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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

From professional aspirations to identity confirmation and transformation: The case of Japanese career women working for foreign subsidiaries in Japan

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Abstract

This study investigates what attracts career-oriented women to foreign subsidiaries and how they experience this work context. Based on 125 interviews with career-oriented women in Japan, we find that their frequent choice of foreign employers is not only motivated by *professional aspirations* but also by *identity-related aspirations*. Japanese women who embraced an internationalist orientation experience a *confirmation* of their identity by working for foreign subsidiaries; by contrast, those who still felt bound by traditional role expectations, undergo a liberating *identity transformation*. Based on the perceptions of these particular employees, we develop recommendations for gender diversity management in foreign subsidiaries. We further argue that women, who are disadvantaged in the local employment context, often desire that foreign subsidiaries implement *standardized* home country *human resource management practices*, instead of adopting local practices. By focusing on the recruitment of highly qualified women,

Abbreviations: AOF, Advantage of foreignness; GDM, Gender diversity management; HQ, Headquarters; HR, Human Resources; HRM, Human resource management; IMF, International Monetary Fund; LOF, Liability of foreignness; MNC, Multinational corporation; OECD, Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development; US, United States.

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foreign subsidiaries may turn their liability of foreignness into a competitive advantage.

KEYWORDS

career, diversity management, foreign subsidiaries, gender equality, identity, international human resource management, Japan

Practitioner notes**What is currently known about the subject matter**

- Foreign subsidiaries are frequently confronted with liability of foreignness (LOF).
- human resource management (HRM) managers frequently know about and cater for professional aspirations of career women.
- multinational corporations (MNCs) are frequently advised to localize their HRM practices.
- Foreign subsidiaries are frequently advised to adapt their gender equity management to the domestic context.

What this study adds

- We provide information about professional aspirations of career women alongside considerations about the relevance of identity considerations.
- We highlight the relevance of identity confirmation and transformation for gender equity management.
- We find career women might reject local HRM practices and prefer to work for foreign subsidiaries.
- We emphasize that foreign subsidiaries can turn their LOF into a competitive advantage.

Implications of the study findings for practitioners

- HRM managers will need to consider identity confirmation and transformation in their gender equity management.
- In a domestic environment characterized by gender discrimination, foreign subsidiaries should specifically recruit talented female employees.
- MNCs should standardize their gender equality HRM practices globally.
- Foreign subsidiaries should strive to transform their foreignness from a liability into an asset.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In many countries, major domestic corporations represent highly attractive employers for high potential employees, whereas subsidiaries of (equally important) foreign companies are perceived as distinctly less attractive (Newbury et al., 2006). In such cases, foreign corporations experience a significant liability of foreignness (LOF), as they are unable to compete with domestic employers for the best employees (Denk et al., 2012; Zaheer, 1995). However, previous studies have also suggested that in cultural and institutional contexts of discriminatory domestic employment practices, members of locally marginalized groups, especially women, might find foreign employers more attractive if they come from a context known to be less discriminating against women (Newbury et al., 2006; Newbury et al., 2014). Hence, in regions where domestic companies discriminate against women, female talent might enthusiastically welcome foreign employers if they standardize their subsidiary practices towards the more equal and just employment practices of their headquarters. In host countries characterized by significant gender inequality, foreign subsidiaries might therefore offset their LOF by targeting well qualified and career-minded local women (which we

will label in the following as “career women”) through proactive gender diversity management (GDM) as practiced in their home countries (Newburry et al., 2014).

In order to implement the best possible management practices for attracting and developing career women in environments, where domestic firms fail to fulfil the ambitions of local female talent, it becomes of utmost importance for MNCs to find out what really drives those women in their career choices. To address this research agenda, our study primarily investigates what is relevant to ambitious women in pursuing a professional career and how they perceive foreign subsidiaries as employers. As such, our study does not investigate employing companies or managers but the recipients of their management practices. Furthermore, we are less interested in the career women's perceptions of specific management practices (but still provide a certain amount of information about managerial activities which career women highlighted as particularly pertinent for them). By contrast, our main focus lies on investigating what attracts them, in more general terms, to work for foreign subsidiaries. This knowledge can assist foreign subsidiaries in countries with significant gender discrimination in fundamentally enhancing the quality of their HRM and particularly their GDM systems. To help provide rich insight into the perspectives of this target group to the HRM and GDM of foreign subsidiaries, we ask the following research question: *In host countries where domestic companies favor men over women, what attracts local career women to foreign subsidiaries and how do they experience this work context?*

To provide a more holistic picture, we do not limit this investigation to the career women's *professional aspirations*, defined as the professional goals they hope to achieve. Instead, we put a particular focus on how their potential attraction to foreign subsidiaries interacts with their *professional identity*, which refers to how membership in a profession influences the self-definition. As a result of our findings, we will draw conclusions, which should be able to assist foreign subsidiaries in successfully developing a GDM system that targets not only the local career women's professional aspirations but additionally and specifically their identity concerns. Beyond helping foreign-owned businesses to offset their LOF, this information may even help them to turn their LOF into an “asset of foreignness” (Ikegami et al., 2017; Taussing, 2017), thus gaining competitive advantage in comparison to other (domestic or foreign) organizations.

We chose to explore our research question with a qualitative, interview-based research design, as this method brings us close to our informants' “inner events” (Weiss, 1994). Going beyond the frequent focus on Western countries in the gender diversity literature (Cooke, 2022; Kemper et al., 2016, 2019), we selected Japan as our research setting, which we consider particularly well suited for the purpose of our investigation. In Japan, LOF is considered a particular challenge for MNCs, given the country's particular cultural and institutional context. As such, Japan is regarded a very difficult country for Western MNCs to enter (Pudelko, 2006). Primarily, challenges of GDM in Japan appear to be particularly acute (Eda, 2020; OECD, 2020). This extreme case puts the phenomenon under study into focus, thus making it specifically accessible to analysis, but simultaneously also yielding insights for more moderate conditions in other countries. While this qualitative study focuses on one particular country context, it is meant to generate theory relevant for other host countries with similar conditions as well.

To preview our main findings, we first found that many of our interviewees were attracted to foreign subsidiaries (in Japanese: *gaishikei*) due to advantageous prospects for their career progression. Given the widespread disadvantages Japanese career women experience in the domestic organizational context and the more gender-egalitarian policies and practices in foreign subsidiaries, this was not a surprise to us. However, we also discovered that their motivational context was significantly more complex. In addition to mere *professional aspirations* on the surface level, Japanese career women were attracted to working for a foreign-owned (mostly Western) employer also based on deeper level *identity-related aspirations*. More specifically, we observed two categories of identity-related aspirations. (1) Japanese career women who embraced from the start an internationalist orientation as key part of their identity experienced an *identity confirmation*, that is, a strengthening of their professional identity, by working for foreign subsidiaries. This identity confirmation made them even more attracted to their employer. (2) Those who originally experienced a conflict between the traditional role expectations (by others and themselves) as Japanese females and their desire to pursue a career found their work at *gaishikei* a liberating life choice and as such underwent an

identity transformation, that is, a process of significant identity change towards more Western concepts. This process attracted them even stronger to their employer.¹

Our findings have important implications beyond the Japanese context and help to shed new light on the aspirations behind women's career choices. Firstly, they show that in particular in countries where domestic employment practices are not in tune with basic desires of specific employee groups, career choices transcend professional considerations. In such environments, identity aspirations become an important driver of individual career choices. Depending on the identity status before entering a foreign organization, our study suggests that we should distinguish *identity confirmation* from *identity transformation*. On this basis, we provide recommendations on how foreign subsidiaries should recognize and satisfy not only professional, but also identity-related career aspirations. More specifically, they should implement "traditional" diversity management practices (e.g. equal pay) to address the former, but also tailored identity-related support (e.g. recognition) to address the latter.

Ultimately, we submit that conclusions from our findings can also contribute to inform a more general and abstract debate, which addresses one of the most complex challenges for MNCs: to establish the perfect balance between standardization and localization of management practices, here specifically GDM practices (e.g. Ouyang et al., 2019; Pudelko & Harzing, 2007, 2008). We found that particularly in host country contexts characterized by discriminatory management practices, standardization around a home country context typified by non-discriminatory practices can benefit locally discriminated groups, who may therefore embrace these practices enthusiastically. By rejecting local isomorphism (Zaheer, 1995) and targeting female talent via a tailored GDM in such host countries, foreign subsidiaries can turn their LOF at least partially into an AOF. Being and acting foreign through proactive GDM can thus become a competitive advantage.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Defining "career women"

Throughout various disciplines of social sciences, authors have expressed different ideas about what "career women" constitute. For Damaske (2011, p. 409), a sociologist, it already suffices for women to "work continually as adults" to qualify as career women. In management studies, Ansari (2016, p. 533) focuses more on the career output, defining career women as females "belonging to the middle and top tiers" of an organization. Honda-Howard and Homma (2001) use for their study in social psychology on Japanese career women a combination of input factors (high education) and output factors (having secured a full-time employment in white collar professions). By contrast, in cultural studies, Entwistle (2020: 285) proposes the definition of a career woman as "someone aiming to make it to positions of power often in previously male-dominated career structures" or at least "steer[ing] a steady course through male-dominated professions". In a very similar vein, HRM scholar Ezzedeen (2015: 243) defines career women as females "displaying professional ambitions, especially in fields where glass ceilings are prevalent".

