

Japan Diary

Executive Women in Japan

People are usually surprised when they learn that the president of a company distributing exclusive French cosmetics in Japan is a woman. Reiko Lyster established Elle International K.K. five years ago and made it profitable within three years. Today, her sales figures are healthy—and without the help of her husband, or other male advisers. She is one of very few Japanese women executives.

In Japan, women are expected to stay at home and look after their husbands, children, and perhaps their own or their husband's parents. Not only Japanese men expect this, but most women accept it as their role in life.

But modern Japanese housewives are better educated and have more free time on their hands than ever before. A growing number are working outside the home—as many as 51%, according to a 1982 survey by the Prime Minister's Office. Most, however, are doing part-time work that could not be described as a career. "Women are over-educated to stay at home, but they are under-educated to find interesting jobs," says Mariko Fujiwara, author of a report entitled *Japanese Women in Turmoil*, soon to be released by the Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living. "Women are not educated to work. They are expected to learn to do 'nice things'—play the piano, for instance—to prepare themselves for marriage."

A long haul to the top

Employers are reluctant to hire women for career positions, not only because they believe that a woman's place is in the home, but also for practical reasons. Most women are at least 22 years old when they graduate from a university, and if they follow the usual pattern, they will work for only two or three years before getting married and retiring. Companies are not prepared to invest time and money in their employees for such a short period of returns, especially in Japan, where lifetime employment is still the rule. Employers prefer women straight out of high school or junior college to university graduates because the former will work longer before leaving, although they are less qualified. Female university graduates often must convince potential employers that they are serious about their career and are committed to working beyond their marriage or first child, before being considered for employment.



But finding a job does not mean an end to a woman's career difficulties. On the contrary, if she is ambitious, it marks only the beginning of a long and difficult climb to the top. Once employed, men and women are treated very differently as a rule. Women are often given secretarial duties and asked to serve tea to their male colleagues. Ms. Lyster observes: "There is a favorite expression in the Japanese business community, *ocha kumi* (pouring tea), that's often thought of as the role of the working woman. Of course, we do it in our office, too. Someone has to pour the tea, and it's nicer that a woman does it."

While their male counterparts are being trained for management positions, young women may have to wait four or five years until their superiors are convinced that they are not about to leave. An important aspect of management training is acquiring experience in different departments or branches, but women are rarely transferred to other localities because of their family commitments. And they often miss the experience of working in different sections, usually because they have decided to specialize to make themselves indispensable. Some women claim further that they are purposely denied the chance to gain broad experience because men do not want to compete with women.

Women also face more intangible disadvantages. Many business propositions and ideas are discussed after working hours in a social context. But Japanese men, as a rule, tend to enjoy their own company in social gatherings outside of the office, so women often miss out. While men also have the opportunity to keep in touch with old schoolfriends who may have succeeded and become useful contacts, most career women's schoolfriends are likely to be housewives. There is no old boys' network for women.

Choices for executive women

Women are most successful in the fashion and cosmetics industries, but there are other, less obvious fields in which women have begun to advance into management, especially middle management. Many women are now employed in the computer and high-technology fields, because the rapidly growing demand for staff has forced employers to hire only the best candidates, regardless of their gender. Women may still be at a disadvantage in these fields because their

night-time working hours are restricted by law, but some women believe they are better suited for computer work than men. And they are more often prepared to specialize than men.

Government agencies tend to be more egalitarian employers than most private companies. Once they have passed the civil service entrance exam, women find that the procedures for promotion are better defined in government offices than in private enterprises.

Once they have actually reached the top, most women are eventually accepted by their male colleagues—but men may need time to get used to having women among them. The first woman news anchor on Japanese television, Yoshiko Sakurai, recalls that when she first took a position at Nippon Television: "Everyone in the station hated me. The men in the Announcer's Department felt I was taking away their job, and those on the studio floor were unused to working with women. It took about a year to get over that stage."

Whatever their field, the secret of all successful Japanese career women is single-mindedness. In most cases, they must be better than the men doing the same jobs. "It also helps if they are attractive and agreeable," remarks Ms. Fujiwara.

To young women seeking a career, Ms. Lyster offers the following advice: "Decide which is more important—to be a happily married wife and mother or to be a successful career woman. If you decide your career is more important, you have to be prepared to sacrifice your personal life. You can't have both."

(Doune Porter, Japan correspondent for Voice of America)

Bookshelf

Competitive Edge: The Semiconductor Industry in the U.S. and Japan

Edited by Daniel Okimoto, Takuo Sugano,
and Franklin Weinstein
Stanford University Press
1984, California
275 pages; \$27.50

In recent years, the United States and Japan have become embroiled in various kinds of economic friction centered on such industries as steel, automobiles, and consumer electronics. Today, one of the major sources of friction is increasingly heated competition in semiconductor