

NAILS STICKING UP
THE DILEMMA OF MODERN JAPANESE WOMEN

by

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The status and role of women in modern Japan is a complicated issue incorporating historical, cultural, social, and political elements, both indigenous and foreign. The educational and vocational opportunities of the Meiji era opened up to women new realms of participation. Furthermore, the post-war reforms and the influences of Western democracy have established impressive legal rights for women. Nevertheless, gender-based discrimination is prevalent and frequently the legislation guaranteeing equality fails to express itself in practical terms.

The thesis will trace the roots of some current difficulties urban middle-class women face in pursuing education, in work, and in domestic responsibility back to the Meiji period. This will aid in investigating some of the persisting forms of discrimination within an historical and ideological context. In addition, this study will illuminate some of the conditions of women's lives in modern Japan and indicate possible directions for advancement in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

From an outsider's perspective, Japan appears to be a generally harmonious, homogeneous society in which strong social controls and pervasive cultural ideology encourage conformity and interdependence. Certainly one of the most celebrated traits of the Japanese in the post-war era has been their inspiring cooperation and collective effort in overcoming devastating circumstances. This cultural characteristic may have a long history, but it is particularly evident in the jarring transitions of the last century. In general, modernization has been for Japan, as it has been for other nations, a trial of huge proportions and many have suggested that Japan's ready adaptation to a changing world has been greatly facilitated by a national spirit of cooperation. The effects of industrialization, urbanization, war, and defeat, among others, have produced turbulent times and provoked feelings of fear and insecurity nationwide. The remarkable resiliency exhibited by the Japanese people to accommodate these changes and improve domestic conditions has been internationally recognized and admired.

Yet while Japanese history affirms the desirability of conformity to the group, it also testifies, perhaps unwittingly, to the wisdom of the individual voice. Though often unheeded, ignored, or suppressed, these voices sometimes issued prophecies of necessary reforms and confronted the injustices of oppressive societal structures. Conformity, while producing harmony on some level, is not

without cost. In light of the abuses of power especially pronounced during this period of unrest, acquiescence to authority has in some ways impeded the progress of democratic reform in Japan.

Not surprisingly, the job of the social reformist has not been particularly attractive to a large majority of Japanese. There is a common proverb that discourages individual defiance of accepted standards; "The nail sticking up gets hit back down [and into its proper place]." There is hardly a more appropriate summation of the frequently impeded progress that women have struggled to achieve in the recent past. For some, improvements in women's status and opportunities have seemed painstakingly slow. For others, the changes appear to have been accomplished surprisingly quickly, within one or two generations. Yet regardless of perspective, gains for women in the modern era have not come without resistance. Nor are the barriers to equality completely dismantled.

An examination of the influences operating in the lives of urban, middle class women in recent years should provide a general context for appreciating the opportunities and limitations experienced by the greater portion of the female population of Japan. Although by no means exhaustive, an analysis of these influences will permit the delineation of women's status and function; the rights they enjoy, the options available to them, and the social and economic pressures which shape their choices, their concerns, and their roles in society.

Recently there has been an upsurge of interest in women's contributions to Japan's stunning economic success, and in their expanding realms of participation and influence within postwar society. In addition there have been a variety of comments on yet

continuing forms of restriction and discrimination. This study seeks to unravel the complexly interwoven elements that compose the lives of women in the modern era, and to formulate some possible projections for the future.

The incentives for undertaking such a study are both numerous and significant. In addition to acknowledging the vital role women have played, both in the home and in the work force, in the post-war reconstruction era, there is a continuing need to dispel the myth of the meek, subservient, and exotically mysterious Japanese woman that persists in American thinking. In this age of global awareness and intercommunication, such deprecating stereotypes must be exchanged for more informed, nuanced, and realistic assessments which regard Japanese women with the respect that is their due. Furthermore, the changing role of women within Japanese society provides new vistas from which to observe the gradual integration of concepts of democracy and equality into various realms of practical expression.

The issue of gender as it defines spheres of masculine and feminine influence is another aspect of this type of study. In regarding domestic duties as appropriate responsibilities for women and social duties as appropriate for men, there has been a tradition of labor division based upon the distinct and separate functions women and men perform within the family unit. An examination of women's roles and status in Japanese society illuminates the ways and the extent to which familial ideology has permeated the vocational, educational, and political aspects of modern life.

