Gender, Economics and Industrialisation: Approaches to the Economic History of Japanese Women, 1868-1945

Janet Hunter
London School of Economics and Political Science

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Introduction

The fundamental task of the economic historian is to understand the process of economic change in the past, and it is widely acknowledged that in all countries, and in all periods of history, the economic role of women as both producers and consumers has been of crucial importance. It is clear, however, that even into the modern period the economic activities of women have tended to be less well recorded than those of men, often presenting historians with an insufficiency of empirical evidence with which to substantiate any claims of such an importance. We do, however, have more than enough evidence to confirm that women in industrialising economies have invariably been integrated into the modern economy on a basis of inequality with their male counterparts. Even in economies in which women are acknowledged to play a major role in consumption and in decisions relating to consumption, the productive economy has been characterised by a significant gender disparity in aspects such as labour force participation, employment prospects, remuneration and legal rights.

A variety of explanations has been offered for these disparities. Historians working in the traditions of classical or neo-classical economics have focussed on issues of profit maximisation and rational expectation, arguing, for example, that female workers have tended to be less educated, and to work for shorter periods, so embody more limited human capital. They therefore cannot expect to be paid on the same level as their male counterparts. More recently the new institutional economists have extended these considerations, by identifying gender as one of the 'rules of the game' in the operation of society that constrains individual decision-making, but how perceptions of gender impact on individual economic decisions and activity is rarely spelt out. Scholars working within the Marxist tradition have been inclined to use class as the explanatory variable, with the nature of gender relations closely tied to the relations of production and the superstructure associated with it. For these scholars a fundamental shift in the nature of relations between men and women can only be brought about by a change in the mode of production. For women's and feminist historians the most important factors have been power, patriarchy and discrimination. Most industrialising economies have experienced some form of patriarchal family system, in which women's primarily domestic roles have been prioritised over their productive roles, and this in turn has locked them into economic disadvantage within

the productive sphere, their power to change the situation undermined by formal regulation as well as social prejudice.

In her famous book, *Who Pays for the Kids?*,[1] the feminist economist Nancy Folbre argued that each of these modes of interpretation was essentially incomplete and partial. Folbre sought instead to offer an alternative explanation, whereby individuals made choices within 'interlocking structures of constraint'. These structures were founded on social characteristics such as gender, age, race and class. Arriving at a more integrated answer to the two conjoined questions of why the record on the economic activities of women is particularly incomplete, and why women's integration into the modern economy has been characterised by gender inequality, is clearly a challenging task, but we are unlikely to make progress on it until we at least recognise the limitations of depending on any single explanatory framework. While historical research has inevitably to prioritise one or a few variables in order to communicate clearly its findings, this should never be achieved at the expense of acknowledging that this is only one part of the explanation.

The objective of this paper is to look at some of the different approaches adopted by Western scholars towards the economic history of women, and to explore their use or potential value for the study of the economic history of women in industrialising Japan. It will be argued that in Japan, no less than in other industrialising economies, the economic role of women has been crucial throughout the modern period. Studying the economic history of modern Japanese women faces historians with the same deficiencies of data as have been experienced by historians working on other countries, and women's integration into the modern economy has, if anything, taken place on the basis of an even greater inequality than that found in most industrial economies. It will be suggested, however, that our attempts to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the economic role of women in Japan's past have been particularly impeded by the tendency on the part of scholars working in particular traditions to locate their findings exclusively in the context of their own tradition, disregarding insights that can be gained from work in other disciplinary or theoretical traditions. Most notable in this respect has been the lack of cross-fertilisation between women's and feminist historians on the one hand, and economic and business historians working within the economics tradition on the other. Until

[1] *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994)

women's and feminist history becomes a more accepted part of the academic 'mainstream', the institutional set-up may continue to entrench this damaging intellectual divide.

The focus of this paper is on women's role in production. This is not because the consumption role of women has been less important, far from it. The growing volume of scholarly work over the last two decades on women and consumption has exposed the crucial role that women have played in consumption throughout history. Rather, it is the production sector that perhaps highlights best the problems inherent in the availability and interpretation of data, and in which the inequalities highlighted by historians have been most prominent. The core of the paper consists of three elements. The first is a discussion of some of the approaches adopted in the study of the economic history of women in Western industrialising economies, highlighting some of the main themes that have characterised this research. This discussion will focus in particular on the efforts that have been made to bring together the strengths of the economics and feminist approaches. There follows an analysis of the extent to which the broad trends in approaches to the economic historiography of women in modern Japan reflect the same issues raised in the context of the Western historiography. The third element is a consideration of the relevance to Japanese industrialisation of two specific themes identified in the Western literature. One is the relationship between technology, skill and the social construction of work. The other is the significance of the family and the family economy.

