CHAPTER 4

Gendered Offices: A Comparative-Historical Examination of Clerical Work in Japan and the United States

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Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century was marked by dramatic changes in women's economic participation in the United States and other Western industrial countries (Bergmann 1986; Davis 1984; Oppenheimer 1970, 1994). The most important departure from previous decades was the rapid rise in labor force participation among married women. In the United States, this trend began in the 1940s and early 1950s; in each subsequent decade, white married women's labor force participation increased by about 10 percentage points, reaching 60 percent by the end of the century (Blau and Kahn 2005).

There are many reasons for this change. One of the most important was a transformation in the nature of labor demand. The rapid development of the service sector in the early part of the twentieth century produced great increases in the demand for white-collar workers, in particular clerical workers. Compared to manufacturing and domestic service, the sectors that had employed the majority of working women in earlier periods, office work opened up the possibility of cleaner, less hazardous, "respectable" wage-earning labor. The opportunity to work in the clerical sector was especially important for white middle-class married women, as factory and domestic service jobs were viewed by the majority of these women and their husbands—as well as by some working-class families—as beneath their dignity (Cohen 1992; Degler 1980; Goldin 1990). The demand for office workers played an important role in drawing more women into the labor force and, even more

importantly for the eventual narrowing of the male-female wage gap, transforming the *composition* of the female labor force in full-time jobs into a more highly educated group comprised of both single and married women.

Stated simply, participation in clerical work increased American women's labor force attachment. As early as 1940, the labor force participation rate among married women who had worked in the clerical sector while single was higher than for women who had been in the manufacturing sector before marriage (Goldin 1990). The clerical sector also played a historical role in heightening women's educational aspirations, because office work required more education than the jobs that had been open to women in earlier periods. Women with more human capital were increasingly drawn into the labor market, resulting in a "virtuous cycle" of continual upgrading of the human capital stock of working women from the mid-twentieth century on. This eventually had positive repercussions for the narrowing of the overall male-female wage gap in the United States: the narrowing of the gap since 1980 has been due in part to the cumulative effect of the increased economic participation of successive cohorts of highly educated women (Bianchi and Spain 1986; Blau and Kahn 2005; Goldin 1990; McLaughlin et al. 1988; O'Neill and Polachek 1993; Wellington 1993).[1]

Expansion of the clerical sector and its increasing openness to women therefore played a very important role in the transformation of the female labor force in the twentieth-century United States (Goldin 1990; Oppenheimer 1970). Many studies have documented the transformation of clerical work from being a male job to being culturally defined as "female" within the space of a few decades early in the century (Goldin 1990; Oppenheimer 1970; Reskin and Roos 1990). It is not clear whether the nearly complete feminization of clerical work was critical to its transformative role for the female labor force or whether the gender integration of clerical work would have been sufficient; certainly, what *was* required was that clerical work change from being culturally labeled as an occupation suitable only for men. But feminization of clerical roles was tied inextricably to a second, more structural, change: these roles became bracketed off from internal labor markets. The intertwining of these two processes rendered clerical jobs unattractive to the vast majority of men and in effect created a cultural space that was female. At first almost entirely occupied by single females, these jobs eventually expanded to include large numbers of married women because the supply of single women eventually became insufficient to

meet the volume of employer demand for secretaries, filing clerks, and other clerical positions.

The important influence of clerical sector expansion on the dramatic increase in American married women's full-time labor force participation across the twentieth century can be contrasted with the Japanese experience, where expansion of the clerical sector has had more muted effects. Two distinct differences mark these national cases. First, a great deal of clerical work in Japan remains embedded in career ladders in internal labor markets—career ladders that remain occupied almost entirely by men (Brinton 1993; Ishida et al. 2002; Spilerman and Ishida 1996). Second, and closely related, clerical jobs have not become feminized to the extent that occurred in the United States in an earlier historical period, nor have full-time positions in the Japanese clerical sector become as open to *married* women. This has dampened the positive effect of service sector expansion on labor force participation and labor market rewards for Japanese married women overall.

The next section outlines the historically transformative role of the clerical sector in increasing American female labor force participation, especially for the married population. I show that the early cultural labeling of clerical work as "female" and women's subsequent near-monopolization of most of the numerically largest clerical occupations opened up a culturally sanctioned space for women in the American labor force that was preserved even when demands were high for full employment for men, as in the early post-WWII era. In the third section I outline recent historical trends in women's clerical sector participation in Japan and show that although large numbers of women do hold clerical jobs, their presence in these positions does *not* increase their lifetime labor force attachment. In the final section I discuss in more general terms what the contrast between the United States and Japan tells us about the conditions necessary for clerical sector expansion to have a transformative effect on married women's labor force participation and rewards.

