed that networking activities, to them, were more about "communication with others inside and outside the firm" to stay informed rather than "self-promotion" or "office politics." Nonetheless, the typical activities men

engage in to build strong opportunity-oriented⁵⁹ networks in their organizations were considered the norm and most effective. During the interviews with Japanese senior managers, “playing golf with clients and superiors” or “drinking with other department heads and executives” were the first activities that came up when asked about networking strategies. Similarly, the Korean women with higher levels of seniority in age and rank and front-line jobs (marketing, sales) frequently mentioned team dinners (or *hweshik*), socializing over drinks, entertaining clients, and playing golf with superiors. The narratives about networking often started with a critical note about the emphasis on personal ties rather than abilities.

There were single women in both samples who enjoyed and strategically took part in male-oriented activities to make themselves known to influential individuals, but the majority of women (single and married) found other ways to nurture relations without compromising on personal time or comfort zone. When asked about their specific networking activities and time allocated an attitudinal difference across generation, marital status, level of seniority, and occupational status emerged. Senior women with families frequently reported they “did not have enough time to engage in it.” Some women, single and married, “could not drink very well” or “disliked playing golf with men during the weekend.” In contrast, junior women often felt “they were not in the position to approach senior officials or executives yet” or were reluctant to join male coworkers for after-work socializing because “it would make them [the men] uncomfortable to do certain things [male banter, room salon visits].” The nature of the reasons not to engage in male-oriented networking practices clearly differed based on women’s seniority in age and rank. The deliberate inaction of senior women can be interpreted as an act of

⁵⁹ Burt (1995) defines opportunity-oriented networks as vast clusters of connections to a broad range of individuals outside the immediate work group that offer access to entrepreneurial opportunities for information access, timing, referrals, and control in competitive workplaces.

resistance while the hesitance of junior women was more involuntary and reflective of social constraints (mobilizing masculinities by men).

My interview data produced no anecdotal evidence for either gender/person-centered or structuralists explanations of sex differences in networking choices/outcomes. There were high-status women who eschewed office politics and focused more on relations with subordinates and peers while others enjoyed joining men in the game. There were entry-level professionals who actively sought new contacts outside their immediate work groups or companies when stuck in their functional departments while others gave up and concentrated on excelling at the job at hand. Within the group of most assertive women who emulated the workstyles of senior men there were some who gave up on joining the old boys' club but also several who did not. The diversity among women in their networking motivations/strategies, and combination of passive/active responses, leads me to believe the answer lies somewhere in the middle. However, I agree with Ibarra's (1993) argument⁶⁰ that while women and other members of minority groups are constrained in their social network choices, opportunity structures are not all-determining so we should consider individuals as active creators within the context of pre-existing workplace relations they are embedded in. In closing of this section, I will provide some examples of women mobilizing femininities in response to exclusionary practices by men.

⁶⁰ In her article "Personal Networks of Women and Minorities in Management: A Conceptual Framework" Ibarra (1993) proposes a framework for understanding differential social network outcomes of women and racial minorities in organizations that is both agency-centered and structural. It does not view individual strategies as reflections of endogenous traits or enduring preferences but as alternatives shaped by social context. As such, it appreciates the role individuals play in actively creating strategies to pursue their goals without dismissing the particular constraints members of minority groups face in gaining access to information, expertise, professional advice, political power.

Mobilizing Femininities Through Informal Networks

The stories of women in both countries revealed there is more female camaraderie in particularly male-skewed organizations than the often-heard myth “women are women’s worst enemies” suggests. For these women, scattered throughout large hierarchical organizations, informal friendships, and loyalties amongst like-minded offered more meaningful support (both affective and instrumental) than the formal female networking programs in place. The experiences of junior women who participated in such programs offered by their companies indicated rather artificial platforms are limited in nurturing long-lasting close ties to high status females that could potentially transform into mentor-protégé relationships. Unfortunately, very few participants maintained contact with their mentors in consecutive years “due to busy work schedules that didn’t match” or “a lack of interest in developing relations on behalf of the mentor.”

Other than practical or motivational issues, there was another obstacle related to the overall atmosphere in the workplace (lack of trust among employees, distance between low- and high-ranked employees) that emerged in the stories of junior women who participated as mentees. Some women like Young-hee (33) felt uncomfortable to discuss career desires or work-life balance issues with senior women she never met before and were concerned such information would get back to their immediate superiors.

