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To cite this article: Sonja Bobrowska & Harald Conrad (2017): Discourses of Female Entrepreneurship in the Japanese Business Press – 25 Years and Little Progress, Japanese Studies, DOI: [10.1080/10371397.2017.1293474](https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2017.1293474)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2017.1293474>



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Published online: 19 Mar 2017.



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## Discourses of Female Entrepreneurship in the Japanese Business Press – 25 Years and Little Progress

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on social constructionist theory and critical discourse analysis in media studies, this article examines the portrayal of female entrepreneurs in the Japanese business press over a 25-year period from 1990 to 2014. We find that, despite the increased variety in the representations of female entrepreneurs, traditionally gendered discourses prevail in positioning women as inferior in the entrepreneurship discourse specifically, and in the social order at large. This positioning of female entrepreneurs is achieved by stereotypical representations, drawing on traditionally gendered 'division of labour' and 'women and men are different' frames, and is masked by seemingly feminist and progressive 'work-life balance' and 'entrepreneurship as self-realization' representations. Our findings resonate with those of other research in Western contexts and confirm the male-gendered nature of entrepreneurship in Japan. The discourses uncovered appear to be hinged on evaluative assumptions about the social world and women's position within it and are reflective of and at the same time reify Japan's capitalist male-dominated ideology. Moreover, as these portrayals shape societal attitudes, which are assumed to affect entrepreneurship levels, this lack of progress in the media discourse is likely to negatively affect female entrepreneurship levels.

In 2012, Japan's Abe government allocated ¥20 billion for a fund exclusively directed at women entrepreneurs, expecting that preferential access to funding would result in increased female entrepreneurial activity.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in his 2013 general policy speech, Abe outlined two pillars of his economic growth strategy: 'regaining a country teeming with an entrepreneurial spirit' and 'creating a society in which women shine'.<sup>2</sup> This recent political interest in female entrepreneurship needs to be seen in the context of what Lechevalier has called the 'neo-liberal-inspired reform of the [Japanese] innovation system'.<sup>3</sup> While the classic Japanese innovation system has been dominated by large established firms, policy initiatives since the 1990s and 2000s have sought to promote start-ups and new firms specializing in particular technological areas. The rationale behind these reforms has been the view that low levels of entrepreneurship are associated with an inherent inability to create new industries and are bad for economic growth.<sup>4</sup> Following Lechevalier, one might question whether a 'Silicon Valley model' of innovation is really compatible with Japan's coordinated market economy,<sup>5</sup> but it is clear that Abe's reform initiatives are influenced by such neo-liberal economic thinking.

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<sup>1</sup>Cabinet Office, *Josei ga kagayaku Nihon e*.

<sup>2</sup>Cabinet Office, *Dai 185-kai kokkai ni okeru Abe naikaku sōridaijin shoshin hyōmei ensetsu*.

<sup>3</sup>Lechevalier, 'Is Convergence towards the Silicon Valley Model?', 124.

<sup>4</sup>Lechevalier et al., 'Diversity in Patterns', 1716.

<sup>5</sup>Lechevalier, 'Is Convergence towards the Silicon Valley Model?'.

The question at the heart of this article is whether this new focus on female entrepreneurship also reflects wider societal changes in attitudes towards female entrepreneurs, as they find their expression in and are consumed through the mainstream Japanese business press over the last 25 years. This question is important as it has been argued that a relationship exists between societal attitudes towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial activity. Although the causal effects of societal attitudes on entrepreneurship levels are difficult to establish, cross-country research has shown that positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship correlate with high levels of entrepreneurial activity.<sup>6</sup> It is argued that attitudes towards entrepreneurship affect the propensity of individuals to become entrepreneurs, their ability to rebound from business setbacks and the support they can expect to receive from their relatives and the general public. We might thus assume that the potential success of current increased public support measures for female entrepreneurship will to some extent depend on the degree to which attitudes towards female entrepreneurship have changed in Japan.

Female entrepreneurship and its discourses have been the subject of a number of studies in Western contexts.<sup>7</sup> However, in the Japanese case researchers have so far focussed primarily on female entrepreneurship as such, studying personal backgrounds, support systems, attitudes, the start-up process and so forth,<sup>8</sup> while the media discourse has been ignored. The absence of such a critical discourse analysis is particularly striking in light of research showing that media texts ‘replicate themes and notions in the specialist literature, which they merely popularize’.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on social constructionist theory and critical discourse analysis in media studies, the purpose of this article is to help to close the existing research gap through an in-depth analysis of the portrayal of female entrepreneurs in the Japanese business press from 1990 to 2014. Our guiding research questions are: How have female entrepreneurs been portrayed in the Japanese business press; to what extent have there been changes in their representation; and how can the strong continuity of the gendered discourses that we have detected be explained?

To pursue these issues, we start with a short overview of our theoretical points of departure, namely our assumptions about the social construction of reality and some notes on poststructuralist feminist theory. The next section discusses very briefly the concept of entrepreneurship and presents some basic statistical data. This is followed by a review of the existing literature on female entrepreneurship in the media. After an overview of our sources and methodology, we examine Japanese media portrayals of female entrepreneurs during the 1990s and since the turn of the century. Our final discussion considers some of the reasons which account for the continued stereotypical portrayals of female entrepreneurs uncovered in the previous sections.

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<sup>6</sup>European Commission, *Entrepreneurship in the EU and Beyond*.

<sup>7</sup>For example, Ahl, ‘The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur as the Other’; Langowitz and Morgan, ‘Women Entrepreneurs’; Achtenhagen and Welter, ‘Surfing on the Ironing Board’; Eikhof et al., ‘Women Doing Their Own Thing’.

<sup>8</sup>For example, Shimomura, ‘Josei kigyōka no jidai’; Muramoto, ‘Nettowāku jidai no josei’; Koga, ‘Tōkyōtokubu ni okeru josei’; Leung, ‘Motherhood and Entrepreneurship’.

<sup>9</sup>Bruni et al., ‘Entrepreneur-mentality’, 256.