The Rise of Married Women's Labor Force Participation in the United States: The Contribution of Clerical Work

Women's participation in the American labor force was heavily concentrated in a handful of low-level jobs in manufacturing and service occupations at the turn of the twentieth century.[2] But in the course of the

TABLE 4.1
Percentage of working women over time in the clerical sector, United States

	AGE								
Birth cohort	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49	50–54	55–59	60–64
1896–1900			28.0		21.8		23.6		22.1
1901–1905		34.0		26.6		23.9		26.7	
1906–1910	37.1 (1930)		30.2		26.9		28.0		28.0
1911–1915		30.1		26.9		29.0		29.8	
1916–1920	31.2 (1940)		30.8		31.2		33.3		32.6
1921–1925		40.2		35.3		36.5		34.1	
1926–1930	49.3 (1950)		38.1		37.0		35.1		
1931–1935		41.9		36.7		35.4			
1936–1940	51.6 (1960)		37.1		34.5				
1941–1945		38.8		32.9					
1946–1950	48.8 (1970)		34.3						
1951–1955		35.5							
1956–1960	42.4 (1980)								

SOURCE: James P. Smith and Michael P. Ward. 1984. "Time-Series Growth in the Female Labor Force." *Journal of Labor Economics* 3: 559–590.

NOTE: Figures are for white women.

first thirty years of the century, the proportion of working women who occupied clerical jobs increased fivefold; fully one-quarter of all working women in 1930 were employed in this sector (Goldin 1990). Table 4.1 shows the proportion in clerical work for each five-year age group of American working women, starting with the cohort born in 1906–1910. Because the layout of the table is rather nonintuitive, it bears explaining why the numbers are presented in this way and how they can help us understand how the age structure of women's participation in clerical work changed over the first 60 years of the twentieth century.

Work-history data are the ideal type of data to show how individuals respond to opportunities in the labor market across their life cycle. These can be collected by asking individuals in late middle age, for example, to recall the jobs they have held throughout their working life, or they can be collected by asking a large sample of individuals every year about their current jobs, allowing the researcher to compile a record of the jobs an individual has held across his or her life cycle. But neither of these options is generally available to economic historians, labor economists, or sociologists who want to study the historical patterns of individuals' work over the life cycle; such data were very rarely collected historically by anyone.

In lieu of individual work-history data, we can create "synthetic cohorts" by piecing together cross-sectional data (data gathered at

one point in time) for a large number of individuals across different age groups and compiling these cross sections to infer life-cycle work patterns from them. This is the method I rely upon here. Table 4.1 shows the figures compiled by Smith and Ward (1984) for the proportion of each five-year age group of working women in the United States who were in clerical work, beginning in 1930. The left-hand column shows when a given group of women was born (beginning at the top of the table with the cohort born in 1896–1900 and ending at the bottom of the table with the cohort born in 1956–1960). The row across the top of the table follows members of each cohort as they age, and the cells in the table show the proportion of the working women in each cohort who were in the clerical sector at each age. As an aid, I have added to the first data column the calendar years in which a given cohort reached ages twenty to twenty-four. (For instance, the cohort born between 1906 and 1910 reached ages twenty to twenty-four in 1930.)

The table allows us to see three principal changes over time in the ages of American female clerical workers. First, the proportion of working women in each age group employed in clerical work generally grew over time. This can be seen by reading the figures in each column from top to bottom. The proportion of working women ages twenty to twenty-four in 1930 who were in clerical work was 37 percent, and this had increased to 42 percent for this age group by 1980. The proportion of women in clerical work at each life-cycle stage, as indicated by the ages across the top of the table, increased over the decades. Second, this increase was *the greatest for middle-aged women*—those in their forties and early fifties. Whereas only about 22 percent of working women ages forty to forty-four in the early period were in the clerical sector, this had increased to 35 percent for women in this age group in 1980. This shows the secular change over time in the proportion of American middle-aged women who worked in the clerical sector. Although these figures unfortunately are not available by marital status, it is likely that a large proportion of women in this age group were married. The increase is similar for women ages forty-five to forty-nine and fifty to fifty-four. In contrast, the participation of younger women in clerical work reached its peak around 1960 and has declined slightly thereafter. This is probably due to the increased educational opportunities that became available to women, especially pre-professional school programs in business and medicine; starting one's work life in the clerical sector has become less appealing for highly educated American women since other opportunities have opened up.

Third, over historical time there has been a gradual "leveling" in the age distribution of clerical work, starting from a point early in the century when it was chiefly the domain of young women. This is a different way of stating the second point, that clerical work gradually became less and less monopolized by younger women. This can be seen by following each historical time point upward and to the right on its diagonal line. In 1940, 31 percent of women ages twenty to twenty-four were in clerical work compared to almost 10 percent fewer women (22 percent) ages forty to forty-four. By 1980, these figures had changed to 42 percent and 35 percent, respectively.

One need not rely solely on aggregate data to see the dramatic shift in the United States from a historical situation where clerical work was mainly an arena for young, single women to the more contemporary situation where working women across the age spectrum are almost equally likely to hold such jobs. Using establishment surveys conducted by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, Goldin (1990) shows that about half of female office workers in the 1930s and 1940s were in firms that had a policy of not hiring married women or a policy of leaving this to the discretion of the department head. These so-called "marriage bars" were not removed for clerical work until the 1950s. This happened because the supply of young single women to fill these jobs became insufficient and employers quite simply *had* to hire married women. There were three principal reasons for this change.