For the purpose of our study, we base our definition on the conceptualizations of Entwistle and Ezzedeen, as they do not denote a certain career outcome but focus on the mindset of those women ("aiming to make it to positions of power") and on the particular context in which these women find themselves ("in fields where glass ceilings are prevalent"). We consider both aspects, mindset and context, of particular relevance for the purpose of our study. Particularly in Japan, the setting of our study, "career women" clearly constitute a distinct sub-group of the overall Japanese female population. Their mindset sets them apart from women concentrating on housework in deference to Japanese gender role expectations (Belarmino & Roberts, 2019) or even from the large group of Japanese working women, who are content to accept the supporting roles, part-time or temporary jobs without much prospect to pursue a corporate career, which even highly educated women have been traditionally assigned in the Japanese employment system (Bozkurt, 2012; Olcott & Oliver, 2014), a system that has been based on lifelong employment and the seniority system (Pudelko, 2006, 2009).

2.2 | Aspirations of career women

2.2.1 | Professional career aspirations

To understand what attracts women to certain employers, we need to focus on their motivations for selecting particular organizations to work for. The most obvious part of this complex are professional aspirations. Given the freedom women have gained through birth control, improving equal opportunities legislation and the increasing salience of personal attitudes and preferences in life-style choices, career trajectories are increasingly determined by women's personal preferences and professional aspirations (Hakim, 2000). Overall, there is evidence that women's career aspirations have changed significantly over the decades. Earlier studies revealed that women were—and partly still are—reluctant to position themselves as overly ambitious (Fels, 2004) compared to men. By contrast, more recent studies found that women are becoming more comfortable asserting their professional ambitions (Harman & Sealy, 2017). However, while gender equality can arguably nowhere be fully guaranteed, substantial barriers to women's professional aspirations still prevail in countries characterized by culturally deeply engrained gender inequality at the workplace (Kinias & Kim, 2012).

2.2.2 | Identity-related career aspirations

Next to purely professional considerations, career choices also relate to an individual's personal identity, defined by Gecas and Burke (1995: 42) as “the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others”. On the one hand, individuals are prone to selecting a career path that matches with their preexisting self-concept; on the other hand, job experiences help to also influence self-definition. So far, research has mostly emphasized the former effect. Culturally engrained gender roles constrain career aspirations of both men and women (Correll, 2004) by influencing which “professional possible selves” individuals envisage to define and create their professional identities (Slay & Smith, 2011).

Japanese women, the subjects of our study, appear to be particularly torn between traditional role expectations and a more progressive career-orientation. In a 2020 survey of Japanese women aged between 20 and 69, only 34.2% responded that they “actively want to continue developing [their] career” and a mere 18.7% “would be interested in a managerial position” (Nippon.com, 2020). Adachi's (2018) survey of work–family planning and gender role attitudes among Japanese youth showed that more than half of the female participants planned to quit working after childbirth. Other authors, however, also note an “increased consciousness and activism among women” (Cooke, 2022, p. 437), opposing gender discrimination in Japanese companies. A growing number of career-minded Japanese women is no longer prepared to accept the “rice paper ceiling” (Kopp, 2000) and is choosing less traditional paths for their lives (Smirles, 2017).

However, Japanese women often find it still difficult to construct an identity as emancipated professionals in the face of gender stereotypes and discrimination in domestic organizations (Ridgeway, 1997). If interpersonal interactions in highly gendered workplaces focus mostly on gender identity, while marginalizing a career-focused identity (Hatmaker, 2012), traditional role expectations are reinforced in female employees' identities and career aspirations are stunted.

In contrast, an empowering and egalitarian work environment may help to develop and encourage professional achievement and strengthen women's identities as capable and independent professionals. What matters, is to align career ambitions with a likeminded surrounding environment. Peters et al.'s (2013) identity-fit model of career motivation proposes that if employees see themselves as similar to prototypical members of their organization and believe that they fit into the organization, their career motivation and organizational commitment will increase (Van Dick et al., 2004). Foreign MNCs' subsidiaries in Japan may constitute the empowering identity-fit environment

that appears to be largely missing domestically. Our study explores what attracts Japanese career women to foreign subsidiaries, thus showing these employers how they can enhance the quality of their GDM practices.

2.3 | Gender diversity management

2.3.1 | Gender diversity management in foreign subsidiaries of MNCs

Considering that women make up approximately 50% of the world's population and its human capital, achieving gender equality at work counts for reasons of justice but also of productivity among the most acute global challenges (United Nations, 2019). Due to this, many organizations have initiated GDM programs. These programs may include a wide variety of practices, such as gender-blind selection, anti-discrimination/equal employment opportunity programs, education and training, career development, mentoring programs, and work-family friendly policies (Ali et al., 2015; Kemper et al., 2016; Olsen et al., 2016).

Multinational corporations need to consider for their gender management policies and practices the respective local contexts, given that each host country exhibits a unique socio-political and cultural setting, which influences the acceptance, implementation, and outcomes of GDM (Hennekam et al., 2017; Klarsfeld et al., 2014; Özbilgin et al., 2012). Gender issues are considered to be particularly deeply embedded in local culture and institutions (Guillaume et al., 2014), typically subjecting GDM practices to strong local conventions and norms (Rosenzweig & Nohria, 1994). As a result of this, MNCs have been described as facing severe barriers and resistance when implementing globally standardized approaches to GDM (Alhejji et al., 2018; Cooke, 2022; Festing et al., 2015; Kemper et al., 2019). Ferner et al. (2005), Nishii and Özbilgin (2007) and Luring (2013) have shown for different home-host country combinations, the transfer of diversity management practices from headquarters to subsidiaries can turn into a competition between the headquarters aiming for global standardization and the subsidiaries struggling to gain local legitimacy. They also demonstrated how these attempts to roll out domestic diversity programs globally failed to achieve their objectives by antagonizing locals. Overall, GDM is considered very “sticky” and not easy to standardize across national boundaries (Alhejji et al., 2018; Cooke, 2022; Kemper et al., 2019).

2.3.2 | Gender diversity management in Japan

Japan represents a country context, which is characterized by its deeply rooted gender inequality and a clear separation of gender roles. Confucianism, one of the founding sources of Japanese culture, clearly segregates the public (male) sphere from the domestic (female) sphere (Barbasiewicz, 2013). Since Confucian concepts confine women as “family persons” to the household (Du, 2016, p. 402), their foremost role has traditionally been that of a good wife and mother (Lebra, 1998). A Japanese woman's traditional position is illustrated by the “three obediences” in Confucian ethics: “a woman should obey her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood” (Du, 2016, p. 402). These gender patterns are perpetuated into present times by prevalent stereotyped images of men as providers and women as homemakers on Japanese television (Yamamoto & Ran, 2014).

Women in an organizational work environment have traditionally been called “*shokuba no hana*” or *flowers of the office*, or, in more modern jargon, *OL* respectively *office ladies*, performing mostly supporting tasks for their male superiors (De Mente, 2004). According to Bozkurt (2012: 226), the traditional Japanese employment system was characterized “by women's low labor-force participation, their relegation to peripheral, temporary and marginal positions in the workforce and their near-absence from managerial posts”. Just a little over a decade ago, 97% of positions in the managerial category (*sogoshoku*) were still staffed by men, while jobs in the clerical track without options of career advancement (*ippanshoku*) were mostly given to women (Assmann, 2007). This striking imbalance is all the more remarkable considering that women in Japan make up 46% of university students (The Japan Times, 2020).

To make better use of female talent, Japan enacted the first Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1986. The legal mechanisms for ensuring gender equality in the workplace have progressed since then (Nippon.com, 2013). Former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe committed his government to building a “society where women shine”, achieving a growth of three million in the number of women employed in Japan during his years in office (Nippon.com, 2021). However, Japanese women continue to be highly concentrated in part-time and low-paying jobs (Inagaki, 2020). In addition, Japan's gender pay gap is the second largest among OECD countries (Eda, 2020). Japan fell to the 116th rank out of 146 countries in the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2022), down from 80 in 2006 and 104 in 2014, trailing countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and the United Arab Emirates.

