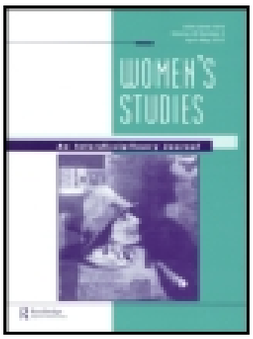

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 0049-7878 (Print) 1547-7045 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gwst20

Japanese women: Still three steps behind

William R. Nester

To cite this article: William R. Nester (1992) Japanese women: Still three steps behind, Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 21:4, 457-478, DOI: 10.1080/00497878.1992.9978956

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1992.9978956

Japanese Women: Still Three Steps Behind

WILLIAM R. NESTER

VIRTUALLY EVERY KNOWN SOCIETY has made women a "second sex," inferior in status, wealth, power, and opportunity to men. The concept of political liberty and equal opportunity for all is a Western invention. Although its philosophical antecedents can be traced to the ancient Greeks, democracy's modern evolution begins with the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Jefferson, and the American revolution in the 18th century, and was originally confined to men. The organized attempts of women actively to change their secondary status and achieve equality with men is recent, and first began in the democratic industrial societies. Female suffrage movements emerged in the late 19th century, and, one by one, throughout the 20th century, the democratic industrial countries and other governments responded by granting equal political rights. Although the concept of equal rights was theoretically universalized by the United Nations Charter and the 1980 Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, genuine equality for men and women in employment, education, childrearing, wealth, leadership, and interpersonal relations remains elusive in all countries to greatly varying extents. Official acknowledgment of equal rights does not automatically translate into opportunity; it is only the first step in what remains a long, and perhaps in many countries endless, road to genuine equal opportunity.

The status and opportunities for Japanese women have varied considerably in form and degree over the country's 1,500 year history. Before Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the requirement that women had to walk three steps behind a man dramatically symbolized their inferior status. However, since 1945, the status and opportunities for Japanese women have improved enormously in many ways. The American Occupation (1945–52) authorities imposed a democratic constitution on Japan

Women's Studies, 1992
Vol. 21, pp. 457–478
Reprints available directly from the publisher
Photocopying permitted by license only

guaranteeing, among other things, women full political, economic, and social rights with men, and these ideals have been reinforced with a range of related laws.

Yet, despite these revolutionary political changes, just how much have the status and opportunities for Japanese women improved? Many question whether Japanese women have achieved any genuine equality with men over the past 46 years. Takie Sugiyama Lebra, in her book, "Japanese Women: Constraint and Fulfillment," sets up two stereotypes of contemporary Japanese women, and asks how true either is. (1) One view sees Japanese women as "bound by the rule of segregation and division of labor, confined to household drudgery, and pitiably deprived in status, power, and opportunities. Actually or expectedly, they are demurely submissive, coquettishly feminine, and hopelessly removed from the attainment of self-fulfillment." The other asserts that it is "women who run men, not the other way around . . . the Japanese housewife holds and exercises dictatorial power over the household affairs and enjoys unrestrained autonomy." Both stereotypes, however exaggerated, essentially portray women as prisoners in their homes, the difference being one is merely a servant and the other a master within the household.

Do Japanese women still figuratively if not literally walk three steps behind men? Just what are the continuities and changes in the status of Japanese women since 1945? And regardless of any answers to these questions, are these very questions ethnocentric and irrelevant? It can be argued that posing questions about opportunities for women in nonwestern societies is irrelevant and ethnocentric because the very notion of equality itself is a peculiarly Western one whose values are often completely at odds with most other cultures. For 1,500 years, political, economic, and social inequality, not equality, has been the norm in Japanese society. Confucianism defines a "just" society as one of unequal relationships in which the "superior" protect the "inferior" in return for their loyalty. Women are considered to be naturally inferior to men. In a culture in which inequality is the norm, how appropriate is even the question of whether Japanese women have, let alone should have, achieved equality? By what standards, if any, should the status of Japanese women be evaluated?

The changes and continuities in the status and opportunities for Japanese women will be addressed in four sections dealing respectively with history, politics, economics, and sociology. The question of the relevance of such questions will be addressed in the conclusion.

HISTORIC CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES THROUGH 1952

The status of Japanese women has undergone enormous changes over the past 1,500 years. Prehistoric Japan was a land in which male and female gods interacted freely and equally, while the female Sun Goddess Amaterasu Omikami was the founder of the imperial family. (2) Women and men never enjoyed god-like equality during the first centuries of Japanese history, but at least half of Japan's rulers during the Asuka (552–710) and Nara (710–784) eras were female. Although women quickly receded into the political background during the Heian era (794–1185), a status from which they have yet fully to emerge, writers like Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shonagon, and Michitsuna wrote the first Japanese vernacular literature. Murasaki's "Tale of Genji" is considered the greatest work of Japanese literature.

But even the cultural ascendance of women disappeared during the 800 years of feudalism following the Heian era. Hojo Masako aside, no Japanese women played any significant political or cultural roles, while women's behavior became strictly controlled. During this era, the inferior status of women was symbolized by the requirement that they walk three steps behind any accompanying males. The oppression of women was justified by Buddhist and Confucian dogma. Although mainstream Buddhism maintained that women could never hope to achieve nirvana, Shinran, the 13th century priest who founded the Pure Land Buddhist Sect, propounded a slightly less pessimistic view: "Women by nature are covetous and sinful. . . . They must always think of this fact and exert themselves to cleanse themselves of this sinful nature. Without this effort, they cannot be received into the world of Buddha."(3) Confucianism reinforced this image of women as essentially sinful and degenerate with the dichotomy between yang, the active, bright, pure male spirit and yin, the dark, dangerous female spirit. According to Confucian tradition, women are considered morally, intellectually, and emotionally inferior to men, and merely "bellies borrowed to bear sons."(4) The "Doctrine of the Three Obediences" (Sanju Kun) maintained that: "A woman remains subservient through life. When she is young, she obeys her father; when she is married, she obeys her husband; when she is widowed, she obeys her son."(5) These principles were reinforced by books of morals like the "Ladies' Mirror" (Hinekagami), "Teachings for Women" (Fujin Oshiyegusa), and "Greater Learning for Women" (Onna Daigaku).