Having glanced at some of the reasons for broaching the topic of women's role and status in modern Japan, it is essential to clarify

several points before proceeding. Firstly, on a general level, I do not claim that the results of this analysis will be universally applicable to all Japanese women. The conclusions can claim, at best, to be an incomplete overview of some of the social, economic, traditional, cultural, and political factors which, to varying degrees, affect the lives of a great number of Japanese women. To try to simplify the myriad factors which shape and define the lives of an entire society of women, or to attempt to blanket the stratified population with a generalized depiction of the forces creating and maintaining their universal "role" would be inaccurate and patronizing.

Necessarily selective, then, the study will be restricted to middle class and upper middle class women in urban environments. This category has been given preferential treatment over rural women, bar hostesses, geisha, and the like for primarily two reasons. The first is that they are the largest classifiable category of women in Japan, and as such merit attention. The second is their potential range of influence in society at large. Urban middle and upper middle class women generally have more educational and vocational choices than their rural or entertainment world counterparts. Thus they are more likely to gain access into typically male dominated domains and to advance the status of women through their involvement.

An investigation of the circumstances and influences existing outside the scope of urban life would be overwhelming and too expansive for a study on this scale. The depiction of the lives of women in these categories would likely provide only a superficial sketch, simplifying the issues rather than examining them in depth. The complexities of life in the farming community, the entertainment

business, the "floating world" or world of pleasure, the religious community, and in specialized fields such as professional athletics are fascinating and are certainly involved enough to merit theses of their own. Particularly in regards to women's overall status, the researching of these fields provides valuable and frequently surprising perspectives on the collective image women inspire in Japanese society.

Gail Bernstein's book, *Haruko's World*, is one example of the kind of in-depth research that offers an insightful and engaging profile of the life of a middle-aged woman in a rural community. The author's position, as a houseguest and participant in the Utsunomiya family, allows her to observe and contextualize Haruko's many responsibilities and her behavior in a variety of conditions. Also open to view are Haruko's relationships with her mother-in-law, her husband, children, neighbors, other farmers, and co-workers.

Particularly interesting are the discrepancies between Haruko's self-perception, or at least her desired public image, and the demanding circumstances of her life. While she claims to be "just a housewife," her workplace may, depending on the season, rotate from the family's pig sty, to a distant vegetable field, to a construction site across the village, to a nearby factory. As the book progresses, it becomes obvious that the reader gains more than factual data concerning the lives of farm and factory women, but also comes to appreciate their ambitions, their perspectives, and their social identity.

The issue of farm women's social position and self perception in contrast to urban women further encouraged me to focus on urban

women alone. While the rural lifestyle may in fact offer women a more demanding role as producer and overseer and while these women may have stronger community ties, it seems that many rural women envy their urban sisters. Most frequently, these feelings point to the desire for greater financial security, less physical labor, more leisure time, easier access to quality goods and services, and improved educational opportunities for their children.

Very recently, farming has become more automated by improved technology and the countryside is being transformed from a patchwork of oddly shaped paddies to the rectangular, orderly fields of the modern cooperative. Now, more than ever, the comforts of the middle class seem attainable to many rural families and the dream of becoming "just a housewife", that is freed from the heavy labor of the farm, seems within reach.

Hopeful of achieving a higher standard of living for their offspring, many rural women have sent their daughters off to the cities to work as clerks and secretaries. Perhaps, these mothers may speculate, they will be fortunate enough to marry a salaryman and will not need to return to the rigors of country life. Incidentally, this exodus of young women out of Japan's rural communities has resulted in a serious shortage of possible marriage partners for the men left behind. Some northern areas have resorted to importing brides from the Philippines while others have opened recruitment offices geared at attracting young urban women to the countryside. The latter of these efforts has been largely unsuccessful. Given rural women's attraction to urban life, both as the standard of quality living and as the open door to better work and marriage prospects, the city, for my purposes,

promises the most revealing look at where Japanese women are headed.

Secondly, another concern in the study of women is the tendency toward constructing "feminist" arguments for their advancement and superimposing this ideology on their actual progress and gains. While movements to win political, social, and economic equality for women were largely spearheaded by strong, independent-minded leaders, this approach toward reform was accompanied by other more conservative voices. Some argue that given the cultural tendency among Japanese to avoid direct confrontation, this approach may at times have been more effective than open protest.