Seeking alternatives to Japanese employers, many career-minded Japanese women turn, next to self-employment (Renshaw, 1999), to subsidiaries of foreign multinationals in Japan, as foreign-owned companies appear to pursue more gender egalitarian human resource policies than their Japanese counterparts (Olcott & Oliver, 2014). This impression is supported by a recent study by Kemper et al. (2019), according to which the majority of Western executives attaches high meaning and relevance to the kind of gender diversity and equality management practices they know from their home countries and find it rather natural to ensure females' rights also in their Japanese units. Apparently, most *gaishikei* in Japan model their more egalitarian working environment after their home countries' cultural values (Bozkurt, 2012).

Due to the extent that the GDM practices of foreign subsidiaries meet Japanese career women's professional and identity-related aspirations, these organizations may have an advantage in attracting the highest qualified female talent. This would be even more important, as Japanese male graduates from the top universities (traditionally the main access point to a successful career) are traditionally much more interested in working for a major Japanese *keiretsu* (e.g., Mitsubishi, Mitsui etc.) and less so inclined to work for a foreign subsidiary. While research focused mainly on what domestic and foreign organizations do in terms of GDM so far, we know very little about how (potential) female organizational members actually perceive these practices, what they desire in this respect and how they react. To help foreign subsidiaries and their human resource managers enhance the quality of their GDM, we therefore conducted an in-depth interview study investigating *what attracts local career women to foreign subsidiaries and how they experience this work context*.

2.4 | The standardization-localization debate

While our study does not primarily address aspects of the standardization-localization debate, it still allows for conclusions, which can inform this debate with regards to GDM in important ways. Thus, we wish to lay here the conceptual foundation for this contribution. Standardization towards headquarters practices or (perceived) best practices reflects an internal focus, as it is designed to integrate and harmonize practices across the entire organization. Localization, on the other hand, that is, the adoption of local practices, represents an external focus and strives to adapt subsidiary practices towards the cultural and institutional particularities of the host country (Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2018; Pudelko & Harzing, 2007).

Due to its embeddedness in local cultures (Romani, 2018), legal (MacKenzie & Martínez Lucio, 2018) and political (Edwards, 2018) systems, HRM has been described as the most localized management function of foreign subsidiaries (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007, 2008) and as the function most led by local HR managers (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). Within the area of HRM, the need for localization has particularly been highlighted for GDM (Hennekam et al., 2017; Klarsfeld et al., 2014). Cultural differences (e.g., in gender roles) and institutional differences (e.g. labor law, diversity regulations and employer-employee-relations) have regularly been named as reasons why HRM in general and GDM practices in particular cannot easily be standardized across countries (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Sippola & Smale, 2007).

In addition, localization has been pointed out as an instrument to overcome the already mentioned LOF. This liability stems from stakeholder concerns about the legitimacy of foreign firms, a lack of cultural sensitivity and the

long-term commitment to the host country (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Zaheer, 1995). To gain legitimacy and reduce LOF, MNCs have been frequently recommended to imitate local management practices (Zaheer, 1995).

But what if the local culture strongly favors men over women in the workplace and what if, at the same time, a high degree of LOF results in foreign subsidiaries having a low status among male job candidates (as clearly is the case in Japan)? In this case, LOF would prevent foreign subsidiaries from attracting the best qualified male candidates; and in addition, the localization of gender practices (i.e., the adoption of discriminatory host country practices) would lead to female candidates not being particularly interested in working for foreign subsidiaries either. Consequently, the adoption of more gender-neutral home country practices might provide foreign subsidiaries with a competitive edge in attracting valuable local female talent in the ongoing “war for talent” (Beechler & Woodward, 2009).

An upcoming strand of research is therefore also questioning whether a fit between national culture and management practice necessarily improves HRM effectiveness (Caprar et al., 2022; Newburry et al., 2006, 2014; Siegel et al., 2019). Due to variation between individuals or demographic groups within countries (Gerhart & Fang, 2005), some host country nationals “might not subscribe to the culture implied by the nationality indicated in their passports” (Caprar, 2011, p. 621). This means that the impact of foreignness on local legitimacy might not be monolithic across contexts (Newburry et al., 2014). It is to this strand of literature that we intend to contribute.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Research design

As we are seeking a broad understanding of how certain work conditions in a specific organizational and managerial context are perceived, narrated and interpreted by a particular group of employees, we regarded an inductive and interpretative approach most appropriate (Pratt, 2009). In the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we started out with the broad objective of investigating the career motivations of Japanese career women, as they stand in an exemplary fashion for women who are quite limited in their career opportunities in their domestic context. After several iterations between data collection, data analysis and revisiting the literature, our inductive approach gradually revealed the significance of identity-based aspirations, going beyond mere professional aspirations. Furthermore, it was due to our inductive research approach that we uncovered among identity-related aspirations the differentiation between what we subsequently described as identity confirmation and identity transformation. Since it is our objective to investigate career women's personal perspectives and their lived experiences, a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews appeared most appropriate (Gioia et al., 2013).

3.2 | Research setting

For our research purpose, we considered Japan to be an ideal country context. Firstly, Japan is a highly developed country, allowing us to isolate differences in gender (in)equality from developmental disparities. Furthermore, as the 3rd largest economy worldwide (IMF, 2021), Japan is a highly relevant country in terms of location for setting up subsidiaries abroad. More importantly, Japanese career women experience acute challenges in their domestic work environment (Eda, 2020). Many Japanese career women therefore choose to work for *gaishikei* and may be especially receptive to MNCs' GDM efforts. On the other side, foreign subsidiaries in Japan have major difficulties in attracting talented men to their operations, given the higher job security and status offered by domestic firms (Bozkurt, 2012), increasing the necessity of foreign subsidiaries to focus on female talent. Thus, the situation of career women and of the foreign subsidiaries render Japan ideally suited for our investigation. Such an exceptional case provides a particularly fertile ground for theorizing because the phenomenon under study is clearly more noticeable than it would be under more moderate conditions. At the same time, gender bias of varying degrees exists in many if not all locations

around the globe (OECD, 2020). Therefore, our sample of Japanese career women contains both unique features as well as characteristics that are transferable to other country contexts. On this basis, lessons for proactive GDM in foreign subsidiaries can be learned, which have the potential to offset MNCs' LOF.

3.3 | Data collection

Of our 125 interviews, 65 were with our target group, Japanese women working for foreign subsidiaries. The foreign employers our informants worked for were mostly large corporations from a broad variety of industries such as finance, law firms, manufacturing companies, consultancies, media, pharmaceuticals, tourism and health care. Practically all of them were headquartered in the West with the majority coming from the United States (27th rank out of 146 countries in the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index, cf. World Economic Forum, 2022). Others were from the United Kingdom (22nd rank), Australia (43rd rank), Germany (10th rank), Switzerland (13th rank), France (15th rank), Finland (2nd rank), and Sweden (5th rank). All these HQ countries perform significantly better regarding the Global Gender Gap Index than Japan (116th rank).

Numerous informants employed by foreign companies also had prior experience working in domestic companies, allowing them to reflect critically on human resource practices and GDM in the two types of organizations. We additionally conducted 33 interviews with women working for domestic organizations and 13 self-employed women to understand the motivations, experiences and perceptions of those who chose other careers. Six students aspiring to become career women, one retired career woman reflecting on her working life and weighing in on the current generation and seven foreign professionals working in Japan provided us with up-close, but outsider perspectives of Japanese career women. Throughout our sample, in line with Entwistle (2020) "career-mindedness" was our key sampling criterion, that is, we only included women who explicitly defined themselves as seeking professional advancement.

We included informants of different ages and in various career stages, ranging from prospective candidates to new recruits, top managers and retirees. Table 1 displays interviewees' key characteristics. We were struck by the consistency of our informants' attitudes across personal demographic criteria (age, marital status, children) or professional criteria (professions, industries, employing organizations, career stage). We consider this as an indication of the robustness of the concepts we were investigating.

Our interviews lasted 55 min to 3.5 h in length and averaged 1.5 h. These conversations were tape-recorded and then transcribed word for word, which resulted in 3400 pages of double-spaced transcripts. Seven out of our 125 interviews were not done with our focal group of Japanese career women, but with foreign, mostly female expatriates, who had worked closely with Japanese career women for several years. These additional conversations provided us with an outside perspective on gender diversity issues in Japan.

We originally set up our study to be longitudinal to investigate developments in individual perceptions and reactions towards gender inequality. Accordingly, we conducted interviews at four different time periods (2007, 2011, 2014 and 2017), sampling new informants every time. During this time span, we observed change in the sense of our interviewees increasingly acknowledging efforts of the Japanese government and corporations trying to increase the number of female managers in Japanese organizations but our interviewees working for foreign subsidiaries considered any progress to be painfully slow. As is typical for inductive research and its iterative processes, it was only during the most recent round of data collection that we uncovered the differentiation between what we subsequently described as identity confirmation and transformation. At this point, we also decided to have reached theoretical saturation.

