

Gender and Ethnicity in Japan's Health-Care Labor Market

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Summary

As the socialization, privatization, and internationalization of health-caregiving proceeds, in many industrialized nations the health-care business, which was often a gendered labor market to begin with, is now evolving as a labor market at the intersection of gender and ethnicity. This paper addresses a bipolar concept of invisibility—and potential vulnerability—of female labor migrants through the lens of gender and ethnicity in the health-care labor market in Japan. It does so by introducing the roles both dimensions play in Japan's labor market in general and in the health-care sector in particular. Juxtaposing two different groups, namely longtime foreign residents of Japan entering the health-care business as a second career option on the one hand and newly arrived health-caregivers from Southeast Asia on the other hand, the paper first highlights the commonalities and differences in the way gender and ethnicity impact the structures of life and work in Japan for the two groups. Secondly, the paper looks at the interlocking dimension of gender and ethnicity and provides some insights into the intersectionality of these factors in Japan's labor world.

Keywords: Japan, labor market, health care, migration, gender, ethnicity, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Japan's population is aging at unprecedented speed. How the nation is coping with the manifold challenges that this development poses to an already strained economy, to politics in a state of seemingly endless turmoil, and to a society that is looking out for new values and norms to provide it with stability in a transformed globalized world has already been the subject of countless academic and non-academic publications.¹ There is one aspect of the impact of demographic change that is particularly affected by the three main demographic variables of population aging (mortality), population reproduction (fertility), and population mobility (migration), namely health care for the elderly. The more a population ages, the higher the share

¹ For a comprehensive account on the many impacts of Japan's demographic change, see Coulmas, Conrad, Schad-Seifert and Vogt (2008), for example. Also note the special report in *The Economist* (2010/11/18).