Women and Productive Activity

At the start of the period of the period with which this conference is concerned, 1868-1945, Japan was still 'pre-industrial'. Economic activity was dominated by agriculture, and the household remained the dominant unit of production in farming, handicraft manufacturing and services. While in both Japan and the West there were developments within pre-industrial manufacturing that have been categorised as 'proto-industrialisation', most men's and women's work took the form of work within the family economy, in most cases unpaid. Only with the development of industrialisation, with the formal development of wage labour and the growth of employment outside the family context, did the structure of economic activity fundamentally move away from this pattern. This shift occurred at different rates and in different ways depending on the country and the time period, but how accurately

can we know about the position of women in this transition? On one hand, the spread of industrialisation in an economy has in most cases been associated with the availability of better and more detailed information on productive activity within it. The more industrialised a country, the better the data sources tend to be. On the other hand, however, these data often remain insufficient for the provision of an accurate picture.

Economic historians of the modern period have tended to rely heavily on statistical data. However, well into the nineteenth century we have inadequate statistical information for many aspects of production and work, even for Britain, the most 'advanced' industrial economy. Early factory owners were under no compulsion to collect information other than that they required for their own purposes, family businesses even less so. Censuses of productive activity only started in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the first English population census for which potentially informative returns are available only took place in 1841. Such paucity of data may be a challenge that all historians have to face, particularly those studying the pre-industrial period, but it is important to note that even when data collection became more systematic, the value for the historian of gender of what was produced has remained somewhat questionable. While all historical evidence, as we know, has to be used with great care, hard statistics often convey an authority that may be largely spurious. Moreover, the collection of data was undertaken for particular purposes by agents with particular agendas. Those agendas included attitudes to gender, and the social roles seen as appropriate for men and women. The net result, as some historians have argued, is that the real contribution of women to productive activity has invariably been concealed or underestimated.

Bridget Hill's work on Britain[2] shows clearly the major problems entailed in interpreting the information in the English censuses of the 19th century. Censuses were constructed by men, on the basis of certain assumptions about the roles of men and women in society. Because many respondents were illiterate, enumerators often filled in forms for households, a process that allowed for the process to be moderated by the enumerator's prejudices. The rapid changes taking place in the economy meant a constant process of shifting in occupational and other categories and inconsistencies between the methods of compilation between areas. The social construction of

[2] Bridget Hill, 'Women, Work and the Census: a Problem for Historians of Women', *History Workshop* 35, Spring 1993.

information combined with the actual changes taking place in the economy to limit the extent of information on women's productive activity contained in these official surveys. The many women working unpaid in family businesses or on farms were increasingly excluded. Permitted occupational categories excluded domestic activities and part time employment, and by the end of the 19th century census-takers invariably assumed that women were not in remunerative employment, while men were. In a society and economy where idle women were a mark of higher social status, the disincentive to declare a working wife or daughter was considerable. As definitions of skill became increasingly rooted in societal and gender distinctions, the status of an occupation invariably declined if the majority of those who pursued it turned out to be women or children.

Analysis of the United States since the mid-19th century indicates similar problems.[3] While the growth of wage labour by women was relatively well recorded, the persistence of family-run businesses, including in agriculture, led to severe undercounting of women's productive activity. Biases by enumerators, a growing tendency of the household head (who filled in the questionnaire) to ignore women's work, pressure for women to be returned as 'housewives' and the recording of only one main occupation, all contributed to conceal much of the productive labour of women. While more US women moved into more 'visible' jobs during the 20th century, the persistence of family run businesses meant that at least up until the Second World War married women in particular may have played a far more important role in the economy than suggested by official data. Geib-Gundersson's estimates suggest that in 1900 over 32% of all married women were contributing to the production process, as against an official figure of just over 5%. These analyses also indicate that we need to think more carefully about how far married women's labour force participation necessarily declines considerably during industrialisation before recovering as an economy reaches industrial maturity, an assumption often taken for granted.

The problems in the data are admittedly serious, but not insurmountable. Feminist historians in Europe and the United States have managed to redress to a considerable extent the former imbalance between what was known about the productive activity of men in history, and that of women. The spread of women's and

[3] Lisa Geib-Gunderson, *Uncovering the Hidden Work of Women in Family Businesses* (New York: Garland, 1998).

feminist history was a necessary step towards a more thorough understanding of the past. I would argue, however, that the very success of feminist history in Western Europe and the US may also have been a source of its weakness. The need to call attention to the neglected issues of power and patriarchy limited the ability and the willingness to engage with other disciplines that were already well entrenched, and which were slow to accommodate a new gender perspective. Where such a perspective was accommodated, it was invariably explained within existing frameworks. The result was a separation of approaches that was slow to disappear. The gulf between women's historians and economists was particularly marked, although an intermediate approach was adopted by some Marxist-influenced historians.

