

[Skirts, Compulsory Make-up, and Maternity Leave: The construction of normative femininity through job-hunting of university students in ageing Japan](#)

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Wednesday, October 20th at 7:00 pm HST

Registration link: https://hawaii.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_BSFvO4t2TbCcltTrIpcqg

Speaker: Anna Lughezzani, PhD Candidate in Anthropology at University of Padova, Ca' Foscari University of Venice and University of Verona (Italy)

In the last few decades, Japan witnessed an unprecedented decline in birth rate and a rapidly ageing population that caused economic stagnation. In reaction to this demographic scenario and the consequent labor shortage, former President Shinzo Abe invested his hopes in *Womenomics*, a set of strategies for promoting the inclusion of women in the workforce, adopting the concept put forth by Goldman Sachs analyst Kathy Matsui, according to whom women are the "most underutilised resource" in Japan. Out of necessity, predominantly male Japanese companies have opened their doors to women. Far from creating equal opportunities, the underlying logic of *Womenomics* and the fundamental motive for companies to hire more women, born from the need to control women's fertility to increase the birth rate, have the effect of strengthening the gender division of labor.

These tensions are apparent in the job-hunting process of female university students: through job fairs for female students only, seminars on work-life balance and open days aimed at girls, companies give out different information to female and male students, and create different job opportunities for them, always reminding young women of the importance of reconciling work and motherhood when making their first career choice.

Job-hunting is a salient moment in the life of a university student in Japan: if they succeed, they will become *shakaijin*, proper members of society. An anthropopoietic rite of passage in which the Japanese society moulds its youth into adults, job-hunting is a highly gendered process, where students are confronted with normative notions of femininity and masculinity in the workplace and in the family. Nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo among female university students informed an anthropological research on the job-hunting experience of young women taking the first and arguably the most important step into their professional lives.

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The female body is central to the gender differences observed in job-hunting. During their first learning experience about the professional world, young women will be taught how to "work in a feminine way" (*josei no hatarakikata*). They will learn that wearing a skirt and a specific kind of makeup is key to a successful job interview. They will learn that women must find their own "style of work" inside the predominantly male company, prioritizing a good work-family balance, and choosing between the predominantly male, competitive, and demanding managerial track, or predominantly female clerical track. This presentation argues that the concern of the Japanese enterprise-state for women's fertility is an obstacle to equal opportunities in the workplace, and that *Womenomics* has the effect of reinforcing the gender division of labor. Nevertheless, female university students manage to navigate the job-hunting process strategically, exerting agency.

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