First, the birth rate rapidly declined beginning in the early 1930s in the United States (Cherlin 1992). This produced smaller cohorts of young women entering the labor force from the mid-1950s on. Second, there was a decline in women's age at first marriage in the 1950s, partly related to the end of World War II and the beginning of a period of postwar prosperity. This also translated into fewer single women in their twenties. Third, the increase in female educational attainment beginning around 1900 meant that ever-larger numbers of young women remained in school (and, consequently, out of the labor force) for longer periods, gradually reducing further the available labor supply for these jobs. The last of these reasons—the historically early and continuous expansion of education for American women—meant that when employers faced a shortage of clerical workers in the 1950s there existed a ready supply of high school–educated, middle-aged married women.

Historically, then, the expanding clerical sector in the United States had a positive effect on the labor force participation of married women in two ways. First, young women who had begun their work lives in clerical jobs were more likely than others to be gainfully employed as

married women. Although our contemporary image of clerical work tends to be a series of dead-end jobs with no, or at most a shallow, promotional trajectory, the rise of clerical work half a century ago in the United States provided women at that time with the possibility of safe and "respectable" work vis-à-vis the previous era's concentration of labor power in manufacturing and domestic service work. This was especially significant for white middle-class married women who otherwise very likely would not have participated in the labor force. Second, clerical sector expansion had a feedback effect on young women's incentives to pursue their education. If a young woman completed a high school education, the world of white-collar work was at least open to her, even if the work itself did not lead directly into a long and promising career ladder. Women became better-educated in order to gain the skills and credentials to enter the white-collar sector (Cohen 1992; Smith and Ward 1984; Walters and O'Connell 1988). By the 1950s, middle-aged married women were increasingly drawn into office work because the labor supply of young single women could not meet the economy's demands (partly because women were in fact spending longer in school). These middle-aged women had the requisite education and some prior work experience, generally from the period before they had married. The fit was therefore good between employers' labor needs on the one hand and the desire of educated women in their late thirties and forties on the other hand to continue working or to reenter the labor force after having left at marriage or childbirth.

But we can still ask why American employers turned to *married women* to fill their clerical needs in the mid-twentieth century rather than to *young men* (whether single or married). The answer lies in the fact that many types of clerical jobs had essentially become "female jobs" in the early twentieth century. This laid the cultural groundwork for clerical job openings to be filled by married women rather than by men, if single women came to be in short supply. To understand why this occurred and to provide a backdrop against which the contrasting development of Japanese offices can be compared, it is necessary to look at how the division of labor and the structuring of jobs in American offices radically changed in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Feminization of Clerical Work in the United States

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, office clerks and secretaries in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain were almost always male (Cohn 1985; Davies 1975; Lowe 1980, 1986). Census data for the

United States in 1870 document that women were a mere 2.5 percent of the clerical labor force (Hooks 1947). Offices were typically small, entrepreneurial enterprises with young men serving as "right-hand men" to business owners (Edwards 1979; Kanter 1977). But by 1890, the proportion of clerical workers who were women was 21 percent and by 1920 the figure had more than doubled, to 50 percent (Davies 1975). Why?

Along with the expansion of the administrative work of businesses in the early part of the twentieth century came the extension of scientific management techniques from factories to offices, as well as innovations in office technology. The introduction and rapid spread of the typewriter around 1900 created differentiation in clerical work and gave rise to the new job category of typist. Women were believed to have high manual dexterity and, furthermore, to be willing to perform repetitive activities and to be closely monitored. Typing soon became a female occupation. By the early post-WWII period, the office division of labor was so advanced that the National Office Management Association in Canada could meticulously outline the specific duties of job categories such as typist, junior stenographer, stenographer, secretary, and private secretary as well as the progression among these (Lowe 1986). Similarly, the advent of the adding machine followed by Hollerith (precomputer) technology created a more fragmented division of labor compared to the more unified responsibilities of the turn-of-the-century office clerk. As Lowe writes:

> Nineteenth-century office routines are often portrayed as craft-like work. The traditional male bookkeeper was an experienced generalist who at any given moment could report to his boss on the state of the business. But with industrial expansion and increasingly complex business dealings, the rise of large-scale office bureaucracy after 1900 wrought fundamental changes in the division of administrative labour. The mounting volume of routine work induced employers to hire women largely because they could be paid much less than men. As the scope of administration widened, the focus of individual clerical tasks narrowed. By the 1920s, the generalist male bookkeeper had become a relic of the past in most large offices, succeeded by teams of female functionaries monotonously processing financial data with the aid of machines. (Lowe 1986, 194)

This illustrates a complex interplay between the increased mechanization and specialization of many office tasks and their delegation to women, who could be hired more cheaply than men. As I will argue below, the compartmentalization of office tasks has not occurred to this degree in Japan, and this is one of the principal reasons behind the

limited possibilities for married women to participate full-time in office work, especially in large firms.