Furthermore, when women's history is delineated in these terms, it is tempting to regard developments in women's status in Japan in the same vein as "women's liberation" in the United States. While there are numerous similarities, and while there can be little doubt that the women's campaigns in the U.S. have had a significant impact on the procurement of women's rights in Japan, it is simplistic to merely regard Japanese women as "a few steps behind" their American counterparts.

It should be noted that in seeking not to stereotype the changes that have taken place in modern Japan, it is also important to recognize the familiar progressions of industrialization and democratization, as well as the dilemmas inherent in the transition. What Japan has experienced is by no means unique. Many nations have undergone the same burdensome trials of adapting to organized production, economic fluctuations, abuses of power, unjust labor relations, ineffective government, and the constant threat of internal

unrest, among others. These megatrends are accompanied and complicated by the personal needs of citizens to find their places within the new structure. Japanese women have been no exception in this regard and have endured the common realities of inequality, subjugation, lack of political rights, and limited opportunities. Their advancement within society has also proceeded along a plodding, and, in many ways, predictable path.

Having stated thus, I hope that my research reflects something of the nuance which distinguishes the Japanese feminine experience from that of other nations. Cultural influences, religious ideologies, social standards, and national interests specifically Japanese have profoundly shaped the ways in which women have entered the modern era. These are the elements which are particularly relevant to my investigation of women's roles and functions presently. My concern that the subject be treated with sensitivity and attention to cultural differences stems from the inaccurate image of Japanese women frequently portrayed in books and articles. Either frustrated by Japan's slow implementation of equal rights legislation, or proclaiming the dawn of a new era for radical career-minded women, careless authors often cast Japanese women in the shadow of American feminism.

We cannot expect that, irrespective of specific social and cultural gender issues, the concept of equality will permeate Japanese society in the same way it has in the U.S. Neither shall we assume that it is merely a matter of time before Japanese women "catch up." To do otherwise is to remain largely ignorant of the unique factors which shape Japanese life and of the perspectives of the people

confronting change in their generation. That times are changing in Japan is evident. However, that it occurs not according to some transcendent schedule for women's liberation in industrialized nations, but rather according to expressed needs, concerns, and demands from voices within society, is something to keep in mind.

In stating these misconceptions, I do not intend to communicate that I have successfully rid myself of all culturally determined preconceived opinions and am ready to commence with a completely objective analysis of the issues at hand. Of course it is not possible, nor is it particularly desirable in my opinion, to make such a claim. The contrast of perspectives aids the observer in selecting precisely those elements which are unique to a culture different from her own, and which therefore have special significance in a study deeply rooted in cultural influences.

Finally, one last point. The work of creating a composite view of the lives of women cannot be executed in a vacuum, but is indeed a function of the larger question of gender issues within the whole of Japanese society. Far from being separate and distinct, the issues which affect women specifically, such as educational opportunities, the gender based division of labor, restrictions within the job market, child care, the preservation of the family unit, etc. also affect the larger society. Thus they are worthy of concern not simply as components of a woman's rights platform, but as issues central to the development and future of Japan. Wherever appropriate, references to the larger community are made to connect these issues with the dilemmas and problems of modern society, and to accentuate the positive ramifications of further expanding the sphere of participation

and influence for Japanese women.

Given these parameters, then, and the necessary concessions to limiting the breadth and scope of the study of women's lives, this paper will focus on the historical, economic, and social influences on women within urban middle class society. A critical analysis of several factors which influenced the status of women in the Meiji period will compose the first half of the thesis. Modern day manifestations of Meiji ideals and practices will be highlighted to show how pervasive and enduring ideological, educational, and vocational constraints have been in the last century. This should provide a foundation of information from which to formulate an assessment of the relative status of post-war urban Japanese women. In addition, it shall allow for comments on possible expansion and redefinition of this status for the next generation.

It may seem awkward to leap from the turn of the century Meiji era, to very modern times, omitting WWII, the Occupation and subsequent reforms. I justify this by explaining that my purpose is not to highlight the ways foreign involvement has improved women's status as much as it is to uncover the historic roots of modern attitudes and assumptions of proper roles for women. Japan has remarkably progressive legal provisions for women in the workplace and yet seldom are the laws evoked. My suspicion is that rather than lacking a legal platform from which to lobby for more practical manifestations of their equal rights, Japanese women are lacking an indigenous, modern precedent for their involvement in many vocational and political circles.