Staying in touch with women from the same pool of graduate recruits after being dispatched to other departments, however, broadened women’s horizons of vertical moves, especially when formal job rotation systems were not fully functioning (in the Korean companies). These enduring friendship networks with female peers provided timely information about job openings elsewhere in the organization or warnings about “bad superiors” to avoid. For

entry-level women in male-dominated departments/companies, such peer-to-peer relations were often the only remote connections in their social networks.

Women in both countries regardless of rank/age regularly bonded with female coworkers outside the workplace over lunch, hiking trips, and other social activities other than drinks or golf. During lunch breaks, I personally witnessed women gravitating to same-sex (of similar status) members in informal socializing. The female employees coming down the escalators to go out for lunch were typically groups of two or three women of the same age engaged in casual conversations. While waiting in public spaces of the surveyed Japanese and Korean companies (e.g., coffee shops and lounge areas) as I waited for the interview participants, I observed similar dynamics during working hours. These “casual” encounters between female employees seemed more pre-planned than just matters of coincidence. In numerous occasions, one person would arrive at the coffee counter first and waited for the other(s), suggesting that they worked at different departments and coordinated the time of encounter. The nature of such female-to-female interactions was different from the mixed-sex groups that I observed in the same settings. Such gatherings were clearly work-related and functional (the men and women had documents on tables and sat with some distance from each other like team members going over a project). In contrast, when two or more women sat together their dispositions were more relaxed. They often leaned towards one another as if they were sharing personal or confidential information taking cautious glances to the people surrounding them. These brief and casual interactions during working hours resembled the encounters between salarymen I observed in the smoking room. They may appear trivial in isolation but cumulatively, and over time, they could be viewed as micro-transactions requiring little time/energy to stay connected with female peers remote from

their immediate work groups and alleviate feelings of isolation in cutthroat workplace environments.

In many companies, women also established informal social media (Facebook) platforms to share their experiences and frustrations with each other. These online “safe spaces” offered physically dispersed women a sense of connectedness and moral support. In one Japanese business group, the few managerial women initiated their own *circle* and gathered after working hours to learn about various female leadership issues such as “how to dress for success”, “how to use soft skills to their advantage”, and “how to navigate office politics in their own way.” I participated in one session and, witnessing the women drop their facades and voice strong opinions on the slow pace of change, I realized this private initiative by managerial women was also a space where they contested (and ridiculed) the ways men work without any reservation. Altogether, women’s own stories about company life and my observations of the social dynamics (in Japan) did not support the Queen Bee hypothesis (Ellemers et al. 2012) nor a general tendency of token women turning against their own category (Kanter 1977b) found in the Western literature. My impression is that while some degree of female rivalry (healthy competition) and solidarity (mobilizing resources) coexist, the latter is the prevailing attitude among corporate women in Korea and Japan.

In all fairness, there was some anecdotal evidence that female dynamics in the workplace were not entirely collaborative or supportive. Especially in the Korean sample, there were negative stories about women distancing themselves from their own category. For instance, Soon-hee (37) spoke about bathrooms as sites where female employees got together to gossip about other women (a practice she believed made women workers look bad in the eyes of men) or Jung-hyun (36) who felt it was cumbersome to have lunch with other women since “they talk

so much about private issues” (while men talk about work). However, the critiques of these task-oriented women towards other females deemed “less serious about work” seem to reflect divisive relations between women produced by their different organizational status (clerical versus career-track, core workers versus mid-career hires, singles versus working mothers) or job rank more than conscious attempts to align themselves with higher status members. It is noteworthy that both women worked for a fashion company with a balanced male-female overall workforce. A closer look at the company’s employee statistics, however, revealed gender segregated patterns in occupations and rank. Women were overrepresented in jobs in the periphery (R&D and operations) and underrepresented in senior managerial positions (from section chief onwards)⁶¹. In like vein, there were several comments by Korean and Japanese entry-level managers who worked for gender-diverse companies (even with about 30 percent female managers) stating that they “preferred male bosses over female bosses” or worked with senior female managers who did not take an interest in helping younger women fast-track their careers. It stands to reason that women’s prejudicial statements to members of their own category, lack of identification to other females, and difficulty forging solidarity networks were in part behavioral responses by *tokens* to structural realities, that is women’s numerical scarcity in senior management (Kanter 1977b), or individual strategies to be incorporated into the valorized world of men (Lewis and Simpson 2012). Both should not be mistaken for Queen Bee behavior (betraying one’s own social category) but as choices to become *invisible* in a corporate world where masculine standards and practices are the norm⁶².