## The Social Construction of Reality and the Gendered Nature of Entrepreneurship

Social constructionism postulates that human beings relate to and generate understandings of reality through a dialectical process of construction and re-production of a particular social order. People assign meaning to their perceptions and experiences until outcomes of these practices become institutionalized, whereupon they begin to perceive their subjectively constructed social reality as objective and prescriptive.<sup>10</sup> Thus, human knowledge is created in a social context which implies that different cultures and periods of time hold significance for the kind of social reality people create and sanction.<sup>11</sup>

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, ‘gender’ is one of these social constructs. The seeming stability of the social construction of gender depends on its everyday performance in accordance with social norms.<sup>12</sup> Feminist poststructuralists thus study the creation of essentialist masculinities and femininities and how these concepts reinforce gender/power relations. Feminist poststructuralist theory suggests that any social practice or human experience is gendered if the discourse conveying it essentializes gender differences and positions women and men in different, ‘constitutive’ ways.<sup>13</sup> Language functions as a medium for constructing reality through ‘generating representations of the world’ and the ‘constitution of identities and relations between social participants’.<sup>14</sup> As certain groups enjoy greater access to means of discourse production and maintenance through text production, language is used to legitimize and reproduce hegemonic beliefs within a social order. From a feminist perspective, since ‘the male dominance in the media reproduces the male dominance in society at large’,<sup>15</sup> language in general and media discourse in particular are seen as ideological battlefields for the women’s liberation movement.<sup>16</sup>

Just like ‘gender’, ‘entrepreneurship’ is an enacted phenomenon as it emerges from complex social interactions and contains a set of normative behaviours. Existing research has confirmed that entrepreneurship is a male-gendered concept in Western contexts.<sup>17</sup> Ahl’s deconstruction exposes how entrepreneurship researchers construct ‘entrepreneurs’ using strictly masculine characteristics, thereby excluding women from entrepreneurship discourse by definition.<sup>18</sup> The ‘male norm’ is then reinforced through metaphors associated with entrepreneurial behaviour,<sup>19</sup> institutionalized,<sup>20</sup> and reproduced in research<sup>21</sup> and in self-representations of male and female entrepreneurs themselves.<sup>22</sup> Thus, within the discourse on female entrepreneurship, ‘[t]here is a discourse on womanhood that is in conflict with the discourse on entrepreneurship.

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<sup>10</sup>Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>11</sup>Burr, *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*.

<sup>12</sup>Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>13</sup>Sunderland, *Gendered Discourses*, 21.

<sup>14</sup>Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 16.

<sup>15</sup>van Dijk, *News as Discourse*, 12.

<sup>16</sup>Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*.

<sup>17</sup>Ahl, ‘The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur’; Bruni et al., ‘Entrepreneur-mentality’.

<sup>18</sup>Ahl, ‘The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur’.

<sup>19</sup>Anderson et al., ‘Aggressors; Winners; Victims and Outsiders’.

<sup>20</sup>Pathak et al., ‘Influences of Gendered Institutions’.

<sup>21</sup>Ahl, ‘The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur’; Ahl, ‘Why Research on Women Entrepreneurs’.

<sup>22</sup>Gupta et al., ‘The Role of Gender Stereotypes’.

Being a woman and an entrepreneur at the same time means that one has to position oneself simultaneously in regard to two conflicting discourses.<sup>23</sup>

## Entrepreneurship in Japan

Before we delve into an analysis of female entrepreneurship discourses in Japan, we need to clarify the concept of entrepreneurship and introduce some basic statistical information. In Japan, the level of total entrepreneurial activity, a measure which includes people in the process of starting a business and those running businesses that are less than three and a half years old, is low by international standards. According to the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* just 4% of the Japanese male adult population and only 2% of the female adult population were engaged in such activities in 2010. Among the 59 countries covered by the monitoring organization only Pakistan had a lower female rate, at 1% of the adult population.<sup>24</sup> While reliable numbers for entrepreneurial activity are difficult to compile, it is important to note that the number of self-employed people, a more commonly available statistical measure, is not appropriate. Even though there is no globally agreed definition of entrepreneurship, it is usually assumed that entrepreneurs pursue new business ventures and carve out new market niches that did not previously exist. The self-employed, on the other hand, are typically engaged in selling their labour to perform a specific set of tasks that are to some extent routine. Moreover, a high number of self-employed workers does not necessarily indicate a high level of entrepreneurship in a society, as it can be the result of increased unemployment or deregulated labour markets.

For the purpose of this article and for reasons of data limitations addressed further below, we used a wider definition of entrepreneurship than the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* and included individuals who have founded a trading entity in their own name *at any point in time*.

## Female Entrepreneurship in Media Discourses

There are a number of studies into various aspects of female entrepreneurship in Japan<sup>25</sup> and some discourse analytical work on the portrayal of women in the Japanese media.<sup>26</sup> However, we are not aware of any prior work that has looked in detail at the portrayal of female entrepreneurship in the Japanese media. Our analysis relates therefore primarily to existing research on discourses of female entrepreneurship in the American and European popular press and some work on the representation of working women in Japanese manga.

Langowitz and Morgan, for example, have contrasted media representations of female entrepreneurs in American business press articles with survey data on successful women entrepreneurs. They found that the press restricted the image of female entrepreneurship, portraying women in low-value 'women-related' fields, unable to

<sup>23</sup>Ahl, 'The Making of the Female Entrepreneur', 56.

<sup>24</sup>Kelley et al., *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor*, 46.

<sup>25</sup>For example, Shimomura, 'Josei kigyōka no jidai'; Hagiwara, 'Josei kigyōka sōshutsu'; Koga, 'Tōkyōto ni okeru josei kigyōka'; Ōishi, 'Josei kigyōka'; Leung, 'Motherhood and Entrepreneurship'.

<sup>26</sup>Holthus, 'A Half Step Ahead'.

capitalize on social and financial capital and lacking business orientation, implying that female entrepreneurs ‘aren’t really serious’.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the press supported a model of female entrepreneurship that emphasised ‘having a great idea’ and ‘overcoming adversities’. Both of these assumptions were debunked by survey data, and thus there is a clear gap between empirical facts and media discourse.

Likewise, Achtenhagen and Welter conducted an examination of portrayals of female entrepreneurs in German newspapers over a 10-year period (1995–2004).<sup>28</sup> Although they used content analysis to reveal historical patterns of stereotypical representations, they failed to address how representations changed over time. Nevertheless, their study offers an account of gendered discourses which govern the portrayal of female entrepreneurs, some of which are similar to the ones we have uncovered in the Japanese case. For example, just like in Germany, we find that female entrepreneurship in Japan is frequently assessed and validated by comparing it to a male counterpart, which is taken as the norm.

Eikhof et al. used a sociology-of-work perspective to explore female entrepreneurs’ portrayals in a British women’s magazine.<sup>29</sup> They found that the magazine supported a discourse on women’s entrepreneurship that emphasized traditionally feminine and domestic activities. Entrepreneurship was offered as an attainable and desirable alternative to a ‘career rat-race’ as the magazine repeatedly portrayed women who, having established their own businesses, ‘achieved’ work–life balance. The researchers concluded that this seemingly liberating representation actually reinforced increasing gender inequalities in entrepreneurship as it relied on the acceptance of the ‘division of labour’.

Finally, Matanle and colleagues used a psychology-of-fiction approach to examine depictions of women in Japanese workplaces in four mainstream manga aimed at working men and women.<sup>30</sup> They revealed that, despite the occasional emergence of subversive discourses, traditionally gendered social norms prevail in the representations of working women. Significantly, they concluded that depictions of gendered workplaces in manga simultaneously represent and serve to reinforce ideological goals of the Japanese nation-state.