Getting more specific, the textile workers section describes a

well-documented example of the restricted sphere in which women were encouraged to work during the Meiji period. Without representation, earning pathetic wages, utilized as an economic resource to meet Japan's growing export market, and regarded as temporary employees, these women provide an historical reference point for employment practices that persist today and are justified along strikingly similar lines. Underlying assumptions concerning women's commitment and ability to work have endured regardless of the reforms which were meant to encourage equality.

In modern urban contexts there are trade-offs; freedom or security, leisure time or material assets, the real self or a public image, social acceptance or independence. And therein lies the dilemma for women. More and more, Japanese women are taking risks to improve the conditions of their lives and in so doing, are positioning themselves as "nails sticking up." Whether it is returning to a part-time job after one's child begins elementary school, participating in a volunteer organization or study group, entering a four-year university, or simply taking the liberty to disagree with one's mother-in-law, women in the modern era are protruding through the smooth exterior of harmonious Japanese society. At first they are hammered back into place, but eventually their efforts contribute to the construction of a new level of experience for themselves and for their daughters. These gains incur relational and social costs, but are necessary as women continue to build their lives within the ever-changing superstructure of Japan.

THE MEIJI LEGACY FOR WOMEN

LEGAL LEGITIMACY OF THE IE HOUSEHOLD

Confronted with the increasing prominence of the growing merchant class and the subsequent movement towards a cash, rather than rice, based economy, added to the continuing trend of Western intrusion, the feudalistic foundations of the Tokugawa period crumbled. The lower-class samurai reformists campaigned for restoring rule by emperor, but in fact established a puppet monarchy. They ushered in a new era of capitalism in 1868, which was more reactionary than revolutionary.¹ Their ensuing regime had a profound effect on the lives of women which extended beyond the end of the Meiji government.

In Tokugawa times, most women were active participants in the financial and social aspects of family life. The vast majority of the population lived and worked in small agricultural communities, where men and women alike shared the responsibilities of production. Likewise, urban merchants relied on the contributions of all family members. Although women's status was low in comparison with that of men and it is doubtful that they could have sustained themselves alone economically, their responsibilities required them to labor alongside men and granted them significance and acceptance in a variety of circles.

Marriages, particularly among the peasant class, were usually unions based on free choice and mutual affection, and, in villages, were often arranged more by peer groups than by parents.² Leaders of these adolescent groups were particularly influential. In some cases, these leaders discouraged promiscuity while in other areas, local lodges provided rendezvous places for young lovers.³ Some parents, hopeful that a formal relationship would develop, permitted their daughters to sleep near the door, where suitors could visit at night.⁴ Illegitimate children were incorporated into the mother's household of birth in the event that the couple decided not to marry. The girls were free to consent to or reject potential marriage partners and could end the relations in the early stages, if desired.⁵

It would be inaccurate, however, to portray peasant and merchant class women as having vast, unrestricted freedoms in determining their life courses and circumstances. Farm work was extremely demanding and poverty was a constant threat or a depressing reality for innumerable peasant households.

In particularly destitute families, girls were sometimes sold into prostitution houses for a period of several years to boost income. Of these, the most unlucky ones were shipped overseas at very young ages to Borneo and Malaysia, where they worked for a few years as housegirls before discovering their incurred "debt," which they subsequently worked off as prostitutes.⁶ Although this sacrifice was regarded in theory as the ultimate act of filial service, many of these abused women were rejected by their remaining family when their "contracts" had expired, if they had been able to return home.

The more fortunate girls, even after marriage, were subjected

to severe treatment by their overbearing mothers-in-law who, potentially, could control family affairs long after the young couple had wed. Competition between women for positions of influence within the household focused attention on rivals and subordinates rather than on the larger, oppressive societal structure. The principle "respect the male; despise the female," (*danson johi*) was very much in effect at all levels of society.⁷

Nevertheless, in comparison to the samurai, or warrior, class, women in farming and merchant families enjoyed considerable latitude in both function and expression. The samurai households, a portion of the aristocracy representing about 8 percent of the total population, were rigid adherents to long evolving codes of propriety established by prominent moralists. The didactic writings of these scholars may have gone largely unnoticed and unheeded by the overwhelmingly illiterate peasant society, but were likely fundamental to the severely restricted role women occupied in the authoritarian, patriarchal samurai class.