American women were willing to put up with lower wages than men in the clerical sector. First, descriptions of office work in the early twentieth century all emphasize that it was safer, cleaner, and more respectable than almost all other jobs open to women except for the handful of professions (such as teaching and nursing) that were available only to highly educated women. Second, the pay was relatively good, certainly not compared to men's jobs but compared to the other jobs open to women with a high school education. And third, channels of upward mobility were open to at least some female clerical workers, although it is important to note that this depended on individual initiative and was not built-in, in the sense of clear promotional trajectories in firm-internal labor markets. As Kessler-Harris writes, "File clerks who normally began work at twelve dollars a week could aspire to run offices, where they might create classification systems, index, and keep records at eighty dollars per week. Cash girls could become sales clerks or even buyers. Telephone operators could be supervisors" (Kessler-Harris 1982, 227). The expansion of personnel departments after 1910 is a particularly good example of a class of jobs considered especially appropriate for women to move into, involving skills such as the maintenance of good interpersonal relations that were considered to be natural among women's arsenal of abilities (Kessler-Harris 1982).

The fact that over half of all clerical jobs were filled by women by the onset of the Great Depression had an ironic effect on the employment of American women versus men. Aside from the first three years of the Depression, women actually fared better than men in employment (Cohen 1992; Kessler-Harris 1982; Milkman 1987). The industries hit hardest in the 1930s were those such as heavy industry that employed very few women. And the industries that recovered the most quickly and then expanded (social services and education) had large clerical needs—and many jobs that had already been culturally labeled as "female." The return of American men to the economy after WWII therefore had less effect on women's labor force participation than might have been expected, because so much low-level office work had become labeled as "women's work." The Women's Bureau reported shortages of stenographers and typists in 1953; these shortages were subsequently filled by women, not men (Goldin 1990).

Nevertheless, it would be a definite mistake to suggest that women's increased participation in clerical work in the first half of the twentieth

century quickly helped narrow the overall male-female wage gap in the U.S. economy. This chapter does not advance such an argument. To the contrary, the overall male-female wage gap remained stubbornly resistant to change until the 1980s (Bernhardt et al. 1995; Goldin 1990). Rather, what the feminization of office work accomplished was to gain for married women a permanent foothold in white-collar work and to encourage subsequent cohorts of women to increase their human capital through educational attainment. As stated earlier, by 1940 educated married women were on average more likely to be in the labor force than their less-educated counterparts, and they were highly visible in the office.[3] The historical comparison of women's to men's wages in clerical work is not a positive one; male and female starting wages tended to be very similar, but the wage gap increased substantially with experience. However, the earnings slope for female clerical workers with substantial (more than 15 years) work experience was greater than for women in manufacturing by 1940 (Goldin 1990). It is this comparison—with women's other occupational alternatives—that is significant for the argument posed here. Women had occupational choices available, albeit across a limited and culturally defined range, and clerical work had become a very positive choice relative to the others available.

In conclusion, the rapid expansion and feminization of clerical work in the early twentieth century created a female ghetto in American offices. But at the same time, this very feminization led ever-greater numbers of women to complete high school in order to enter office work, eventually producing a critical mass of middle-aged, educated women. Members of this new labor pool were increasingly hired from the 1940s on because the supply of young single women for these jobs, now designated by employers as female jobs, had become insufficient.

It is also highly likely that the exposure of a broad age spectrum of educated women to corporate environments eventually made women's comparison of their wages relative to *men's* ever more natural and more frustrating. Further education, always a distinctly "American" solution to individuals' aspirations for upward mobility, was pursued fervently by women in American universities' rapidly expanding MBA programs from the 1970s on. This option was available not just to young women but to those who had had some work experience and perhaps marriage and childrearing experience as well. By 1980, nearly 30 percent of American administrators/managers were female, as were nearly 80 percent of clerical workers (Brinton and Ngo 1993). Women's increased educational attainment and labor force attachment had so permeated

successive cohorts that both factors finally had some effect on reducing the overall male-female wage gap.

I turn now to the experience of Japan as a distinctly different case, where clerical sector expansion has not exerted as transformative an effect on the economic status of married women as occurred in the United States.

The Expanding Clerical Sector in Japan

In East Asia as in the United States and other Western economies, industrialization and the expansion of the white-collar and service sectors led to an irreversible rise in female labor force participation. But women's rates of labor force exit upon marriage, as well as the male-female wage gap, remain much greater than in Western industrial countries (Brinton 1993; Brinton et al. 1995; Hirao 2002; Shirahase 2002). This is especially the case in Japan and South Korea. As pointed out by Yamaguchi (1997), the deepening of the "M-shaped" curve of female labor force participation by age in postwar Japan contrasts with the historical experience in the United States, where the trough in the M-shaped curve has virtually disappeared. The same can be said for South Korea (Brinton et al. 1995). Moreover, the link between women's education and their probability of labor force participation, evident in U.S. data as far back as half a century ago (Goldin 1990; Smith and Ward 1984), has repeatedly shown up as weak or absent in analyses of married women's employment in these two countries (Brinton 1993; Brinton et al. 1995; Hirao 1997; Osawa 1988; K. Tanaka 1987; S. Tanaka 1998). Why has an expanded clerical sector apparently not strengthened married women's labor force attachment, not produced a close relationship between married women's education and labor force participation, and therefore not helped narrow the gender wage gap as it did in the United States?

