INTRODUCTION

Every society is likely to carry its own legacy of gender culture. But today, it is Western feminism, though loosely understood, that has made and is making perhaps an irreversible impact on women’s rights and movements world over. Japanese women and men are also getting increasingly sensitized to gender issues mainly under Western influence. They look to North America and Europe (especially Scandinavia) – let me call them together Euro-American or simply ‘West’ – for models to emulate or for standards whereby to measure their own progress or retardation. Behind all this is the international pressure coming from the United Nations resolutions for women from the mid-1970s.

One indication of this Western impact is the liberal use of English, or rather ‘Jinglish’ to describe gender-relevant phenomena (although, for that matter, this practice extends to all other fields as well in Japan). Just to mention a few: ‘ūman ribu’ rather than the native equivalent, ‘josei kaihō’ has been in the popular speech since the 1970s. Rape has appeared as ‘reipu’ to replace the old ‘gōkan’; ‘feminizumu,’ ‘kyaria ūman,’ ‘jendā’ too are circulating along with many other such loan words.

Such anglicization, first, contributes to making gender awareness exotic and fashionable like most popular culture items, and to elevating familiar but tabooed subjects to public discourse. Second, it is to add new words for what have not been recognized in the Japanese dictionary. One such example is ‘sexual harassment’ which is called in a typically Japanese abbreviation ‘sekuhara.’ This is no denying that there is strong underrun, as well, counteracting Western feminism whether from resentment, cultural inertia, or awareness of its limitation in universal application.

The bulk of this paper concerns the experiences of Japanese career women. These data, in relation to Western feminism, have emerged from years of fieldwork and interviews. Given various versions of feminism, I focus more or less on the demand for gender equality in economic, political, social, and domestic rights and duties. At the end, I contextualize this case study in a theo-
retical framework, especially in light of Western concerns with essentialism and constructivism and their implications for feminism.

SAMPLE WOMEN
I explore the lives of those women who have crossed gender barriers to enter the male sphere, and to climb the male dominant hierarchy, as recalled, constructed, and evaluated by themselves. Over the past two decades I have interviewed more than 40 such women who have achieved eminence as the first, only, highest-ranking, or otherwise pioneering women in their respective professions or workplaces (for earlier findings, see Lebra 1981; 1992). This includes 24 women interviewed in 1993, a few of them interviewed again in 1996, who constitute the main sample for this paper. Their careers were in civil service, business, academia, research, journalism, media, adult education, film making, politics, law, architecture, music composition, zoo administration, athletics. At interview time, their ages ranged from mid-40s to early 70s, concentrating in the late 40s, 50s and 60s. Four women were divorced, one widowed, four single, the rest being married, seven including the four singles were childless.

By the time of the interviews, their careers had all reached fruition, gaining national recognition in terms of organizational ranks and leadership and/or records of individual productivity, creativity and performance in their respective professions. Their names appeared in national and sometimes foreign media, many were prolific authors, and several were subjects of biography written by admirers. They were recipients of prizes, including imperial decorations, governmental, corporate, or professional awards and commendations. In a one-page printed curriculum vitae which I was often given before each interview, I also found long lists of appointments to advisory councils or committees attached to the executive branch of the government. They were sought after as advisors and opinion-makers on public issues. My sample thus comes from a special category of women whose experiences and views cannot be extrapolated to Japanese women in general except in part. Still, I hope to suggest some differences between Japanese and Western concepts of women and gender.

TRANSNATIONAL EXPOSURES
For their career development, many of these women benefited from transnational experiences. Fifteen women out of 24 had overseas experiences and education in childhood, on a home-stay program, at a pre-career or early-career stage. All the returnees continued to be transnationally mobile by spending additional years abroad after their return. Four of the civil servants were sent abroad by their employer, the government, for further training at foreign universities or in international organizations. The United States was the host country for most of the post-war sojourners, with only a few European connections. The nine other women who did not belong to this category had mid-career overseas exposures.