In some respects the bonds on women loosened considerably during the Meiji era (1868–1912). Japan's attempts to assimilate the best Western

ideas, institutions, and technologies inevitably stimulated debate over the status of women. Christian and secular missionaries in Japan called for more freedom for men and women, and Japanese began to echo and expand these ideas. Koka Doi's 1876 book, "Great Civilized Learning for Women" (Bunmeiron Onna Daigaku), Jinzo Naruse's "Women's Education" (Joshi Kyoiku), and Yukichi Fukuzawa's books, "New Women's Higher Learning (1898, Shin Onna Daigaku) and "Comments on the Onna Daigaku" (Onna Daigaku Hyoron), advocated general equality for women, with Fukuzawa openly declaring that "there is no difference (between men and women) in status or in value."(6)

The Meiji government's response was mixed. On one hand Tokyo initiated mass public education for girls and boys which resulted by 1912 in a 98 percent literacy rate for girls and 99 percent rate for boys. (7) On the other hand, Article Five of the 1887 Peace Preservation Law prohibited women and minors from joining political organizations, holding and attending political meetings, and initiating such meetings. The Meiji Civil Code of 1898 preserved the traditional "household" (i.e.) system in which the family, headed by the oldest male, rather than the individual, was the basic social unit. Marriages could not take place without the household head's consent, and when a women married she joined her husband's household and was subject to his will. According to Japanese law, women were "legally incompetent," and thus could not make any contracts, had no legal rights over her children, and could not even manage their property. A woman could sue her husband for divorce in the case of adultery only if the other women was also married and her husband won a court case against them, and only then if the wife had suffered a grave insult by her husband's behavior. If a family member married without the household head's permission, he could have the offender's name struck from the family registry and deny any support. (8)

Despite these oppressive laws, women began to organize politically, with some openly challenging the status quo. The Japanese Women's Christian Temperance Union (Kyofukai), founded in 1886, was the first woman's group to advocate social reform. The Young Women's Christian Association (Nihon Kirisutokyo joshi sienenkai), New Woman's Society (Shin Fujin Kyokai), Society for the Liberation of Women (Fujutsui Kaisha), and Friendly Society (Yuai Kai) pushed for labor and political emancipation, while in 1918 housewives exasperated with food shortages and high inflation took to the street to initiate that year's "rice riots." Scores of women's magazines emerged to deal with contemporary women's issues. By 1919, 13 percent of women worked outside the home, by 1930, 33 percent did. (9)

These efforts achieved some limited successes. In 1908, the Lower House actually passed a bill allowing women to join political organizations, although the Upper House rejected it. The Diet did pass factory laws in 1911 and 1923 which attempted to regulate child labor, night work, work hours, and maternity leave, although the laws were sporadically enforced. But during the 1920s and 1930s, there was a growing backlash against the more radical women's groups, with the leaders arrested and groups broken up. The first women's socialist group, the Red Flag Society (Sekirankai) was founded in 1921, driven underground the following year, and disbanded in 1925. In 1925, the government passed an even more stringent Peace Preservation Law (Chian Jiho) that prohibited all groups espousing "dangerous thoughts" and empowered the "thought police" (Kempeitai) to root out such groups. Attempts by more progressive members of the Diet to revise the family law in the 1920s and early 1930s were easily defeated.

Women were mobilized to support Japan's deepening authoritarianism at home and imperialism abroad. Groups like the Patriotic Women's Society (Aikoku Fujinkai), which was founded in 1901 and grew to three million members by the 1930s, acted as cheerleaders for Japanese imperialism. Others like the Salvation Army combined nationalism with social reform. In 1934, a women's primary school teacher convention voted down women's suffrage by a vote of 800 to 3, and throughout the decade and into the 1940s women were exhorted to "produce more babies and increase the population" (umeyo fuyaseyo) for the Japanese empire. (10) Finally, in 1942, all women's groups were merged into the Great Japan Women's Society (Dai Nihon Fujin Kai), which served under the Imperial Rule Assistance Association (Taisei Yokusankai).

Japan has undergone revolutionary political and economic changes since 1945. The American Occupation (1945–52) demilitarized, democratized, and economically revitalized Japan. The Occupation authorities recognized that Japan's totalitarian wartime political system ultimately rested on an authoritarian, patriarchal family system, and reasoned that Japan's political totalitarianism could be sharply undermined by politically, economically, and socially liberating women. The American imposed democratic Constitution (1947) and a series of accompanying laws guarantee Japanese women equal political, economic, and social rights with men. Article 14 of the 1947 Constitution directly addresses the problem of discrimination: "All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political or economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status, or family origin." Article 24 theoretically sweeps away the old patriarchal system: "Marriage shall be based only on the mu-

tual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis. With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes." The revised Civil Code took effect on January 1, 1948, elaborated the principles of Article 24: required parental consent for marriage only when the participants were under legal age; abolished the right of the husband to take charge of the wife's property; allowed no preferential treatment toward the man in case of adultery; and provided for equality in inheritance. (11)

The Occupation authorities understood that the mere enunciation of political rights was not enough to ensure the blossoming of democracy. In order to be successful, the concepts of political liberty and rights had to be socialized into Japanese from an early age. On December 4, 1945, the Occupation forced the Ministry of Education to issue a "Summary of Reforms in Education for Girls" which stipulated, among other things, coeducation and standardized education at secondary and university levels. In May, 1947, the Diet acted on recommendations by the American Educational Mission to Japan by passing the Fundamentals of Education Act and School Education Act, which together revolutionalized Japan's education system as it instituted the ideals of coeducation and equal content and opportunity. The new system abandoned the "good wife, wise mother" ideal for one based on nurturing the human potential of both females and males. In 1947, middle schools became coeducational while college entrance exams were opened to anyone, and in 1949, the Ministry of Education (MOE) certified 211 women's colleges that had not been recognized under the old system. By the Occupation's end in 1952, women had legally achieved full political, economic, and political rights with men. (12)