Almost all interviews were conducted face-to-face, with very few exceptions that were done over Skype. The first 22 interviews were conducted by a female Japanese research assistant, who was thoroughly trained for this task by the first author. This was done under the initial assumption that female Japanese interviewees would be more comfortable to open up to an "ingroup member" and reveal their "honne" (their real self) instead of showing their "tatemae" (their public self). However, when the first author of this paper (a male Westerner with many years of

TABLE 1 Interviewees' demographic characteristics.

	Full sample	Working for foreign subsidiaries	Working for domestic organizations	Other
Age	Mean = 40 years, range = 16–83 years	Mean = 43 years, range = 23–65 years	Mean = 39 years, range = 21–68 years	Mean = 44 years, range = 18–83 years
Age groups	15%, 18–29 years 28%, 30–39 years 40%, 40–49 years 11%, 50–59 years 5%, 60–69 years 0%, 70–79 years 1%, 80–89 years	15%, 18–29 years 29%, 30–39 years 43%, 40–49 years 9%, 50–59 years 4%, 60–69 years	31%, 18–29 years 22%, 30–39 years 35%, 40–49 years 9%, 50–59 years 3%, 60–69 years	7%, 18–29 years 25%, 30–39 years 40%, 40–49 years 18%, 50–59 years 7%, 60–69 years 3%, 80–89 years
Marital status	41%, single 52%, married or widowed 7%, divorced	41%, single 48%, married or widowed 11%, divorced	41%, single 59%, married or widowed	40%, single 57%, married or widowed 3%, divorced
Children	40%, yes 60%, no	37%, yes 63%, no	35%, yes 65%, no	57%, yes 43%, no
Interviews 2007	22	22	0	0
Interviews 2011	34	20	7	7
Interviews 2014	19	8	6	6
Interviews 2017	50	15	20	15
Industry examples	Finance, law firms, manufacturing companies, consultancies, media, pharmaceuticals, tourism, health care			
Main HQ countries of their subsidiaries	UK, UK, Australia, Germany, Switzerland, France, Finland, Sweden and Hong Kong			

research experience in Japan) conducted a series of interviews for this project by himself, it was soon discovered that the female Japanese interviewees, specifically those working for foreign subsidiaries, considered him a “cultural ally” who would be particularly understanding and sympathetic towards their experiences. They regarded “the West” (rightly or wrongly) as the region of equal opportunities. As it turned out that our interviewees were very responsive to this approach, the first author decided to conduct the remaining 103 interviews himself.

In each of these interviews his role as a male Western interviewer was specifically discussed. Also, the fact that the interviews were conducted in English was addressed in all of the interviews. Our informants, again particularly those working for foreign subsidiaries, felt entirely comfortable talking in English in most cases, which most used daily for their job. Many considered this language choice even to be advantageous, expressing a certain degree of liberation in being able to express their feelings and frustrations in English, a language that allows much more direct and straightforward talk (“no need to beat around the bush”). Using their mother tongue, in contrast, would have required them to speak more vaguely and indirectly. This is fully in line with previous research. For example, Ryan (2009: 415) points out that Japanese women often feel that “expressing oneself in English offers the possibility of freedom from some of the more restrictive features of the Japanese language, specifically in the form of gendered codes, pragmatic niceties, formalities and register.”

We started with background questions about the interviewees' demographic characteristics, their employers and job role. Subsequently, we asked informants to provide in-depth descriptions of their job situation and potential gender inequalities at their workplace, possibly comparing different types of employers they had experienced. Such questions in this section included: “How would you evaluate your standing compared to male peers at your workplace/at previous workplaces?”, “Which human resource/GDM practices do you appreciate/disapprove of and why?”, and “How, if at all, have these aspects influenced your career choices/career trajectories?”

Through a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which we simultaneously collected and analyzed data, we came to understand that the interviewees' personal identity emerged as a powerful determinant of career motivations. To capture these unanticipated, but highly salient aspirations, we introduced additional questions in our interviews targeting the interrelations between GDM and women's professional identities. Questions in this section included: “To which extent does your current employer/did previous employers support your professional development?”, “What is required for you to succeed in your job?”, and “How do you evaluate these criteria?”

3.4 | Data analysis

We followed Gioia et al. (2013) and Locke (2001) in coding and content analyzing our interview transcripts, while still doing further interviews. For the data analysis we used the qualitative research software Atlas.ti. Cycling between the collection of new data, coding and the study of relevant literature allowed us to progressively focus our interviews around the emerging themes, understanding and probing them in increasing depth. Some of our initial codes were taken directly from the data as *in vivo* codes (for example, the quote “there is a lot of discussion about self-actualization” was labeled “self-actualization”). Others, which resonated more with theoretical concepts, were taken from the literature (for example, the quote “I noticed my new self at that time” was labeled “identity development”). If an informant's statement touched upon several aspects, we attached several code labels to it. For each code, we subsequently juxtaposed all relevant interview excerpts (“quotations”) across all interviews and summarized their gist in a short statement, a so-called first-order concept. The table in the Online-Appendix illustrates this process with selected quotations, codes and first-order concepts.

After the initial coding phase, we integrated related first-order concepts into more abstract second-order concepts. We employed the constant comparative method to develop these categories (Locke, 2001). First, we compared different parts of each interview to ensure consistency. We then contrasted the statements of women working for foreign subsidiaries with those working for domestic organizations, with self-employed women and with students. We also conducted comparisons along important demographic criteria (age, marital status, with or without

children). During this constant comparative process, we discovered some particularities of certain subgroups (e.g. older women had experienced the most acute gender inequality when they had started their careers in domestic organizations), but found the distinction between domestic and foreign employers by far the most noteworthy. Focusing on the stark contrasts our interviewees constructed between domestic organizations and foreign subsidiaries, we aggregated second-order concepts further into theoretical dimensions capturing both the professional opportunities attracting female Japanese talent to foreign employers and the identity-related experiences surrounding these career choices. Figure 1 depicts this process.

We tested our preliminary conceptualizations by explaining them to some of our interviewees and asking for feedback. These conceptualizations were only further pursued if interviewees saw their real-life experiences appropriately captured in our scholarly interpretations. We ultimately sought to reconnect our emerging theories to existing literature to enhance their conceptual relevance. In the following, we will explain our findings in detail and provide key quotes to substantiate our conceptualizations.

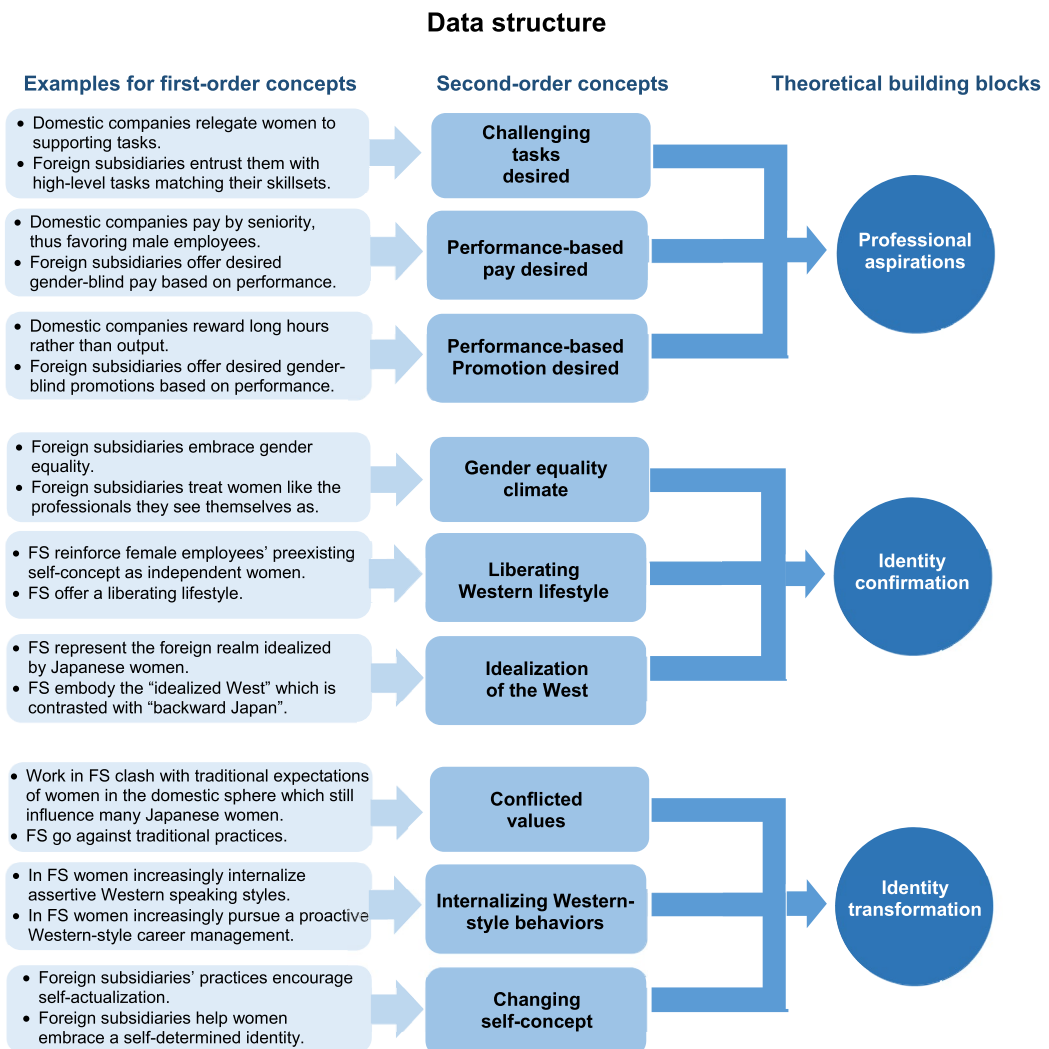


FIGURE 1 Data structure. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Professional aspirations

Confirming international statistical comparisons (OECD, 2020), virtually all the career-minded Japanese women in our sample described the working environment in Japanese corporations as still very unfavorable to women, emphasizing that they perpetuated traditional gender roles (see also Bozkurt, 2012).