In the 1950s and 1960s many scholars of economic development focussed on devising macroeconomic models that would offer an overall explanation of why the structure of productive activity changed over time. Such developmental models could be instructive in relation to the productive work of women. Models of the labour market, such as that of Arthur Lewis,[4] might help explain why, under certain circumstances, it was women rather than men who took up certain occupations in an industrialising economy. These models were not, however, devised specifically to address gender issues. Some economists who did seek to explain gender issues, such as Gary S. Becker, proved far more controversial. Famous for his application of rational choice models of decision-making to the family,[5] Becker's work sought to explain gender issues by analysing them in conventional economic terms, and formalising a theory of discrimination. Becker's reliance on the vocabulary and concepts of economics is epitomised in the article abstract cited below:

> 'Increasing returns from specialized human capital is a powerful force creating a division of labor in the allocation of time and investments in human capital between married men and married women. Moreover, since child care and housework are more effort intensive than leisure and other household activities, married women spend less effort on each hour of market work than married men working the same number of hours. Hence, married women have lower hourly earnings than married men with the same market human capital, and they economize on the effort expended on market work by seeking less demanding jobs.'[6]

[4] W.A.Lewis, 'Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour', *Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies* May, 1954.
[5] Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
[6] 'Human Capital, Effort, and the Sexual Division of Labor', *Journal of Labor Economics* 3, 1, pt.2, 1985.

For a surprising length of time, most economic historians remained relatively untouched by the growth of interest in social and labour history that accompanied the rise of women's history. Indeed, this upsurge of interest coincided with what has been termed 'the new economic history', which made extensive use of econometric analysis and quantitative data. As noted already, such techniques could be applied only with considerable difficulty to the analysis of women's productive work, so much of the new work that was done was largely qualitative. One group of economic historians that was attracted to the field comprised those working within the Marxist tradition. Their view, that gender interests and class interests were mutually reinforcing, highlighted the constraints on individual choice and the importance of group dynamics, offering a different, and often conflicting perspective from that of the neo-classical and classical schools dominant in the US.[7]

Some of the first women's historians drew on this Marxist tradition. In the words of Joan Scott, E.P.Thompson's famous book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 'was not written within the new context created by feminist politics, [but] must nonetheless be read as a precondition for the socialist-feminist discourse'.[8] Socialist feminists sought to combine the analysis of capitalism and patriarchy.[9] However, much of the growth of women's and feminist history was spearheaded by intellectual and social historians, concerned in particular to look at the development of feminist thought or the development of societies that had produced the gender divisions and inequalities that they were so keen to confront. The origins of feminism in political activism meant that economists and potential economists were only a small proportion of those concerned with gender issues. Moreover, as economics became more theoretical, quantitative and mathematical, gender history began to appear by contrast 'softer' and more qualitative. Its focus on power and patriarchy were real enough, but it has constantly been exposed to the danger of 'peripheralisation' rather than becoming integrated into the 'hard' mainstream disciplines. The location of many leading economic historians in economics departments, particularly in the United States, may also in some cases have further limited the chance of economic history wholeheartedly embracing gender.

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[7] See e.g. E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968).
[8] 'Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*', ch.4 of *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p.71.
[9] See e.g. Sonya O.Rose, '"Gender at Work": Sex, Class and Industrial Capitalism', *History Workshop* 21, Spring 1986.

Notwithstanding this potentially unpromising institutional environment, our knowledge of the economic history of Western women has advanced significantly over the last two decades, and this is in large part due to the efforts made by a number of scholars to bridge the potentially damaging divide between economics and gender studies. The path breaking work of Nancy Folbre has already been mentioned, but Folbre is far from alone in her recognition of the need to bring together hitherto diverse approaches. The work of scholars such as Pat Hudson, Katrina Honeyman and Maxine Berg on English industrialisation has successfully demonstrated the role and significance of women in the broader picture of economic development.[10] Claudia Goldin's seminal study on the economic history of women in the United States offers a clear demonstration of how rigorous analysis based on economic theories of employment, discrimination and wages can be fused with an understanding of the institutions of gender to carve out a new intellectual path within the historical study of women.[11] Some of the work that has been done has focussed exclusively on the productive activity of women, but other scholars have taken the view that a greater understanding of gender disparities requires analysis not just of women, but of the interaction between men and women in economy and society. In effect this means gendered economic history, rather than the economic history of women.

Many of these studies have looked in some detail at the changes that have taken place in the gender division of labour during the industrialisation process, particularly in the growing manufacturing sector. This entails looking at shifts over time in occupational structure, work status, age profiles and marital status of both male and female workers. Although limited by the data inadequacies mentioned earlier, it has proved possible to produce credible statistical estimates, particularly for the twentieth century. Within this broad framework a number of recurrent themes have emerged relating to the interaction between gender and industrialisation, but I want to note just two of them here. One is concerned with the actual content of productive work, and its social construction. Industrialisation is closely associated with mechanisation and the development of new technologies, whether in the factory, the farm or the office. In most countries the process of industrialisation has tended