⁶¹ The 2015 employee statistics showed 40.5% of section chiefs, 25.5% of deputies, 20.3% of general managers, and 17.6% of executives were female. These numbers indicate that in the company, although female-oriented on the surface, women were still a proportional rarity in senior management that may help explain the divisiveness and lack of solidarity (Kanter 1977b) among the interviewed women in a qualitative sense.

⁶² This is a point made by Lewis and Simpson (2012) in their re-examination of Kanter’s tokenism framework to understand women’s responses to structural constraints in organizations. The authors argue that women

The above analysis of women's networking behavior and same-sex group dynamics, again, underscores female professionals are a heterogeneous group with diverse work/lifestyle preferences and behaviors. The picture emerging from the individual stories combined is that of a changing workplace in which women *collectively* are becoming less of a numerical rarity in the career tracks of Korean and Japanese large firms. Individually, however, there appear to be growing status differences between female coworkers that contribute to looming divisions across generational and hierarchical lines regardless of industry or overall workforce compositions. The most distinctive polarization was found between regular staff/non-career versus career-track women, cohorts of older middle managers that slowly ascended versus faster promoted younger managers, and single-minded careerists versus women with broader lifestyle preferences (family, friendships, hobbies, travel). As such, it is hard to conceive of today's workplace dynamics mainly in terms of older gender concepts such as dominants-tokens or privileged-marginalized (Kanter 1977a, b). Some women may have risen to similar organizational status as men, while others with similar educational credentials or tenure got stuck in the periphery. Despite some signs of positive change, women remain a statistical scarcity in senior management and core departments which can be linked to the lack of solidarity and sometimes divisiveness among female group members in even the most gender diverse firms I surveyed. Having said that, I do not mean to exaggerate the influence of numbers on same-sex and inter-sex dynamics. As others point out, policy strategies preoccupied with merely increasing the ratio of women in organizations have failed in the past to reduce gender inequalities or stereotypical views in masculine occupations/senior management and sometimes even backfired polarizing men against

distancing themselves from practices and values associated with femininity, which might exclude or marginalize them, are in fact seeking to become *invisible* within the norm rather than protecting their own turf from marginalized women.

women as well as women against their own subcategories (Hakim 2016; Lewis and Simpson 2012).

In contrast to the more “natural” male solidarity, female solidarity is complicated by structural constraints posed by their scarcity in managerial occupations and positions in core departments. As such, any observed divisions among lower and higher status women within the same workplace that appears to be “female rivalry” or “jealousy between women” might actually be more reflective of tensions resulting from growing disparities in employment opportunities and working conditions. This remains an open question at this point. Nonetheless, the individual stories indicate there is more female camaraderie than commonly believed in Korean and Japanese firms, especially among women with the same employment status or rank and female employees in companies where women are stretched out thinly across organizational units. In these cases, relations with peers and female seniors offer isolated women mental support, professional guidance, and crucial information how to get the job done or develop their careers long-term. From a women’s agency perspective, a dual approach (ties to senior males for instrumental reasons and ties to women for affective reasons) in creating social networks seems the most common. The former is obviously more effective in terms of career development as all department heads and executives in the samples spoke of having influential males, other than their immediate supervisors, as sponsors prior to their promotions. This implies that mentoring programs or corporate networking platforms restricted to women have their limitations in increasing real opportunities for younger women with multiple identities and roles in life.

4.5 CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this chapter underscore women in today's corporate Korea and Japan are a heterogeneous group of individuals with diverse aspirations and career behaviors. Their attitudes and actions do not fit neatly in binary categorizations (career-oriented versus family-oriented). The observed variation *between* different cohorts of corporate women and *within* members of the same generation also casts doubt on older gender-centered explanations of women's corporate outcomes. Altogether, the intricate stories told by the Korean and Japanese women in my project, filled with seemingly contradicting behaviors and fluctuating attitudes, reveal the complexities and ambiguousness involved in navigating a corporate career. Moreover, my analysis of women's diverse career experiences and interpretations of emerging opportunities constructs a far more dynamic and cautiously optimistic picture of Korean and Japanese workplaces than the organizational stasis found in the older literature focusing on structural barriers (Nemoto 2013b, 2016b; Kang and Rowley 2006; Yuasa 2009; Lam 1992; Lee 2009b). Despite remaining barriers, female professionals with university degrees view themselves as active creators of their own careers rather than victims of pre-existing organizational structures and biased practices. In contrast to the managerial women in older case-studies (Aronsson 2015; Kimoto 1996; Renshaw 1999), the younger cohorts are finding their own ways (with ups and downs) to improve their functioning as moral professionals without emulating the work behaviors of men.