POLITICAL CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES

The basic political problem for Japanese women, as it is for women in most other democratic industrial nations, is to translate legal rights into power. In some ways, the political power of women peaked during the Occupation. Thirty-nine women were elected to the Diet during the election of April 10, 1946, the first in which they were allowed to participate as either voters or candidates. However, women have rarely made it into the Cabinet. Since 1946 there have been only three female cabinet ministers and eight parliamentary vice ministers. After the 1986 elections the House of Representa-

tives was 98.6 percent male, while only 1.4 percent of prefectural level councils, 3.2 percent of municipal councilors and 7.7 percent of ward councilors were women. There were no women governors. The bureaucracy is no better. Of the 1987 entering class of 1,669, only 128 were women, and of 6,500 middle-ranking administrators in the bureaucracy, 36 were women. Reforms have been cosmetic. In 1986, the civil service did allow women to take two Saturdays off a month and dropped the requirement that they wear uniforms. Not to be outdone, the Self Defense Force recently announced that it will accept women to the Defense Academy after 1990. (13)

Measured by sheer numbers, one area of politics where women seem to have enormous power is consumer interest groups. There were 4,639 Japanese consumer groups with 21. 4 million members in 1988, up three percent from 1987, although the total membership has steadily declined from 25.3 million in 1980. (14) Formidable as these numbers seem, no national organization unites them, and their efforts are thus fragmented and often contradictory. At least one third of the "consumer groups" are simply front organizations for industrial, agricultural, and distribution interests which advocate higher not lower prices. Other organizations are concerned with "peace," or "cultural" issues, or simply social groups for bored housewives.

And even those few groups which are dedicated to genuine lower prices and product liability issues have no impact on Japan's political system. Japan is ruled by relationships, not law. Tokyo deliberately limits the amount of judges, lawyers, and lawsuit awards to minimize litigation. There are no class action suits or specific product liability laws to protect Japan's consumers, thus few groups ever bother suing a Japanese cartel or producer of a dangerous product. Consumer "protection" responsibilities are scattered among 18 government agencies, including such seemingly diametrically opposed organizations as MITI and the Environmental Protection Agency. Hatoko Shimizu, secretary general of the Housewives Association, exclaims in exasperation, "Can you believe that there are different sections in charge of insecticides for gardening and cockroaches? We were completely discouraged by the extreme amount of red tape we had to cope with."(15)

Yet despite the tiny representative of women in politics and the civil service, and the impotence of the consumer movement, some observers believe there are signs that women may be posed to steadily increase their direct participation in government and influence over governments. In Hans Baerwald's words, the 1989 election "may go down in Japan's history as the year women became full-fledged participants in the political process."(16) What accounts for Baerwald's optimism?

The "new era" took off in 1986, when Takako Doi became the head of the Japan Socialist Party, generating a so called "Madonna boom," a term to which many object. Doi's rather conservative goal is to have 2,000 women in elected offices by 2000. Inspired by Doi's success and image, and infuriated by the Recruit Scandal, revelations about Prime Minister Uno's relations with a bar hostess, enactment of a new value added tax, and high cost of living, women turned out in large numbers for the 1989 election. Of the 73.32 percent voter turnout, women outvoted men by a margin of 2.68 percentage points. (17) The JSP and JCP fielded 8 and 29 women candidates, respectively, in the 1989 election, a fact both parties continually emphasized. Altogether 12 women were elected: 7 from the JSP, 2 from the JCP, 1 from the CGP, and two unaffiliated although both were espoused by the JSP. The LDP's one officially endorsed female candidate lost. These women were the largest group elected to the House since the 1946 election, although they still numbered only 2.5 percent of the total. Discouragingly low as are these figures, the percentage of Japanese women in politics is comparable to that of other democratic industrial countries. For example, women comprise only three percent of the United States Congress (31 seats), and unlike in Japan, no women have ever headed a major political party.

The late 1980s gains of women were insignificant and unlikely to be increased. Political rights are not enough if traditional attitudes towards women in politics remain entrenched. The prevailing attitude toward women and politics was exemplified by Agriculture Minister, Hisao Horinouchi, who wondered "if women can really become useful participants in the political process? In fact, I think it's impossible for them to do so."(18) Prime Minister Takeshita, when asked in 1988 if his faction would field any women candidates, said no because "campaigning is too physically tough for women."(19) But the biggest enemy of women in politics may be women themselves. According to Susan Pharr, the chief obstacle to political empowerment is psychological, which in turn reflects Japanese society's attitudes that women are inferior and should not play a public role. (20) In her book "Political Women in Japan," Pharr conducted a survey of 100 women, with ages ranging from 18 to 33, who are involved in one of 50 political groups, and divided her respondents into one of four political attitudes: traditionalists, neotraditionalists, new women, and radical egalitarians. Even new women and radical egalitarians are often inhibited by prevailing traditional notions of gender role. Lebra states bluntly that "resistance to women's liberation is as widespread and persistent as ever. Only

a handful of women are self-proclaimed 'libbers,' and they remain a source of amusement or an object of ridicule."(21)

ECONOMIC CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES

Equal economic opportunity for women remains as elusive as political opportunity. Legally, women are supposed to enjoy equal economic rights with men. Tokyo reinforced articles 14 and 24 of the Constitution granting, among other things, equal economic rights, by signing both the 1980 United Nations "Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women," but only grudgingly after succumbing to enormous political pressure. Tokyo's position was that the Convention violated Japanese tradition. The LDP reasoned that if the government did not sign the treaty, it would lose significant numbers of women votes in the upcoming election. In compliance with the treaty, Tokyo opened up 12 types of government jobs previously closed to women, including air traffic controllers, prison guards, tax collectors, immigration officers, and Imperial Palace guards. Between 1980 and 1983, the percentage of women passing the civil servant exams rose from 2.2 percent to 4.5 percent. (22) Tokyo increased women's inheritance rights through revision of the inheritance law; women now receive one half rather than one third of the total inheritance. The Supreme Court reinforced this liberalization trend in March 1981, when it unanimously ruled that Nissan Motor Co., Ltd's rule forcing women to retire at age 55 while men stayed until 60 was unconstitutional. This ruling marked the first time the Court had ever struck down an employment practice discriminatory toward women. On April 1, 1986, the Equal Employment Bill went into effect, which was passed in compliance with Tokyo's signature of the 1980 treaty.