[10] See e.g. M.Berg, 'What Difference did Women's Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?', *History Workshop* 35, Spring 1993; K.Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); P.Hudson & W.R.Lee (eds.), *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).
[11] *Understanding the Gender Gap: an Economic History of American Women* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

not only to strengthen the division between home and workplace, but also constantly to redefine the status of different occupations. This means that as industrialisation progresses, the available tasks change, and the ways in which those tasks are perceived by society also change. In many places new technologies have been associated with a deskilling or feminisation of work, although they have also generated new occupations offering new employment opportunities for both men and women. Employment opportunities for women, for example, increased enormously with the advent of new office machinery in the first half of the twentieth century, but at the same time many economies instituted marriage bars restricting women's career prospects, thereby ensuring that managerial posts were only open to men, and confirming both gender and status divisions within the workforce.[12] A second main area of emphasis has been on the role of the family. Why this should be so is perhaps self-evident. Pre-industrial economies were founded on family economies, and the family was the major locus of productive activity. This significance declined as industrialisation progressed, but has persisted through to the present in all industrial economies. Families were also crucial for women working outside the family, as they were invariably compelled to combine work and domestic responsibilities, and to see their earnings as a family rather than an individual matter. The pre-existing nature of the division of labour in the family determined the ease or difficulty of labour supply to other economic activities. For contemporaries, too, it was the nature of the family that lay at the core of debates on the relationship between women's paid work, their domestic responsibilities and their 'ideal' social role. Even those who criticise Becker's mechanistic approach to analysing the operation of the family have acknowledged that the focus on the family is an entirely legitimate one.

The literature on the economic history of women in Western industrialised economies has thus become increasingly rich. Many of the contributions have helped not just to bring together the strengths of economic analysis and women's history, but have in turn also offered new insights to each of those areas of study. The remainder of this paper will consider whether the economic history of Japanese women has been impeded by similar disciplinary divides, and how far trends in Western scholarship can be instructive in the context of Japan during the industrialisation period.

[12] See, for example, Sally Alexander, 'Men's Fears and Women's Work: Responses to Unemployment in London between the Wars', *Gender and History* 12, 2, July 2000; Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, pp.160-79. For examples of work on gender and technology, see Gerjan de Groot & Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Women Workers and Technological Change* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995).

Approaches to the Economic History of Women in Industrialising Japan: Economists vs. Feminists?

As in the West, feminist and women's history in Japan has undergone enormous development over the past two decades. The extensive remit of this new work in women's history will be familiar to this audience, and can clearly be gauged by looking at the contents list of some of the major edited volumes in the field.[13] Studies have covered all aspects of family and work life, activism and ideology, the body and sexuality. The net result is a greatly improved knowledge of the historical role of Japanese women, and a more rounded picture of the historical experience as a whole. Much of this work relates to the economic history of Japanese women. The focus on the structures of power and on social institutions such as the family and marriage, raise issues of fundamental importance to our understanding of productive activity. A number of studies have looked at the experience of different groups of working women, and at the consumption role of women.[14] Our understanding of the significance of women's activities as consumers has been extended by the growth of work on consumption. Much of this work has been influenced by feminist theory, in particular theories of patriarchy.[15] Oral histories have been used to illuminate the personal stories of women during the period of industrialisation, particularly of the interwar years.

Despite these significant advances, however, I would argue that in Japan writing the economic history of Japanese women has been rendered very difficult both by the kind of insufficiency of information noted in other countries, and by a divide between economic and business historians on the one hand and women's and feminist historians on the other that is, if anything, even more entrenched than that that has existed in the West. Let me comment first on the information problem. As in Western Europe or the United States, available Japanese statistical sources are often

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[13] Among the most recent publications is Haruko Wakita, Anne Bouchy & Chizuko Ueno (eds.), *Gender and Japanese History* (2 vols., Osaka: Osaka University Press, 1999). This is the English language version of an earlier Japanese language publication (H.Wakita & S.B.Hanley (eds.), *Jendaa no Nihon Shi* (2 vols., Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1995).

[14] Among the most recent to appear in English is Barbara Satō's book on the 'new women' (*The New Japanese Women: Modernity, Media and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003). Earlier English language studies include E.P Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[15] For example the work of Ueno Chizuko (eg. *Kafuchōsei to Shihonsei* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990)).

inadequate to allow an accurate measurement of women's productive activity, particularly during the early industrialisation period. However, the strengths and weaknesses of the available statistical data are not necessarily exactly the same. Local pilot surveys were undertaken in the Meiji period, but Japan's first complete census was not carried out until 1920, by which time the industrialisation process was already relatively well advanced.[16] Two further censuses were carried out in 1930 and 1940, although the findings of the latter were not published until the 1950s. Indeed, by the interwar years both census-taking and other kinds of survey were in a position to benefit from scientific methods of sampling and other social scientific survey techniques that had been developed. In some respects, therefore, our statistical information on the Japanese economy in this period, including on women's occupations and productive activity, is, if anything, better than that which exists for many Western economies at a similar stage of industrialisation.