Japanese companies all ask the same questions such as "Why do you want to work even though you're a woman?"; "Are you still going to work after you're married?" and "Are you planning to come back to work after giving birth?" (foreign subsidiary, single, 35)

These traditional role expectations contrasted with the excellent education of Japanese women, who graduate from prestigious universities in relatively high numbers. Multiple interviewees reported that they aspired to tasks that were commensurate with their educational level but had been relegated in Japanese organizations to tasks like performing supportive administrative functions and making tea.

I got into a major Japanese bank, but quickly became disillusioned by the idea of photocopying, typing and being an office lady serving tea for the rest of my life. (foreign subsidiary, divorced, 49)

Over the course of our one hundred plus interviews, we were astonished at how often "tea serving" was mentioned with disdain, as this act apparently was symbolic of the submissive role Japanese women were expected to adopt in relation to men. One respondent believed that this was due to traditional values spilling over into the practices of domestic organizations:

"Teishu kampaku" means that in a family, the husband is more powerful than the women. We still have that "teishu kampaku" sense in Japan these days. (student, single, 18)

Confirming previous findings by Barbasiewicz (2013) and Kelsky (2001), many of our respondents dissatisfied with these conditions changed to a *gaishikei*, where they were able to use their skillset on more challenging tasks in a more gender-neutral environment.

In the Japanese company, women weren't really expected to do much and most women saw their jobs as "koshikake" ["seat-warmers", occupying a seat in the company only until it is time to quit and get married]. If we went to work, smiled and poured good tea, then it was a pleasant place to be in. We didn't really have to think much, but in a foreign subsidiary, we are expected to use our heads! If you really want to have a meaningful job, then foreign subsidiaries are the place to be. (foreign subsidiary, married, mother, 49)

Our respondents also considered their chances of climbing the career ladder very restricted in domestic organizations, given that women very rarely are admitted to the career track (*sogoshoku*) and are therefore limited to the clerical track (*ippanshoku*).

I felt that my [Japanese] company was extremely conservative and traditional. There wasn't a single woman in the company who was on a manager level. When I looked around, there were a lot of extremely intelligent women, however, they never got promoted. I don't think that it had anything to do with the women themselves, it was company policy. Even if women explicitly expressed their desire to for a promotion and worked hard, they never got the chance. In the end, they would end up quitting. (foreign subsidiary, married, 33)

By contrast, career opportunities for ambitious professional women were regarded as much better in foreign subsidiaries. At the *gaishikei*, our respondents particularly appreciated being judged in a gender-blind way based on professional criteria and being individually assessed and rewarded for their efforts.

Being in an international company is different. Where I work right now, they are opening themselves towards women and they are giving them more opportunities. They don't judge a person's performance on the gender, but rather on the outcome, on what they have done for the company. (foreign subsidiary, single, 23)

What primarily mattered in the foreign context was the personal performance, not the gender. Our findings are also in line with Kageyama (2005), who noted that foreign employers have been crucial to the career development of some of the highest profile women in the corporate world of Japan.

Our respondents also highlighted equal pay between genders as a key attraction factor at foreign subsidiaries. The wages female employees received in Japanese corporations were on average well below their male colleagues' pay. A British recruiter, who headed a pro-bono women's leadership program for job-seeking mothers, observed:

Women in Japan get paid between 15% and 40% less than men for doing the same job. So they are actually a cheaper workforce and sometimes companies think strategically from that point of view. When we got some of them a job, the salaries they were offered were really low. That's not a leadership salary! Japanese won't pay that kind of money - not for a woman. I was just horrified to discover this. It is just like: "wow - does that mean that there is the idea of how much you pay for a woman and how much you pay for a man?" (British observer, 49)

In contrast, foreign employers were known to base their salaries entirely on performance, irrespective of gender. Foreign subsidiaries not only sought to reward equal performance with equal pay, they also proactively targeted female talent in their recruitment efforts:

From the diversity point of view, are we not going to accept a column in any of the leadership positions that doesn't have a female in one of those boxes. If there is no female talent there, we need to proactively hire women at a more junior level to subsequently enable their growth through the organization. (foreign subsidiary, Australian, male, 53)

Our interviewees very much appreciated these diversity management practices along with foreign subsidiaries' strict policies against sexual harassment at the workplace.

Our company really values diversity and the company is very strict on maintaining an environment which reflects that. My boss would never dream of joking about discriminatory things, unlike Japanese companies. It is very different. (foreign subsidiary, single, 35)

Japanese career women also enjoyed claiming their right to maternity leave and then returning to their employer, which is different from many domestic organizations, where women are expected not to return after childbirth.

Our rights are our rights. It's absolutely normal to take maternity leave and about 80% come back. It's quite rare for women to quit at this point. It's a good environment to work for a long time. (foreign subsidiary, single, 35)

Overall, the human resource and diversity management practices of *gaishikei* were well aligned to our interviewees' professional career aspirations.

I was married and I wanted to have the opportunity not be judged as a married woman but also be rewarded for my work as a professional. When I took these aspects into account, I really didn't have a choice but to work in a foreign subsidiary. (foreign subsidiary, married, 33)

Our interviewees' subjective judgments correspond to statements by the Japan Institute of Labor Policy and Training, reporting that the starting salaries for female graduates in foreign affiliated firms in Japan were about 15% higher than in domestic organizations and much closer to those of their male counterparts (Olcott & Oliver, 2014).

Our findings around professional aspirations very much confirm overall "textbook" recipes for diversity management practices, thus forming the base line of our respondents' desires and requests. However, our interviews also revealed that purely professional aspirations capture only part of the motivations that stand behind many Japanese women's choice of foreign employers and that identity-related aspects are of the same relevance to them if not more.

4.2 | Identity confirmation

Beyond rational professional considerations, which mostly stand in the foreground of corporate diversity management practices, our interviewees emphasized that their choice of working for foreign subsidiaries was also very much motivated by a desire to escape the emotionally straining discriminatory working environment of domestic corporations. Multiple respondents termed traditional Japanese workplaces as "suffocating". They repeatedly reported to feel "out of place" in Japanese companies, indicating that discriminatory employment practices contradicted the identity many career-minded women had established for themselves.

Working in a Japanese company means conforming to everyone else. I felt that it wasn't my place. (foreign subsidiary, divorced, mother, 46)

Interviewees acknowledged that Japanese organizations had increasingly adopted practices aimed to increase gender diversity but continued to be dissatisfied with the slow progress.

The older women have seen worse. They compare what they have been through with what women are going through now and they feel it is improving. It should continue to improve, because the majority of part-time workers are still women and they are in lower-paying positions. It is really hard to go through the barrier, the glass ceiling. So it is understandable that the young women are frustrated. I think I am somewhere in between, in the middle of the young and the old, because I know that the situation has improved, but not so greatly. (domestic company, married, mother, 47)

They criticized that Japanese GDM practices were primarily targeted to "protect" women. While fighting discrimination, they put females into the specific category of those to be protected, which contradicts the self-confident identity many career-oriented women in our sample established for themselves.

When I was working for the [Japanese] think tank, they said: "You should be going home because it's getting dark and you're a woman." And I said to the manager: "My coworker is still working, so I'm working. I don't need this kind of special treatment." I wanted to be equal. I think men misunderstand that. We don't need your protection, we just want to have the opportunity to protect ourselves. You know what I mean? Don't baby us as women. It's like this old saying "Don't give us a fish but teach us how to catch the fish so we can be independent." It's much more helpful. If you want to treat women in the right way, I don't think the babysitting is the best way of doing it. Maybe give her more tasks that are difficult for her to accomplish, and then support her throughout her journey. (domestic company, single, 27)

An interviewee working for a domestic firm provided the example of her company setting up a specific department to support working women, which then sent out emails with parenting advice—only to the females. Female employees regarded this as proof that the company continued to treat men and women unequally and had missed an opportunity to inform men how they could share responsibilities at home. A young professional summarized the situation in Japanese companies as follows:

They are trying, but what they are trying to do is very misguided. They base it on very conventional views of what a family and what a woman should be like. (foreign subsidiary, single, 24)

By contrast, our interviewees stated that foreign subsidiaries treated male and female employees more equally. The most frequently mentioned aspect in this context was not related to a particular HRM practice but to line-managers assigning tasks in a gender-neutral way. Receiving challenging tasks was clearly important for confirming many career women's identity as strong and independent professionals.

