

# Office Ladies and Salaried Men

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Power, Gender, and Work  
in Japanese Companies

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1998

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

*Berkeley / Los Angeles / London*

## Gossip

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Never did I dream that talking behind someone's back was so prevalent among office ladies. Hardly a day passed without someone putting down another worker. The target was almost always a man. OLs also talked about other women, but unless they were close friends, they usually refrained from belittling women. Instead, they discussed who was getting married, what her fiancé was like, and how the two met.

Lunch break was the ideal time for OLs to gossip about men's annoying behavior. An OL typically complained to other OLs of some unpleasant incident that morning or the previous afternoon.

OL 1: I'm really furious with Kataoka!

OL 2: Which one is Kataoka-san?

OL 1: The young one. He joined the company in the year sixty [1985], so he should be about twenty-nine. Anyway, when things get busy, he just stops listening to what other people have to say. And then afterward, he annoys us with persistent questions. He asks, "What? What? What's going on?" and makes a big fuss out of it. Just this morning, I found out that Matsuda *buchō*'s [general manager's] schedule was all screwed up because of him. You know, [he's] a type we've got plenty of in this bank.

OL 2: Yeah, I know what you mean. Is he single?

OL 1: Yes. There seem to be good reasons why single people remain single. Good guys get snatched up first.

OL 2: Yeah. There's always something wrong with a single man one way or another.

OL 3: When Kataoka talks to you, he places both of his hands on your desk and sort of looks into your face, doesn't he? It always makes me feel sick—makes me say, "Get away from me!"

OL 4: [Giggling] Do you really say that?

OL 3: Yeah, when I'm busy, I do.

OL 1: I know exactly what you mean. I always do *this* when he comes [bends herself back exaggeratedly]. I hold something in my hand to put between him and me. You know, as if to say, "Don't you dare get any closer!" Did you know that Kataoka was invited to Nishimura *kachō*'s [section manager's] home because he looks like Wally [a cartoon character]? Nishimura *kachō*'s kids loved him for it.

OL 3: He does look like Wally!

OL 1: Doesn't he? Shall we call him Wally from now on? No, I guess not. Wally's too cute for him.

The OL who had to sort out Matsuda *buchō*'s schedule because Kataoka-san had forgotten to cancel appointments indicated her anger first and foremost by neglecting to add suffix, *san*, to the man's name as she normally would.

By gossiping about these unpleasant experiences, OLs seriously damaged the offender's reputation among the female staff. In the preceding case, both OLs 2 and 4, who have little daily contact with Kataoka-san, are given an unfavorable impression of him. OL 1's story may not determine the way the others view Kataoka-san, but it will undoubtedly influence their opinion. As an OL explained, "If one of us talks badly about a man, all the women who hear the story begin to take a dim view of him."

A man's reputation is not determined overnight. It is evident from the conversation that this was not the first time Kataoka-san offended OLs 1 and 3: every time he did something "wrong" in the eyes of the OLs, he became the target of their reproach, until finally his reputation was thoroughly trashed. Women's dislike of a repeat offender often escalated into physical aversion, at which point, his bad reputation was almost impossible to change. Both OLs 1 and 3 disliked Kataoka-san so strongly that they detested his physical proximity. Indeed, many OLs I interviewed said there were one or two men in their office whom they preferred to keep at a distance.

When a man repeatedly annoyed OLs, the gossip about him became less logical and more emotional. Whatever the man did became the possible target of criticism. One woman who worked in a pharmaceutical company described how the OLs grew to detest an unpopular man's

habit of wiping his hands with a handkerchief as he emerged from the rest room. She added, "The same conduct could have been considered cute if done by somebody we like."

As OLs recognized, behavior that would not normally draw attention was criticized in detested men. From the point of view of men, this was problematic, because it increased the unpredictability of OLs' accusations. Because similar innocuous behavior might become the focus of OLs' censure, men understandably felt that OLs got angry unreasonably and at random over trivial matters. Some men were wary of women's gossip because of its unpredictable nature. The following sentiments, voiced by a man working in a research institute, are illustrative:

I care a lot about how I treat women. It's because women tend to complain about petty things—like someone is slow in answering the phone, or that he doesn't clear the table—that sort of thing. When women get together, trivial things are made into big issues. And they spread. Men also speak badly of another person, but we don't make a fuss out of small things. I often hear my male colleagues grumble that they were accused unreasonably by a woman.

Indeed some men expressed confusion and anger because they thought they had been unjustly condemned by women for unimportant things. For example, an unpopular man on the bank floor was reproached by an OL for throwing garbage into her wastebasket instead of his own. The man complained that it was the first time he had ever been criticized for putting garbage in a garbage can! Another man working for an electric wiring company was at once indignant and perplexed because he had been blamed for giving the same instructions both verbally and in writing. He did so because he thought it was easier for the OL to understand what he wanted her to do, but he was accused of slighting her. The man asked for my opinion, so I agreed that it was rather strange for the woman to have reproached him, but asked him how they had been getting along before that. He admitted that they had not been on good terms.

Because men usually did not have access to OLs' lunchtime gossip, they were unaware that bad reputations were built gradually. A man became aware of women's antipathy to him only after he had accumulated many accusations. By this time, anything he did was likely to appear distasteful. I noticed, however, that four main criteria recurred in women's backstage talk and were particularly important in the early stages of the OLs' evaluation of any given man.

### Office Ladies' Criteria for Evaluating Men

First of all, an arrogant man was disliked, whereas a courteous man was praised. A man was considered arrogant if, for instance, he asked for tea to be served to his customer by calling out, "Four teas to room one!" Such a man's commanding tone was contrasted to the politeness of another man who said, "Sorry to disturb your work, but would you please bring four teas to room one?" One man enraged women on the bank floor by saying curtly, "Necktie." He wanted an OL to take out a black necktie that was kept on hand in a cabinet for male employees who needed to attend a funeral. "What was *that*? Who does he think he is? He could have at least said, 'Could you hand me the black necktie?'" fumed the OL. "There are a lot of ways to say it, and all he says is the noun!" agreed another woman. Because men often angered OLs by the way they spoke, both women were convinced they could easily write a manual for men on "good and bad uses of language."

In contrast, some men were popular among OLs because they were courteous. In addition to speaking politely when making requests, these men thanked the OLs when they brought tea to their customers and apologized when they caused trouble. Polite words, however, were not primarily what the OLs sought: they wanted a man's opinions to match his courteous behavior. In general, they believed that behavior reflected inner thoughts, but they were quick to sense when a man's attitudes were at odds with his actions; they knew whether the man was really sorry to bother them with tea serving, or whether he thought it their inevitable duty to serve him. They believed they could detect the conceited man's belief that he can lord over women.