How significant were the legal and administrative changes of the early 1980s. The 1986 Equal Employment Bill provides an excellent example of the relative power of women in Japan. At first women groups enthusiastically supported the original bill while the business federations Keidanren and Nikkeiren lobbied to it. But after the business groups had the Bill completely rewritten so that no significant reforms would go through, feminist groups then opposed the bill because it provides no guarantee of protection against discrimination but does away with current protective provisions such as menstrual leave, and restrictions on overtime and night work. Employers are only requested to strive for equality in hiring and promotion, while women are still prevented from working over 24 hours overtime a month.

Japan's ratio of working women to the total female population is one of the world's highest. As in other industrialized countries, real wages have stagnated while the cost of living has soared in Japan since 1973, so Japanese women are increasingly moving into the workforce to supplement their husband's salaries. In 1989, 48.2 percent of all working age women were employed, of which 60.6 percent were regular staff employees and 31.7 percent part time workers. Between 1975 and 1988, the percentage of female employees to the total workforce rose from 32.0 percent or 11.67 million to 36.8 percent or 16.70 million. (23) In 1984, 33 percent of women wage earners were in clerical, 22 percent in manufacturing, 14 percent in professional, and 12 percent in sales jobs. (24)

Yet, the quality of these jobs and the pay was vastly below that of men. A 1989 Prime Minister's Office survey revealed that about 63 percent of employed women charged that they were still suffering from discrimination in the workplace. (25) In 1989, men and women with high school diplomas taking office jobs in the same company received starting salaries of 125,785 yen and 120,024 yen, respectively, while university graduates received 157,574 and 152,549, respectively. But after 20 years of service, the woman's wage will have dropped from 93 percent to 70 percent that of the man's. (26) Overall, the average women's pay was half that of men and the gap is widening as women increasingly taken lower paying part time jobs.

Female employment by age follows a roller-coaster pattern in which there is a rise in numbers between the ages of 18 to 25 and then a steady decline as women marry and are pressured to leave their companies, then a steady rise again in the 35–45 age bracket as children enter school giving their mothers an opportunity to work again, followed by a steady decline. The percentage of married women among female employees also rose slightly from 55.4 percent in 1978 to 58.5 percent in 1988, while unmarried women fell from 34.3 percent to 32.4 percent, and divorced women from 10.3 percent to 9.0 percent. Of married working women, 49.6 percent were regular workers and 41.5 percent part time workers while of unmarried women, 82.3 percent were regular workers and 13.9 percent part time workers.

The desire among Japanese women to work far surpasses any employment opportunities. A 1984 survey of 1,000 unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 29 revealed that 72.4 percent of women aged 20–24 either had or were looking for work, while the rate dropped to 53.9 percent for ages 25–29. (27) Of the total, only 4.9 percent said they did not want to work, 25.7 percent said they wanted to work until marriage, 21.4 percent

wanted to work until they had their first child, 23.9 percent wanted to quit at childbirth and later return to work, and only 24.1 percent did not want to quit at childbirth. At least half of female university graduates wanted to work more than ten years compared to less than 30 percent of junior college graduates. The actual length of service was considerably less: in 1978, 5.2 years for high school graduates, 4.0 years for junior college graduates, and 4.5 years for university graduates. There is a discrepancy of 25 percent for university graduates and 15 percent for women graduates who want to work yet cannot. (28) And women also overwhelmingly wanted jobs with responsibility. A 1984 survey indicated that one quarter or 25.7 percent definitely wanted a job with responsibility, while an additional half or 55.1 percent would take a responsible job if given the opportunity. In contrast only 17.2 percent wished to avoid a responsible job and only 2.0 percent would outright refuse such a job if it was offered. (29) Surveys indicate that about 70 of female university graduates hope to maximize their individual potential and economic independence through a career. (30)

Virtually all companies have two employment tracks, "comprehensive" or professional work (sogo shoku) and "general" or noncareer work (ippan shoku), in which men almost exclusively fill the former and women the latter. It is often said that the chief responsibility for white collar female workers, or "office ladies" (OLs), is "smiling, bowing, and pouring tea." A 1988 survey of 1,000 firms found that only 150 had women at the kacho (section-chief) level, and fewer than 20 have women in positions above that level. Altogether only 7.3 percent of working women have a subordinate. Sumitomo bank claims the largest number of high administrators (sogo shoku): 50 women out of 12,000 total. Women, on average, make only half as much as men. There are, however, 80,000 women presidents of small, often one or two person, firms. (31)

Why are Japanese women shunted away to largely ceremonial jobs? Japanese women are trapped in a vicious employment circle in which the justification for discrimination against women in the workplace becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy which is in turn used to justify continued discrimination. It is assumed that a woman will work only to find a husband, and even if she should want to continue working after marriage, her first commitment is to her home. Since women will only work three or four years after graduation, it is considered a waste of time to train, pay, and provide them with responsible jobs. Of course, since there are no opportunities, women do drop out to get married since that is the only viable option society gives them. More than two-thirds, or 71 percent of Japanese men think

a woman's place is in the home, compared to 34 percent of American men, and only 13 percent of Swedish men. (32)

Given their largely ceremonial duties and expectation that they will resign in their mid-20s to marry, firms tend to prefer hiring junior college to university graduates. Firms can pay them less and hold on to them longer. The company benefits when women quit after eight years of service because they have worked for low wages and quit just when their wages would be rising at a faster rate, and their absence clears the way for men to advance up the employment ladder. A 1980 survey of 1,728 major companies revealed that 1,268 or 82.9 percent had no plans to hire any female university graduates, while only 738 firms planned to hire junior college graduates. (33) When women are allowed to return after their children go to school, their salaries start at the year's level at which they quit. The percentage of junior college graduates finding work surpassed that of university graduates in 1969, and throughout the 1980s the employment rate for junior college graduates has averaged 70 percent while that of university women graduates has averaged 60 percent. The year 1978 was typical. According to the Ministry of Education, 51,798 of 86,131 women graduates from four year universities, and 104,250 of 147,433 women graduates from two year women colleges found jobs. (34)