In other respects, though, the data problem is more acute than in some Western countries. Firstly, quantitative evidence for the years before the First World War is much more limited. While there are instances of relatively detailed surveys or data collection, for example that contained in the famous Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce survey of 1903, *Shokkō Jijō*,[17] or censuses of production such as the one issued by the same ministry in 1907,[18] these data sources cover only certain sectors of the economy. Moreover, most of the available data is cross-sectional, i.e. giving a snapshot at a particular point in time. While some data collection is what we call time series data, that is, offering information from successive years or periods of time, this was rarely done on a systematic basis. The government's factory statistics, for example, came out sporadically, and it was not always clear whether the different surveys were conducted on exactly the same basis.[19]

A second, related problem relates to the partial nature of the available data, and its ability to contribute to a more rounded picture of the economy as a whole. As indicated earlier, there has been a tendency for statistical evidence on productive activity to improve as an economy becomes more industrialised. This rests not merely on the acquisition of necessary techniques and infrastructure for good

[16] For the introduction of the census, see Satō, Masahiro, *Kokusei Chōsa to Nihon Kindai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002).
[17] Nōshōmushō Shōkōkyoku, *Shokkō Jijō* (1903, repr. in 3 vols., Tokyo: Shinkigensha, 1976).
[18] Nōshōmushō Shōkokyoku Kōmuka, *Kōjō Tsūran* (1909, repr. Tokyo: Kashiwa Shobō, 1986).
[19] Nōshōmushō, *Kōjō Tōkei Hyō* (Tokyo: various years from 1909).

information gathering, or on its social acceptability or facility, but on the growth of more formal structures and means of production and market operation, which can be more easily measured. Japan in the years prior to the First World War was an economy in the early stages of industrialisation. Factories were few and far between. The majority of the population worked in the large agricultural sector, usually on family plots, in small individual or family-owned manufacturing operations, or in the service sector, which likewise continued to operate on largely traditional lines. Much of the data that we do have for this period relates only to the 'modern' sector, such as factories, financial institutions or government operations, which accounted for a minute proportion of all productive activity. Even in the interwar period a great deal of productive activity continued to be undertaken outside the formal or large scale sector, and significantly these were where female workers were increasingly concentrated. Notwithstanding the efforts of the authorities, it was still difficult to gain an accurate picture of men's and women's participation in production across the whole economy.

Finally, the question of how to interpret the available data to assess the economic role of women is as significant an issue in Japan as elsewhere. As industrialisation proceeded, women were increasingly concentrated in the agricultural sector and in small scale manufacturing and commercial operations, which were precisely those areas of productive activity that were most difficult to measure. To that extent even the interwar data may well not tell the whole picture of women's economic role. In Japan, too, censuses were drawn up and filled in by (male) individuals possessing certain perceptions of gender, and the legal position of women tended to exclude them from participation in both of these functions. Social pressures to emphasize the primarily domestic role of women, particularly of married women, may have been articulated differently from in, say, England or France, but they were equally important. There is one particular respect, though, in which the fact that throughout this period Japan still essentially remained a developing economy may have been particularly significant. This relates to the ability of official data gathering to reflect part time work or subsidiary employment (by-employment). Particularly in the countryside, many farm family members, as well as members of other households, tended to engage in a range of occupations, often on a seasonal or part time basis. While the occupation of a head of household might be identified as 'farming', the likelihood was that other members of the family, if not the household head himself,

would combine farming activity with other income earning activities. This so-called *kengyō* or *fukugyō* was widespread, but the ability of censuses and other formal surveys to convey this situation was limited.[20] Even the detailed surveys of farm families and farm household budgets of the interwar years often failed to reflect the details of this reality. Since it was women who were, if anything, more involved in this kind of seasonal or part time employment, including within the home, this again is likely to mean that their contribution to productive activity is here, too, underestimated in the statistics.

Women's historians have proved, however, that a shortage of quantitative evidence is no barrier to furthering our knowledge of women's historical role in Japan. Economic historians should be capable of making the best use of the statistical data that they do have at their disposal, using their imagination and historical expertise to try and fill the gaps with non-quantitative evidence and logical deduction. What then becomes important is the questions that they decide to ask of that historical evidence, and the approaches that they adopt to try and answer those questions. In this respect, I will suggest, there has so far been less cross-fertilisation between the approaches of the economists and of the women's and feminist historians than in the West, and the Japanese institutional context may have made the bridging of this divide relatively more difficult.

Economic history has for a long while been a core element in Japanese historical studies, and economic historians of both the pre-industrial and modern periods have never argued against the significant role of women in productive activity. Indeed, many have highlighted that role, and undertaken detailed research on women's economic activity both within the family economy and in the market economy. Women's productive activity has been used to inform both theory and historical interpretation. What has invariably been more lacking in this work by economists, however, is the consideration of Folbre's 'structures of constraint', in particular the operation of power and patriarchy identified by feminist historians.

Economics approaches to the history of Japanese women during the period of industrialisation can be broadly divided into two groups. The first group consists of those scholars who have worked within the Marxist-Leninist tradition. With few exceptions these scholars have come from Japan itself. The second group consists of

[20] This problem is discussed in M.Satō, 'Shoki Kokusei Chōsa no Shomondai', *Keizai Kenkyū* 48, 1, Jan.1997.

economists whose approach has been defined by the Western classical and neo-classical traditions. Examples of this framework can be found in both the English language and Japanese language scholarship. As in the West, there are clearly identifiable links between the concerns of the Marxist economists and the later feminist scholarship on women's economic activity, but the classical and neo-classical approaches have much less influence on writing on Japanese women's history.