OLs who had graduated from university were especially sensitive to men's views of women's role. "He thinks women exist to provide miscellaneous personal services to men," "He treats women as mere messenger girls," and "He thinks women's place is in the home," these women complained. One university graduate contrasted a "liberal" man to a "conservative" man and admitted that she worked wholeheartedly for the former but shirked tasks for the latter. She particularly detested her deputy-general manager, who joined the bank after finishing high school. She judged the man to be "conservative," because she heard him say under the influence of liquor things such as "Silly women are cute" and "Women who go to university are thoughtless, obstinate, and unfeminine."

The second recurring criterion was related to the first: men who treated OLs as fellow human beings, who indicated care and concern for their lives, and who showed empathy with the type of work they did, were immensely popular. In contrast, those who seemed to regard OLs as machines that provided services at the touch of a button were loathed.

One section manager was much admired by OLs on the floor because he asked them what the matter was when they looked troubled. Another man was liked by many OLs because he remembered to tell them the results of a business matter that concerned them. An OL explained: "If you become involved in something, you naturally want to know how things turn out—whether it works well for the man and the company or not." This particular man often remembered to tell OLs how things turned out and to thank them for their help. It was nice, said the OL, to be told that what they had done had helped. The considerate man was compared with a man who made a lot of fuss when he asked for OLs' help but neglected to tell them the outcome once the business was settled. Such a man gave women the impression that they were regarded as nothing more than unfeeling machines.

Though all this sounds reasonable, OLs' wish to be treated nicely sometimes assumed a different aspect because of the nature of their positions within the organization. For several reasons, OLs in general did not feel that they owned their work. For one thing, the company did not evaluate their performance seriously and treated them together as "girls." For another, the work they performed was often piecemeal, and therefore it was difficult for them to cultivate a sense of their own jobs. Pouring tea for customers, copying documents, and typing manuscripts tended to be regarded as services provided for men, rather than professional work that they were paid to do.

In addition, OLs were often asked to do jobs that seemed personal rather than professional. They sometimes made vacation travel arrangements for managers, and I witnessed a woman purchase and wrap prizes for a golf tournament that a group of men planned for pure entertainment. Although these examples clearly indicate an abuse of authority, there was a large gray zone where the line between business and personal tasks blurred. This was because at Tōzai, as in most other Japanese companies, there was no clear job description for OLs. As a result, whenever men asked women to perform tasks, they tended to "ask for favors" rather than make official requests based on their authority. OLs became used to being asked to do favors and increasingly lost the sense

of fulfilling professional responsibilities even when they were engaged in what could be regarded as their proper jobs.

Women's weak sense of professionalism was reflected in their word choice. Work, for them, was seldom something that they simply "did" (*shigoto o suru*), but rather was "done for somebody" (*shigoto o yatte-ageru*). Similarly, a boss used different phrasing to recognize work done by men and work done by women. He usually used *gokurō-san* (I appreciate your effort) when speaking to a male subordinate. Although it was possible to say *gokurō-san* to a female subordinate, it was more common for him to say *arigatō* (thank you). *Arigatō* expresses gratitude for the service provided, whereas *gokurō-san* indicates acknowledgment of the work performed without expressing a strong sense of gratitude. By thanking women more often than men, a boss suggested that women worked differently from men.

OLs in general believed they were entitled to thanks for the various jobs they did for men. When a man failed to express his gratitude for their work, they criticized his lack of appreciation. He was condemned for assuming that he deserved to receive their services.

Some men were aware of OLs' weak sense of responsibility toward their work and treated them accordingly. For example, a man working in a real-estate company explained how he regarded male salespersons and female assistants differently:

I clearly differentiate between salesmen and assistants. When a female assistant complains about her work, I say, "There, there, don't make a fuss. I'll listen to what you have to say." I regard her as somebody I must attend to—someone I must soothe and calm. Of course, a salesman sometimes complains about his work too, but this I see only as a sign of temporary confusion. Superficially, I say that salesmen and female assistants are equal, but in reality, I rank them. I don't expect much from my female assistants, and so I indulge them. I don't expect them to assume responsibility for work.

Men who did not distinguish women's role in work from men's and treated them in a strictly businesslike manner often incurred their displeasure. It was ironic, for these men were condemned by women precisely because they would not discriminate against them. A man who worked for an electric wiring company analyzed the reason he lost popularity among women in his office:

Because there were many transactions to be made, women's contribution was critical. It was absolutely necessary to gain their cooperation, and so men

in the section were careful not to offend them. It was generally thought in the office that a man's job was to soothe and humor women's various complaints and get them to cooperate. You can call it a sort of discrimination, I think. That is, women were regarded as something different from men—people who must be lured into doing work by offering bait. Women, on their part, seemed to think that men would soothe them whenever they fretted. I was the only man in the section who was indifferent to their fretting. And so I became the target of their censure.

Both of these statements indicate that when men and women are not regarded as equal business partners, treating women nicely may be a form of discrimination. In the words of a man working in a heavy electric equipment company, men have to attend to women who are "almost like spoiled children."

A man's business capability was the third criterion in determining OLS' attitude toward him. Women at Tōzai talked admiringly of able men and despised those who were slow-witted and inefficient. There was a very practical reason for OLS' preference for capable men. An incompetent man often annoyed women with extra work: he pestered them with silly questions and unreasonable requests; he issued unclear instructions; he often gave wrong directions and later asked for many revisions; and he made requests at the last minute, which sometimes required OLS to work overtime.

The fourth criterion was whether a man was generous or stingy. When an OL gossiped about a man, one of the important pieces of information she provided was how generous he was to women. This was brought home to me when an OL described her present and previous direct supervisors. She did not like her former boss very much, because he was particular about details. He asked, for example, for a copy to be reduced to 93 percent. It was difficult for the woman to work with such a meticulous man. However, she added, he was generous. When she and two other OLS in the section had to work overtime, he often treated them to dinner. On a rare occasion when he had to leave earlier than they did, he bought them fruit sandwiches for them to eat after work. Upon his transfer to another section, the three women gave him a small wallet. In return, he sent them each a large box full of gorgeous muscat grapes, which they thought must have cost a fortune. Her present boss, in contrast, did not care about small matters and was fun to work with. However, she emphasized, "He has never treated us to lunch or anything." The woman repeatedly said that her current supervisor had never given her a treat, as though it was the only defect he

had in his otherwise perfect character. It was also apparent from her comments that, for her, her previous boss's faults were somewhat offset by his generosity.

OLS regularly exchanged information about men's generosity. They talked about which restaurants men took them to for lunch and dinner, what souvenirs they received from overseas business trips, how much money they were given to buy themselves cakes and sweets, and what White Day gifts they received. (On White Day, men reciprocate women's Valentine's Day chocolate gifts. Valentine's Day and White Day gift-giving customs in the office are discussed in the following chapters.)