Women face other forms of discrimination as well. Women are not covered by the company lifetime employment system. In 1984, 90 percent of all part-time workers were women, and thus do not enjoy the company's health insurance, retirement pension, or other fringe benefits. Few Japanese firms have day care centers. One firm's employment requirements explicitly warned against hiring women who "wear glasses, are very short, speak in loud voices, have been divorced, or are daughters of college professors."(35)

Will Japanese women ever have an opportunity to find meaningfully careers? Possibly. Japan is experiencing a labor shortage which, with its aging population and low birthrate, will only worsen in the future. The ratio of effective labor demand to effective supply in September 1989 was 1.43, up from 1.30 only a year earlier. In other words, there were 143 jobs available for every 100 persons looking for work. The nation's employment rate was only 2.2 percent in 1990. The MOL predicts a labor shortage of 2.6 million in 2000 and 9.1 million in 2010 if no measures are taken. (36) Some of the labor shortage can be made up with increased productivity, longer work hours, older retirement ages, and foreign labor. But women, too, could fill some of the gap. How much and to what degree remains to be seen.

SOCIAL CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES

The lack of political and economic opportunities merely reflects Japan's persistent cultural norms, values, and behavior. Most women and virtually all men would agree with the message of a May 1981 issue of the magazine, "Life Education" (Seimei no Kyoiku): "Women should demonstrate their naturally passive proclivities: they should understand and accept their husbands' feelings compliantly, without question; they should respect and praise their husbands and obey them selflessly."(37) This ideal was not much different from what Ume Tsuda, the founder of Tsuda College, portrayed in the early 20th century: "in blind ignorance, she does everything. She is not often loved, often a plaything, oftener like a servant, but little educated. She believes herself perfectly happy if she has a husband and children."(38) Robins-Mowrey finds the central image of Japanese women as that of a passive, obedient "doll-like figure—lovely but not quite real."(39)

The Japanese language continues to reflect the vastly different roles and status between men and women. Women still find themselves linguistic prisoners of both traditional concepts and contemporary slang. The ideogram for men is someone standing, for women someone kneeling. Most women's first names terminate with the ideogram, Ko, which means child. Japanese husbands are literally "masters" (shujin) and wives "inside wife" (kanai) or "Mrs Interior" (Okusan). While some women long for a "participation society" (sanka shakai) in which their individual talents and desires can be fully realized, most women are content to be housewives and mothers, exemplified by the saying that women only desire, "a husband with a car, house, and no mother, an afternoon nap, and three daily meals" (ka tsuki, iye tsuki, baba nuki, sanshoku hirune, tsuki). Even today, Japanese men propose marriage with the words, "Will you come and follow me?" while the standard woman's response is: "Yes, I will come and follow you." And all too many husbands still barge home late at night barking the commands to their wife, "Food! Bath! Bed!" (Meshi! Furo! Neru!). (40)

In Japan as elsewhere, children are deeply socialized in traditional gender attitudes. Although Japanese children generally enjoy a pampered, sheltered upbringing, boys, particularly the eldest (chonan), are treated with special regard and privileges that even the oldest girl (chojo) does not enjoy. From an early age, girls are carefully taught how to speak, behave, sit, and even sleep in as feminine and modest a manner as possible. Teenagers are given bridal training, which usually involves taking courses in flower arranging, tea ceremony, koto and shamisen instruments, and

calligraphy. The idea is not so much to excel at the specific art, but to master the grace and style associated with it.

The socialization process continues throughout the education system, in ways both direct and subtle. Statistically, it would appear that Japanese women enjoy equal educational opportunities with men. In 1989, a greater percentage of females than males graduated from high school (95.9 percent, 93.6 percent), entered college (36.7 percent, 24.6 percent), and graduated from college (38.8 percent, 35.8 percent). Yet, women are discriminated against in higher education. In 1987 men accounted for 82 percent of all four-year college students and women 90 percent of all junior-college students. In terms of studies, 70 percent of men enrolled in law, economics or applied sciences, but only 20 percent of women. (41) These figures are partially the result of Ministry of Education policies which have consistently advocated a two track higher education policy in which boys would go to universities and girls to junior colleges, and in 1979 announced a "Family Oriented Policy" for high school girls stressing their preparation for becoming housewives.

One might think that the arts might be the one area in which Japanese women could be judged by their own individual merits, rather than by their sex. Not so in Japan, where the group suppresses the individual even in the art world. Japanese women writers, for example, have been lumped together in the so-called women's school of writers (joryu sakka), considered outside the mainstream of Japan's literary world (bundan). Most female writers, however, deeply resent this status which implies they can address only certain "female" themes, thus severely cramping their artistic impulses. They prefer simply to be called "woman writers" (josei sakka). This secondary status reflects the "tendency of Japanese critics and literary historians to overemphasize literary schools and movements, often to the point of glossing over the distinguishing characteristics of the individual writers participating in them. . . .Women writers, regardless of any literary development they may show, remain joryu throughout their careers."(42)

Popular images of women, no matter now stereotyped or shallow, can become self-fulfilling. No media provides more vivid role models than television. There have been some interesting shifts in the types of women portrayed by television between 1974 and 1984. Surprisingly, there was a shift toward more rather than less married women: in 1974, 34 percent of all female characters were married and 47 percent unmarried; in 1984, 50 percent were married and 31 percent unmarried, while the number of divorced and widowed females remained the same at 19 percent. The relationships and roles, however, were more diverse and departed further

from tradition in 1984. Females still tended to be overwhelmingly other-directed—62 percent of the characters in 1984 were concerned with other's problems, 26 percent with her own problems, and 9 percent with materialistic concerns. Male–female conflicts increased from 60 percent of all relationships in 1974 to 80 percent in 1984. The most interesting change was the percentage of female characters satisfied with their lot—from 46 percent to 13 percent over the decade. (43)

Statistics can again be misleading when marriage and divorce rates are compared. Japan's marriage rate in 1989 of 5.8 per 1,000 people is below America's 9.7, Britain's 6.7, Germany's 6.5, and Sweden's 5.2. (44) But the rates are higher in the other countries because many of the marriages are remarriages resulting from the higher divorce rates. Japan's divorce rate is one of the world's lowest. In 1989, there were only 1.26 divorces per 1,000 people, slightly up from 1.26 in 1988. In comparison, America's divorce rate of 5.8 per 1,000 people was four times greater, followed by Britain's 3.20, Germany's 3.14, and Sweden's 2.27.