Right now, I am a pure professional. (...) It's all about providing my clients with the highest level of service. I don't do things that are time-consuming and meaningless. (foreign subsidiary, married, 33)

Only subsequently, classic issues of gender discrimination were raised regarding what Western subsidiaries do better in terms of GDM, such as gender-neutral recruitment, pay and equal promotion opportunities. As a consequence, our interviewees felt that at foreign subsidiaries it was their professional identity, which took center stage, whereas in Japanese companies their gender always remained dominant in how they were treated.

The interview in the Japanese company was more about whether I would fit into the company—I was judged mainly on character. However, at my gaishikei I was asked more about my intellectual abilities, judged by my knowledge and understanding of the financial world. They really treated me as a professional. (foreign subsidiary, married, 33)

Overall, we noted that being treated as professionals in day-to-day interactions with male supervisors and colleagues was ultimately even more relevant for the identity of Japanese career women than the implementation of particular gender-specific corporate practices.

Given this actively pursued egalitarianism at foreign subsidiaries, their work environment was frequently described as invigorating. Interviewees described working at *gaishikei* as “*kakkoi*”, meaning “cool” (foreign subsidiary, married, mother, 48) and as “*trendy*” (foreign subsidiary, divorced, 49). Some acknowledged that they had a “*fascination with everything foreign*” (foreign subsidiary, single, 45) and “*idealize[d] the West*” (foreign subsidiary, single, 27). This idealization of the West contrasted strongly with the depiction of the Japanese context (“*It seems like in Japan men's power is bigger than women's, STILL, although that's unfair.*”—student, single, 18; “*Japan is still more of a patriarchy.*”—domestic company, single, 27). Even interviewees working for domestic corporations felt attracted by the freedom they associated with Western countries.

When I went to Canada I felt that there's a life outside of Japan. There's a life in which I could be so free. Like maybe it's ok to go backwards or maybe it's ok to go sideways. And I like that feeling that you don't have to define your life. No-one can define your life. (domestic company, single, 27)

In the eyes of our interviewees, working for foreign employers signified the pursuit of a liberating new lifestyle (*ikikata*) centered around self-actualization inspired by the West. This touched on their very identity as self-determined, internationally oriented women.

Women joining a foreign company have thought about this very well and want to be part of the company. They are looking for a place where they know that they are respected, accepted and seen. (foreign subsidiary, single, 23)

The strong identification with the foreign employer encompassed a strong sense of pride that went so far as to feel superior to and look down on their counterparts working for domestic companies.

I feel more comfortable in the way I work. I am more expressive compared to the other, naïve Japanese women. I feel more to be myself than trying to be like someone else at work. (foreign subsidiary, single, 38)

Many of our interviewees had held this identity around self-actualization since their youth.

I want to be independent. That's my very strong belief all from high school on. It fits for me as a person who wants to follow my own interests. (foreign subsidiary, married, mother, 35)

Others had adopted this kind of identity while studying abroad.

When I lived in Spain for one year for studying Spanish I found my new self. (foreign subsidiary, single, 45)

These women's identity as independent professionals equal to men pre-date their employment by foreign subsidiaries. They were immediately attracted by the gender diversity practices of foreign subsidiaries, which we explain by the fact that these organizations confirmed the identities they already had established for themselves before. A young professional summarized:

Women joining a foreign company are looking for a place where they know that they are respected, accepted and seen. In a Japanese company, once you join, it is very hard to find an opportunity to let yourself be known in the first place, to be recognized. Whereas in a foreign company, they have a lot of opportunities where they recognize and show a sign of respect even for the smallest thing you have done. Women, who want that sort of recognition, join foreign companies. (foreign subsidiary, single, 23)

Caprar (2011) described this type of local employees as "infatuated" with the foreign MNC they work for, holding an extremely favorable attitude of their employer and a much idealized perception of the situation they are in. From the outset, these employees were "marginals" to the local culture, so they enthusiastically turn to the "competing" culture the foreign employers offer (Caprar, 2011, p. 623).

4.3 | Identity transformation

Fully embracing this kind of assertive identity and Western-style career ambitions required Japanese women to reject traditional gender roles, which constrain females in the domestic context. Whereas the above-quoted informants had taken this step already before starting to work for a foreign subsidiary, others still felt torn between traditional role expectations, characterized by gender role separation (Barbasiewicz, 2013), and a desire for a more ambitious career.

I think that there's a difference about whether you were born as a man or a woman. There are some jobs only a man can do and some jobs only a woman can do. ... But I do think that as long as you're doing the same job, then you should be assessed without discrimination. (foreign subsidiary, married, mother, 41)

Some of our informants had initially chosen foreign employers only for practical reasons—because of the above-described professional opportunities or simply because they fell for some reason outside the Japanese companies' annual new graduate recruitment cycle. However, once these women were exposed to the Western corporate culture and the GDM practices in particular, they underwent a significant process of change. This change was initiated by Western employers' understanding of and demands for professional behavior. Whereas traditional Japanese cultural norms impose “proper speech” and “modest manner” as central virtues upon women (Du, 2016, p. 402), numerous interviewees reported that Western corporations expected and pushed them toward a clearer, more direct and more assertive communication style, to openly speak their mind and to speak (quite literally) louder. Under the guidance of supervisors and more senior colleagues, they worked hard to adopt these communication patterns, but then also came to appreciate them for their simplicity and egalitarianism. As such, they took pride in having learned to adapt to them.

I think that I'm much more explicit whilst expressing myself and I think I've changed a lot since I've come to work in a foreign subsidiary. I've also become much more opinionated. (foreign subsidiary, single, 38)

Interestingly, interviewees frequently observed that they felt more true to themselves when speaking in the foreign and learned mode than in the domestic way, in which they were socialized. The following respondent labeled the more assertive speech taught by Western employers as “normal”, indicating how much she had already internalized it.

There is a difference in the language. I change it consciously. When I speak with men in Japanese, I speak very respectfully—even with my subordinates. With foreigners, I speak normal. (foreign subsidiary, married, mother, 41)

However, speaking louder, more directly and more assertively did not come naturally to most of our interviewees but had to be practiced. In this context we noticed how much such a technical, if not trivial matter such as the loudness with which one learns to speak can become an identity transforming exercise.

Besides championing a more assertive speaking style, foreign employers also systematically encouraged women to embrace more proactive career management. A foreign HR manager explained how her company actively challenges women to become the captains of their own careers by encouraging talented females to assume higher responsibilities.

When they [women] walk into a Western company, they are considered to be a partner in their own career design. We certainly work very hard to support Japanese men and women in shaping their own career. That you go in and discuss what you want to do in your career with your boss is revolutionary. That you shift mid-career your area of focus with the support of your organization is revolutionary. (American observer, 50)

By championing Western-style behaviors, foreign employers led Japanese women to assert a “new self (*atarashii jibun*)”. This new identity emerged through the shift of allegiance from traditional gender values women increasingly perceived as confining towards foreign, that is, Western, lifestyles—or, more precisely, an idealized version of them. Consequently, what started as a purely professional or pragmatic career choice for many (“*It was all a coincidence but it has allowed me to become independent.*”—foreign subsidiary, divorced, 49), turned into a transformative experience.

*I worked for about four years in a Japanese company. I think about myself now and I think: “Oh, how cute you were ... and naïve for that matter”. I had gone to an all-girls school and university and I think I was really naïve. In the company, I was an *ippanshoku*, so I did the photocopies and was serving tea. I became an *ochakumi* [the literal meaning is ‘tea squad’ and refers to lower-ranking female office workers being*

expected to make and serve tea to their male coworkers and company superiors]. *I can't believe how much I've changed.* (foreign subsidiary, divorced, 51)

Under the influence of their foreign employer's corporate culture and management practices, this group of informants underwent an identity transformation, broke the bonds of traditional norms and embraced a more self-determined identity.

We are the way we are because of the company that we work for. (foreign subsidiary, married, mother, 37)

Many of our interviewees voiced their pride about the change they had undergone. At the same time, they expressed their interest in acting as mentors for the next generations of female entrants into foreign subsidiaries, showing what women could achieve as professionals, boosting their self-confidence and encouraging them to pursue professional self-actualization.