It was common for an OL at Tōzai to ask a man to buy her and her fellow OLS pastries or to take her out for lunch. I witnessed a woman practically force her direct supervisor to treat her and me to lunch. On that day, the other six women who usually had lunch with us were either on vacation or had other appointments, so the woman and I were the only ones left to have lunch together. She decided it was a good opportunity to go outside of the bank to one of the restaurants. (Because it was difficult to secure seats for eight women during the crowded lunch hour, we usually ate in the company cafeteria.) When her boss came back from an early lunch, she asked him rather bluntly, "You wouldn't think of going out to have lunch for a second time, would you? Since there's only me and Ogasawara-san, I was thinking of going outside and was hoping that perhaps you might give us a treat." The supervisor did not have any choice but to give us lunch tickets worth about four thousand yen, which we used in the company cafeteria. I later heard the poor boss grumble that a man must be rich in order to supervise OLS.

At first I did not understand what made OLS so bold. One incident, however, led me to realize that they thought they deserved treats from men because the men were better paid. On that day, a man who was decidedly unpopular among the women on the floor took a can of juice from an office refrigerator and drank it. The juice happened to belong to an OL. It was immediately evident that something out of the ordinary had happened: all across the open office, the OLS got together and talked among themselves in twos and threes. After a long whispering session, they came back to their seats, several saying things such as: "He's a thief!"; "I cannot believe it!"; and "What does he think? That a can of juice grows in a refrigerator like a plant or something?"

The women continued to talk about the incident in their seats so

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that even men could hear them say, "It's the same as stealing cans from a vending machine," and "It's unforgivable to take a can of juice that a girl has bought with the little money she has." Yet it was obvious that the man did not intend to "steal" the juice; rather, he had absentmindedly taken it—as, he innocently admitted, he had taken two other cans in the past.

Initially, I was shocked by the vehemence of the women's rage over a mere can of juice, which led them to condemn the man as a thief. However, this man was disliked by the OLs before the incident, and the OLs would probably not have made such a big fuss over a can of juice if someone else had taken it. The difference between the man's interpretation and the women's interpretation of the incident suggests that the man and the women had contrasting views of *uchi* and *soto* (inside and outside) (Bachnik and Quinn 1994). The male employee might have been treating the refrigerator contents, and hence people who stocked it, as his *uchi*. From his point of view, he was only *amaeru*-ing (asking for indulgence) when he took the juice. The OLs, in contrast, saw most men in the office as *soto*, who should not ask for this kind of indulgence.<sup>1</sup> (See the latter part of this chapter on how women view their male colleagues as strangers.) However, I also came to understand that the OLs' anger stemmed in part from the fact that men were paid considerably more than they were.

Men's better pay was one of the unpleasant facts of life for OLs. They often speculated about how much money a certain man must be making. Such speculation invariably led them to grumble at the large difference in the amount of compensation that men and women received. The more incompetent a man seemed, the more they felt the difference in pay was unjustified. Therefore, it seemed natural to many OLs that men should treat them occasionally. Yet it was unthinkable that a woman would have to pay even one hundred yen to buy a man a can of juice. Although women were aware that they might have larger discretionary incomes than men, since most men had to support their families, this did not seem to influence their attitude toward "treats." It is interesting in this regard that three ex-OLs of large Japanese companies, now married to businessmen working in similar institutions, said they thought it utterly unjust that their husbands had to treat OLs, whom the wives considered far better off than themselves, but they had felt it only right for men to treat women when they were working as OLs.

OLs' attention to men's generosity cannot be considered separately

from the company's compensation policy that discriminated against women. OLs were acutely aware that men's pay increased rapidly with accumulated tenure, whereas their own stayed relatively stable, which resulted in a widening gap in pay between the two sexes. It was whispered among them that even Uchida-san, the man who took the can of juice from the refrigerator, must be making at least double the amount they made. Many women regarded the inequity in pay as a just reason for OLs to be given treats, and thus OLs' concern over men's generosity was, in this sense, a critique of discriminatory company policies.

Similarly, the three other main criteria OLs used to distinguish a good man from a bad one were also related to discriminatory company policies. As we have seen, women often demanded that men give them special attention. Because the sexes were not on equal terms, men had to assume the responsibility for women's work as well as their own. Many OLs thought it was the men's job to ensure that OLs were happy with their work. If an OL was dissatisfied, she had the right to protest, and a man must attend to her complaints. Those men who thought women had the obligation to work and failed to show proper appreciation for the jobs OLs performed were severely criticized. Such criticism expressed the women's refusal to assume equal responsibility and obligations as businesspeople when they were not given corresponding rights.

However, OLs disliked men who considered themselves above women and assumed arrogant attitudes. The company justified its discriminatory policies by insisting that women had different roles and priorities in life from men, which implied that women were not necessarily inferior to men. OLs reproached men who lorded it over women.

Finally, although there were practical reasons for OLs to dislike incompetent men, this criterion was also related to discriminatory company policies. From the OLs' perspective, it was almost a breach of contract for men to be incompetent. Many OLs were discontented with the discrimination they faced. It was not fair that men should be selectively promoted and considerably better paid. Women's discontentment was somewhat alleviated if the man who was promoted and highly paid was capable and, therefore, apparently deserving of the advantageous treatment. In a sense, women could perhaps reluctantly accept a man being given favorable treatment if he was an astute businessman. In contrast, OLs had little tolerance for incompetent men. Many of them found it nearly unbearable to work as assistants to such men and to provide services such as making copies and serving tea.

The four recurring criteria in OLs' gossip about men all relate to discriminatory company policies. For many women, it was "part of the deal" that men be courteous to them, be attentive to their needs and complaints, be competent managers, and be generous. A man who failed to meet any one of these criteria was often reproached for not carrying out his responsibility. He was criticized for unfairly profiting from the system without doing his share of work. OLs were disgusted by a man who conveniently alternated between upholding and neglecting discriminatory policies as they suited his purpose.

OLs sometimes stated explicitly that the company's discrimination against them meant that men had to shoulder certain responsibilities. An OL on the bank floor vented her anger during lunch: a man had mildly complained of his busy schedule and talked enviously of the woman who could leave work early. Hearing her story, the OLs agreed that it was not fair for the man to say such a thing to her, because their positions in the company were completely different. One of the OLs protested, "He says such a thing only when it's convenient, and other times treats us as 'girls'!"

Most OLs had little sympathy for busy men. The employees of the bank were allowed to take fifteen days off in addition to one-week vacations in the summer and in the winter. Women took turns taking at least a day off every month. Men, however, seldom took a day off. When I pointed out the difference to an OL, she replied, "Why, of course. They're that much better paid. I would get really furious if they were able to take as many holidays as we can." At another time, a man was strongly condemned for leaving work early to play mah-jongg while his female assistant stayed overtime to type his report. An OL expressed her feelings succinctly, "If they're going to discriminate against us, they should at least protect us."