That the position of Japanese women in the country's industrialising economy was the cause of official and public concern as early as the 1880s is well known, and it was this concern that generated some of the earliest surveys of the labour force around the turn of the century. Debates took place over the necessity and desirability of women's employment, the extent to which it was compatible with motherhood and domestic responsibilities, and its significance for the development of the nation. These concerns and analysis in turn helped not just to stimulate official action, but also to provide some of the raw material for the labour and left wing movements. Particularly in the 1920s and early 1930s economists and intellectuals strongly influenced by the ideas of Marxism-Leninism developed structural interpretations of Japan's economic development in which women's economic activity, particularly in the growing factory sector, played a crucial role. These interpretations dominated academic work on the economic history of Japan until the 1970s, and have left a lasting impact through to the present.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse in any detail the interpretations of women's productive and reproductive activity contained in the writings from the so-called Japanese capitalism debate and by later historians working in the same tradition, but one major point needs to be made here. That is, the attention paid to female workers was for the most part concentrated on the position of industrial workers. In particular, it was argued that the many poorly paid industrial workers, male and female, who came from the agricultural sector, were critical to the structural interdependence of agriculture and industry that was seen as the key to understanding the operation of the economy. Since there were more women than men employed in factories up until the 1930s, the productive activity of women was crucial to these interpretations. For the participants in the Japanese capitalism debate the experience of female industrial workers epitomised the link between poor working conditions, low wages and agricultural poverty.

This does not mean that these scholars had any awareness of gender as a core issue. Women were viewed as 'victims' of the development of Japanese capitalism, their position weakened by legal and social institutions, but gender as such merited little analysis. These scholars, like their Western counterparts, believed that issues of gender disparity were integral to the nature of class relations and of the relations of production, so addressing gender relations was never a priority. Mackie's research has shown that women involved in the left wing movement in Japan at this time were rarely treated as equals,[21] while the experience of communist countries such as the Soviet Union suggests that socialist principles could be a mixed blessing for the female half of the population.[22] Later Marxist-influenced scholars appeared to accept concepts such as the 'supplementary' character of women's wages almost without question.[23] Nevertheless, this approach produced a long term legacy in the form of an emphasis on structural constraints and distributional issues in the study of economic history. While the conclusions were increasingly questioned, this scholarship embodied a recognition that an understanding of economic factors had to be combined with consideration of issues of power and structure for any effective analysis of the nature of economic development, and of the position of different groups of the population within it. This emphasis on power and structure is reflected in the work of many feminist and women's historians, socialist and non-socialist alike.[24]

However, the Marxist-Leninist tradition, like other traditions in economics, was highly selective when it came to the economic considerations on which it focussed. Many factors known to be of importance in the operation of economies received little attention from these scholars. By contrast, scholars working in the classical and neo-classical traditions of economics rejected the Marxists' focus on structural and distributional issues, instead focussing on the nature of economic growth in Japan and the factors behind market operation, such as price, supply and demand. Productivity levels and price were used to inform the same movement of agricultural workers into industry that had been so prominent in the debates over Japanese capitalism.[25] Profit maximisation and cost structures were used to explain

[21] Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[22] See, for example, Michael P.Sacks, *Work and Equality in Soviet Society* (New York: Praeger, 1982).
[23] E.g. Kazuo Ōkōchi, 'Chinrōdō ni okeru Hōkenteki naru Mono', *Keizaigaku Ronshū (Tōkyō Daigaku Keizai)* 19, 4, April 1950, p.176.
[24] Tsurumi's book on textile workers cited above is a good example of this.
[25] Much of this work drew on the ideas of Lewis mentioned above, and of his successors. Examples of such interpretations are Ryōshin Minami, *The Turning Point in Economic Development: Japan's*

technological choices in conjunction with the operation of male and female labour markets.[26] Much of this work has implicitly raised issues of gender, but gender *per se* has not been assigned any explanatory power. The wage discrimination attributed by the Marxists to the relations of production in the countryside and by the feminists to power and patriarchy, has been to the neo-classical trained economists explicable in terms of women's embodying a lower level of human capital or their labour having a lower opportunity cost. As historians, we know instinctively that there exists a complex relationship between the practical operation of an economy, formal and informal institutions, rhetoric and the structures of power. The rise of new approaches in economics, particularly what has been called the new institutional economics, has explicitly acknowledged that existing economic models and concepts are inadequate for explaining the totality of economic development. Even here, though, application of the concept of gender is still in its infancy. Innovative approaches to the study of productive activity by Japanese women include the application of game theory and ideas of transactions costs, but gender rarely appears as such.[27]

As is well known, the decline of the Marxist tradition in Japanese scholarship has left the neo-classical tradition dominant in the world of academic economics and economic policymaking. As we have also seen, this dominant tradition has been less inclined to incorporate into its methodology and conceptualisation the concerns of women's and feminist historians. This is not to suggest that there have been no attempts at bridging the damaging divide between those who consider purely economic concerns, and those who are concerned with structures and power. Historians such as Nakamura Masanori and Saitō Osamu have, from differing economic traditions, sought to achieve more integrated analyses.[28] The economists Takenaka Emiko and Yōko Kawashima have both made use of the abundant statistical sources on post-Second World War Japan to produce economic analyses that are also

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Experience (Tokyo: Kinokuniya, 1973); Shunsaku Nishikawa, *Chiikikan Rōdō Idō to Rōdō Shijō* (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 1966). See also Kōji Taira's seminal work, *Economic Development and the Labour Market in Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

[26] Gary Saxonhouse's articles have used this approach. See e.g. 'The Supply of Quality Workers and the Demand for Quality in Jobs in Japan's Early Industrialisation', *Explorations in Economic History* 15, 1, Jan.1978.