## Methodological Remarks

As source texts for our analysis, we selected a comprehensive range of the most important mainstream Japanese business publications, including business newspapers, with a combined circulation of over four million copies (see [Table 1](#)). As we were interested to understand the discourses in the mainstream general business press, we purposely excluded magazines such as *Nikkei Women* that have a female target audience.<sup>31</sup> While it might be the case that the portrayal of female entrepreneurs in these female-oriented outlets differs – by (potentially) being more progressive – we argue that a focus on the mainstream business press allows us to assess better which images the general public, including a substantial male audience, has been consuming over the last 25 years.

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<sup>27</sup>Langowitz and Morgan, ‘Women Entrepreneurs’, 114.

<sup>28</sup>Achtenhagen and Welter, ‘Surfing on the Ironing Board’.

<sup>29</sup>Eikhof et al., ‘Women Doing Their Own Thing’.

<sup>30</sup>Matanle et al., ‘Popular Culture and Workplace Gendering’.

<sup>31</sup>*Nikkei BP, Ad Info*.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Analysed Articles by Publication and Period.

Publication	Type	1990–2001	2002–2014	Total
<i>Nikkei Shinbun NS</i> (circulation: 3 million) <sup>35</sup>	Newspaper	44	12	56
<i>Nikkei Sangyō Shinbun NSS</i> (circulation: 160, 000) <sup>36</sup>	Newspaper	-	41	41
<i>Nikkei Business NB</i> (circulation: 245, 000) <sup>37</sup>	Magazine	-	4	4
<i>Weekly Toyo Keizai WTK</i> (circulation: 60,000) <sup>38</sup>	Magazine	3	3	6
<i>Weekly Diamond WD</i> (circulation: 85,000) <sup>39</sup>	Magazine	1	4	5
<i>Weekly Economist WE</i> (circulation: 80,000) <sup>40</sup>	Magazine	10	5	15
<i>Nikkei Top Leader NTL Nikkei Venture NV</i> (circulation: 50,000) <sup>41</sup>	Magazine	1	5	6
<i>The Strategic Manager TSM</i> (circulation: ca. 140,000) <sup>42</sup>	Magazine	-	7	7
<b>Total</b>		<b>59</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>140</b>

Note: The circulation numbers show the latest available figures and do not reflect likely changes during the investigated time periods.

Among the selected publications we looked for articles containing at least one of the phrases ‘female entrepreneur’ (*josei kigyōka* 女性起業家), ‘female company president’ (*josei shachō* 女性社長) or ‘female manager’ (*josei keieisha* 女性経営者). In this way, we aimed initially to capture articles which might not use the phrase ‘female entrepreneur’, even though they were in fact talking about such people. After screening the resulting set of articles we then selected only those that did in fact cover female entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship explicitly (as the main topic) and substantially (in more than 1000 characters). Moreover, as the articles were not always clear about how long somebody had been an entrepreneur, we applied, as mentioned above, a wider definition than the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* uses. We assumed that ‘entrepreneurs’ are individuals who have founded a trading entity in their own name at any point in time, but excluded articles on female business owners of inherited companies. This left us with a set of 140 articles, which were analysed in further detail.

For the analysis of our sources, we drew on a number of textual analysis techniques. When examining individual texts, we used Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on texts’ use of representations and discourses, as well as the assumptions and evaluations they made.<sup>32</sup> Regarding gendered discourses, Sunderland’s discourse identification and naming technique was used to organize patterns and themes which emerged across the years and publications.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Sunderland’s analysis of self-construction in discourse was helpful to understand those cases where female entrepreneurs were directly cited talking about themselves.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*.

<sup>33</sup>Sunderland, *Gendered Discourses*, 27–50.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 173–77.

<sup>35</sup>Nikkei PR, *Kurosumedia ni tsuite*.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>Nikkei BP, *Ad Info*.

<sup>38</sup>Toyo Keizai, *Ad Info*.

<sup>39</sup>Diamond, *Ad Info*.

<sup>40</sup>Mainichi Shimbun, *Ad Info*.

<sup>41</sup>Nikkei BP, *Ad Info*.

<sup>42</sup>TKC Group, *Baitaku shiryō*.



Though mindful of the arbitrariness of dividing our data by decades, we started our analysis by looking at the material in this way for the following reasons. Even though the number of articles in *Nikkei Shinbun* (NS) dropped in the new millennium, the overall number of relevant articles increased. Furthermore, and more importantly, we hypothesized that progress in the political and legal spheres, such as revisions of the Equal Employment Opportunities Law (1997, 2006), revisions of the Child Care (and Family Care) Leave Law (1995, 2001, 2004) and the implementation of the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society (1999), as well as initiatives such as the establishment of a Women's, Youth, and Senior Entrepreneurship Support Fund (1999) (Josei, Wakamono/Shinia Kigyōka Shien Shikin) and the Gender Equality Bureau in the Cabinet Office (2001) (Naikakufu Danjo Kyōdō Sankakukyoku), would have a significant influence on the way female entrepreneurs were portrayed in the new millennium. Overall, the results of our analysis support a distinction between the two periods, even though certain frames, such as the entrepreneur as a 'good wife and wise mother', were found, with some variations, during the entire period.

## Media Portrayals of Female Entrepreneurs in the 1990s<sup>43</sup>

### *Housewives*

One of the most common frames emerging from the portrayal of female entrepreneurs throughout the 1990s and early 2000s is that of the 'housewife' (*shufu*). The prevalence of this representation is exemplified by article titles such as 'The Era of Entrepreneurial Housewives' series (*Weekly Economist* [WE], 1991); 'Wives' Declaration of Independence' mini-series (NS, 1994); 'Women Have Courage: Entrepreneurship Boom Among Female College Students and Housewives' (WE, 10 October 1995); 'Housewives Become Entrepreneurs on the Internet' (NS, 11 September 1995); 'Inventive Housewives: The Rise of the Practically Minded Women Who Draw Lessons from "High-Efficiency" Housework and Child-care Experience' (NS, 10 March 2000). Phrases such as 'as a [professional] housewife' (*shufu toshite*), 'housewife-entrepreneurs', 'housewives' ingenuity' (*shufu no hassō*), 'housewives' sensitivity' (*shufu no kansei*), 'using the housewife's experience' (*shufu no taiken o ikashite*) were commonly used when referring to female entrepreneurs.

Evaluations of female entrepreneurs' qualities were usually contradictory because regardless of whether certain characteristics allegedly possessed by female entrepreneurs were thought to be positive or negative, writers associated them primarily with women's roles as *housewives*. As articles universalized the particular cases of female entrepreneurs, readers were forced to conclude that housewives as entrepreneurs are 'trusting' and 'naïve', 'hardworking', 'energetic', 'caring' and 'goal-focused'. Most texts adopted a celebratory stance towards housewives' entrepreneurship, praising women for using their experiences and ideas in creating business opportunities for themselves and workplaces for others. But this portrayal again framed women's entrepreneurial success as contingent on *being housewives*. Moreover, female entrepreneurs were applauded for using their unpaid work at home as inspiration.

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<sup>43</sup>All translations in this article are by the authors, if not stated otherwise.