Trends over Time

Expansion of the clerical sector in Japan has occurred at a steady pace throughout the post-WWII period. Forty years ago about 15 percent of the nonagricultural labor force (including males and females) were in clerical jobs, compared to 21 percent currently. Table 4.2 shows the proportion in clerical work for five-year age groups of Japanese working women across historical time. A comparison with the trends for U.S. women (Table 4.1) shows a number of similarities.

TABLE 4.2
Percentage of working women over time in the clerical sector, Japan

	AGE							
Birth cohort	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49	50–54	55+
1899–1903								
1904–1908								4.5
1909–1913							7.7	4.9
1914–1918						7.7	11.1	6.0
1919–1923					7.7	11.1	10.4	12.3
1924–1928				15.4	11.1	15.2	15.0	13.3
1929–1933			15.4	16.0	16.6	17.5	18.4	16.1
1934–1938		23.0	15.9	16.3	18.4	18.5	18.1	
1939–1943	34.9 (1963)	27.5	20.6	21.5	22.0	22.5		
1944–1948	42.6 (1968)	32.6	26.9	26.2	26.0			
1949–1953	45.5 (1973)	36.1	26.9	26.4				
1954–1958	49.6 (1978)	38.9	31.0					
1959–1963	50.2 (1983)	42.0						
1964–1968	48.0 (1988)							
1969–1973								

SOURCE: *Rôdôryoku chosa* (Survey of the Labor Force), various years.

The proportion of Japanese working women in each age group employed in clerical work has consistently increased over historical time. Women ages twenty to twenty-four increased their participation in clerical work from 35 percent in 1963 to 48 percent in 1983, above the American rate. But just as in the United States, the most dramatic increase was among middle-aged women. In the early 1960s, less than 8 percent of Japanese women in their forties worked in the clerical sector. By the late 1980s, the rate had more than tripled among women in their late forties as well as their early forties. Thus a very substantial change had occurred in the space of just a few decades.

Yet substantial differences are also observable in the comparative data for the United States and Japan. The probability that an American working woman over age twenty-five was in a clerical occupation in 1980 could not have been predicted very well by her age, as shown if we follow the line for 1980 in Table 4.1 across ages (upward to the right): between 32 and 35 percent of women in every age group (save the youngest) were clerical workers. In contrast, over 40 percent of Japanese working women ages twenty-five to twenty-nine were in clerical work in 1983 compared to just over 20 percent of women in their late forties and many fewer in the older cohorts.[4]

In sum, the movement of women out of clerical work as they age is much more evident in Japan than in the United States. The late-1980s

life-cycle pattern for clerical work that we can infer for Japanese women from these data is similar to the pattern that existed for American women in the late 1940s, before marriage bars were dismantled in the United States. This can be seen by comparing the last diagonal, upward-sloping line in Table 4.2 with the line for 1950 in Table 4.1. Also, the proportion of young women (ages twenty to twenty-four) in clerical work in the United States peaked in 1960 at over 50 percent and then declined by about 10 percentage points over the next twenty years, consistent with young American women's increasing rates of university and professional school attendance. In contrast, once young Japanese women began exhibiting high rates of clerical sector participation in the late 1960s, the figure continued to rise and appears to have become quite stable since the late 1970s. The difference between these rates and those of women in their early thirties and beyond is suggestive of the continued importance of youth and singlehood among female Japanese clerical workers.

Work-Career Implications of Clerical Work for Japanese Men and Women

To look in greater detail at Japanese women's life-cycle employment patterns and the role of clerical jobs within those patterns, I use data from the Japanese Survey on Social Status and Mobility (SSM) conducted in 1995 by the Social Status and Mobility Survey Research Group. The survey was distributed in two versions to a national random sample of 8064 individuals. I use the version that includes information on the complete work histories of individuals. Because the survey was carried out for both men and women, we can examine the implications of clerical work for the work lives of both sexes, which is an additional advantage of the data. These implications are strikingly different.

Of all ever-worked women in the sample, the proportion of women who entered clerical work as their first job nearly doubled from 26 percent for women who were over age sixty in 1995 (who would have entered the labor force in the early 1950s) to 47 percent for women ages twenty to twenty-nine in 1995 (who would have started work in the late 1980s to early 1990s).[5] Interestingly, these figures from individual-level data are very consistent with the aggregate figures in Table 4.2 for these cohorts.