[27] See e.g. Masaki Nakabayashi, *Kindai Shihonshugi no Soshiki: Seishigyō no Hatten ni okeru Torihiki no Tōchi to Seisan no Kōzō* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 2003).

[28] E.g. Masanori Nakamura, *Rōdōsha to Nōmin* (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 1976); Osamu Saitō, 'Nōgyō Hatten to Josei Rōdō – Nihon no Rekishiteki Keiken', *Keizai Kenkyū* 42, 1, Jan.1991.

informed by a concern with gender.[29] It is more that as it has become increasingly unfashionable to talk about class and exploitation, so the ability of economists to tackle the question of how the structures of power interact with aspects such as profit maximisation and rational expectation has been reduced. At the same time, much of the feminist literature, and much of the women's history, have shown themselves disinclined to embrace a recognition of the importance of economic imperatives, and trends within economics may have made it more difficult for them to do so.

This dilemma, as indicated above, is far from being unique to Japan. I discussed how the disciplinary divide has posed problems for economic historians of women in the countries of Western Europe and the United States. In Japan, though, the efforts to bridge the gap have so far been more limited. This may in part be because Japan's distinct historical tradition detached it from the Western upsurge of labour and socialist history that was so influential in the production of feminist and women's history, and women's history in Japan is of relatively more recent origin. It may also be, however, that attempts at cross-fertilisation have also been impeded by entrenched academic and disciplinary hierarchies. If this is so, then it may take a while for the different approaches to listen to each other, and to come closer together.

Can We Learn from Comparative Historiography?

Finally, I want to return to two of the themes that have figured prominently in the literature on women's role in production in other industrialised economies: the content and social construction of productive work, and the role of the family. We need to consider whether these themes are equally relevant to the economic history of women in Japan, and whether the scholarship on Japan has been moving in parallel with that in the West.

The content of productive work in Japan in this period was fundamentally affected by the technological changes associated with the industrialisation process. To that extent, the changing content of work has been as important in Japan as elsewhere, and might be expected to have impacted on men and women alike. Some historians of technology have argued that common technologies bring convergence between economies, because a certain technology can only be used in a limited number of ways, and will generate similar modes of organisation and use across

[29] Yōko Kawashima, *Wage Differentials between Women and Men in Japan* (unpublished PhD thesis, Stanford University, 1983); Emiko Takenaka, *Sengo Joshi Rōdō Shi* (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 1989).

countries. However, it is apparent that technologies get modified as they are transferred from one country to another, and that the ways in which they are used and developed has to accord to the specific environment within which they are located. Through the Meiji, Taishō and early Shōwa periods Japan introduced many new technologies from the West, but did not necessarily use them in exactly the same way. As in the West, technology changes in industrialising Japan impacted to a major degree on the gender division of labour, and fundamentally altered gender relations. Technological advances created many new openings for women. Telephone operators, secretaries, typists were new occupations that had never before existed, while in parts of the weaving industry women's position was strengthened as new technologies meant that they required less strength and could operate without assistants.[30] New technologies could also lead to a process of 'deskilling'. In Japan, as elsewhere, production line technology increasingly substituted for the work of skilled workers. Both men and women might lose out, but not necessarily to the same extent. In a society where sewing was traditionally regarded primarily as a female skill, we need to ask what sort of impact the introduction of the sewing machine might be expected to have. Might it undermine the position of traditional skilled tailors or seamstresses, by simplifying the tasks that they had traditionally undertaken and making the technology widely available, or was the new technology, at least at first, so expensive that it was out of reach of most potential users, thereby confirming the position of those who could use traditional manual skills? Essays such as those contained in the volume produced by Nakamura as part of a United Nations University project have begun to explore these kinds of issues for Japan.[31]

These questions are equally applicable to all industrialising economies, but it is the social construction of the content of work that is more likely to differ between countries. In this respect the gendered construction of work in Japan is particularly interesting. As we know, the process of industrialisation in Japan over time tended to confirm the existence of what economists refer to as a highly gender-segmented labour market. That is, work tends to be fairly sharply divided between so-called 'men's jobs' and 'women's jobs'; men compete with other men for work, and women