More women marry than want to marry. According to the 1985 census, only 10.4 percent of all women aged 30–34 remained unmarried, while only two percent of women remained unmarried all their lives, despite the fact that a 1982 survey revealed that 23.6 percent of women aged 30–34 preferred to never marry. (45) That over half of those who preferred staying single ended up getting married reveals the intense social pressure on Japanese to do so. Parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, and company employees exert continual pressure on women in their mid-20s to marry. Women over 25 are considered over the hill and lucky to get what they can in the marriage market. About 40 percent of all marriages result from an arranged meeting in which the couple must decide after 3 or 4 dates whether they want to marry or not. After the wedding the marriage settles down into a traditional routine where the women pours her energies into her children and the home.

Likewise, fewer women divorce than would like to divorce. Although the Occupation reforms made divorce easy, the practice did not become common until the late 1960s when Japan's rapid economic growth had provided women with enough employment opportunities to stand alone. Divorce, however, still carries a heavy social stigma. Men fear it may jeopardize their advancement opportunities within their firms while women often find themselves ostracized by friends and family. Divorce remains a luxury in Japan that few women can afford. Women receive no compensation in about three quarters of all divorces and small lump sums of 23 million yen ($15–20,000) in the rest. (46) Women do not have any legal claim to

household property, and the husband generally keeps the children. Despite these obstacles, divorce is steadily increasing in Japan. Most divorce is by mutual consent; few go to court because of the immense time and money involved. About 60 percent of all divorces are initiated by women. (47)

Although the highest ideal of matrimony for women is to become the wise, nurturing mother of children, Japanese couples are having fewer babies. Japan's birthrate has plummeted throughout the postwar era from 31 births for every 1,000 people in 1945 to 10.2 per year in 1990, about 30 percent less than America's 15.7 rate. Japan's 1.57 children per child bearing age woman is now the world's lowest, well below the 2.08 rate necessary to sustain a stable population. In 1989, America's birth rates per 1,000 people was 15.9, Britain's 13.8, Germany's 11.0, and Sweden's 13.0.

Why are Japanese women having less babies? Affluence, the "examination hell" education system, easily available birth control, and an exhorbitant cost of living have all contributed to the decline. A 1987 survey of Japanese wives aged 25 to 34 revealed that 30 percent cited the societal pressure to provide the "right" education for their children posed "unbearable" financial and psychological costs and 37 percent that their homes were too cramped for children. Only 21 percent of Japanese women expected having children would be fun compared to 49 percent of Americans and 70 percent of French. Satisfying career opportunities for women, already severely restricted, become almost nonexistent when a women has a child. (48)

Japan's government is becoming increasingly alarmed about the country's so called "child shock." In June 1990, Finance Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto captured the sentiments of many when he decried the falling birth rate and linked it to the increase in well-educated women. (49) The government has attempted to aid working mothers by setting up over 23,000 government sponsored day care centers with 2 million children enrolled. In February 1991, the government announced a program of incentives to encourage Japanese women to have more babies. Families will now receive 5,000 yen a month for each child of pre-school age, plus an additional 10,000 yen a month for every third or more children. The Cabinet is also considering a package of housing loans, tax breaks, education aid and other incentives. Whether such incentives actually encourage a significant growth in the birthrate remains to be seen. But these efforts do recall the government's wartime exhortations to "Give Birth and Populate!" (Umeyo, Fuyaseyo!). Many would agree with Ryo Ochiai, a childless woman at Sony Corporation who admits that government programs to up the birthrate "just make me laugh. This is a different Japan now, and for the

first time women feel free to tell people in authority, 'My life is none of your business.'"(50)

Japanese women clearly have the "right to choose," a right their American sisters may eventually lose. Abortions have been legal and easily accessible in Japan since the Eugenic Protection Law took effect in 1948. (51) The official abortion rate in 1987 was 498,000 or 18.6 for every 1,000 women of childbearing years, well below the 27 per 1,000 rate in the United States. But health specialists estimate the actual rate as two to three times the official rate, the highest among democratic industrial countries and comparable to figures in Eastern Europe. Many doctors conceal the number of abortions they perform to avoid paying taxes.

Why is Japan's abortion rate so high? Once again, a seeming liberation is actually a disguised repression. Most Japanese find abortion morally troubling, with two thirds believing life begins at conception and that to abort a fetus is to take a life. There are thousands of "mizuko-jizo" shrines across Japan at which mothers can pray for the souls of their aborted babies. Yet, over 75 percent of people use condoms and rhythm for birth control despite their high failure rate.

The reason for the high use of condoms and abortions is simple—the government has banned birth control pills while doctors discourage sterilization, IUDs, or diaphragms, ostensibly for health reasons. Some, however, argue that if more sophisticated birth control methods were used, the medical profession would lose enormous income that abortions generate. Thus the government and medical profession discourages more efficient birth control methods. The government is currently reviewing the possible approval of an estrogen pill. Yet, even if the pill is approved, decades of official condemnation have inhibited all but 10 percent of Japanese women from saying they would use it. (52)

Just as birth control has liberated Japanese women from unwanted pregnancies, modern appliances have freed them from the time and drudgery of most housework. Meanwhile, women in Japan, like their counterparts in other industrial countries, are living longer. Japan's life expectancy for women is 80.9 years and for men 75.2 years, among the world's highest, and well above America's 78.8 and 71.6 and Britain's 77.6 and 71.6. The number of years married women spend on child care, from the birth of the first child until the last child starts school, has shortened from 19 years in 1945 to 8.7 years in 1984. (53) In 1940, women lived an average 49 years had five or six children, and lived an average 7.6 years after her youngest child entered school; in the early 1990s, women live an average 80 years, have one or two children, and will live an average 46 years after her young-

est child enters school. The extended family has given way to the nuclear family. Grandchildren are often far away. If present demographic trends continues, more than 25 percent of Japan's population will be 65 years or older by 2025.