Because OLs' gossip seemed unreasonable and capricious, men tended to view angry women as "creatures of impulse" and despise their gossip. However, OLs' criticisms of men are not without reason. OLs may not stand up and advocate equal treatment. They may not even use the term *discrimination*. But their gossip shows that they are in most cases strongly aware of the unfairness they face. Gossiping women are not "merely" carried away by emotion; through gossip, they assert that if men are to take advantage of discriminatory policies, they must shoulder the accompanying responsibility. OLs are quick to identify any man who evades men's responsibility and yet makes the most of the inequitable system. Such a man meets strong opposition from OLs for "taking a free ride."

## The Effects of Gossip

As we have seen, OLs' gossip makes it costly for men to discriminate against women; it ensures that men pay their "dues" for such discrimination. For gossip to be truly effective, however, reputation must be important to men. In large Japanese firms, this indeed seems to be the case.

In order to climb the organizational hierarchy, a man must prove his competence as a manager. One of the key requirements of a manager is the ability to supervise his subordinates, including OLs. Failure to gain cooperation from OLs is often regarded as a sign of a man's weakness as a manager. A man's potential as a manager is questioned by company executives and personnel directors if he has a bad reputation among women.

A man may, therefore, try to give the impression to his boss that he is on good terms with OLs. One OL at Tōzai told me that even though she and her immediate supervisor quarreled often, the man never mentioned this to the vice-general manager or complained of her disagreeable attitude. In fact, she had often heard him praise her work in front of the manager. The woman suspected that this was a calculated move to indicate to the manager that the man got along well with his assistant.

Men seemed to fear that the personnel department would hear of their bad reputation. Unlike human resource departments in typical American companies, personnel divisions of Japanese firms usually wield considerable power because they single-handedly do the hiring for the entire organization. They also keep track of all employees' performances and evaluations and assign jobs and positions. If the personnel department suspects a man of being a poor manager of OLs, that man has little chance of promotion. In her study of a large American company, Rosabeth Kanter found that a secretary's opinion of her boss did not affect his fate in the company (1977). This is not true in Japanese companies. What OLs think about their superior often matters to the man's future in the firm.

I do not argue that reputation is not a matter of concern for OLs. On the contrary, most women, especially for the sake of finding marriage partners, preferred to have a good name rather than a bad name among their male colleagues. Many wished to be considered attractive and feminine. Some flirted. A number of women I interviewed said that there were quite a few such women in the workplace and indicated contempt for them by calling them *burikko* (a woman who exaggerates femininity by acting "cute"). Reputation, however, was not as directly

linked to women's marriage prospects as it was to men's promotions. A woman did not necessarily look for a husband in the workplace, whereas a man had to "make it" in the company. Moreover, unlike the majority of men who were tied down to the company they worked for, many women thought that if worse came to worst, they could leave the workplace. Therefore, maintaining a good name in the office was ultimately more important for men than for women.

For OLs' gossip to damage a man's reputation as a competent manager, that gossip must disseminate. And disseminate it did. Men feared the way women's gossip spread like wildfire. As a form of entertainment all OLs could participate in, gossip circulated fast and wide. As discussed in chapter 2, OLs spend long working hours together but are not necessarily close friends. Their relationships are frequently superficial, and they rarely disclose their innermost feelings to any but their few intimate *dōki*. Under such circumstances, gossip concerning men becomes a handy topic in which all women can participate. The following sentiments, voiced by a woman who used to work as an OL in a general trading company, are representative: "There wasn't any overt hatred between-us university graduates and junior college graduates. But I'm sure both sides felt a little uneasy with each other. That's why gossiping about men is popular. It's the safest thing to talk about. It's one thing we can all talk freely about. We can relax when we say bad things about men. We feel the togetherness." In contrast, she thought that gossip about women was taboo except within a truly close circle of friends. She explained, "We can't gossip about women. It's too scary. You don't know how the story might leak." When I asked her whether this meant that it was all right for gossip about men to leak out, she responded that it was in fact good for a man being gossiped about to hear the story so that he could change his attitude accordingly.

Because men were such a safe and handy topic, gossip about them was frequent and enthusiastic. The OLs at Tōzai tirelessly repeated whatever story was current that day whenever a new listener joined the group. As a result, word spread rapidly, so that usually by the next day, all the women on the floor and perhaps many more knew how a man had offended an OL.

Men sometimes discovered what OLs were gossiping about at lunch because women continued to gossip during regular business hours. OLs seldom reproached a man to his face, but they did not refrain from talking even when other men were within hearing distance. When the victim was not a general or a vice-general manager and, therefore, not

too powerful, women sometimes deliberately let the man know that he was being gossiped about.

Having overheard women's talk, many men I interviewed could point out one or two men in their offices who were unpopular among women. A man working in a machine-tool manufacturing company described the situation to me:

I'm sure there are men who are liked and others who are disliked by girls. I can tell because I often hear them complain that this man does such and such a thing, or that man's such and such a habit makes them sick. When I hear them say these things, it makes me realize that although girls usually smile, they say what they want to say behind our backs. I heard them say things like they felt disgusted at a man who tapped them on the shoulder from behind, or that a man had made an unreasonable request. That sort of thing.

Similarly, a banker told me that women could not care less about being overheard by men. He added, "When I hear them say terrible things about men, I just hope I won't become the next target of their criticism. I try not to do things that will offend them. I think it's only natural for a man to think so." By talking in front of men, OLs wittingly or unwittingly made some men think twice about their attitudes toward women.

*OTHER LISTENERS OF A GOSSIP*

In addition to damaging a man's reputation as a competent manager, gossip interfered with a man getting his work done by making it difficult for him to gain the cooperation of OLs. OLs often stopped cooperating with a man they did not like, as the following statement from a man working in a home electronic manufacturing company indicates:

Girls work according to their likes and dislikes. They keep smiling at you, but once something goes wrong between you and them, that's the end of it. When a girl says, "I don't like that man," that means she won't cooperate with him. There's no such a thing as distinguishing between private feelings and work. The girl becomes very emotional, and it takes a hell of a time to restore the relationship.

Another man working in a research institute observed, "Women work as the mood takes them. They will do a very tedious job for men they like, but for those they don't like, they either postpone doing the work or they don't do it at all." Although none ever refused entirely to cooperate, OLs at Tōzai often made a wry face when a man they did not like requested their assistance. Many men said women's displeased looks made them hesitate to ask for their help again.<sup>2</sup>



Naturally, men feared the spread of gossip. As we have seen, OLs who heard a bad story about a man began to take a dim view of him. Many men agreed that being disliked by one OL was the same as being disliked by all the OLs. A man working in a general electrical and electronic products manufacturer noted, "It's really something how women are connected with each other. For example, girls always eat lunch together. If you offend one OL, you'd better be prepared to receive queer looks from all other OLs." A banker described a similar situation in his office: "If one girl decides that this man is no good, then all the girls start thinking in the same way." Because being gossiped about increased the likelihood that a man would lose the cooperation of many OLs, men feared women's gossip. They knew that the climate of opinion formed by gossip frequently encouraged OLs to resist in other ways (see chapter 5 for further discussion).