The quintessential Tokugawa woman, as defined in the famous treatise *Onna Daigaku*, or "The Greater Learning for Women," by Kaibara Ekken, was gentle and obedient, chaste, courteous, humble, and quiet. Since all women were, in his opinion, prone to a variety of evils such as jealousy, discontent, obstinacy, and silliness, it was necessary for wives to obey their husbands implicitly. According to the *yin/yang* distinction, women were classified as *yin*, being of the nature of darkness and passivity. Their inferior status in regards to men was supposedly comparable to the relationship between earth and heaven, between human and deity.⁸

Referred to as *Okusan*, *oku* meaning "the depths far within a building," samurai wives were severely restricted both physically and ideologically.⁹ Considered little more than borrowed wombs, from the adage that states, "The womb is a borrowed thing" (*Hara wa karimono*), samurai women had worth only to the extent that they were able to produce a male heir to continue the existence of the family line and to retain the family estate.

These women became the property of the household upon marriage, had virtually no legal rights, and could be divorced at the whim of their husbands who had to produce only the necessary "three and a half line letter" (*mikudarihan*) ordering dismissal.¹⁰ In the case of illiterate husbands, three and a half lines, literally lines written rather than words, would suffice.¹¹ This household unit, devoted to the preservation of the family from generation to generation through the patriarchal line of primogeniture and submitted to the supreme authority of the male household head, was known as the *ie* and was regarded as the basic unit of the empire.

The family lineage originated with the *senzo* (ancestors) and next, the *hotoke* (recently dead). The *inkyō* (retired household head) followed and the *koshu* (current household head) was the existing patriarch. The *kokeisha*, or successor, was the first born male child of the *koshu* and his wife or, if she proved infertile, a concubine. Daughters-in-law married into the family, while daughters typically went out to other households, and younger sons married and formed dependent branches of the central house. Beyond this, the *kodomo* (children) and *shison* (descendants), promised the prosperous continuation of the family name, the estate, and the ritual practice of

ancestor worship.¹² Thus the *ie*, its generational fibers intertwining both the deceased and the unborn into the living family, represented an extended household in the broadest sense of the word.

For women, the samurai household was one of confinement and submission. Marriage was typically arranged by heads of households and, while daughters could object to proposed matches, it was unseemly to protest too much. The potential benefit to be gained by the family, particularly if an advantageous alliance could be made, was considered more important than romantic feelings, which were negatively identified with the lower, less sophisticated classes.

After marriage, as expected, wives subordinated their personal interests to those of their parents and children. Even the word *yome*, meaning both "daughter-in-law" and "wife," is composed of the two Chinese characters for "woman" and "*ie*," illustrating the point that a woman of this period married not an individual, but an entire household.¹³ A woman in such a position occupied no true sphere of influence within the samurai home. While she might be primarily responsible for the nurturing of her children, she had no actual authority to make decisions regarding their education or welfare.¹⁴ Neither could she assume the rights of a guardian, as women were legally regarded as nonpersons.

By 1874 the discussion of women's issues had extended to numerous newspapers and periodicals in which various opinions were openly debated.¹⁵ While there is no record of women's contributions to these early discussions, there are many indications that some of the standard positions were being questioned. Interest in these topics was highlighted by the translation of sections of Herbert Spencer's

Social Statics (1877), Sheldon Amos's *Differences of Sex* (1878), and John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjugation of Women* (1879).¹⁶

One prominent group contributing to the melange was the *Meirokeisha* (Meiji Six Society) composed of a number of intellectuals from a variety of positions and opinions, who were concerned primarily with the strengthening of Japan through examining and adapting the techniques of Western advancement.¹⁷ Several of them, including Mori Arinori, Nakamura Masanao, and Fukuzawa Yukichi, criticized the treatment of Japanese women as barbaric and inhumane and furthermore, believed that such practices contributed to Japan's poor image in the eyes of Western observers.

While they argued against the acceptance of concubines into the family household, and promoted equality in marriage, none of them considered themselves to be equal rights advocates (*danjo doken*), and apparently did not consider the broader implications of their theories. Believing as they did that social reform begins in the home, they supported the expansion of women's influence within the domestic sphere, although later it became clear that such parameters were contradictory to the notions of equality.