It is difficult to be a perfect model, but I can still be a role model. They [other Japanese women] need someone to talk to and learn how interesting it can be if you continue to work. So the ones who are working, we have to speak up and I think that is what we are going to do. We could be guest speakers. We should not be super-hero role models but rather everyday role models. (foreign subsidiary, married, mother, 47)

To conclude, our findings support Caprar's (2011: 609) proposition that host country nationals may be "contaminated" by the culture of the organization they work for. They also align with Kelsky's (2001: 121) anthropological interpretation that "the foreign alternative becomes not simply an external site of professional opportunity, but an internalized marker of transformed identity" for Japanese women. Foreign companies therefore have an important responsibility in implementing proactive dedicated gender diversity practices that support women along their journey of identity transformation. The general manager of a U.S. sports apparel manufacturer's Japanese subsidiary aptly summarized foreign employers' responsibility in GDM:

What we have realized is: we can't just point at a female leader in Japan and say, "Yeah, job's done, we're diverse". We do need to create a strong safety net and support underneath, whether it's mentoring, whether it's making sure that the team sees you're empowering them. It's by no means just sit and forget! It takes more work to make any leader in Japan successful and I think it's amplified with women. (foreign subsidiary, Australian, male, 53)

Gender diversity management which is well targeted to the needs of female Japanese talent benefits not only its target group, but also the employer.

I walked into the operations floors of Western banks here in Japan and all the employees were female. One sense for this is the energy and pride in the organization and tremendous loyalty to the organization because it offered opportunities that are absolutely unique. (U.-S.-American observer)

Knowing what attracts Japanese career women to foreign subsidiaries helps these organizations turn their LOF into an advantage, an aspect, which also finds increasingly in the attention of the LOF literature (Ikegami et al., 2017; Taussing, 2017):

What we need to do as a Western company is to shift it from a "How do make this a good working environment for women?" and shift it to say, "How do we use that as competitive advantage to attract and retain the best talent?" (foreign subsidiary, Australian, male, 53)

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | Conceptual contributions

We started out with the following research question: *In host countries where domestic companies favor men over women, what attracts local career women to foreign subsidiaries and how do they experience this work context?* In direct response to this question, our data have shown that Japanese career women have very precise and straightforward *professional aspirations*, which are very important to them. More importantly, our findings clearly suggest that next to purely professional aspirations, *identity-related aspirations* also play a major role in informing individuals' choice of careers and particular employers. We argue that specifically in environments that are characterized by gender inequality, such as Japan, Western MNCs can attract female talent by assertively highlighting what they (at least ideally) stand for: the opportunity for emancipated self-assertion, individualized self-actualization and liberating lifestyle choices. Together, these experiences lead to a confirmation of their own identity for those women who already had rejected the traditional domestic employment system and fully embraced the international domain before entering the foreign organizations. For those who felt torn between traditionally engrained local values and the lure of an international lifestyle, these experiences lead to a journey of identity transformation under the influence of the foreign subsidiaries' organizational culture and management practices.

These emotional, identity-related aspects of career choices, which go deeper than the rational, professional criteria on the surface level, have so far been largely overlooked in business research. Our evidence supports, however, suggestions from other social science disciplines that identity-related attraction to "liberating" Western lifestyles might motivate women from environments characterized by gender inequality to work for foreign employers. For example, anthropologist Kelsky (2001) summarized the feelings of progressive Japanese women towards the foreign realm with the Japanese word *akogare*, a desire for and idealization of the foreign. This foreign realm is almost always equated with "the West"—not with specific countries, but with an idealized concept of the Western world, which contrast to "backward" and "oppressive" Japan, making many Japanese women wish to work for subsidiaries of Western companies. Whereas we studied the identity-related aspects of career choices specifically for female employees, we submit that similar phenomena should apply to other diversity dimensions than gender, such as nationality, race, sexual orientation and the like—wherever some form of discrimination might occur. In all diversity dimensions, which might form the basis of potential discrimination (see Cooke, 2022 for an overview), employers might want to stress more positive practices of demonstrative emboldening, encouraging, and entrusting, instead of (good-willed but defensive) measures of protecting the alleged weak.

On a more abstract level, our findings provide new empirical nuance on how identities are embedded in specific social structural contexts (Warner, 2008) and how they are shaped by environments that either constrain or encourage them (Craig et al., 2017; Stewart & McDermott, 2004). More specifically, they empirically support and extend Peters et al.'s (2013) above-mentioned identity-fit model of career motivation. Once career women see themselves fully accepted and fitting into their work environment and their contribution recognized and appreciated, they internalize the norms and expectations of their organization as self-defining, in a way that their work for the foreign employer becomes an integral part of their self-concept. Therefore, they reciprocate by a very high degree of loyalty, commitment and motivation (see also Van Dick et al., 2004). Our interviewees' loyalty, enthusiasm and even idealization of their foreign employer was often striking to the interviewer. As a Westerner, he frequently stressed to his interview partners that a fully egalitarian and gender-equal work context was hardly achieved by Western companies in their respective home countries and that there was still quite a long way to go—upon which the interviewees became highly defensive of their employers. This interesting constellation emphasizes the powerful effects career motivations can exert, if based on the (potential) employee's identity. These deep level effects, specifically identity confirmation and transformation, are in our view more potent and impactful than "mere" surface level professional aspirations. Hence, our findings underline the high commitment, which MNCs and their foreign subsidiaries can muster, if their GDM is directed towards fully recognizing their female employees' contributions. This also highlights

the responsibility MNCs have in order not to disappoint those career expectations that are linked to their employees' identity.

By stressing the relevance of identity, this study deepens, on a more general level, our understanding of *emotional aspects of career motivations*. According to Harman and Sealy (2017), women's affective reactions to their organizational context are still not adequately captured or explained in current theory. Particularly the emotional, liberating side of career choices that is related to the rejection of and defection from one cultural system (the own) and the dedication to another system (the idealized version of a foreign one) has so far been largely overlooked in management literature.

In addition to the above discussed contributions to the career-, identity- and international HRM- and GDM-literatures, we also contribute to the more general *standardization versus localization debate* of HRM practices in foreign subsidiaries (for a review see Chung, 2015), which we characterized as one of the main disputes in international HRM. We already referred to literature that highlighted the difficulty to standardize diversity management around headquarters practices, respectively the need to localize diversity management (Alheiji et al., 2018; Cooke, 2022; Ferner et al., 2005; Festing et al., 2015; Kemper et al., 2019; Luring, 2013; Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007). While we are far from disputing the general embeddedness of GDM in the respective cultural and institutional context, we argue that in specific situations (e.g., high degree of gender role separation in host countries, high educational levels of women and a high degree of LOF regarding recruitment), MNCs should standardize their (gender) diversity management practices around non-discriminatory headquarters practices, thus assuredly rejecting efforts to localize diversity management. This approach applies to all cultural and institutional contexts, in which privileged employees (in our case men) have a preference to work for major domestic corporations. In such a case, foreign subsidiaries will need to target less privileged potential employees (in our case women), specifically if they are in no way less educated, prepared and eager to take on demanding positions.

Additionally, standardization of gender diversity practices around headquarters practices and the dismissal of localization may be seen from an *ethical perspective* (Du, 2016). While risking the accusation of cultural imperialism (Khan & Lund-Thomsen, 2011), our findings suggest that MNCs need to consider what they stand for, globally and across all their units, in terms of their gender diversity policies. For an MNC which globally upholds certain universally assumed ethical values, non-localization of GDM might ultimately be less problematical than strict advocates of local adaptation might suggest (a similar logic would apply, for example, regarding the non-adaptation towards corruption). Important in this context is to win the moral high ground of standing for universal ethical values over the accusation of cultural imperialism.

Resisting the localization of management practices becomes even more relevant in host countries characterized by ongoing *major institutional changes* (Caprar et al., 2022). In these instances, traditional customs might lose their legitimacy, while more recent practices gain in acceptability. A case in point might currently well be Japan, specifically pertaining to gender diversity. Multinational corporations in Japan should therefore be aware of not becoming "museums of Japanese management" in their attempt to adapt to local practices that also Japanese companies increasingly recognize as dated and difficult to legitimize (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007).

Our findings helped us to indirectly deduce the following conclusions: to decide where to standardize and where to localize gender diversity practices, it is essential for MNCs to properly understand up-to-date, dynamic, contextualized as well as self-defined aspirations and identities of local employees. This is clearly more relevant than following dated, static, non-contextualized cultural diversity or distance scores on the national level, which have been established decades ago by external scholarly authorities (Pudelko, 2020). In resisting a potentially dated form of localization, foreign subsidiaries might even form an *avant-garde* or "cultural incubators" (Caprar, 2011), starting or supporting early trends also in domestic organizations of their host countries, thus turning their LOF into an AOF.