### Critical and Persistent Gaze

Gossip was a form of entertainment for OLs. Therefore, it was not limited to men's unpleasant behavior but also included reports on their pleasant characteristics, their chances for promotion, funny stories, and other information about them. Any story about men was a safe subject that all OLs could enjoy. Besides, in the mundane worklives of OLs, there were not that many new things to talk about at lunch day after day. Under the circumstances, any tale concerning men was bound to have some value.

One of the distinctive features of OLs' gossip was that a man was seldom assessed by himself but was customarily compared to another man. For example, when OLs put down X-san who never gave them a treat, he was at the same time compared with Y-san who took them out for lunch occasionally. Y-san's pleasant behavior was thus mentioned and admired in OLs' lunchtime talks.

This comparison made women's criticism more powerful. Contrasting "bad" and "good" examples indicated that their criticism was well grounded and that it was more than just idle complaint. If no man ever indulged OLs, then perhaps the demand that women be indulged by men was unreasonable to begin with and their complaints groundless. However, if OLs could point to men who did give them treats, then their accusation that a man was stingy became more credible.

Men seemed to find this comparison one of the most irritating as-

pects of women's gossip. The vague charge that he was stingy did not embarrass a man as much as the claim that all the men had bought OLs souvenirs from overseas trips except him. OLs at Tōzai were well aware of the effect of comparison and frequently used it to their advantage. They made elaborate displays of presents given and let other men know that they had received treats. One OL described how souvenirs from overseas trips had escalated into expensive presents such as handbags because of the "competition among men." Reports about men's good characteristics were, therefore, as important as information about their unpleasant attitudes. Women annoyed men by constantly comparing them to each other.

OLs also entertained themselves by gossiping about men's performance records. Because they were excluded from the competition for advancement, they could afford to be irresponsible onlookers. OLs on the bank floor had access to surprisingly confidential data. For example, a woman was typing a chart one day that contained personal information on employees, including position, occupational grade, educational background, and the year of joining the bank. The OL explained to me that every woman in the clerical track became secretarial grade II in ten years counting from the time she finished high school, regardless of whether she joined the firm immediately afterward or went on to receive higher education. In the case of men, however, the difference in their speed of promotion increased as they accumulated tenure. She showed me the chart she was typing, pointed at three men's names, and informed me that they had all joined the bank in the same year. One man was already *buchō* (general manager) with the councillor III grade, the next man was *kachō* (section manager) with the councillor II grade, and the last man did not have any title. It was evident that the OL felt she should not discuss such matters openly, for instead of calling the names, she pointed at them silently and asked suggestively, "See?" She then added, "I bet there's a large difference in their compensation, too."

I later learned that OLs enjoyed using their knowledge of personnel data. The man without the title was looked down upon by women and secretly given the nickname "Makkun." They referred to the man considerably older than themselves with the suffix *kun*, a term customarily given to an inferior male.

OLs coolheadedly observed men's serious struggle for promotion. They knew that there was a strict hierarchical relationship among the three general managers and that the lowest-ranking general manager

always made sure he was the first to get in a company car and wait for the other two managers to appear whenever they went out together. An OL also noted that the manager customarily took the least honorable seat, the one next to the driver. She commented, "It's not an easy business being a man. Even if he has become a general manager, he must still try to please those in higher positions. There seem to be no limits." When they witnessed the harsh realities of being the "company warriors," many OLs seemed somewhat glad not to be part of the game.

OLs made the most of their privilege of observing peacefully men's often desperate struggle to survive the race for promotion. During lunch one day, the OLs gossiped about a section manager who used to work on the floor. He was known to be hard upon his male subordinates. The OLs narrated how his first victim stopped coming to work; finally, a vice-general manager had to visit his house and persuade him to return to the office. Uchida-san, an unpopular man among the women, became the boss's next target. They remembered how the manager tore up Uchida-san's reports in the presence of other people. They entertained themselves describing the way Uchida-san bent his head and stood in an upright posture without daring to make the slightest move while his boss reproached his work. "He wouldn't answer a phone even if it rang. He'd just continue standing in the same posture. So one of us used to pick up the phone and say he was in a meeting or something," explained an OL. The manager was infamous for "killing" his male subordinates but was never unkind to the OLs. Therefore, they could amuse themselves by watching in detail from a safety zone as men, especially those that they disliked, suffered at the mercy of the tyrannical boss.

OLs' attitudes as bystanders were reflected in their words. They called men in their twenties and early thirties who did not yet have any title "those young ones," or "the young people." These phrases make sense if used by older men in higher positions to refer to people considerably younger than themselves. It was rather strange, however, for OLs who were younger than the men to use such expressions. Instead of referring to the relation between the men and themselves as one would normally do, OLs expressed the men's objective position within the organizational hierarchy. This shows how easy it was for women to detach themselves from the office hierarchy and assume the neutral stance of onlookers.

Furthermore, OLs entertained each other by sharing funny stories about men. They narrated how a man in a hurry to inform people that a colleague's mother had passed away caused confusion by mistakenly

saying over the phone that the listener's mother had died. They convulsed with laughter over the tale of a general manager who had to change his attire to attend a funeral; one of the OLs brought him a black necktie, then left, and he began to change in his private room. Remembering that she had forgotten to inform him that a car was waiting, she returned. Her voice from behind the door caught the manager by surprise, and he answered in great confusion, "W-w-wait! D-d-don't come in yet!" Long after the manager had left for the funeral, the OL, still giggling, said, "Oh, it was so-o-o funny. The way he was upset and all! He was so cute. We're making a laughingstock out of the general manager, aren't we? But, you know, we all like him." Apparently, the OLs enjoyed the very human reaction of the usually sober and dignified general manager. Needless to say, the story was passed on to other OLs during lunch.

The general manager's story was told for pure fun. However, a humorous story was sometimes told to make fun of the man concerned. This happened more often with unpopular men. For example, one man was said to sweat freely. According to the OLs, he used eau de cologne in such abundance that it was possible to detect his presence from the smell. If they came into a room after he had left, they could tell at once that he had been there. In this way, minute details of men's behavior were turned into comical stories by the women. Their incessant gaze directed at men was sometimes kind but more often critical.

OLs exchanged information on men that seemed trivial and insignificant to an outsider. That a man keeps a picture of his pet cat in his wallet or that a man's daughter went to Australia on a school excursion may be utterly uninteresting for someone who does not know the men concerned. However, this information interests the OLs who work with these men day after day. Any story concerning their common acquaintances was worth being told to break the monotony of the OLs' work-lives. However, I suspect that the stories were also interesting because they revealed that the stern-looking man adored a pet cat, or that the stingy section manager sent his daughter to an expensive private school. By disclosing the personal lives of men, gossip enabled the OLs to imagine characteristics the men did not reveal at work.

