

The Rise of Women's Power

By Ato Ekusa

Developments on the industrial front, especially the dramatic information revolution taking place around us, appear to be bringing about fundamental changes in the way we live. The results of a survey issued recently by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, for example, suggest that the transformation is strongly affecting the marriage patterns of the Japanese.

Because agriculture and manufacturing demand hard manual labor, women, who are less muscular than men in the first place, had few job openings outside the home until recently. They were economically handicapped. And since they had no economic strength whatsoever, they were forced to marry at an early age, and to depend economically on their partner. They had to obey their parents in their childhood, husbands once married, and even children when they grew old, especially in East Asian agricultural societies, including Japan, under the influence of strict Confucian ethics. Japanese has a proverb—completely outdated nowadays—that goes *onna sangai ni ie nashi* (roughly translated as “women can never find peaceful homes in this world”).

In today's society, however, products often come in the form of information, and women are just as capable as men when it comes to the brain work needed to turn out this information. Indeed, more job opportunities have started opening up for women precisely because they are sometimes better than men at providing the kind of information that people thirst for.

As job opportunities increase, women have become economically stronger and have changed their behavior patterns. For a start, because the information society places so much importance on educational background, the number of women delaying marriage and going to university instead has increased. The age at which university graduates get married—29.6 years for men and 27.3 years for women—is much later than the national average



A couple cut the cake during their wedding reception. Social transitions in Japan have meant more women are working, with changes in wedding styles reflecting their growing financial independence.

of 28.2 years for men and 25.7 years for women.

According to the Health and Welfare Ministry's survey, 97% of women were working before marriage in fiscal 1991, up 2 percentage points from a decade earlier, while 67% continued to work after marriage, an increase over the same period of 14 points. As the reason for not quitting work, the overwhelming number of women replied that their job involved easy mental labor, was creative, and was not very tiring physically.

There has also been a change in the nature of marriage itself. While love marriages accounted for 82% of the total, up 16 points over a decade earlier, arranged marriages declined by a corresponding amount. Moreover, reflecting the fact that more women go out to work these days, the highest ratio of love-marriage women (40%) replied that they met their partner at the office. Marriage patterns seem to have become a kind of measure of the degree to which society has become information-oriented.

Asked how many children they wanted, both husbands and wives responded almost the same as they did 10 years ago—an average of 2.3 and 2.1, respectively. What is surprising, however, is that only



The information society means more job opportunities for women.

2.3% of women replied that they wanted no children at all—exactly the same as a decade ago. Japan has not so obviously experienced the American social phenomenon of DINKS (double income, no kids), by which couples set out to enjoy an affluent married life on two incomes and minus the interruptions of children.

Interestingly, asked by what age they wanted to have children, 30% answered 30 years, down 6 points from a decade ago, while 20% replied 35, an increase of 8 points. Clearly there has been an increase in the number of women wanting to put off childbirth until they are older so that they can pursue their careers. The emergence of the information society and the social advancement of women have meant that women are taking more time before marriage and childbirth.

The survey also revealed that 15% of women had married partners younger than themselves, an increase of 5% over a decade ago. If the survey results are anything to judge by, the so-called “age of women” in Japan may be closer than expected.

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