Women's entrepreneurial experiences and behaviours were restricted by the confines of the traditionally gendered 'division of labour' frame. As evidenced by the referents writers used in their depictions during the 1990s, housewife-entrepreneurs were always primarily just that: housewives. They were not entrepreneurs, company presidents, managers or businesspersons. The assumption was that women must fulfil their family obligations first.

Representations of women entrepreneurs' work also revealed the authors' assumptions about who these women were or should have been. One particularly telling example is found in the *NS* article 'An Energetic PR Woman [Working] from Home' (*NS*, 29 November 1996). The image of a 'strong' and 'empowered' woman, invoked by the word 'energetic' (*baribari*) in the title, is in contrast to the descriptions of what the entrepreneur, Suzuki Kyōko, actually does. After sending off her husband and cleaning up after breakfast, she starts working on her internet business. During lunch time, she does the laundry and shopping, and cooks the dinner. She continues working until her husband returns home around 10pm, and is cited as saying 'It's just like a one-person time attack' (*marude hitori jikansa kōgeki*). The article encourages women to start companies via the Internet, thus letting them work 'anytime, anywhere': 'Even housewives who cannot work for businesses that operate during lunchtime because of their child-care responsibilities can start at their own pace when their kids are at school or late at night' (*NS*, 29 November 1996). Suzuki Kyōko is depicted not only as performing a de facto double shift as the primary carer and a business-owner, but also as taking pride (*hokori*) in her position as a housewife and mother.

Many articles advocate entrepreneurship as a solution to the problem of finding re-employment post-childcare or as a way out for women who have experienced workplace gender discrimination. In 2001, a university teacher is cited in *NS* saying:

When you start a company, there is no retirement, and even if you have children, your options to continue working will broaden. ... [W]omen might hit a wall in their employment due to marriage and childcare. At that time, if they realized that there was another way to work, entrepreneurship, they could manage their careers flexibly. (*NS*, 16 July 2001)

However, depictions of female entrepreneurs were not all positive. For example, the suggestively titled 'Wives' Declaration of Independence' series in *NS* takes up the issue of the household's male breadwinner in an article titled 'Divorce: Wife's Higher Salary the Biggest Threat to Marriage' (*NS*, 28 July 1994). The author takes the position that one wife's self-employment led a couple to divorce:

Because the wife's income was higher than her husband's, she gained more of a say in family matters. Meanwhile, she also spent less time at home. On top of these sudden changes in the wife, nobody was looking after the children ... (*NS*, 28 July 1994)

The writer uses this reasoning for justifying the husband's infidelity, which is mentioned as the actual cause of the divorce. He then finishes the article with the conclusion: 'A wife becoming independent ... is said to be the biggest threat to marriage. That is because her attitude unwittingly becomes arrogant' (*shirazu shirazu no uchi ni, katei-nai de no tsuma no taido ga sondai ni nattari suru kara da*) (*NS*, 28 July 1994). Women's independence and success were thus portrayed as threatening to the man's primary role within the household.

## Mothers

Another common frame of female entrepreneurship during the 1990s was that of the ‘entrepreneurial mother’. Motherhood was portrayed as a source of entrepreneurial inspiration and existential anxiety. Articles frequently portrayed women who were motivated to start businesses because of personal experiences that concerned the safety of their children. A common example is that of bakeries offering safe, ‘pesticide-free’ bread. The emphasis in such representations is on business ideas being developed by mothers for mothers, because of women’s special role as primary caregivers. According to Leung, this relationship between entrepreneurship and motherhood is one of the unique characteristics of female entrepreneurship in Japan. She attributes the relationship to the historical *ryōsai kenbo* ideal of ‘good wife and wise mother’ and develops the propositions that ‘the identity of motherhood can serve as the propellant for female entrepreneurship’, and that ‘[g]ender role identity can become the defining element of the venture identity’ and ‘can be a significant resource leading to a competitive advantage in female entrepreneurship’.<sup>44</sup> Another discussion of idealized motherhood in entrepreneurship was titled ‘Mommy’s Assertiveness Caused (*unda*) the Expansion of “Mommy Businesses”’ (*WE*, 12 February 1991). The author’s claim that ‘mommy businesses’ allow these women to express themselves as women is ironic in a sense since ‘being a woman’ is still constituted as ‘being a mother’, and this is telling of the strength of the link between womanhood and motherhood as constructed in Japanese society.

Nevertheless, female entrepreneurship in our sources is portrayed as interfering with women’s roles as mothers. In another example we read that ‘when a mother works outside the home, it is not the husband nor the mother-in-law who is the most troubled, it’s the children’ (*WE*, 15 January 1991). But ultimately this author seems to confirm Leung’s analysis of motherhood as defining gender identity for female entrepreneurs:

In cases of businesses where the inspiration for their [business] actions was not their housewife situation, what they realized most was their influence on their children as mothers. In all those cases, women talked about ‘The meaning of entrepreneurship when you do it as a mother. A woman’s lifestyle as a mother.’ (*WE*, 16 April 1991)

The author goes on to cite statements by the entrepreneurs that appear to support the notion that motherhood is indeed the gender identity with which they identify most. Such self-representations are in line with widely held notions about motherhood being synonymous with femininity in Japanese society.<sup>45</sup> However, we need to be careful not to over-interpret these self-representations as we do not know whether the cited quotes are really representative of what the entrepreneurs had to say about this topic.

## Consumers

An account of the stereotypical representations of female entrepreneurs in the business press of this period would not be complete without mentioning the focus on women entrepreneurs’ role as consumers. Articles frequently portrayed female entrepreneurs as

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<sup>44</sup>Leung, ‘Motherhood and Entrepreneurship’, 262.

<sup>45</sup>Charlebois, *Japanese Femininities*, 6.

embarking on and succeeding in their ventures because of their experiences and ideas *as consumers* (*shōhisha toshite*), as in: ‘If I should put it somehow, they are businesses established from a consumer’s perspective’ (*WE*, 16 April 1991). Journalists and ‘experts’ alike expressed hopes for and expectations (*kitai*) of ‘unique ideas’ developed by women from the consumer’s perspective (*shōhisha no shiten kara*). In the same *WE* article, the writer compared housewives’ businesses to the ‘norm’: ‘[Female entrepreneurs] do not conceptualize these ideas as “business ideas”; rather, they use their ideas, experience and knowledge as consumers.’ Thus, in spite of women becoming entrepreneurs and de facto producers in the economy, the Japanese business press insisted on framing their entrepreneurial behaviour within their ‘original’ supportive roles as consumers.