Many researchers have documented how a Japanese *sarariman* is expected to put his company and work before his relationships at home (Allison 1994; T. Lebra 1981; Ōsawa Mari 1993; Rohlen 1974; E. Vogel 1963). It is said that as *kaisha ningen* (company people), men work so hard that they spend little free time at home. The assumption is that

unless they commit themselves intensely to work, they won't be promoted. The wives' role is to provide various domestic services to husbands who have little time to take care of themselves at home and not to distract them.

Because a successful businessman is expected to give himself wholeheartedly to his work, men at Tōzai were keen to present themselves as "company persons" and downplay their private lives and roles as husbands and fathers. As Erving Goffman notes, "A performer tends to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products" (1959, 48). Men often boasted of how late they had worked the previous night and were in general reluctant to talk about home and family. Anne Allison (1994) similarly observes how a Japanese white-collar worker turned his absence from home into evidence of hard work and made it the subject of competition among his colleagues.

OLs were an audience for men's performance as "company people." They suspected, however, that the character a man projected at work was not all there was. When a man inadvertently revealed a part of himself that he took care to conceal, OLs found it amusing in part because it was inconsistent with his usual performance. They were eager to know that a man adored a pet cat or that a manager sent his daughter to an expensive private school because such details confirmed that the supposed "company person" indeed had a personal side, just like the OLs.

### *Ojisan kaizō kōza*

OLs' gossip and other aspects of their lives that have hitherto remained closed to outsiders are being made public through books published recently in quick succession.<sup>3</sup> Many of these behind-the-scenes stories of OLs are written by women working in a company, although not necessarily as clerical assistants, and are based on information collected from women working as OLs in various firms. For example, the editing groups Onēsama Company for *Tonari no OL zubari 36 gyōkai* (OLs next door in thirty-six industries speak frankly) and Nippon no OL Kenkyūkai for *Nippon no OL tachi* (Japanese office ladies) each distributed questionnaires to one thousand OLs in an attempt to delineate ideal typical OLs.

A book that introduces various well-known companies to prospec-

tive OLs, *Shin OL zukan* (The new OLs' pictorial book), also gathered data from women working in those companies. The focus of this volume is not on major business activities of the companies or sales and profit figures, as is usually the case with recruitment books consulted by job-seeking graduates, but is instead on the daily working lives of OLs. *Shin OL zukan* discloses whether OLs are responsible for mopping the floor and wiping the office desks, whether men make their own copies, whether OLs can make private phone calls, and how prevalent marriage between employees is. The authors consider this information vital for any women interested in working at these companies.

Many of the books quote OLs extensively. The name of the woman quoted is not usually disclosed, but her age and the type of company where she works are indicated. The overall impression conveyed by the use of quotes is that the book tells the true stories of OLs. One volume, *OL jutsu* (The art of being an OL), consists entirely of interviews with more than a hundred OLs.

Many authors expect their books to be read by men as well as by women. *OL jutsu* explains on its cover page that the book is intended for men working in a company: "How do women sitting nearby observe you every day? Please read this book laughingly, angrily, and, if possible, seriously" (Group Nagon 1990). Gotō Ukiko, the editor of *All That's OL!* and *It's OL Show Time!*, is reported to have attributed the recent demand for books on OLs to men who wish to better understand women: "Women have come to account for over 40 percent of the working population, and their work style has changed. As a result, it is no longer possible to manage personnel without considering women. Men are taken aback at this change and want to know the true nature of women" (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2 December 1991). In fact, according to the same article, the four books, *All That's OL!*, *Imadoki OL daizukan* (The encyclopedia of contemporary OLs), *Saigo ni warau OL wa dareda?* (Who is the last OL to laugh?), and *Tonari no OL zubari 36 gyōkai* (OLs next door in thirty-six industries speak frankly), had each sold approximately ten thousand copies as of December 1991, and 80 to 90 percent of their readers were men. In this respect, it is revealing that one book states explicitly in the title that it is written "for men who can no longer understand women" (*Josei ga wakaranakunatta ojizamatachi e*).

Among the most successful and most influential books on OLs are those in the series *Ojisan kaizō kōza* (Lessons for transforming men), which are based on a popular two-page column published in the weekly

magazine *Shūkan Bunshun*. The column started in 1987, when two women, Shimizu Chinami and Furuya Yoshi, came up with the idea of reporting on ordinary OLs' views of the male middle managers with whom they worked. They formed the "Committee of Two Hundred OLs," a clublike group, to distribute questionnaires to OLs working in different companies, asking their opinions on male middle managers. Statistical data and quotes were published, along with funny and frank comments by Shimizu and Furuya. Among the wide range of topics discussed in *Ojisan kaizō kōza* (hereafter *Ojisan*) are men's poor taste in everything from ties, socks, undershirts, and casual clothes, to briefcases; repellent physical characteristics such as bald heads, dark eyebrows, flabby buttocks, and long little fingernails; annoying habits such as thinking aloud, boasting, making gross noises while eating, and lowering their trousers in public in order to tuck in their shirts; and desperate efforts to be promoted.

Although the column was initially scheduled to appear only ten times, it became such a smash hit that it never ended; it was still going a decade after its start, in the winter of 1997. The membership of the "OLs' Committee" continued to grow, reaching 1,200 by the end of 1989. The columns were compiled in six books and adopted for television and film, as I learned from interviews with Shimizu and the editor, Sasamoto Kōichi (Shimizu and Furuya 1989).

Coauthor Shimizu emphasizes that when she and Furuya started *Ojisan*, they did not intend to publish in a magazine, much less become famous figures in Japanese journalism. Shimizu was working in a tedious job as a software programmer in a leading electronics company. To kill time, she began using a fax machine, because "it looked like you were doing work." She and her friend Furuya faxed simple questionnaires to friends working in different companies, asking such things as "Is a man in your office sometimes laughed at because he is wearing a funny tie?" They collected as many as two hundred answers within a week. She attributes the ease with which they were able to collect answers to OLs' latent desire to amuse themselves with matters regarding men in their offices. She says, "OLs wanted to have fun with things concerning men. Once we put a little system in place, it spread rapidly."

*Ojisan* indeed seems to be a slightly exaggerated version of OLs' gossip. For example, *Ojisan* discusses how men make desperate efforts to please their superiors, quoting the following reports from OLs:

When I handed out sweets in my office, Noguchi *kachō* [section manager] first said he did not want one. But, on learning that the sweets were a gift

from *buchō* [general manager], he came to me hurriedly to receive one, and said in a loud voice that everybody could hear, "I really like sweets."

*Buchō* called from the meeting room next door, "Hayashi ku-un." By the time I turned around, Hayashi *kachō* had already rushed to the room. (Shimizu and Furuya 1989).