It is likely that some Meiji women, who had been aware and supportive of the progressive views expressed in these debates, had hoped the new government would correct the injustices. They were to be deeply disappointed. The 1898 Meiji Civil Code established the primacy of the *ie* household system and legally sanctioned the extremely restrictive customs of the Tokugawa samurai. One of the implications for Meiji women was a curtailment of their legal rights. Married women could make no request for legal action apart from their

husbands, and were categorized within the same legal class as the "deformed and mentally incompetent."¹⁸

The sexual double standard of the Tokugawa continued as husbands were free to take concubines while adultery for women was a punishable offense. Husbands had the privilege of controlling property brought to the marriage by the wife and were entitled to the profits it accrued. Patriarchal authority was absolute and women were expected to bear sons, this time for the Empire as well as for their husbands. Patriotism, loyalty to the Emperor, duty and obligation on a national scale were manifest at the microcosmic level of individual households.

Along with such edicts, the image of the model Japanese woman was also promoted by the government. Acceptable womanly character (*onna rashiisa*) included such virtues as patience, diligence, even-temperedness, compliance, gentleness, and, of course, obedience. In addition, as women were viewed almost exclusively as housewives, their domestic behavior was also prescribed. Courteous greetings, good posture, good manners, gracefulness in movement, and orderliness in the home were the hallmarks of womanliness.¹⁹

The slogan "good wives, wise mothers" came to define the feminine ideal, and, more importantly, served as justification for confining women to the home and child raising. Interestingly, although this concept is said to have roots in Confucian principles, some scholars assert that it better represents a Japanese interpretation of the nineteenth-century Western cult of female domesticity.²⁰ This profoundly influential ideal has shaped the lives of Japanese women since its inception and continues to define womanliness, to a lesser

degree, in the modern era.

In short, the transition from the Tokugawa to the Meiji era essentially brought feudalistic class distinctions to an end. As the nobility lost much of its superior status and privileges, the commoners, that is merchants, craftspeople and peasants, became increasingly imitative of the samurai class. However, despite the seemingly egalitarian developments, the Meiji did not usher in a new era of progressive reform for women.

Not to be outranked, the lower classes sought to adopt the cultured customs and lifestyle of the ousted aristocracy. Upwardly mobile merchants and land amassing peasants found it profitable to protect their daughters' virtue in order to secure a favorable marriage arrangement. Primogeniture, which was already a common system of inheritance among the peasant class, became more central to household status. Even elevated philosophic ideals relating to the status and function of members within the household became more familiar and influential. Such concerns, which had been formerly the interests of the noble class, took root at many levels of society. Thus democratization did not mean reducing the samurai class to the commoner status, but rather elevating the commoner to the status of the samurai.

The widespread adaptation to the *ie* household system and the restriction of women to the interior role of *okusan* were inherent in the Meiji restructuring. Status and duty were a function of gender, in which men were responsible for publicly representing the household and could freely interact with a variety of persons, while women were enclosed within the confines of the home. Certainly economic

necessity limited the number of households which could afford to restrict their women in this way. However, it is generally accepted that significant changes in women's status and in popular attitudes concerning "feminine" roles were widespread. Although the subordinate status of women dates back to premodern times, "it may be true that only when the Meiji government made the *ie* system the official legal unit of social organization in the late nineteenth century did the subjugation of women permeate Japanese society even down to the village level."²¹

EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Stimulated by a need to modernize and a desire to understand what policies and strategies had empowered the West, the Japanese government turned its attention toward education. In 1871, a Ministry of Education was established with the purpose of developing an academic program for both boys and girls. Initially, the statute required sixteen months of compulsory schooling. This was lengthened to three years in 1880 and then to six years in 1907.²² At the beginning of the Meiji period, approximately 40 percent of boys and 10 percent of girls received some kind of elementary education in temple schools, and it is estimated that about 50 percent of samurai women, who were educated at home, were literate.²³ A noteworthy point is that among the best educated women during this period were geisha, whose occupation required that they be skilled in conversation and knowledgeable about issues of general interest.