### **Feminists?**

Apart from the ‘wives’, ‘mothers’ and ‘consumers’ frames, we found also that a ‘lost identity’ trope was invoked as the primary motivation for housewives’ engagement in entrepreneurship: ‘Housewives have started working. Not to earn pocket money, but to create meaning in their own lives’ (*WE*, 8 January 1991); and ‘Motivated by a desire to overcome the anxiety to which housewives are prone’ (*WE*, 16 April 1991). In the same tone, seven years later we read:

Mother, bride, wife, I have held all these roles. However, I felt that one more, ‘myself’ – that is, ‘a woman’ – was missing. I needed this shop to realize that feeling. ... I took a chance on opening the store because I wanted to explore the possibility of being myself other than as a mother. (*WE*, 10 October 1995)

In these accounts we see a contradictory stance towards ‘motherhood’ as the main gender identity for female entrepreneurs. Perhaps Leung was too quick to generalize after all? In ‘The Wave of Today – Women’s Self-assertion’ (*WE*, 2 April 1991), the author describes a case of ‘feminist’ female entrepreneurs who established a marketing and research company because ‘they wanted to spread the message of “feminism” understood as “women’s economic independence”’. However, when questioned about their incomes, the women admitted they had no desire to earn enough to enable them to become truly financially independent. The writer concludes that those entrepreneurs ‘wanted as a minimum to assert their status in Osaka’ and ‘to take pride in their work and family’. In the concluding article of the ‘Era of Entrepreneurial Housewives’ series (*WE*, 16 April 1991), that same writer not only uses Betty Friedan’s work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in his analysis, but is also careful about generalizations: ‘Because my sample was too small, I cannot conclude whether this inclination towards camaraderie and networking appears only in these cases, or whether it is characteristic of women’s and even housewives’ entrepreneurship as a whole’ (*WE*, 16 April 1991).

Other writers also discuss the decline of the influence of Japanese ideals of womanhood – embedded in phrases such as ‘three meals with [an afternoon] nap’ (*sanshoku hirune tsuki*) which imply that ‘women find happiness through their devotion to housework and childcare’, and in the ‘good wife, wise mother’ ideal – proclaiming them ‘things of the past’. It might appear that the media discourse in the 1990s was well

on a path to recognizing gender equality. However, this assessment is too optimistic. The crucial new theme that appears alongside this progressive reporting is one of contrasting women and men. Women's entrepreneurship is juxtaposed against its male 'counterpart', which is assumed to be the norm in terms of business practices. For example: 'Until now, the pattern of success for entrepreneurs was to improve management efficiency and increase sales. However, women entrepreneurs want their employees to feel [a sense of] satisfaction and social purpose (*shakaiteki igi*)' (*WE*, 16 April 1991). This is a rather positive representation, creating an alternative model of women's entrepreneurship.<sup>46</sup>

Contrasting female and male entrepreneurs' qualities is commonplace and is usually expressed through 'expert' or women entrepreneurs' voices. Some examples from *NS* are: 'men ... are persuasive', 'Compared to men, women prioritize their emotions and idealism' (*NS*, 26 October 1998); 'If you aim to grow [your business], you should consider bringing in men after a certain stage, too' (*NS*, 13 February 1998). These assertions imply that women lack experience or 'spirit', or both. One writer accuses women entrepreneurs of 'naiveté in business attitude' (*keiei shisei no amasa*) and 'yielding of social responsibility which causes things to fall apart' (*shakaiteki sekininkan no ketsujo ga hokorobi o maneite iru*) (*NS*, 26 October 1993).

In sum, portrayals of female entrepreneurs in the 1990s are not really progressive in the feminist sense. Rather, they are polarized between praise, awe, and scorn, as is also evidenced by noun phrases used to refer to them: 'housewife-entrepreneur-warriors' (*shufu kigyōka senshi*), 'strikers' (*sutoraika*), 'feudal lord and master' (*ikkoku ichijō no aruji*) and 'touted darlings of the age' (*jidai no chōji ga motehayasaretari*).

## Media Portrayals of Female Entrepreneurs in the New Millennium

Compared to the 1990s, the business press coverage of women entrepreneurs in the 2000s and early 2010s became more frequent and diverse. Traditionally gendered discourses with a 'division of labour' frame and a focus on representations of women entrepreneurs as housewives and mothers were typically absent. That is not to say that stereotypical portrayals faded and were replaced by gender-blind accounts of entrepreneurs 'who happen to be women', however. On the contrary, essentializing gender remained widespread; but rather than referencing women's traditional gender roles, the emphasis was placed on women entrepreneurs' 'feminine' qualities.

### Big Sisters

This tag translates the Japanese phrase *anego-hada* (姉御肌) which is composed of two words, 'big sister' and 'skin', and refers to 'a woman's natural inclination to care for others; big-sisterly disposition'.<sup>47</sup> It is in line with what Michelle Lazar has conceptualized as feminine self-identity through 'other-centeredness'.<sup>48</sup> This gendered descriptive characteristic appeared in two articles in the mid-2000s. In February 2005, *The Strategic*

<sup>46</sup>Ahl, 'The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur'.

<sup>47</sup>Japanese-English Dictionary, Online at: <http://ejje.weblio.jp/>

<sup>48</sup>Lazar, 'Gender, Discourse and Semiotics', 388.

*Manager (TSM)* ran a feature on female entrepreneurs titled ‘Learn Flexible Management from Female Presidents’. In one article, we read about a woman, Kurosaka Mie, who was rejected in employment interviews because of her ‘showiness’ (*hadesa*), and so sets up her own business because ‘that was the only thing [she] could do’: “showiness”, or in other words, dynamism. Or one might say, “a big sister type” and “a good character” (*TSM*, February 2005).

The author then writes that ‘although some might deny it’, the woman might have been at a disadvantage because of her personality and appearance as a woman, drawing on the assumption that being an energetic woman is frowned upon in a male-dominated society. The author reframes Kurosaka’s personality from a negative feminine trait to a positive masculine one, although s/he does not question this gendered notion and writes further in the text, ‘However, in company president Kurosaka’s nature, this extravagance coexisted with tenderness towards all things (*monogoto e no yasashisa*).’ The observation serves an argument that in terms of flexible management, ‘dynamism and tenderness can coexist without contradiction’. It is a representation based on essentializing gender characteristics. The writer draws on a commonsense assumption that these traits cannot coexist because one is stereotypically ‘masculine’, the other ‘feminine’. That is, they are mutually exclusive traits in an individual, but complementary for opposite sexes. Moreover, the inclusion of ‘tenderness’ might have a reassuring effect, meaning Kurosaka’s personality was ‘not that bad’ because she was *also* sensitive, as a woman should be. Nevertheless, on balance this representation is positive in as far as it counters the first assumption, albeit indirectly.

