

Changing Images of Japanese Women

By *Catrien Ross*

At a recent lunch meeting with Japanese businessmen and bureaucrats, one conversation topic was the "new" Japanese woman. The group's perception was that today's women are surprisingly independent, resourceful, and much less willing to compromise. Japanese men have become a poor match. The conclusion was that while females in Japan are growing more and more powerful, the Japanese male is an increasingly pathetic figure.

Statistics underscore changing social patterns. A white paper issued by the Prime Minister's Office in 1995 reports that in 1947 only 55.5% of women in their early 20s were single, compared with 85% in 1990. Thirty years ago 73 out of 100,000 marriages ended in divorce; today that rate has doubled. Between 1947 and 1952 two out of every three marriages were arranged, but from 1987-1992, 83% of all marriages were *not* arranged. And the average age for women to marry for the first time is now 26.2 years, up from 23 years in 1950.

Birth rate, meantime, has dropped to an all-time low of 1.43 children over a woman's lifetime. Women gave birth to an average of 4.54 children in 1947, while it was quite common for farm families prior to World War II to have between 11 and 14 children. There are now fewer than 20 million children in Japan, the lowest number recorded since the first national census was held in 1920. By contrast the rapid graying of society means that by 2007, one in five Japanese will be 65 years or older. The situation is so troubling that the Health and Welfare Minister, Kan Naoto, held a press conference in July to announce that the government will begin measures to ensure that the birth rate does not continue to fall (however, he gave no details on how to accomplish this).

Women comprise just over half of Japan's total population of 125 million and the life expectancy of Japanese

women is now the longest in the world—82.11 years versus 76.11 years for men. In 1953 only 28.1% of women were employed, but today women comprise 40% of the labor force.

Clearly much of the social change has occurred within the last few decades. Although a women's rights movement emerged during the Meiji Era (1867-1912), Japanese women were not given the right to vote until April 10, 1946. At that time, perhaps reflecting a new optimism, there was a surge of women in politics, and 39 women were elected to the National Diet. However, it was not until 1986 that Doi Takako became the first woman ever to head a major political party when she was named chairperson of the Social Democratic Party. Due to her influence, more women entered politics and in the 1989 Upper House election a record number of women won seats in a phenomenon dubbed the "madonna boom." Since then, however, women have made fewer political inroads. In 1995, 35 of 252 Upper House Diet members were women, and in the more powerful Lower House, only 12 out of 500 members were women.

A fundamental education law enacted in 1947 opened the doors to women desiring a university education. Prior to that girls had attended separate schools designed primarily to prepare them for marriage and motherhood. Today, 95.6% of all girls go on to high school, with 37.4% entering university or junior college (figures for boys are 93.2% and 35.1% respectively). In 1930 a mere 13% of secondary school age girls attended school, and in 1955 only 2.4% of girls went on to university.

Social historians have pointed out that the status of post-war women in Japan was significantly aided by the constitution drafted by U.S. occupation forces in 1946. In fact, the provisions guaranteeing women's rights, Articles 14 and 24, were drawn up by a 22-year-old American woman, Beate Sirota Gordon.

Japanese men like to say that after World War II women and nylon stockings got stronger and while this remains debatable, it is true that the scope of women's activities broadened considerably. Before WWII, women spent most of their energy cooking, cleaning and sewing since clothing was handmade and there were no household appliances. In addition, in farm households women worked side by side with men, a situation that can be seen in rural communities today. The current global image of Japan is that of a highly industrialized nation, but until very recently, this was an agrarian society. In the early years just after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan's population was around 35 million. Of the 19 million or so employed, 80% worked in the agriculture and forestry sectors.

From my experience giving lectures on Japan to foreign executives, I have learned that stereotypes of Japanese women die hard. The image of the meek, self-effacing Asian woman content to follow behind her man persists, although this may simply be wishful thinking on the part of the Western male. Foreign women who like to imagine Japanese females as down trodden weaklings are also often surprised to discover the financial and decision-making clout women in Japan typically wield at home. That such private spheres of power may perhaps be preferable is something many Western women find hard to understand. The wife of a *sarariman* (white-collar, salaried worker) is usually completely in charge of the household finances, including major decisions concerning children's education, family savings, and even the purchase of a house. I know the wife of a high-ranking newspaper editor who, on her own, researched, found and bought the new family home. She plans all vacations without consulting her husband (he proudly jokes that his only role is as the porter), and in her spare time teaches