[30] T.Hareven, 'Women's Work and Family Strategies in the Household Industry of Japanese Weavers: a Comparative Perspective', in E.Aerts et.al.(eds.), *Women in the Labour Force* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990).
[31] Masanori Nakamura (ed.), *Technology Change and Female Labour in Japan* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1994). The Japanese original appeared as Nakamura (ed.), *Gijutsu Kakushin to Joshi Rōdō* (Tokyo: Kokusai Rengō Daigaku, 1985).

with other women. While such gender segmentation has existed across countries, its extent in twentieth century Japan has been particularly notable. In the 1930s, for example, the range of occupations and tasks open to women was very narrow compared to the number of those open to men, and while the disruption of the Pacific War period did modify this situation temporarily, it failed to generate longer term change.[32] Key concerns for the economic history of Japanese women in the modern period, therefore, are the process whereby this division between the productive activities of men and women became accentuated, and the reasons why this segmentation seems to have been in many ways more extreme and more persistent than in other economies. I would argue that these questions cannot be addressed properly without taking into account both the practical issues of technology and economics and the structures of constraint associated with power and patriarchy.

Western historians' focus on the family and the family economy during the industrialisation process has perhaps an even greater resonance for the Japanese case, and the significance of the family in modern Japanese history is evident from the works of sociologists such as Ochiai Emiko,[33] or from the extensive work on farm families and by-employment. There have perhaps been a number of reasons for this focus. The family was a key element in social, intellectual, political and cultural terms. There was great emphasis on the family (*ie*) as both a legal and social institution in official rhetoric and public discourse throughout the modern period. As far as the economy was concerned, we know that many 'modern' business organisations sought to replicate the family environment to facilitate the shift to new forms of production, while the late onset of industrialisation in Japan meant the persistence of family enterprises through the twentieth century. The undermining of the family as the site of productive activity took place later than in the United States or Western Europe, and that in turn impacted upon the ability of women to contribute to such activity, and the forms in which they did so. While Japan experienced during these years a general idealisation of the role of the family and womanhood, these trends in the social and intellectual construction of gender were often in sharp conflict with the ongoing need

[32] See my papers: 'An Absence of Change: Women in the Japanese Labour Force, 1937-45', in T.G.Fraser & Peter Lowe (eds.), *Conflict and Amity in East Asia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); 'Gendering the Labour Market: Evidence from the Interwar Textile Industry', in Barbara Molony & Kathleen S.Uno (eds.), *Gendering Modern Japanese History* (Cambridge MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

[33] Emiko Ochiai, *The Japanese Family System in Transition* (Tokyo: LTCB International Library Foundation, 1996).

to rely on the family as a productive unit that was a necessary consequence of Japan's relatively late industrialisation and low income level. The state of the economy did not permit a fuller implementation of the concept of 'separate spheres' for men and women, at least until the second half of the twentieth century.

Some aspects of industrialisation may even in the short term have strengthened the position of the Japanese family as a production unit. Hareven has noted how technological change in weaving actually facilitated the involvement of family members in production, perpetuating family operation.[34] As it became in practical terms more difficult for married women (but not necessarily single women) to take work outside the home, many families, particularly in urban areas, participated in domestic outwork, taking on lowly paid piece work which allowed all family members, including children, to make a meagre contribution to the family income.[35] The fact that women's earnings were invariably viewed by contemporaries in family rather than individual terms confirmed the importance of the family unit as the defining institution for women's productive activity and the social construction of that activity. For the economic history of women during Japan's industrialisation period, therefore, it is the family that matters, even more than in Western Europe or the United States. This is one area, perhaps, where scholars of other countries can learn from Japan.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to make two main points. One is that the fragmentation of disciplinary approaches to the writing of the economic history of women has limited our ability to understand the historical process, and that the division between those who adopt the approach of economics and those writing in the feminist and women's history tradition has been particularly damaging. In the Japanese case, it has been suggested, this division has been no less problematic. If anything, more work needs to be done to integrate the concerns of the different disciplinary approaches, but existing hierarchies and institutions may make this difficult. The second point has been to show that study of the economic history of Japanese women during the

[34] Tamara K.Hareven, *The Silk Weavers of Kyoto: Family and Work in a Changing Traditional Industry* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2002).
[35] See, for example, Kathleen S.Uno, 'One Day at a Time: Work and Domestic Activities of Urban Lower-Class Women in Early Twentieth-Century Japan', in Janet Hunter (ed.), *Japanese Women Working* (London: Routledge, 1993).

industrialisation years of 1868-1945 can be strengthened by use of a comparative approach. Many of the themes that recur in the Western economic historiography of women are relevant to the Japanese experience. In some cases, historians of women in Western economies may also find the work that has been done on Japan instructive.

Undertaking this kind of comparative exercise is difficult, but not impossible. I discussed above the extent to which an insufficiency of quantitative data has made it difficult to measure the productive activities of women in Japan and in other industrialising countries, and the lack of comparability of such data as do exist makes rigorous cross-country comparisons even more difficult. Qualitative evidence demonstrates, however, that many issues and questions are common across economies. The more we look at the economic history of women, the more we find strong similarities. All countries are in a sense unique, but Japan is no more unique than any other.