The narratives in this chapter revealed that corporate women in Korea and Japan continuously redefine what a career means on their own terms like their counterparts in industrialized societies. In doing so, their anticipation of future success in professional and family life indeed plays a crucial role in the level of emphasis women place on each realm at a

given point in time (Powell and Maniero 1992). In contrast to the salary man/company man, career woman models were largely unavailable until the turn of the century in both countries. It is therefore not surprising to find women rarely had fixed career ideas from the start or explicit aspirations and responded more to situational and relational conditions. The stories combined indicated career outlooks and unexpected events at work and home propelled women to (temporarily) invest more time and energy in their career pursuit or family life.

The cases of agentic women who managed to climb the corporate ladder while fulfilling other roles (wives, mothers, daughters), inform us that accommodating factors at the work-group level (supportive supervisors, collaborative coworker relations, challenging job assignments, and perceived fairness of performance evaluations) affect women's career decisions more directly than either women-friendly organizational structures or more gender egalitarian values in society precisely because they shape women's anticipations of future successes in the workplace. In the reverse direction, the examples of older women who declined promotions or deferred investing more in their individual career pursuit for the sake of family members in the Japanese sample and disillusioned younger university graduates who turned outwards (company-exit) in the Korean sample show that the organizational-context (lack of female role models in management, scarcity of male mentors who offer career advice, ambiguous career paths for women core workers, masculine ideal manager images) can reduce the positive outcome of the interplay between gains in individual agency (higher educational attainment, stronger professional identity, self-efficacy, etc.) and shifting gender and work values (towards self-actualization and gender egalitarian roles) in society at large. In both directions, women's work-group environment outweighs the more distal factors at higher levels in pulling or pushing women towards investing in careers or relations outside the workplace.

My exploration in Korean and Japanese context corroborates the consensus in the European and North American literature on career development. Like in other industrialized societies that witnessed a radical transformation in the organization of work (e.g., changing psychological employer-employee contracts, increased job insecurity, new organizational forms/structures, deregulation of labor markets, globalization, and technological advancement), women's careers take many shapes and forms, and so do their professional accomplishments (Collin and Young 2000; Nicholson and West 1988; Storey 2000). Their career paths are increasingly unpredictable and rarely fit the male mold of an uninterrupted series of planned job transitions leading to increasing rewards/hierarchical progression in one company as promised by meritocratic ideology (Sullivan 1990). As others pointed out decades ago "women's careers are important and different (Gutek and Larwood 1989b)," and "women's experiences, concerns and successes in relationships outside work are important considerations in how they manage their careers (Powell and Maniero 1992)." Indeed, even the generalists in my samples who started their careers alongside men in the career-track with work histories closest to a "traditional bureaucratic career" did not anticipate horizontal and vertical job changes. Despite their formal elite status in a firm's internal labor market, they experienced many moments of doubt, uncertainty, and ambivalence about the potential roles they could fulfill in their organizations. In constructing their career paths, their choices were neither entirely strategic nor fatalistic but (un)conscious responses to unexpected opportunities and looming career plateaus mediated by relations with others.

Given the limitations of my samples, I am in no position to make sweeping generalizations. Nonetheless, the data collected from the life-story interviews with 63 women does confirm women's notions of career advancement are undeniably much broader than male-

oriented definitions in terms of tangibles like wage, rank, or organizational status (Cho et al. 2017; Dyke 2006). For women in both countries, having a linear career path with gradual vertical progression in one company is not the only (or desired) way to be successful as a professional. Women's inclination to value broad experiences, might explain the observed phenomenon that they perceive vertical moves to a field of choice as greater personal achievements than getting promoted in the same jobs they have been doing for years. Since women have their own conceptualizations of corporate careers and advancement-- whether this largely reflects preferences or adjustments to structural constraints-- different from typical salaried men, it is important for scholars of gender equality to look beyond mere labor market achievements and consider improvements on intangible dimensions that make a career meaningful to women.

My informants' personal reflections on their career journeys confirm women's professional identities are fluid and their actions embedded in social relations. What they choose to do at certain points in their careers or how they respond to (blocked) opportunities is context-specific and not determined by stable character traits or socialization. Instead, women's actions are largely informed by their reading of the situation and relations with superiors, subordinates, and peers that widen or narrow their horizons of what is conceived as possible. On their career journeys, women transition through different phases in which they display varying levels of agency. Sudden shifts in personal or workplace circumstances can sway them in both directions (from paralysis to bold action).