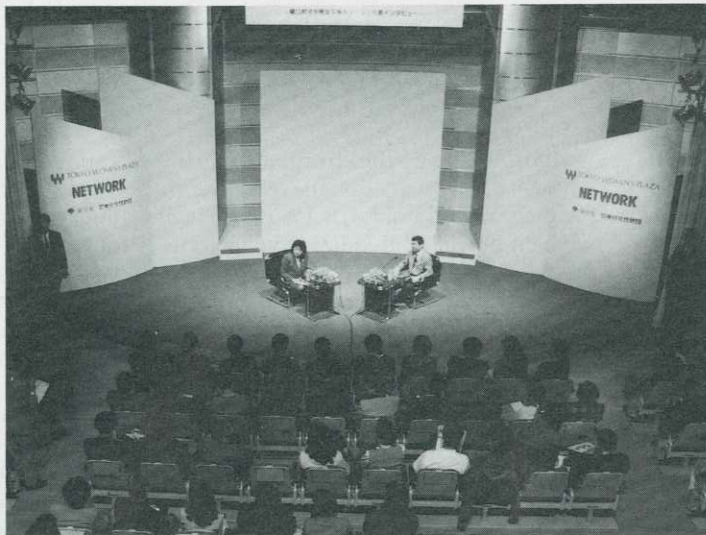
language classes, takes tennis and piano lessons, and has a part-time translation job which she has held for more than 20 years, and which takes her around the world. Competent and financially secure, she directs her own schedule. Years ago I was astonished to hear a top government bureaucrat explain that for his entire working life his paycheck had gone directly into his wife's bank account, over which he had no control. Yet, it is common for many Japanese men to receive a monthly allowance from their wives, who determine the spending limits, even when the money is for the job-related after-hours socializing so essential in Japan's business world.

Women, culture and work

The idea of strong women in Japan is not limited to the last 50 years, however. Showing parallels with the mythology of several other cultures, the Japanese creation myth involves a female deity who, along with her brother, creates the islands of Japan. Their daughter becomes the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omikami. She, in turn, is cajoled by the heavenly shaman, the female Ame no Uzume, who dances to draw the Sun Goddess out of the cave where she has hidden so that the darkened world may brighten once more.

There are Chinese reports about the reign in Japan of Himiko, a mighty female shaman or high priestess who ruled a state called Yamatai around the mid-third century, when most Japanese were organized into about 100 small communities. Himiko is said to have kept 1,000 female attendants, but only one male, who served as her communicator.

The *Tale of Genji*, described as the first novel in the world, was penned during the 11th century by a Japanese lady-in-waiting, Murasaki Shikibu, who wrote of court life in the Heian



Tokyo Governor Aoshima takes questions at the opening event of Tokyo Women's Plaza.

Period (794–1185). Also written in the same era was the *Pillow Book*, by Sei Shonagon, another woman of the Heian aristocracy, while a famous woman poet was Ono no Komachi. In fact, the best literature of the day, including novels and poetry, was written by aristocratic women who freely enjoyed intellectual interests as well as romantic pursuits such as love affairs.

But as Japanese conventions and customs changed, largely due to the influence of Chinese culture, the status of women, too, shifted. Confucian values ranked women as inferior, with three important principles admonishing a woman to be obedient to her father when a child; to her husband when married; and to her sons when in old age. A traditional image evolved wherein the Japanese woman became primarily a mother/housekeeper and caregiver to the elderly and sick, namely her husband's parents. The word used by a Japanese man to describe his wife literally means "inside the house." In pre-war years women further assumed the role of co-worker on the farm, and in modern times, as consumer of a burgeoning array of goods. Despite increasingly imposed social constraints in Japan, certain women such as mystics and spiritual leaders throughout the centuries retained a position of strength

and the founders of several powerful religious sects (Omoto and Tenri, for example) have been women.

When it comes to current workplace statistics, however, the picture is not at all rosy. Although more women than ever in Japan are working, their actual status has not improved accordingly. In 1985, for example, women earned 51.8% of men's wages for comparable work. In 1993 this had dropped to 50.9%, the worst discrepancy among the world's so-called advanced economies. Women make up 40% of the workforce, but the reality is that in

1994, part-timers represented 32.5% of all women working. Since the bursting of the "bubble economy" in the late 1980s, there has been a growing tendency for employers to turn women into part-time or contract workers, deprived of the wages, job security, and benefits extended to men. Part-time workers (working 35 hours per week) in 1995 received an average of ¥94,704 per month, compared to an average of ¥408,425 per month for full-time workers. And while Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law was enacted in 1986, it is essentially without legal teeth, in that employers are not punished for any failure to comply. Nevertheless there has been a growing number of lawsuits against employers brought by women no longer willing to tolerate unfair working conditions.