The statistics reveal the startling success of educational reforms. By 1897 the rate of elementary school attendance was higher than 50 percent for girls and 80 percent for boys and by the end of the Meiji era in 1912 the rates had increased to 98 percent and 99 percent respectively.²⁴ Japan's literacy rate is a much noted phenomenon in modern times.

As equitable as this seems, the opportunities for women to pursue higher education in the Meiji period were discouragingly limited. After the compulsory school years, male students could go on to *chugakko* (middle school), which comprised grades 7-11, and continue on to either *koto gakko* (high school) and from there enter the university or they could opt for a three year program equivalent to the high school education.²⁵ Girls were another case entirely. After elementary school they could go on to *kotojogakko* which was equivalent in years, grades 7-11, but not in quality, to boys' middle school. Educational opportunities beyond this, such as women's colleges and higher normal school, were few.

Christian missionaries contributed to women's education by opening secondary schools, but were curtailed in the 1890's when the government began to look unfavorably on missionary endeavors. One of the more successful institutions was the Tokyo Women's Normal School, founded in 1875, in consultation with Professor David Murray. Another was the Women's English College, founded by Tsuda Umeko in 1900, who as a girl had studied in the U.S. on an experimental government-sponsored program with four of her peers. Incidentally, all five of these young girls eventually became influential leaders, spearheading a variety of women's campaigns for improved education,

greater political equality and the like.

Finally, there was the Japan Women's University, opened in 1898 by Naruse Jinzo and supported by both the Minister of Education and the Prime Minister of Japan. Naruse's efforts, however, were criticized by the feminist activist Hiratsuka Raicho, herself a graduate of the college. Although advocating a stronger science and philosophy curriculum for women, Naruse, like many others, ultimately supported the goal of producing good wives and wise mothers through education. This was objectionable to a handful of feminists but encouraged by most scholars and sympathetic officials. Such justifications for women's education had been circulating for some time and were always included in discussions on the topic.

It was not always possible for women's schools themselves to get the necessary accreditation from the government to become universities. In 1918, although some private schools were accepted into the university rank, the huge deposit payments, the equivalent of 500,000 yen for one college course and 100,000 yen for each additional course, prevented women's colleges from achieving this status.²⁶

In all fairness it should be acknowledged that there were women admitted to imperial and men's universities until the reforms of the university system after World War II. However, their numbers were extremely small and no efforts were made to encourage their attendance. In 1937 the disparity between men's and women's educational opportunities was substantial. The numbers of institutions for men, including public and private universities, higher schools, prep courses, and colleges totaled 186 while women's

colleges and normal schools amounted to only 50.²⁷

Because women were at least partially responsible for the education of the future generation, the Meiji government responded in 1917 to public debate by appointing a fifty-two member committee to examine nine topics, one of which was the status of women's education.²⁸ There were numerous objections to the creation of women's universities, the most general being that Japan simply was not yet ready for such things, nor was it prepared, in the opinion of the committee, to welcome women into men's universities in larger numbers. Other comments suggested that while more schooling in practical subjects such as home economics, religion, and medical science, might improve women's functioning in the home, such needs did not necessitate establishing universities.

Many women contributed to the debate as well; Fujita Taki, a professor at Tsuda College who recommended science and business courses for women. Hiratsuka Raicho, Tsuda Umeko, and others called for improvements in educational opportunities. However, unlike England and the U.S. which were opening their university doors to women as early as the mid 1850's, Japan, for all its discussion and good intentions, failed to admit even one of its women's colleges to university status until after World War II. Although the modern education system offers many more opportunities, the study of typically "feminine" majors, such as home economics and literature, is still considered desirable and adequate for young unmarried women.

TEXTILE FACTORY WORKERS

To kill a factory girl
You don't need a knife;
You just strangle her
With the weight and denier of the thread.²⁹

This little verse, composed by an unknown silk reeler reveals much about the hardships of factory life for Meiji and Taisho (1912-1925) workers. At the dawn of industrialization, women were called upon to provide much needed labor for the expanding production of cotton and silk. In 1882, approximately three-fourths of all factory employees worked in textile mills, and 62 percent of these were women.³⁰

The first spinning factory was built in 1872 under the guidance of a French engineer and employed 400 women, many of whom were daughters of the extinct samurai class. The remnants of their status lent a dignified aura to the goal of developing this new imported technology. In the early stages it seems that factory girls were treated quite well. The young women from many parts of Japan lived in acceptable dormitory housing, were visited by parents, were able to secure advances from the company for emergencies, and were free to leave in the case of illness or upon the request of parents.