‘Feminine tenderness’, ‘politeness’ and ‘attention to detail’ (*kimekomakasa*) feature regularly across titles and years of publication, including in an article which references the *big sister* trope. ‘The Lifestyle of a “Female Entrepreneur”’ is an interview with Tsunezawa Kahoko, CEO of Trenders. The writer begins with a stereotypical portrayal of Tsunezawa, constantly drawing readers’ attention to the fact that she is a *business-woman*. We examine this representation in detail later but want to highlight here that the author also calls Tsunezawa ‘a very lively big-sister type of a woman’ who ‘laughs with a wide open mouth’. Tsunezawa is quoted at length; she presents an extensive list of the qualities that ‘make women suitable as entrepreneurs’:

As consumption professionals, they know first-hand the needs of the world; attention to detail and kindness, which are peculiar to women, are definitely necessary in business; because they instinctively enjoy taking care of others, they are skilled at human resources development; and they are stable and earnest above all and so they are able to expand business, not in an unreasonable way but by starting out small and growing big. (*WE*, 21 March 2006)

Such essentializing contributes to the promotion of stereotypical and inaccurate interpretations of individual differences. Moreover, Tsunezawa claims:

I’m just not good at details, and because I prefer to think about strategy, I leave the actual at-the-coalface work to staff. There are many female company presidents who can’t rest if they don’t oversee everything, but I do things in a very broad-brush way. I think, isn’t that better for the business? (*WE*, 21 March 2006)

Thus, while supporting gender essentialism, she also conveniently positions herself as an exception, outside the ‘femininity’ discourse.

Following on from the 1990s, expressions such as ‘compared to men’, ‘unlike men’, ‘when it comes to women’ are ubiquitous, but the focus has shifted to framing feminine qualities as advantages. Nevertheless, these qualities are framed as ‘complementary’ to the normative male entrepreneurial behaviours. Female entrepreneurs and their businesses continue to be contrasted with male operations in terms of performance and management style. Moreover, qualities such as ‘desire for stability (*antei*)’ and ‘changing one’s mind frequently’ are both designated as feminine even though they are opposites, which demonstrates the tendency of the press to draw on the ‘femininity’ discourse only as it sees fit. Such strategies of representation are harmful not only for female but also for male entrepreneurs, since men do not conform to male normative standards of entrepreneurship either.<sup>49</sup>

### **Superwomen**

Women who achieve work–life balance through entrepreneurship are elevated as ‘role models’. In the above interview with Tsunetzawa, the author begins by describing her business accomplishments, referring to her as a ‘top businesswoman’, and follows that with:

Moreover, as a mother of two small children, for whom the home is equally important, she attracts attention as the role model for a ‘new woman’s lifestyle’ (*atarashii josei no ikikata*). She is an admired superwoman for the current generation of women. (*WE*, 21 March 2006)

Similarly, we read about Hamasuna Keiko, who ‘has many faces: a woman, a housewife, a mother, and also a company president’, and who as an ‘entrepreneur with hidden energy’ advises other women: ‘Rather than think which of child-raising, housework or work to abandon, it is better to be greedy and end up doing everything’ (*Nikkei Sangyō Shinbun* [NSS], 17 January 2003).

As ‘work–life balance’ became a buzzword into the 2010s, entrepreneurship continued to be constructed as a desirable ‘lifestyle choice’ (*sentakushi*) for women who wished to work and have a family. We read about a woman who, after establishing her own business, ‘had worked in a way that allowed her to balance [work] with child-rearing and the home’ (*TSM*, May 2013). Another entrepreneur advises: ‘Being a company president allows you to schedule your own time for yourself, so it works well with child-rearing’ (*Weekly Toyo Keizai* [WTK], 15 October 2011).

Thus, establishing one’s own company was offered as a solution to balance work with family obligations that are assumed to be women’s responsibility. Moreover, entrepreneurship was seen as desirable and easily attainable; while at the same time female entrepreneurs who managed such a lifestyle were referred to as exceptional *superwomen* whose experiences were outside the reach of ‘normal’ women. Crucially, discussion of problems arising from an entrepreneurial lifestyle or of husbands’ and fathers’ roles was absent.

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<sup>49</sup>Ahl, ‘The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur’.

### **Women on a Mission**

The woman who is motivated to establish companies that aid other working women is a figure frequently represented throughout the 2000s and early 2010s. Two types of such businesses tend to be featured: day-care facilities and babysitting companies; and companies with flexible working arrangements. In these portrayals, female entrepreneurs are applauded enthusiastically as they embark on the task ‘with a sense of mission’ (*shimeikan*) and ‘impatience’ (*iraira*):

Mothers who have to work have no choice but to leave their own children at a facility, even if they feel uneasy about it. Realizing this, she decided to take it upon herself to create the ideal day-care facility. (*NS*, 31 October 2003)

This day-care facility is popular because it is open from early in the morning until late at night. Thus, women are applauded for fitting in with existing working conditions and the ‘division of labour’ frame is tacitly upheld, since fathers are absent from the representation. The premise of *TSM*’s 2005 ‘Learn Flexible Management from Female Presidents’ series is that women entrepreneurs can teach flexible management to the male managers who are the presumed readers. ‘Praiseworthy’ points of this management style include ‘creation of an environment that is easy for female (care-)workers to work in’ and ‘effective use of the female labour force’. These representations draw on what we might call an ‘effective use of female workforce’ frame. It featured frequently in the 2000s and early 2010s, presumably because female entrepreneurs are supposed to know how to do it *as women*. Overall, texts are silent on the institutionalized gender discrimination and the corporate working conditions that affect men equally negatively. Even in the curious example of a letter from a female entrepreneur – who urges women to establish companies because ‘If wives earn money, men can relax as well. If middle-aged men are released from this “I must provide for the household” pressure, the rate of suicides among them might even decrease’ (*Nikkei Business [NB]*, July 2002) – the discussion is framed as an individual and family problem rather than an institutional and systematic one.

### **Pioneers**

A favourite theme of the business publications when constructing female entrepreneurs is that the latter are ‘heroic and fierce pioneers’ who ‘never give up’. Writers use various referents and metaphors to construct this image of female entrepreneurship; the Japanese words *kusawake*, *paionia*, *kaitakusha* and *sakigake*, all corresponding to the English ‘pioneer’ or ‘trailblazer’, feature frequently across the publications for the entire period. For example, we read that Saitō Keiko is ‘a female entrepreneur-pioneer who continued to develop a new business while managing marriage, pregnancy and child-care’ (*NS*, 26 December 2003). Female entrepreneurs, as well as being ‘rare’, are ‘strong’ and ‘tenacious’. Another female entrepreneur is said to have ‘gradually become serious about her “never-give-up-ism”’ (*akiramenai-shugi*) and ‘is overcoming hardships one after another’ (*TSM*, 1 May 2013).

Female entrepreneurs ‘challenge’, ‘attack’, ‘struggle’ and ‘conquer with pride’. Although this representation could be considered positive, as it provides potential



entrepreneurs with strong role models, the authors' focus on *rareness*, *remarkableness* and the 'novelty' of female entrepreneurship can be attributed to the media's pursuit of 'newsworthiness' and 'deviance'.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, this portrayal contributes to positioning female entrepreneurs as exceptional women whose experiences are removed from those of 'ordinary' women. It echoes the 'self-selected woman' strategy employed by researchers to explain meagre results in terms of male/female differences, as evidenced by Ahl.<sup>51</sup> It is harmful also because it implies that women must be and do *more* than men to succeed.