The great majority (93 percent) of ever-worked women in the sample have had at least some work experience prior to marriage. Among these, clerical work was the most common first job; employing 41 percent of

women.[6] Among women who started their first job after marriage, only 20 percent were in clerical work. Instead, these women were more likely to work in manufacturing jobs. Virtually no women (or men) started their working lives as administrators/managers.[7]

Although American women in the mid-twentieth century who began their work lives in clerical jobs were more likely to be employed after marriage than women who had started out in manufacturing, it is striking that the *opposite* is true for Japanese women. Calculating the proportion of Japanese women in the labor force at ages thirty, forty, and fifty as well as the occupational distribution of working women at each age shows that among women whose first job was clerical, the majority (54 percent) were not in the labor force at age thirty. This figure is higher than for women who started out in any other occupation, although sales occupations are close behind. Similarly, fewer women who had started out in clerical than in other work had reentered the labor force by age forty or fifty, a stark contrast with the United States.

Among women who had initially entered the labor force as clerical workers, 30 percent were also in clerical work at age thirty. This figure increases to 34 percent for women working at age forty and a similar proportion at age fifty.[8] In sum, although about one-third of the women who began their work lives in office work were also engaged in that type of work at ages thirty, forty, and/or fifty, much larger proportions at each age (54 percent, 39 percent, and 42 percent, respectively) were not in the labor force at all. The data also demonstrate that clerical experience almost never produces female administrators/managers in Japan. By ages thirty, forty, and fifty, respectively, only minuscule percentages—0.5 percent, 1.0 percent, and 1.3 percent—of initial female clerical workers had become administrators/managers (see also Ishida et al. 2002).

The experience of Japanese men is very different. About 20 percent in every cohort started their work lives in jobs classified as clerical. At age thirty, all of these men were employed and nearly 80 percent remained in clerical work. An additional 4 percent had become administrators/managers. By age forty, about 60 percent were still clerical workers and about 20 percent had moved into management; an additional 10 percent were in sales. The proportion who had moved into management by age fifty was 34 percent, and a remaining 50 percent and 9 percent, respectively, remained in clerical or sales work.

In sum, three occupational categories (administrative/managerial, clerical, and sales) are the career destination points at age fifty for over 90 percent of Japanese men who start out as office workers. In contrast,

these white-collar occupations are the destination points at age fifty for fewer than half as many women (42 percent); moreover, an equivalent proportion of women who initially held clerical jobs are not in the labor force at all at age fifty. Even more stark is the fact that whereas about one-third of Japanese men who start out in low-level office work eventually become managers or administrators—many of them by age forty—the corresponding figure for women is just *1 percent.*[9] This finding is very similar to what Spilerman and Ishida report in their study of a large Japanese financial firm; there were so few women in managerial positions that the researchers needed to delete them from the statistical analysis of promotional trajectories (Spilerman and Ishida 1996). In contrast, women occupied 46 percent of the managerial positions in the comparable American firm the authors studied, and posting and bidding provisions in the company (a nonexistent practice in Japanese companies) translated into about one-half of all managerial entrants having started out as clerical staff (Ishida et al. 2002).

Clerical and Managerial Work Throughout Men's and Women's Working Lives

Given that a significant proportion of Japanese men continue to be classified as clerical workers at ages thirty, forty, and fifty, what is the nature of the clerical work that the two sexes do at these different ages? Calculation of the distribution of men and women across clerical categories at these ages as well as the percentage of females in each category shows that male clerical workers' distribution across job titles varies little with age. Women's distribution shows slightly more variation, the major shift being that the proportion of female clerical workers who are account clerks goes up considerably among older women workers. Notably, Japanese women do not monopolize (by occupying 85 percent or more of the positions) any categories of clerical work at any age, except for the categories of receptionist and typist/stenographer/keypuncher, which together comprise less than 5 percent of the clerical labor force in Japan.

The workplaces and employment statuses of Japanese male and female clerical workers also increasingly diverge over the life cycle.[10] The distribution of first jobs for the two groups of workers across different firm sizes is similar; women are slightly more likely to be in small firms of fewer than thirty workers, and men are considerably more likely to be in government jobs.[11] But nearly half of the women working in the clerical sector at age forty work for firms of fewer than thirty people;

this is true for only 15 percent of men. In contrast, about one-third of male clerical workers are in large firms of 1,000 or more employees, whereas only 12 percent of women are. Men also continue to be more heavily represented in government than women. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that whereas men in clerical fields at age forty overwhelmingly remain full-time employees, the rate of women working as full-time employees in clerical fields drops to one-half what it was on first jobs. At age forty, 46 percent of female clerical workers are full-time employees, another 23 percent are part-time or temporary workers, and 24 percent are classified as family enterprise workers.

To conclude, although the job classifications of Japanese male and female clerical workers remain fairly stable across different ages, the workplaces become more and more different for the two sexes. Women become heavily concentrated in small firms and distributed almost equally between full-time workers on the one hand and part-time, temporary/family enterprise workers on the other. These trends are not at all evident for Japanese men. It is especially important to emphasize the divergence of the two sexes into firms of different sizes as they age. Given the large discrepancy in wages by firm size among middle-aged Japanese employees, men's greater presence in large firms in and of itself creates a significant gender wage advantage (Brinton 1993; Kalleberg and Lincoln 1988).