In today's depressed economy women are facing a particularly hard time in a diminishing job market as Japanese companies downsize and restructure. The unemployment rate now stands at 3.5%, the worst in the past 50 years. Resulting competition for jobs has led to recruiting and hiring practices that would be reprehensible in the U.S. or the European Union. According to the Labor Ministry, last year female job applicants filed a record 18,553 complaints and requests for legal advice

Photo: Tokyo Women's Foundation

concerning questionable company behavior during job interviews. The ministry has since ordered more than 3,000 companies to remedy the way they recruit and hire applicants. A government survey has revealed that more than one in four companies in 1995 blatantly ignored guidelines set in 1994 prohibiting companies from offering jobs to men and women on an unequal basis and "encouraging" such companies not to treat women unfavorably during job interviews.

Nor does the discrimination begin and end with hiring. It remains common for working women to be pressured to resign once they get married, become pregnant, or give birth. Such unwritten norms are much worse within the larger companies, and are especially prevalent within the financial and insurance sectors, as well as the mining industry, despite the fact that Article 11 of the EEO Law prohibits dismissal for reasons such as marriage or childbirth. A closer look shows that some 40% of Japanese companies maintain a policy of placing female workers in "jobs for which the female character and sensitivity can best be used." That is, in jobs where women do not compete with men. In addition, the Japanese company practices of overtime and after-hours drinking make it difficult for a woman to keep both a demanding job and a household. Married women putting in the same working hours as men still do the bulk of the housework, childcare and care of the elderly.

With their entry into Japanese companies blocked and their career paths denied, more and more Japanese women are seeking alternatives. Some opt to work for foreign companies operating in Japan; others seek employment overseas, in, say, Hong Kong or the U.S. The number of Japanese female international civil servants grew from 19 in 1975 to 190 in 1995, with a particularly visible role model being Ogata Sadako of the United Nations. More enterprising women are courageous enough to start their own companies. In 1994 the number of female company presidents surpassed the 50,000 mark (54,175 in 1996). Although women still

account for only 5% of all company presidents in Japan, this number has doubled since 1987 and quadrupled since 1981. There is a definite upward trend in female entrepreneurship. On the other hand, among 39,897 board members at 2,128 listed companies in 1993, there were a mere 48 women (0.1%). One in 26 company managers is a woman, but this has risen from one in 40 from 10 years ago. Companies with more than 100 employees now have 78,400 women managers nationwide, up a significant 82% from 10 years ago. A survey of newspapers and TV/radio networks, however, indicates that in 1995 there were only 1,636 females among 20,166 reporters at firms surveyed.

Other positive notes are emerging. In March this year a U.S. business magazine named four Japanese women among 50 of the world's most prominent businesswomen. They include Noma Sawako, president of Kodansha, Japan's largest publishing house, and Shinohara Yoshiko, founder and president of Tempstaff Co., Japan's second largest personnel agency specializing in temporary staff. Tempstaff has 92,000 people registered and works with more than 25,000 businesses. About 70% of those registered with Tempstaff are women aged between 25 and 35 years.

The long-term impact of women in the workplace is yet to be determined. In politics and government jobs—where national decision-making lies—Japan continues to lag behind other nations in terms of female representation. Female Diet members still account for only 6.7% of the total, compared with 39.4% in Norway, ranking Japan 62nd out of 116 countries indexed from a combination of statistics. Women comprise 8% of senior government officials in Japan but a comparatively impressive 58.2% in Hungary. In this category Japan was ranked 81st.

In terms of practical support for women, the Tokyo Women's Plaza was opened last year to promote equality and disseminate information. Also opened was a woman's support center established by a woman who was illegally dismissed after she became preg-

nant. When she refused to resign, her employer assigned her heavy manual labor to force her to leave.

For women who must work to support themselves or their families, such movements provide assurance that prevailing conditions in the workplace can be challenged. Yet looking at the harried state of the typical sarariiman's life in Japan, I question whether Japanese women, given a true choice, really should aspire to the same grueling conditions. Much better, surely, that both women and men pursue creative alternatives that more deeply inspire human potential and provide meaningful life work. As women enter fields once reserved for men, the same problems such as stress-related disease are showing up. Today, for example, an unprecedented number of women are smoking in Japan—about 7.55 million, an increase of 280,000 from 1994–1995. The largest percentage of smokers is among women in their 20s. Lung and breast cancer rates are rising. Will death from company "overwork" begin occurring among women, as it has already shown up among Japanese men? Is perceived work equality worth such a price?

A few years ago the sister of a Japanese friend resigned from her well-paying corporate job and moved to Bali to live. While this may be an extreme example, it does illustrate that the changing image of Japanese women encompasses the idea that better choices do exist. If the modern Japanese woman is really as resourceful and independent as my lunch associates believe, the next 10 years should yield more alternative solutions to the problems of living which face us all. As a woman I like to think that my half of the world will be brave enough to set an entirely new course for the future.

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