### The 'Sultry Dragon-lady'

The original Japanese expression which translates into the above phrase is *atsukurushii mōjo*:

You'd expect a female manager who says 'work is my life' to really seem like a 'sultry dragon-lady', but from Hirono Michiko, who leads 21LADY, there isn't even a trace of such a vibe. Rather, her tone of voice hints at brightness and eloquence. (*WD*, 6 November 2004)

The representation of Hirono in the above passage is markedly sexist. For the writer to deny the trope of a 'dragon-lady', that representation had to be pre-constructed and affirmed *elsewhere*.<sup>52</sup> Even though the author denies that stereotype, the simple act of inclusion hints at what *should be*, namely that a strong female manager should be aggressive and dangerous. This allows the writer to frame the description of Hirono as 'cheerful' and 'articulate' as a surprise. Throughout the text, he also alludes to Hirono's 'sensibility' to re-establish her personality as understood to be traditionally 'feminine'.

In 2005, Hirono appears again in *Nikkei Venture* [*NV*], where she is interviewed by Morishita Atsushi, an entrepreneur and CEO of Tenpos Busters, who begins:

I really have a strong feeling that 'business is a man's thing', isn't it? But Ms Hirono, buying Hirota like that, is very energetic and brisk in this male society. And so I was thinking, what kind of person is she? Perhaps she's like a hedgehog, like a woman with thorns. Won't I get bitten and be covered in blood? ... And so here we are, and I'm relieved (laughs). (*NV*, April 2005)

Morishita upholds this sexist 'men's world' stance throughout the interview, commenting that he wished his female employees would 'stop being women' and 'become men'. Initially, Hirono maintains a progressive counter-stance, repeating: 'It has nothing to do with being male or female' or 'It's the same. As a man and a woman', but she finally succumbs to Morishita's rhetoric and declares, laughingly: 'Sure, maybe I am manlier than a man', at which point the discussion turns from men's superiority to women's advantages in business. Morishita acknowledges Hirono as an entrepreneur ('As I thought, you're a natural venture entrepreneur, aren't you?') but that is weakened by the text's ending: 'At the same time, she is a terrifically beautiful woman. She was trying

<sup>50</sup>van Dijk, *News as Discourse*, 122.

<sup>51</sup>Ahl, 'The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur'.

<sup>52</sup>Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 47.

to get her appearance in order, but as you can see in the photo, her hair got in the way. So embarrassing ... (laughs)' (NV, April 2005).

Two mutually reinforcing themes emerge from these representations. First, female entrepreneurs who exhibit strength and power, which are considered typically male qualities, are demonized and represented as aliens to both 'ordinary' women and powerful men, for whom their presence is intimidating. Second, the authors attached greater significance to instances when Hirono acted in a feminine way, highlighting her appearance and gestures. Her entrepreneurial behaviour is re-constructed within the discourse of traditional 'femininity' in order to portray her as less threatening.

## Discussion

Our analysis has so far addressed *how* the portrayal of female entrepreneurs in the Japanese business press changed over a 25-year period. It reveals that despite progress in the political and legal sphere, such as revisions of the Equal Employment Opportunities Law in 1997 and 2006 and the implementation of the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society in 1999, traditionally gendered representations prevail in the media discourse. Text producers continued to rely on stereotypical representations of women, especially when those women appeared successful. In fact, some 'progressive' discourses associated with entrepreneurship, such as those employing the 'work-life balance' frame, turned into pseudo-feminist discourses invoked to create an illusion of women's empowerment, while masking and reinforcing traditional gender roles. These findings are similar to what other researchers have established for Western contexts. For example, the trope of the female entrepreneur as somebody who overcomes particular adversities and is engaged in 'women-related' business fields is found in the American business press, too.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, 'work-life balance' frames of female entrepreneurship have been shown to be prevalent in a British women's magazine,<sup>54</sup> while Achtenhagen and Welter's work on German newspapers also finds persistent gender stereotyping.<sup>55</sup>

In this final discussion, we want to touch upon the question *why* these gendered representations of female entrepreneurs have remained so prevalent in Japan. According to Fairclough, '[i]mplicitness is a pervasive property of texts' in two respects.<sup>56</sup> Firstly, texts depend on shared meanings circulating within a social reality for communication to occur. Secondly, power within a social order includes the ability of the dominant and hegemonic to shape what is taken for granted, which implies that to a certain degree assumptions constitute ideology. In order to better understand the continuity in media representations, we need thus to investigate the assumptions/ideologies that underlie the selection of themes and metaphors in the portrayal of female entrepreneurship.

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<sup>53</sup>Langowitz and Morgan, 'Women Entrepreneurs'.

<sup>54</sup>Eikhof et al., 'Women Doing Their Own Thing'.

<sup>55</sup>Achtenhagen and Welter, 'Surfing on the Ironing Board'.

<sup>56</sup>Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 55.

### ***Economic Growth Is Important***

Over the 25-year period of this study, press endorsement of female entrepreneurship shifted from a ‘social contribution’ frame prevalent in the 1990s to an ‘economic contribution’ frame dominating in the mid-2000s. The assumption that entrepreneurship is good hinges on another assumption, namely that economic growth is desirable. Throughout the 1990s, writers frequently stated that female entrepreneurs would have a unique impact on the consumer goods industry in terms of product innovation and development, because of their insight as consumers and experiences as women. Occasionally, articles suggested that women entrepreneurs could contribute to alleviating Japan’s prolonged recession. However, in the new millennium the general trend in articles shifted overwhelmingly to supporting female entrepreneurship because of its anticipated positive impact on Japan’s economy, an assumption which appeared to intensify in the 2010s.<sup>57</sup> Writers assumed that a rise in numbers of female entrepreneurs would significantly contribute to Japan’s GDP as women became taxpayers and employers (*NS*, 7 November 2011). One author went so far as to state: ‘I wish to support female entrepreneurs and executives. When most people hear this story, they assume it is about gender equality or social engagement. However, the real theme is the revitalization of Japan’s economy’ (*NB*, 19 July 2004). Thus, in general, Japan’s economic growth is a theme that precedes any argument that hails female entrepreneurship in terms of human rights or social wellbeing as valorising female entrepreneurship.

### ***Men and Women Are Different***

In both periods under investigation, it became evident that business press articles adopted an essentialist view on gender differences. Differences in behaviour were not explained as reflecting individuals’ personalities but as natural ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ qualities. As mentioned above, research in Western contexts has shown that entrepreneurship is a male-gendered concept.<sup>58</sup> We found the same for Japan. When women entrepreneurs were compared against a ‘standard’ of entrepreneurship, that standard was actually male-gendered. Feminine qualities were judged as both favourable and unfavourable in terms of entrepreneurial potential, and this prompted journalists to create alternative, ‘feminine’ models of entrepreneurship. However, that did not undermine the ‘original’ male normative standard against which the performance of female entrepreneurs was still measured. This in turn prompted discussions of the special support women need to perform like men. Women entrepreneurs were valued for their ‘feminine’ style of leadership and management based on their ‘innate’ characteristics of compassion and care. This model was celebrated because it appeared to complement men’s aggression and ambition. However, when female entrepreneurs displayed such positive ‘masculine’ qualities, they were portrayed as threatening and given objectifying and derogatory labels. These findings resemble those in Renshaw’s work on Japanese women managers.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>As we have studied only 20 articles after 2010, further research is needed to establish whether the reporting has truly intensified since then.