Critical National Distinctions in the Gendered Division of Labor in Office Work

In both the United States and Japan, clerical work among women was historically concentrated among the young and single. But I have argued that once we acknowledge this historical similarity, the two national situations look quite different. Although larger proportions of married Japanese working women over age thirty have gradually come to participate in the clerical sector, the transformative effect of clerical work for the status of married women in the economy is less evident than in the United States. The clerical sector opened up the possibility of normatively approved employment for older American married women with a high school education or greater who wished to reenter the labor force. Perhaps more importantly, it also offered a long-term career for younger women starting out in the working world—a phenomenon that is not evident in Japanese data. Whereas some clerical jobs in the United

States lead into management positions for American women as well as men, this occurs for Japanese men but virtually never for women (Ishida et al. 2002).

To understand the differences in the implications that the clerical sector has held for middle-aged married women in these two countries, it is not enough to argue that this sector expanded much later in Japan and therefore has not yet incorporated married women to the degree that it did in the United States. The higher labor force participation of middle-aged American married women who had been in clerical work before marriage became a phenomenon by the mid-twentieth century. In contrast, as the data examined in this chapter have shown, Japanese women who work in the clerical sector prior to marriage are currently the *least likely* of any occupational group to be in the labor force when they are married. Middle-aged female clerical workers in Japan are also much more likely than their male counterparts to work in small enterprises, and a large percentage of them work part-time rather than full-time. There is not a sense in Japan that clerical work is a "career" for women. Why is this the case?

I suggest that there are three fundamental reasons: (1) basic differences in the social organization of office work in the United States and Japan, which include whether clerical work remains built into male-dominated internal labor markets or not, (2) differences in labor supply—namely, dramatic historical changes in the supply of young single women in the United States but not in Japan, and (3) the greater cultural significance of age and gender hierarchies in Japan.

The Organization of Office Work: Embedded in Firm-Internal Labor Markets or Not?

As discussed by many Japanese and American social scientists who have written about the Japanese workplace, white-collar jobs have remained much more ambiguous bundles of tasks and responsibilities than in American work settings (Clark 1979; Cole 1979; Lincoln and Kalleberg 1990; Spilerman and Ishida 1996). Large Japanese companies clearly had set the template for the ideal profile of the full-time worker by the mid-twentieth century: a generalist who was hired straight out of school and who aspired to stay with the company until retirement. Anticipating a long tenure on the part of new graduates, employers set them on a track that would involve rotation through the company in various job assignments in order that they would gain a general understanding

of the operation of different sections and their interplay (Ishida et al. 2002). Clerical tasks were bundled into the mix of job responsibilities performed by male white-collar workers in their twenties. Young men who are in *sôgôshoku* (management-track) positions and are therefore potential permanent employees of the company engage in a wide variety of tasks during their first several years on the job, competing with others in their age cohort to get promoted into the lower ranks of management (Imada and Hirata 1994; Spilerman and Ishida 1996; Yashiro 1995). Young women play subsidiary office roles and are very rarely in the management track, nor do they monopolize key office functions as is common of more experienced secretaries in the United States. Clerical positions guarantee Japanese women neither indispensability to the company nor progression up even a highly truncated job ladder (Ogasawara 1998). This includes not only young women, but also older women with extensive experience in the office environment.

Changes in Labor Supply

Married women in the United States were increasingly drawn into clerical work only after the sector had feminized and after the supply of young female labor had declined to the point where marriage bars were no longer feasible for employers. Such a decline in the labor supply of single women has been barely visible in Japan. Marriage age continues to increase, and by 2005 it stood at an all-time high of over twenty-seven years for women. Although the Japanese population is rapidly aging, the slowdown in economic growth from the early 1990s on has *increased* the ratio of available new female graduates at all levels of schooling to job openings. Japanese media reports since the mid-1990s have often depicted the long lines of female university and junior college graduates waiting to interview for clerical jobs; were the supply of these highly-educated young women exhausted, new high school graduates would gladly take their place, as such jobs are highly desired by female high school seniors (Rosenbaum and Kariya 1989). Under such conditions, even if the complete feminization of certain clerical jobs were to occur, the increased entrance of married women into those jobs would proceed much more slowly than in the United States.

Cultural Significance of Age and Gender Hierarchies

Finally, whereas a beautiful young receptionist may be valued at corporate headquarters in the United States or at major law firms or other

types of offices that deal with an elite client base, age and appearance are otherwise not as important commodities as skill and experience for female American clerical staff. Age is not as important a status-defining characteristic in the United States as in Japan. A young manager who has an MBA from a prestigious business school may have an older, experienced secretary. In such a situation, his educational credentials and status in the firm clearly override the fact that the secretary is more senior to him in terms of age; it does not matter for their interactions with each other. In Japan, status in the work environment is much more related to age. Older women in the workplace constitute an anomaly vis-à-vis younger men. As women, they generally have lower status, but their age gives them higher status. This produces a situation that can be disconcerting for everyone. This cultural difference between the United States and Japan is important because it has ramifications for the work roles that are considered acceptable for older married women in each country. It is more comfortable for Japanese men if the low status attributed to women simply by their gender is complemented by youth as well as by placement in the lowest-level clerical jobs. This produces comfortable status consistency among gender, age, and job status. Older married women disrupt this consistency because culturally they should command more respect due to their age (see also Ogasawara 1998 on the difficulties that female office workers encounter in their interactions with each other when status indicators such as age, education, and work experience are inconsistent). An exception to this discomfort may be work situations such as the small manufacturing company described by Kondo (1990), where older female workers act in a motherly fashion toward young male apprentices. Such logic may work better in the traditional small-scale manufacturing settings Kondo studied than in the sleek corporate offices of Tokyo and other major business centers of Japan.