Not surprisingly, what enabled women to develop their careers on their own terms (and at their own pace) was a combination of favorable individual-, organizational-, and socio-institutional factors. The stories of Korean and Japanese women indicate that it is particularly the

interaction between individual characteristics, personal circumstances, and the immediate work group context (rather than the broader organizational culture or structures) that made the difference. In many cases, it was the encouragement of a progressive (male or female) supervisor who took an interest in teaching women the ropes of company life that provided the final nudge. For women who chose to “lean-in”, instrumental social networks extending beyond their immediate work unit were a precondition leading to promotions from section chief onwards. For women who opted to “lean-out” in favor of a longer future within the companies they were socialized in (Roberts 2020), having affective/friendship networks with colleagues mitigated much of the negative impact losing prospect of further progression in rank might have had on their job satisfaction.

From a comparative perspective, Korean women seem to have greater access to alternatives to the lifetime career at one company as an unintended consequence of flexibility without security and reliance on the external labor market by major corporations. The price they pay, however, is increasingly precarious jobs even when they are regular employees. In contrast, Japanese women face less pressures to follow the footsteps of men since the job security offered to regular workers allows them to develop at a slower pace. Japanese women also have more opportunities to explore new fields of expertise within the same organization because of the integrated job rotation systems of Japanese companies. This highlights the embeddedness of companies in the larger corporate environment and the indirect impact labor market conditions exert on the career experiences of female professionals.

The diversity in individual experiences, although observed in limited and different country samples, implies that not all women become trapped (and disillusioned) by undelivered promises of neoliberal capitalism (Borovoy 2010, Gagné 2020b) and an increasing number are

agents with entrepreneurial approaches in creating alternative career paths that cross company borders without being marginalized. Perhaps it is the absence of a “fixed” salary women model coupled with women’s broader career/life orientations that make female managers more adaptive to the increasingly precarious job market and willing to make radical out-company changes vis-à-vis salary men similar to counterparts observed in an older British study on job transitions (Nicholson and West 1988). Ironically, the historically vulnerable status of women in the internal labor market of firms, might have prepared a subcategory of female professionals to better cope with the uncertain reality now that lifetime employment systems and *companyism* are eroding (Höpfl and Atkinson 2000).

From an organizational perspective, my comparison of the Korean and Japanese cases finds tentative support for the argument that generally speaking “the more bureaucratized personnel practices are, the less freedom managers have to act on their own stereotypes, biases, or impulses to favor ingroup members” (Reskin 2003). Practices such as promotion exams, standardized job ladders, and the centralized function of HR departments to oversee policy implementation, found in the surveyed Japanese companies can be beneficial to ongoing gender diversity initiatives for this very reason. In contrast, the personal discretion granted to Korean middle managers in decisions concerning their subordinates’ promotions and indirect demotions (when promotion is declined consecutively) leaves women with different work-life values/background characteristics than their immediate supervisors vulnerable to be left out. Of course, bureaucratized personnel practices are by no means a guarantee for fairer competition in workplaces. As women’s recurrent stories about lower job performance evaluations, overconsiderate bosses, or non-challenging work assignments indicate, there are abundant situations where gender bias might taint merit-based valorizations of employees in the purest

form, even in organizations with fairly transparent or tightly regulated promotion/reward systems.

The main message of this chapter is that women's career choices are more than snapshot decisions and intertwined with past experiences and anticipations of the future. Therefore, it is vital to have a multi-dimensional and process-oriented view of women's careers to fully comprehend why they choose the paths they walk in life inside and outside the workplace. Both individual employees and work organizations are embedded in larger normative contexts and structures that might be rigid but not monolithic. It remains an open question why exactly certain favorable conditions occurring at different levels exert greater influence on the actions of individual actors at different points in time. Nevertheless, my findings thus far do suggest that we should look particularly at the linkages between women's situated agency and interpersonal dynamics between supervisors and subordinates but also between coworkers to find more robust evidence. Thus, I will pay special attention to the social dynamics at the work-group level in the remaining chapters. Women's approaches to dilemmas at work are closely related to their situations at home. The next chapter probes deeper into the work-family experiences of mothers to explore spillover processes in both directions and find out what conditions enabled them to reap the benefits from work-life balance programs in their companies.