<sup>58</sup>Ahl, ‘The Construction of the Female Entrepreneur’; Bruni et al., ‘Entrepreneur-mentality’.

<sup>59</sup>Renshaw, *Kimono in the Boardroom*.

### **Public and Private Spheres of Life**

In the articles that appeared in the 1990s, the ‘uniquely’ feminine models of entrepreneurship were based on women’s experiences as ‘wives, mothers and consumers’, which implied that men’s experiences as husbands, fathers and producers were inherently different. Women performed caring activities in the private sphere of life, constituted by the family, while men worked in the public sphere. Female entrepreneurship was also endorsed as an alleviation of the burden shouldered by Japanese salarymen working in corporations. This constitutes a quintessential ‘division of labour’ frame. Although the ‘women as wives, mothers and consumers’ frame was not as explicitly invoked after 2000, a ‘complementary femininity’ frame assumed its place, drawing on identical assumptions about traditional gender roles.

Similarly, in the new millennium the ‘work–life balance’ frame penetrated public discourse through literature developed by the Gender Equality Bureau. Entrepreneurship was offered as a solution to women’s problems of balancing work with family obligations, since female entrepreneurs could be in charge of their own schedules, allowing them more time to care for small children. Women were portrayed as making a ‘lifestyle’ choice. However, when they successfully managed those obligations, they were portrayed as ‘superwomen’. Thus, entrepreneurship was seen as desirable and sometimes easily attainable, though at other times remarkably difficult. The burdens of child care and housework were portrayed as being solely a woman’s responsibility. Discussions of husbands’ and fathers’ roles were absent.

Taken together, the above assumptions about the priority of economic growth and the alleged differences between men and women and their respective spheres constitute the building blocks of Japan’s capitalist male-dominated ideology. Miyake has argued that Japanese women keep being oppressed because the preservation of the economic system depends on a sustained division of labour, with women performing unpaid work in the household.<sup>60</sup> The durability of this system is contingent on the ‘hegemonic masculinity’<sup>61</sup> that the Japanese salaryman embodies.<sup>62</sup> This ideology is taken for granted and reinforced because of the hegemonic recirculation of traditionally gendered discourses dispersed through mass media and other pathways. Moreover, our analysis has shown that a significant number of Japanese female entrepreneurs sustained such discourses through their self-representations. Why are they choosing to do this?

Female entrepreneurs are a challenge to the existing order because they transgress their assigned gender roles. Puwar has termed women and minorities causing such disruptions ‘space invaders’, who become ‘insiders’ in male-dominated spaces by aligning their bodies and language to those of the dominant group.<sup>63</sup> Another explanation is offered by Bourdieu, who has argued that the preservation of masculine domination depends on the internalization of socially constructed systems of values as objective in the process of socialization and on their unquestioned reproduction.<sup>64</sup> We might thus hypothesize that female entrepreneurs themselves have internalized

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<sup>60</sup>Miyake, ‘Nihon no shakai kagaku to jenda’.

<sup>61</sup>Connell, *Masculinities*.

<sup>62</sup>Dasgupta, *Re-Reading the Salaryman*.

<sup>63</sup>Puwar, *Space Invaders*.

<sup>64</sup>Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*.

these gendered discourses to a degree that ‘forces’ them to contribute to their reproduction.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to analyse the portrayal of Japanese female entrepreneurs in the mainstream Japanese business press over a 25-year period. Throughout the 1990s, the business press offered stereotypical portrayals of female entrepreneurs, relying on traditionally gendered frames to reconcile conflicting discourses on womanhood and entrepreneurship. Female entrepreneurs were depicted in ‘wives, mothers and consumers’ frames which positioned them outside the mainstream discourse on entrepreneurship, undermining their role as producers in the economy and emphasizing their role in supporting the capitalist patriarchal order based on the gendered division of labour. When female entrepreneurs were not portrayed in their ‘natural’ roles as wives and mothers, texts still stressed the importance of stereotyped women’s experiences as guarantees of women’s business success. Traditional gender roles were considered positive and even necessary prerequisites for female entrepreneurship. Discussions of gender equality as a human right were absent. Feminism was understood in terms of a progressive ‘complementary femininity’ which was used by writers when advocating women’s social advancement.

Portrayals of female entrepreneurs diversified in the new millennium; however, that variety was confined to traditionally understood gender roles and qualities. Women entrepreneurs were depicted as owing their success to women’s innately feminine qualities (‘the feminine manager’), ideas (‘pioneers’ and ‘women on a mission’) or their extraordinary ability to balance work and family obligations (‘the superwoman’). Likewise, women were celebrated as pioneers because of their ventures into male-dominated industries *as women*. Writers focused on such ‘extraordinariness’, creating an impression that they were isolated cases. Lastly, Hirono Michiko was labelled a ‘sultry dragon-lady’, a ‘hedgehog’ and a woman ‘with horns’ because of her determination and ambition. This sexist and objectifying portrayal results from the perception of successful women as threatening to the male-dominated social order.

In our final discussion, we concluded that the Japanese discourses we detected were remarkably similar to those found by other researchers in Western contexts and confirmed the male-gendered nature of entrepreneurship in the Japanese case. Moreover, we touched upon the assumptions and ideologies underlying these discourses and argued that evaluative assumptions about the priority of economic growth, differences between men and women, and the division between public and private spheres of life form the foundations of Japan’s capitalist male-dominated order, which is upheld and reconstructed through media discourses such as those investigated in this article.

These findings are important as they highlight a lack of progress in the public discourse on female entrepreneurship in the mainstream business press. As this discourse shapes the attitudes of bureaucrats, business practitioners and the general public towards female entrepreneurs, recent public policy initiatives by the Abe administration to strengthen female entrepreneurship may struggle to effect changes in public attitudes. As was highlighted in the introduction, causal effects of societal attitudes on

entrepreneurship levels are difficult to establish, but cross-country research has shown that positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship correlate with high levels of entrepreneurial activity.<sup>65</sup> Attitudes towards entrepreneurship affect the propensity of individuals to become entrepreneurs, their ability to rebound from business setbacks and the support they can expect to receive from their relatives and the general public. It was beyond the remit of this research project to test a causal relationship between Japan's low female entrepreneurship levels and societal attitudes. But prevailing public attitudes towards female entrepreneurs, as they find their expression in and are shaped by the Japanese business press, appear not to be conducive to increased female entrepreneurship levels. Future research might be able to investigate the concrete effect of societal attitudes on the behaviour of Japanese female entrepreneurs. In any case, policy makers, educators, business practitioners, journalists and indeed the Japanese public at large are well advised to develop more progressive attitudes towards women in general and female entrepreneurs in particular.

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