Looking toward the future, it is clear that the increasing trend toward outsourcing and the rapid development of temporary clerical services in the Japanese economy signal changes in the structure of clerical work in Japanese offices (Houseman and Osawa 1995; Osawa and Kingston 1996). Some categories of clerical work may become more feminized in Japan. But due to the three reasons discussed above, this feminization will not necessarily be coupled with the conversion of full-time clerical jobs into ones culturally designated as appropriate for married women. Instead, it is rapidly becoming apparent that the clerical work performed by Japanese women is becoming more concentrated in part-time and temporary work, and the clerical functions performed by men

are remaining within firm-internal career ladders. Despite its low pay compared to professional and managerial jobs, clerical work guaranteed American women a permanent place in the corporate world—a place they would not be required to leave when they married, and a place from which they might launch a different sort of career if they had the skills and initiative to do so. The significance of this fact lies in its profound effect on the continuity of American women's labor force participation across their lives. It is not at all clear that this transformation is occurring in Japan.

This chapter has demonstrated that the historical circumstances of occupational feminization can have important implications in terms of drawing women into the labor force and giving them incentives to form strong labor force attachments that persist long after they marry. Much gender stratification research underemphasizes or denies the positive role that newly feminizing occupations can play in drawing women into the labor force and affecting successive cohorts' human capital investment decisions. When the clerical sector expanded and feminized in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century it represented good jobs relative to the other choices faced by all but the tiny minority of college-educated American women. It thereby contributed strongly to the possibilities for middle-class married women to participate in the labor force in a culturally acceptable way.

As legal, medical, business, and academic professions have increasingly become more open to American women in successive decades, the relative status and appeal of clerical work has of course declined, but it remains a white-collar sector that is female-typed and has few age barriers. Much has been written about the career squeeze for American women in professions such as law and academics that have rigid requirements for tenure that temporally coincide with women's prime childbearing years. But what if a much wider range of white-collar occupations—such as clerical work—were relatively closed to women who temporarily leave the labor force during the prime childrearing years? One need only look at a case such as Japan or, less widely known, South Korea, to see the result. These cases demonstrate that employers' strong preference to employ young single women in full-time clerical work, especially in the higher-paying large firms, is detrimental to the chances for middle-class married women to participate in occupations that befit their tastes. Just as American middle-class married women earlier in this century were loath to enter the labor force if manufacturing jobs and petty sales jobs were their principal options, so too are married

women in these and many other countries. Because of this, researchers of comparative gender stratification need to pay greater attention to the historical and cultural context of female-typed occupations in the occupational structure and to the occupational *age segregation* practiced by employers as well, which often takes place within the context of highly structured internal labor markets designated primarily for men.[12]

Notes

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1. Bernhardt et al. (1995) convincingly argue that the polarization in white men's earnings by educational level was also important in narrowing the male-female wage gap since 1980.
2. Because the labor force participation rates and occupational distribution of white and nonwhite women vary considerably in some historical periods, I restrict the discussion in this paper to white women.
3. Many women gained some specialized clerical skills such as typing in the natural course of their high school education, and some also attended postsecondary secretarial schools. The utility and importance of education and a certain amount of occupational training prior to entering the American office were established early in the century and have continued (Osawa 1988).
4. The extent of leveling in the age distribution of clerical work in Japan is at once considerably less pronounced than in the American data and yet more pronounced than one might expect given the popular image that all Japanese clerical workers are "office ladies," a euphemistic term for young single women in office work (McLendon 1983; Ogasawara 1998).
5. The figures are even higher if we exclude from the denominator women working in agriculture, self-employment, or family enterprises.
6. Among women not working in agriculture, self-employment, or family enterprise, the proportion is even higher (47 percent).
7. There were only two men and one woman in this category in the entire sample.
8. There is no job category except clerical at any of these ages into which more than 10 percent of initial clerical workers move.
9. More than half of the males who started out in clerical work and became managers/administrators by age forty or fifty originated as operations or sales clerks or as "other" clerical workers. Very few women started out as operations or sales clerks; the "other" category was heavily female at young ages but became less so at older ages.
10. This is consistent with findings reported by Brinton (1989) using a different data set.

11. Over 90 percent of both sexes who start out in clerical work do so as full-time employees.

12. Japan has a low index of occupational sex segregation relative to many other industrial and postindustrial economies (Brinton 1993; Charles 1992; Charles and Grusky 2005). But as mentioned earlier in the paper, it also has one of the lowest rates of married women's labor force participation and one of the highest male-female wage gaps.

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