*Ojisan* exposes OLs' distaste for the leather shoulder bags that were popular among businessmen at the time: "Anything is better than leather shoulder bags. Men with shoulder bags look bad: the bag bites into the shoulder, crumples the suit, and exposes a fat belly. It is a miserable sight. Some shoulder bags are discolored and look as if they stink. They may be expensive bags, but they certainly make men look shabby" (Shimizu and Furuya 1989). Sasamoto Kōichi, the editor of *Shūkan Bunshun* when the series started, believes that *Ojisan's* success was driven by men's shock upon learning the OLs' views. When a man read the column, he realized that OLs observed him in great detail and often with malicious intent. Sasamoto says that *Ojisan* made public the secret, whispered talk of OLs.

Things that are difficult to say directly to the person concerned can be expressed through *Ojisan*. Many men did not know that OLs thought leather shoulder bags ugly until the series reported this opinion. According to Sasamoto, quite a few men in his company stopped using shoulder bags altogether when the column was printed. He thinks men care very much how they appear in the eyes of OLs.

Sasamoto was ultimately responsible for deciding to publish *Ojisan* in *Shūkan Bunshun*. He says that he changed little of the original series proposed by the two women. The only major modification was the title: the authors initially named the column *Ojisan kaizō keikaku* (A plan to transform men). Sasamoto softened the title by replacing *keikaku* (a plan) with "*kōza*" (lessons). He thought it more appealing if the title emphasized the idea of teaching men rather than laying out a plan to transform them.

One of the key concepts of the column, Sasamoto maintains, is the word *ojisan*. For lack of a better expression, I have translated the word as "men," but it means much more than that. According to a Japanese dictionary, *oji* with the suffix *san* indicates an unrelated, middle-aged man (Kindaichi, Saeki, and Ōishi 1984), which is contrasted to the female counterpart, *obasan*. Although the word is generally employed in a neutral sense, it is at once very awkward and sarcastic when used by OLs to refer to their bosses and other male coworkers. In Japanese offices, subordinates, including OLs, usually call their superiors by their

titles, such as Tanaka *buchō* and Nakamura *kachō*. It is therefore decidedly out-of-the-ordinary for an OL to refer to her boss as *ojisan*.

Sasamoto presumes that the term *ojisan* became popular because it appropriately stressed the way young OLs in their twenties looked at men in their offices. The word suggests that OLs do not see men as their fellow workers, but regard them as unfamiliar objects to observe. It illustrates that OLs think of men as strangers who lead completely different lives from their own. The word left a very strong impression on Sasamoto and was a dominant factor in his decision to publish the work.

I suspect another reason for the word's popularity among the general public is that it aptly captures OLs' ironic indifference to office hierarchy. Although OLs are officially at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, they have, in another sense, an existence that transcends it. They remain aloof from the office hierarchy because they are excluded from the race for promotion. It makes small difference to them whether Tanaka-san is a *buchō* or a *kachō*. Indeed, for that matter, he is just a plain, middle-aged man, or *ojisan*, to them. Rodney Clark argues that the use of standard ranks in Japanese companies to address people and to refer to them gives the ranks immense social significance, for "neither a rank holder nor those he deals with can easily forget his status relative to theirs" (1979, 106). By calling a man *ojisan* and thereby removing his title, OLs demonstrate that they can indeed forget his status. The word *ojisan* shows how women can strip away all the authority that cloaks a man and treat him as a mere middle-aged duffer.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to point out that OLs' indifference to office hierarchy does not result from an inability to appreciate rank and order. Women's disregard for authority has often been wrongly attributed to their weak business sense. Women ignore office hierarchy, it is held, because they do not appreciate the importance of maintaining order in a large bureaucratic organization. Moreover, women's disrespect for the boss is frequently taken to be proof of their overly emotional character. Whenever OLs find something unpleasant about a person, it is said, they put on a long face regardless of their relationship to the person. Such women, the argument goes, are not professional businesspeople (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 17 February 1994; 15 June 1992; 5 January 1991).

The idea that women are emotional and unfit for serious business on the ground that they show little respect for office authority ignores an important aspect of OLs' worklives: women rigidly observe seniority among themselves. As we saw in chapter 2, a woman pays respect to a senior OL in various ways. She uses polite terms or, in extreme cases,

honorific terms when speaking to her. She gives way in walking through doors and narrow aisles. In elevators, she offers to stand behind the buttons and press them. In fact, I suspect that the discord among OLs caused by contradictory index of seniority would not be as strong if hierarchy were taken lightly. Therefore, it is not appropriate to interpret OLs' disregard for male authority as indicative of their general inability to respect organizational hierarchy.

Let us return to analysis of why *Ojisan* became so popular. In addition to attributing the success of the column to the shock that men felt upon learning the malicious intent of OLs' gaze, Sasamoto points out how well the column fit the magazine. As a weekly magazine, *Shūkan Bunshun* is unique in that it is widely read by women although its major readers are businessmen. According to Sasamoto, the ratio of male to female readers of *Shūkan Bunshun* is approximately 6:4, whereas most other magazines in Japan are read almost exclusively by one sex. That the magazine has both male and female readers ensures that the column is read by both sides—those who accuse and those who are accused. It would not be half as fun, Sasamoto maintains, if *Shūkan Bunshun* lacked either men or women as readers: OLs' accusations would lose their sting if there were no *ojisan* to read them, and *Ojisan* would not be able to reflect an increasing number of OLs' voices if there were no female readers to offer feedback.

Coauthor Shimizu states that there are in general two different types of humor in columns such as *Ojisan*: "liable to be true" and "not liable to be true." The former amuses a reader who finds a remark true to life. "Yes! Yes! This definitely happens!" is the reader's reaction. In contrast, the latter is so incredible that it is foolishly funny. "No, this cannot be," the reader responds. Although Shimizu tries to include both types of humor in the column, she thinks *Ojisan* is popular predominantly for the "liable to be true" type of humor.

Although OLs energetically accuse men in their office of various transgressions, Shimizu warns that their lively criticisms do not necessarily empower them. By participating in *Ojisan*, OLs effectively renounce their claims and responsibilities toward work. It is only because they have abandoned all such rights and duties that they can speak out in the way they do. Shimizu says that OLs do not stand in the same "ring" (*dobyō*) with *ojisan*. She explains with the following example:

Let's assume that there are two buildings standing across the street. A phone rings and your boss is summoned to the building across the street by his

superior. It's funny, isn't it, to watch him rush to the building, ignoring the red light. But if you were yourself a *kachō*, you might do the same thing. Or, let's suppose the president of your company looks like an octopus. You and your colleagues laugh at him and secretly call him "that octopus." But if you must curry favor with the president because your whole family depends on the money you make, then you might stop calling him "octopus."

Shimizu adds that in Japanese society, women never have to stand in the same ring as men.

