

Working Women of Japan and Belgium as Seen Through Legislation and Media during the 80's and 90's (summary).

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This thesis looks at working women of the 80's and 90's through the lenses of legislation and media. The legislation gives us a view of what needs to be changed in the future through the implementation of laws. The advertising media shows us the past cultural values and current prejudices. The combination of the two can give us a unique image of the situation of working women during this period. When analyzing the portrayal of working women through legislation and advertisements changes, and examining the following changes in employment situation of women, I refer to Hakim's preference theory. According to Hakim, most women should aim for combining having a career while having a family. If women were allowed to choose the lifestyle they want, the most often portrayed group should be the described group.

Legislation is not created in a void, it is usually based on statistics, research and a lot of deliberation. That doesn't mean it is always correct in its conclusion, or implementation, but it definitely has a certain view on the current situation, an idea of what it wants to change and how it wants to achieve this.

With regard to gender legislation, I look at laws in both Japan and Belgium. Both countries have laws trying to solve gender equality in the work and private spheres and work life balance issues, but both fail to address the underlying social and cultural gender inequality, and therefore fall short in fulfilling their promises. Even though both countries use different strategies to solve their problems, both gendered and non-gendered approaches, as well as family-oriented or individual-centered laws, they both fail. It can be understood that this failure is due to not fixing the root causes. The use of affirmative methods rather than transformative methods has led to legislations having gendered effects.

In Japan the initial Equal Employment Opportunity Law tried to make women equal with men. The resultant focus on women has led to use of the two track system that actually discriminated against working women. Women were seen as undesirable in doing anything but the lowest positions and were placed in a track where there was no chance of advancement. The revision of this law is tougher, but by then women had already made the choice between having a family or having a career. Women either looked for part-time or freelance work, being a full-time housekeeper on the one hand or being single, or being in a long-distance marriage with a career, on the other. The Vision of Gender Equality: Creation of New Values for the Twenty-first Century, and the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society recognize that both genders need to share the household responsibilities to be able to engage in other activities, but admit that it is difficult to change existing gender roles.

In Belgium, the career break law is a non-gendered law which can be used by both genders equally. In reality however, women used it early in their career and men near their retirement. There has been no way for the government to stop married women from sacrificing their careers in order to balance their work-life, at least not as long as women are supposed to take care of the house, children, meals and other housework.

Both countries look at remuneration of housework as way to increase the value of housework and increase equality between the genders. The proposals were not realized. The reasons behind this would be financial, but can be also read as the housework not being perceived as work having enough value to be awarded remuneration. Also, without changing the existing gender roles, the remuneration could only strengthen those roles and reinforce the concept that women should work at home.

For the media lens, I look at both television commercials (those which received an ACC award) and magazine advertisements (which ran in *Croissant* during the 80's and 90's) in Japan. Because they differ in medium and audience, they might give a different view of the same realities.

The 80's commercials show women who are more interested in their looks, rather than doing

any work. Women are most of the time pictured in the office surroundings while standing or walking around. The exception are commercials showing Western women and, unlike their Japanese counterparts, these are shown as professionals. Starting from the 90's more positive images start to appear. Japanese women are now occasionally shown in the role of professionals. They are also portrayed as intellectuals, stating their opinions on various topics. In the case of women portrayed in office surroundings, they are performing simple tasks. However, women portrayed in the following categories are often presented in a negative way. Women in management positions are portrayed as inconsiderate bullies. Women working part-time are visualized as empty headed women who use work as a way to play or find a life partner.

Magazine advertisements are overall more positive than their television counterparts. Working women are shown as busy and passionate. The difference between advertisements of the 80's and the 90's is the shift of the emphasis in advertisements on the purpose of self-education courses. While before the advertisements presented the acquisition of a new skills as a way to fill positions in emerging jobs, later on the same skills are to be applied at one's home, or used as a way to work from home. A lot of emphasis is put on using femininity or feminine traits which can be used to enhance a profession or to learn a profession easily. There is not much variation in the kind of professions the portrayed women perform. Women are mostly portrayed in freelance and creative kinds of jobs. The depiction of working women who have families is very sparse.

The image of women in media tries to fit into the stereotyped view on gender roles. It shows the viewer the image of women that does not reflect the role a woman has in society. However, this idealized image, or image of women belonging to the past years, can influence the viewers to have the view that this is the role women should play so that the society can keep going. To change the stereotypes of women being confined to house realm, or being confined to the freelance type of work, or being the ones responsible for housework, the media can change the way it portrays working women. TV commercials or advertisements should portray women in various kind of professions, outside the frame of only creative kinds of professions. Women should be portrayed occupying higher positions, in a positive light. Married women and women with children should be shown working, to destroy the prejudice that married women should be only responsible for housework. Part-time workers should be shown as responsible workers, and not as people who use work as a playground or a way to find a marriage partner.

The stereotyped image of women from media will not disappear, in the same way the policies will be used differently according to gender. However, small changes will influence the way society views the gender roles. 15 years is not a long time for a change to take place in the gender roles persisting in society, but this change is visible. Legislation calls for more equal division of gender roles, and for the society where everyone can realize themselves. It turns more and more into a genderless approach, this while trying to fit the needs of society. Starting from the 90's, media presents women as actually working, as professionals and as successful people. The change might not be as big as to show Hakim's adaptive category of women as the most forthcoming one, but society has more acceptance for working women, as positive representations of working women find their way into commercials and advertisements.