Thus, the empty nest syndrome for Japanese women is correspondingly longer, and in some ways more stressful. Many women in their mid-40s and after, find themselves without children or employment while they continue rarely to see their husbands who spend most of their time with their corporations. Japan's retirement and health facilities for the age remain undeveloped compared to other democratic industrial countries. And with a average life span five years longer than that of men, millions of women will be living alone in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

What, if anything, has changed in the lives of Japanese women?

The status and rights of women improved enormously during the Occupation, of which the right to vote has been the least important change. Before 1945, women not only lacked civil rights, but human rights as well. Traditionally, women had little choice over marriage or divorce. Marriages were arranged and the woman had little choice over her spouse. A women could be easily divorced for a variety of reasons including not bearing a male heir. During hard times, daughters were regularly sold into prostitution. In contrast, the 1947 Constitution grants women equal political, economic, and social rights with men. Subsequent laws require both marriage and divorce to be based on mutual consent while the 1986 Equal Employment Bill theoretically grants women equal economic rights. Meanwhile, Japan's economy has developed into the world's most dynamic; its financial, manufacturing, and technological prowess outstrips that of the United States by most indicators, and continues to grow about twice as quickly as that of the United States, while its distribution of wealth is far more egalitarian and its people wealthier. The standard of living for virtually all Japanese, male and female alike, has risen enormously.

Yet, despite these changes, the status and opportunities for Japanese women remain limited. Politically, although the percentage of women in the national assembly is only slightly lower than those of most other democratic industrial countries, Japanese women's groups remain fragmented and ineffectual. There are no significant national groups pressing for advances on women's issues. Economically, working women receive about half the pay of men, again only slightly lower than the average in other

democratic industrial countries. But while women make up about 15 percent of managerial posts in the United States, they are less than one percent in Japan. Society still overwhelming considers a woman's place to be in the home. Women are locked into a vicious cycle: since working women are expected to dropout in their mid-20s to marry, firms give them ceremonial duties and pressure them to leave after several years, leading most females workers to do just that, thus reinforcing society's prejudices and discrimination.

Will the status of women change in the future as Japan's population ages and more women are needed to fill the labor shortage? Or even then will women simply take the more menial jobs while men continue to dominate the important positions? As in the case of other Japanese minorities, any institutional convergence towards more international standards of equal opportunity and nondiscrimination are undercut by the persistence of traditional attitudes and informal institutions. The status and opportunities for women and other minorities will change little in the foreseeable future, although they will make up an increasingly important part of the workforce.

Finally, should notions of equal opportunity and rights even be applied to a culture whose values, norms, behavior, and even language are built around concepts of unequal but mutually beneficial political, economic, and social relationships? As a signatory to the United Nations charter and 1980 Convention on Women, Japan can reasonably be held accountable to the standards expressed by those documents. Women suffer continued discrimination even in the most consciously egalitarian of societies. The standard of living and quality of life for both men and women have risen considerably since 1945, but Japanese women may still figuratively if no longer literally walk well behind men in politics, economics, and society.

Notes

1. Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Women: Constraint And Fulfillment,* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984, p. ix.
2. Wei dynasty chronicles tell of a Japan presided over by a Queen Himiko who sent tribute to China in 238 A.D.
3. Quoted in Dorothy Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun: Women Of Modern Japan,* Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983, p. 34.
4 Ibid, p. 36.
5. Ibid. p. 24.
6. Ibid., p. 42.
7. Ibid., p. 40. From the time Japan's modern school system was established in 1872 through today, in Fujii Harue's words, "girls' education has been structured to respond to what the state and society expected of women. . . . Not once in this entire period has

girls' education ever been considered in terms of what women themselves want or can achieve."(Fujii Harue, p. 301)

8. Chizuko Kaji, "The Postwar Wife—No Longer Incompetent: Civil Code Revisions and Equality for Women," *Japan Quarterly*, p. 137.

   According to Chizuko Ueno, there was little stigma to divorce or premarital sex until the modern era. Divorce was common until the 1898 law, with one of three marriages failing, and fell off rapidly afterwards. A husband could divorce his wife by simply handing her a three and a half line letter of divorce (mikudarihan).

   The Family Law "established a patriarchal and patrilineal family system throughout the nation, known . . . as the ie system . . . the ie system is traditional. .only with the samurai class. What the family law did was to introduce the exclusively patrilineal succession rules of the samurai class to the rest of the society." Chizuko Ueno, "Genesis of the Urban Housewife," *Japan Quarterly*, April–June 1987, pp. 134, 135.

   Ueno argues that while women in the samurai class played a largely ornamental societal role, peasant women had a much more egalitarian status with other village men. The female household head (shufu), usually the oldest woman, supervised the activities of the other women in the extended family. Her status was symbolized by her possession of the rice scoop. Control over rice meant control over the household.

   Likewise, arranged marriage was rare before the modern era, and common since. A woman's virginity became highly valued, and has only slowly receded in importance for males. The average of age marriage for females increased steadily from 15–16 to 20–25. Matrilineal succession (ane katoku) was common in the premodern era as sonless families adopted a man (mukoyoshi) to be the husband of their daughters. The Meiji government rejected this practice.
9. Robins-Mowery, op. cit., p. 56.
10. Ibid., p. 80.
11. Kaji, op. cit., p. 13.
12. Harue Fujii, "Education for Women: The Personal and Social Damage of Anachronistic Policy," *Japan Quarterly*, pp. 302–305. Education policy was only one of a range of Occupation reforms that were reversed as soon as SCAP packed its bags and departed. MOE once again argued that "education suitable for girls is carried out better in all-girls schools," and in 1979 limited home economics classes to girls. Ibid., p. 306. Twice as many women as men refuse to inherit their parent's estate implying they are pressured to renounce it.

    Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi summarized the post-Occupation authoritarian attitudes thus: "It is absolutely necessary that we foster the kind of family in Japan that will support our traditions, customs, and love of country. Based on the spirit of the ie, our nation will assume its own definitions and can move ahead internationally on that foundation."Kaji, op. cit., p. 16.
13. *Economist*, May 14, 1988.
14. *Japan Economic Journal*, May 19, 1990.
15. Ibid.
16. Hans Baerwald, "Japan's 39th House of Representatives Election: A Case of Mixed Signals," ASIAN SURVEY, vol. 30, no. 6, June 1990, p. 540. The disgust among women for Prime Minister Sosuke Uno's sleazy relationship with a bar hostess may have been a major reason for his resignation. Ibid., p. 543.
17. Ibid., p. 544.
18. Hisae Sawachi, "The Political Awakening of Women," *Japan Quarterly*, October–December 1989, p. 384.
19. *Economist*, May 14, 1988.

20. Susan Pharr, *Political Women In Japan: The Search For A Place In Political Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
21. Lebra, op. cit., p. ix.
    One significant political achievement by women involved the "world's oldest profession," which remains as prevalent in Japan as elsewhere. As recently as the 1930s, poverty-stricken peasants and workers sold their daughters into prostitution. Women's groups have been attempting to outlaw prostitution since the early 20th century when the Salvation Army and Woman's Christian Temperance League first addressed the issue. Their efforts, however, were ineffectual until the political emancipation of women in the postwar era. Women politicians and groups pushed hard for an end to prostitution, efforts which finally resulted in the Anti-Prostitution Law, enacted in May 1956. The law is notable in that it attempts to rehabilitate rather than prosecute prostitutes, and absolved them of any debts incurred through prostitution.
22. Sueo Ohori, "The Era of the Working Wife," *Japan Quarterly*, p. 177.
23. Unless otherwise indicated, all statistics on female employment have been culled from *Jetro Business Facts And Figures*, 1990.
24. Ohori, op. cit., p. 175.
25. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 12, 1990.
26. Ohori, op. cit., p. 177.
27. Ohori, op. cit., p. 177.
28. "Women University Graduates Need Not Apply," *Japan Quarterly*, pp. 19
29. Sugahara Mariko Bando, "When Women Change Jobs," *Japan Quarterly*, p. 177.
30. "Women University Graduates," op. cit., p. 21.
31. Economist, May 14, 1988.
32. Ibid.
33. "Women University Graduates Need Not Apply," Japan Quarterly, pp. 19–20.
34. Ibid.
35. Economist, May 14, 1988.
36. Japan Economic Journal, December 8, 1990.
37. Quoted in Fujii, op. cit., p. 306.
38. Christine Chapman, "The Meiji Letters of Tsuda Ume, Pioneer Educator of Women," Japan Quarterly, July–September 1987, pp. 268.
39. Robins-Mowery, op. cit., p. xix.
40. Some expressions are more liberating. An exasperated wife may call her mate a "cockroach" (gokuri teishu) when he demands that she constantly serve his hunger and drinking needs while he watches television, or a retired man who just idles around the house all day may be called an "unlabelled canned good" (raberu no nai kanzume). Although the expression, "the two things that have gotten stronger since the war are women and stockings" ( ) is of more dubious distinction.
41. *Economists*, May 14, 1988.
42. Margaret Mitsutani, "Renaissance in Women's Literature," *Japan Quarterly*, p. 315.
43. Yasuko Muramatsu, "For Wives on Friday: Women's Roles in TV Dramas," *Japan Quarterly*, pp. 159–163.
44. Unless otherwise indicated, all the social statistics have been culled from *Jetro Business Facts And Figures*, 1990.
45. Kiyoko Yoshihiro, "Interviews with Unmarried Women," *Japan Quarterly*, July–September 1987, p. 305.
    For some women, one escape avenue from the drudgery and unfulfillment of inferiority is a relationship with a foreign man. In 1989, 8,049 women married foreign men, while more than twice as many men, 19,596 married foreign women. This represented a large jump from 1984 when almost twice as many women (7,362) than men (4,976)

married foreigners. The mixed marriages in 1989 represented 3.8 percent of all marriages in Japan. *Japan Economic Journal,* September 22, 1990.

Until 1987, however, the children of a foreign male married to a Japanese could not be citizens unless the child was illegitimate but the law was changed after concerted foreign protest.

Eimi Yamada's 1985 novel, "Bedroom Eyes," depicting a Japanese woman's torrid relationship with an American Black man, sold 70,000 copies and was that year's winner of the Bungei Prize for new writers and 1987 winner of the Naoki Prize. Kate Elwood reports that since the mid–1980s, "Japanese female office workers have flocked to Guam for trips of three to four days. For some of the women, the tours are widely recognized as an opportunity to let loose with American G.I.s, a fact bemoaned by many older Japanese, including outspoken Diet member Shintaro Ishihara." Hiroshi Yamaguchi claimed that the "sun will surely set on Japan when women become the mothers of the next generation of Japanese." Both quotes are from *Japan Economic Journal,* November 3, 1990.

46. Only 28 percent of divorced women surveyed in 1984 had received any alimony. Takako Sodei, "The Fatherless Family," *Japan Quarterly,* p. 78.
47. *Economist,* May 14, 1988.
48. *Washington Post National Weekly,* November 5–11, 1990.
49. *Far Eastern Economic Review,* July 12, 1990.
50. *New York Times,* February 17, 1991.
51. The "weeding out" (mambiki) or killing of unwanted babies was widely practiced until the modern era.
52. *Washington Post National Weekly Edition,* November 19–25, 1990.
53. Sueo Ohori, "The Era of the Working Wife," *Japan Quarterly,* p. 175.