This argument leads to a further research area to which we contribute: the literature on LOF. In order to counteract their LOF, MNCs have been predicted to err more often than not on the side of local isomorphism (Zaheer, 1995). However, the implicit assumption inherent in traditional international business theory that perceived foreignness is always a liability has recently been challenged. Instead, under certain circumstances, foreignness has been found

to represent an *asset* (e.g., Ikegami et al., 2017; Nachum, 2010). Supporting the nascent research on countercultural practices (Caprar et al., 2022), we argue that the debate around LOF is overly one-sided in two respects: first, what is seen as negative (LOF—being an outsider) can in fact also be turned into something positive (AOF—being *avant-garde*); and second, localization might not necessarily be the key to addressing the risk of LOF, but instead the conscious rejection of it. This position must withstand the potential accusation of legitimizing cultural imperialism, a position, it goes without saying, we also fully reject.

It should be considered that (certain) locals might regard local traditional practices as obsolete (Chen et al., 2004) and foreign approaches as more advanced (Bozionelos & Wang, 2007), resulting in *liability of localness* (Un, 2016). As a result, a misplaced cultural adaptation by MNCs can quickly lead to adopting an unwelcomed liability of localness. It is therefore all the more important for MNCs not to perceive the population of a host country as culturally homogeneous, but instead as diverse, consisting of different sub-groups with different cultural values (Caprar et al., 2015). In addition, MNCs need to carefully establish which stakeholder groups they consider to be of relevance in order to cater for their needs and desires (Caprar, 2011).

In our research context, we established that just and fair employment practices of foreign (particularly Western) MNCs constitute key needs and desires for the important stakeholder group of Japanese career women. In anthropologist Kelsky's (2001: 119) words, "women's internationalist narratives challenge the hierarchies of the native over the foreign". Whereas our inductive study yielded this conclusion based on data from Japan, we find that they should be equally valid in similar contexts. As such, Siegel et al. (2019) and Newbury et al. (2014) found that gender discrimination in South Korean and Latin American firms, respectively, made foreign-owned employers more attractive. Arguably, our results should apply to all host countries with a larger gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2022) than the MNC's home country. Furthermore, literature on the economic theory of labor market discrimination (e.g. Becker, 1957/1971) suggests that foreign employers might also benefit from the inclusion of *other locally marginalized* (e.g. *ethnic*) groups. According to Siegel et al. (2019: 370), "foreign multinationals wield a particularly significant competitive weapon in host markets: as outsiders, they can pinpoint social schisms in host labor markets and exploit them for competitive advantage".

5.2 | Practical contributions

Having a credible and effective diversity management in place should be regarded as a "business imperative" (Kochan et al., 2003, p. 3) for MNCs. Multinationals need to be fair to their employees and to come across as such (Yamazaki & Yoon, 2012). In addition, it simply makes sense not to disregard half of any (host) country's population in the "war for talent" (Beechler & Woodward, 2009), no matter how the local culture interprets gender roles. The resource-based approach to strategic HRM therefore also characterizes diversity management as a capability, which can create competitive advantage (Cooke, 2022). This ability becomes all the more relevant, the more a particular host country is confronted with a shrinking and ageing population, leading to labor shortages (Cooke, 2022; Kemper et al., 2016; OECD, 2017). Japan stands exemplary for such a situation (Kobayashi, 2019), but is by no means an outlier in this context.

Conscious of the looming talent shortage, domestic Japanese companies are also increasingly striving to increase the number of women they hire and retain in their workforce. However, a substantial part of Japanese career women perceives these efforts as somewhat condescending, as women wishing to pursue a career are often regarded as a distinct group that needs protection and special treatment. These recent efforts by Japanese companies may therefore be characterized as attempts to administer gender *diversity*, but not to achieve gender *equality*. Foreign subsidiaries of Western MNCs appear to provide gender equality more naturally than domestic companies do, as they hire job applicants and promote employees chiefly based on performance, a gender-blind criterion. Even without particular GDM practices in place, this position alone makes them very attractive employers for highly educated and motivated

women. Also in this instance, we consider the lessons drawn from our Japanese data equally applicable in similar country contexts.

Given the fact that Japanese highly skilled men habitually have been reluctant to work for *gaishikei* (Bozkurt, 2012) and given that Japanese women are more willing to discard traditional prejudices about foreign firms based on their more equal employment practices, Japanese female talent and foreign subsidiaries can be perceived as natural Allies. To turn this natural alliance into a competitive advantage, foreign subsidiaries need first of all to be aware of this and proactively target highly skilled women, for example, through openly communicating their egalitarian policies. Secondly, foreign subsidiaries need to precisely understand the motivational setup of career women in their host country. In this context, we have already described the relevance of identity-related aspirations in addition to professional aspirations. Thirdly, foreign subsidiaries must be able to design their diversity management in line with these motivations.

With regard to professional aspirations, “traditional” diversity management practices such as equal recruitment, pay and promotion policies, strict prosecution of gender harassment and the creation of an environment where women can freely exercise their labor rights are clearly of utmost relevance. Arguably more important, however, are those practices that facilitate the confirmation or transformation of the career women's identity in ways that connect them even further to their foreign employers. In this context, we already stressed the relevance of recognizing their performance potential and assigning them tasks that are in line not only with their abilities but also with their identity as professionals. We have also argued how much our interviewees valued their Western employers' systematic encouragement to assume higher responsibilities and to manage their careers more proactively. On this basis, we conclude that “lived egalitarianism” and the natural treatment of women as professionals throughout the organizations matter even more than particular GDM policies developed and championed by HR and diversity management specialists. And if special programs are developed, they should consider sufficient bottom-up elements such as immediate supervisors and colleagues assisting in the adoption of more assertive communication styles or supporting women to act as role models by institutionalizing mentoring programs for new female recruits. As these aspects are particularly relevant for the professional identity, they appear to us most promising.

Furthermore, MNCs should understand and appreciate that they are often idealized by many career-oriented women. Consequently, by highlighting their country of origin in recruitment and employer branding, foreign MNCs can signal their distinctiveness from Japanese organizations, thus capitalizing on Japanese women's preexisting positive perception of Western employers. Given their positive image, they shouldn't feel pressured to devise particular programs, meant to convince this target group of what they are convinced already. However, they have to take particular concern to also live up to expectations. As our data clearly have shown, this is much more a question of lived practices by line management and colleagues than devised policies by specialists. Furthermore, while such an idealization might provide a comfortable starting position for subsidiaries of Western companies, they also need to carefully manage it, in order not to disappoint unrealistically high anticipations by their female workforce. Ultimately, what we have discussed here in the context of the female workforce is likely to also hold for other disadvantaged sub-groups, which stick out from the majority workforce on other diversity dimensions such as nationality, race or sexual orientation.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

Our study is subject to a number of limitations, which may provide the basis for future research. To gain an in-depth understanding of female professionals' expectations of and experiences with foreign subsidiaries, we limited our investigation to the situation in Japan. We considered Japan to be particularly well suited for theorizing, given that as an exceptional case it showcases the phenomena under study very well, while at the same time yielding insights also for more moderate country contexts of gender inequality. Nevertheless, future research could investigate MNCs' professional and identity-related attractions for career-minded women and ensuing implications for diversity

management also for other host countries. It would be equally insightful to extend this line of study to other locally marginalized groups.

Moreover, we focused our study on the perceptions and expectations of career-oriented women, the target group of foreign subsidiaries' GDM. Complementing this perspective, more research should investigate how MNCs and their foreign subsidiaries attempt to meet these expectations. For a more holistic view, future studies could even integrate both perspectives.

Finally, whereas we inductively investigated with our qualitative study what attracts local women to foreign employers, future studies could build on these foundations, testing our explorative findings with a survey design. Of particular importance would be to investigate to which degree one can extend our theorizing to different contexts: first, in terms of countries which are equally characterized by conditions of a highly educated female workforce, pronounced discriminatory practices towards career women by domestic companies and a significant LOF of foreign subsidiaries, when recruiting local talent; and second, in terms of diversity criteria other than gender that are equally subject to discriminatory treatment.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our in-depth, interview-based study of Japanese women's expectations of and experiences with foreign employers has shown that this locally disadvantaged group not only feels attracted to foreign subsidiaries due to professional aspirations, but also finds their very identity either confirmed or even transformed by working for these comparatively gender-blind organizations. In the increasing "war for talent" (Beechler & Woodward, 2009), Western MNCs may gain a competitive advantage in recruiting highly skilled local women by standardizing their GDM around the more equal standards at their headquarters. In doing so, foreignness is likely to turn from a liability into an asset.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared as is common practice with interview data as this could compromise anonymity.

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ENDNOTE

¹ By reporting about generally positive experiences regarding professional aspirations as well as identity confirmation and identity transformation through working at subsidiaries of foreign (Western) companies, we are as Western authors fully aware of the risk of cultural imperialism by strongly favoring equal opportunities across genders. However, we like to emphasize that our findings are meant to be descriptive and not normative and that they are obviously not meant to represent all women, Japanese women or Japanese female employees but only those who made the conscious choice of pursuing a career—and this in their majority by working for *gaishikeis*. As such, they also represent a very particular group of informants.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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