Sasamoto holds similar views. He points out that *ojisan* and OLs are not on the same footing: An OL who makes an accusation remains anonymous, whereas an *ojisan's* right to defend himself is not guaranteed. OLs are in a stronger position than *ojisan*. Sasamoto suspects that it is this reversal of real-life positions that makes the column amusing. This relative unfairness is permissible because the topics covered by the series are not usually serious. *Ojisan* seldom discusses "big issues" such as sex discrimination or the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. Instead, its favorite themes are men's tasteless attire and their peculiar habits.

## Conclusion

Many OLs watch men's every move day by day, hour by hour. In so doing, they are particularly alert to men's disagreeable behavior, which they report to each other during lunch break. Although OLs rarely discuss discrimination directly, many are keenly aware of the situation in which they work and have a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as well as those of men. Men and women have unequal rights in the organization, and most OLs think that responsibilities should reflect this discrepancy. For instance, they often believe that it is men's responsibility—not their responsibility—to make sure that work gets done, because it is men who ultimately enjoy the fruits of the labor. Men must, in this way, pay their dues for treating women unequally. Those who do not pay are criticized as "free riders." Such men include those who are arrogant, those who remain indifferent to OLs' needs and complaints, those who do not provide generous treats, and those who demonstrate little aptitude for business. According to women, these men have acted unfairly according to the rules of the game.

Certain men earn a bad reputation among OLs, to the point where anything they do is likely to meet with OLs' disapproval. Women's dislike of a man frequently culminates in physical aversion, which gives men the impression that women's criticism is unreasonable and emotional. Most men are careful, however, not to invite the hostility of women, because a bad reputation among women can harm a man's prospects for promotion. A bad reputation often means that OLs will not cooperate readily with the man's requests, which raises doubts in the minds of company directors and personnel managers about the man's ability to supervise OLs and about his overall competence as a manager. In chapter 5, I discuss how the climate of opinion thus generated frequently encourages women to resist in other ways.

Japanese OLs whom I came to know are similar to American secretaries described by Kanter (1977), in that both have limited access to formal means of control within the firm and use gossip to gain power. Where they differ is the reason why gossip enhances their power. For Kanter's secretaries, gossip is a way to use their privileged access to information. Informal communication through secretaries is so important, according to Kanter, that bosses sometimes use secretaries to get an inside reading of a situation. Few Japanese OLs, in contrast, occupy such a central position in information exchange. Except for executive secretaries, most OLs do not work closely enough with a specific man for them to gain knowledge that is useful and important to other men. Unlike the gossip of American secretaries, the gossip of Japanese OLs is primarily a way to destroy a man's reputation and thus his success in the firm.

Japanese OLs described in this chapter are like Kanter's American secretaries in that gossip makes their day more interesting. OLs not only discuss unpleasant characteristics of men but also their more pleasant aspects, their performance records, funny stories, and almost anything else about them. In fact, practically everything a man does is observed, evaluated, and reported on. OLs often eye men critically, from head to toe.

A number of studies examine the relationship between gender and the power to look. For example, in his discussion of European nude painting in which women were the sole subjects, John Berger (1972) argues that men act while women appear and that men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at. Similarly, Rosalind Coward maintains, "The ability to scrutinize is premised on power. Indeed the look confers power; women's inability to return such a critical and

aggressive look is a sign of subordination, of being the recipients of another's assessment" (1985, 75).<sup>5</sup> OLs' gossip is subversive because it is the product of women staring back at men. OLs assess men and judge men. It is men in turn who are embarrassed and irritated by women's persistent gaze.

*Ojisan kaizō kōza*, the popular column in a weekly magazine, has successfully brought to light OLs' everyday gossip about men in their offices. The column is widely supported because many people find "true to life" the situations that it describes. In particular, the word *ojisan*, originally used to refer to a middle-aged man to whom one was unrelated, has become a new fad word used by OLs to refer to their bosses and other male colleagues. The word emphasizes women's view of men as strange objects to observe. It also expresses women's ironic aloofness from office hierarchy.

Although many OLs energetically review and comment on male behavior, this criticism is possible only because they do not compete with men for promotion. Women can laugh at men making desperate efforts to please their superiors because OLs usually do not have to do the same to support themselves and their families. Only they can afford to observe calmly and coolheadedly men's funny, pathetic, and sometimes ugly struggle for promotion.

OLs therefore face a serious dilemma in their efforts to exercise power. They must resist the existing social order within the terms available to them as "office ladies." Their various demands, such as to be given attention and generous treats by men, and their spirit of criticism, manifested in *Ojisan*, take advantage of their unique position within Japanese corporate organizations: they are excluded from the race for promotion. Their resistance to male authority is premised on the condition that they remain outside of the serious business world.

Nevertheless, in spite of severe constraints, many OLs have challenged existing male authority. They have observed, reviewed, judged, and commented on men's behavior. By scrutinizing and criticizing men, they have called into question conventional understandings and customs in the male business world. In her discussion of OLs in Tokyo, Karen Kelsky observes that "the OL position is . . . an economic tool that enables some young Japanese women to participate in a larger, empowering OL culture. While OLs may not challenge men directly, in the Western legal/political sense, they do so indirectly, through the language, work patterns, and play patterns of their subculture" (1994, 10). I have found in my own research that OLs often question male au-

thority without taking actions that stand out in their routine worklife. They laugh at men who make desperate efforts to please their superiors, and thus they highlight how funny and pathetic—indeed, how abnormal—"company people" really are. By exposing the hitherto taken-for-granted work attitudes of many men, OLs call into question the basic values of *sarariman*.

As Shimizu, the coauthor of *Ojisan*, says, OLs' challenges may not be effective in bringing them into the same "ring" as men. But perhaps they may help create a new, completely different ring, where women are not only spectators but also participants. This is not a fantasy far removed from reality, because women's voices seem to have triggered discussion among men. As a banker said at the end of an interview, "Women in the company are perhaps to be pitied. But women have the home. My daughter, for instance, is very close to her mother. I make efforts to join the family by helping with household matters, but it's difficult when I have to spend so much time away from home. . . . The company is a place where lonely men are compelled to throng because they have been shut out from the home and have nowhere else to go."

Another man working for a manufacturer of heavy electrical equipment told me that he misses his family. Because his work keeps him in the office until late at night, his small daughter, who sees her father only infrequently, begs him to "call again," thinking that he lives somewhere else. Men are becoming increasingly aware that their company and work are depriving them of a decent human life. Kathleen Gerson (1993) has found that a significant proportion of American men would actually prefer to work less and parent more. She therefore argues that economic and occupational structures are more firmly divided by gender than by the preferences of individual men and women.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, some Japanese men, contrary to the stereotype of being work-obsessed, voice their desire to spend less time at work and more time with their children. They may wish to renounce long-established male privileges and claim new rights to care for their children.