The Meiji government was eager to participate in the development of capital-intensive heavy labor as it anticipated the changes of industrialization. Equally profitable for the strengthening

of Japan would be the importation of light industry which required less investment of capital and could produce a favorable trade balance with Western powers. The textile industry perfectly suited the resources available, requiring little government supervision, moderate investment, and an abundance of low-wage scale workers. A silk blight in Europe further increased incentive for developing Japanese mills to compete in the silk market.

The venture proved to be quite profitable; by 1912 Japan had become the world's leading exporter of silk, largely by the efforts of Japanese women laborers.³¹ The cotton industry was similarly successful. The tremendous benefit Japan enjoyed by being enabled to build its military and heavy industry without incurring a large foreign debt was a major contributing factor to its rapid economic growth. It is doubtful whether such gains could have been possible without the contribution of women.

Although much documentation of the extreme conditions of life in the mills has been collected, Japan's economic successes have diverted attention away from its social failures. As girls from farming and fishing communities replaced the young, formerly samurai ladies, workers' conditions worsened.³² In reality the factory experience, from that point onward, was at least as brutal and oppressive, if not more so, as that of European and American laborers.

As harsh economic conditions forced an increasing number of families to choose between sending their daughters off to the factories or to prostitution houses, factory managers took advantage of the abundance of desperate recruits. Certainly much persuading

was required to convince nervous parents of the exemplary conditions of factory life. Promises of supplementary education, healthy food, reasonable work hours, access to medical facilities, recreational time, and improved prospects for marriage were proliferate, but as nothing was formalized in writing, most or all of these pledges proved to be mere talk.³³

Upon discovering these falsehoods, many girls were of a mind to break their one-sided contracts and return home immediately. However a sense of duty to family and gratitude to parents often curbed their anger and resentment or at least enabled them to bear the horrid conditions. One woman's recollection serves as an example of this sacrificial attitude:

I don't know how many times I thought I would rather jump into Lake Suwa and drown. Even so, when I went home with a year's earnings and handed the money to my mother, she clasped it in her hands and said, "With this, we can manage through the end of the year." And my father, who was ill, sat up in his bed and bowed to me over and over. "Sue," he said, "it must have been difficult. Thank you. Thank you."

Then we put the money in a wooden box, and put the box up on the altar and prayed...Whenever I thought of my mother's face then, I could endure any hardship.³⁴ (p. 55)

On a practical level, since money had been advanced to parents prior to the girl's departure, breaking the contract had negative legal consequences and runaways, when successful at escaping the guarded dormitories, were usually retrieved and punished. For the long hours they worked (12 hour shifts, occasionally back to back) and the infrequent breaks they were permitted (only two 15 minute breaks for meals), they were able to send very little money home. In 1915 the

average monthly earnings were approximately \$4.67, of which fifty cents remained after expenses were deducted.³⁵ Furthermore, as it was believed that moisture in the air helped to strengthen silk fibers, steamy factory floors were the norm, which contributed to asthma, congestion, pneumonia, and tuberculosis.

Work, even outside the home, was not a foreign concept to Meiji women, who were accustomed to doing piecework at home, apprenticing to weavers, or, in the case of peasant women, farming on neighboring fields for day wages. This was considered part of their much needed support of the household. Young, unmarried women were easily exploited because of their willingness to sacrifice for their families, and many were readily ushered off to work in the mines and factories. Their miniscule wages could never have secured their economic independence, nor were they intended to liberate by training women in a useful skill.

The justification for sending adolescent girls into these environments, which was promoted by the government, was that the latter years of their youth before marriage were rightly used for the benefit of the family and the nation.³⁶ The ideology was that these daughters were not taking up a vocation but were temporarily serving the interest of their families and would in due time return to their households to marry. In actuality, many of these daughters never returned to their households, while others returned on their deathbeds stricken with tuberculosis. Many wandered from place to place seeking subsequent employment until poverty forced them into prostitution. Often, when they did complete their contracts and return to marry, economic circumstances forced them back into

factory work.

While there were indeed girls who obediently toiled away without protest under these severe circumstances, there is little doubt that not all of these workers regarded their lives with the same resignation. The romanticized view of these times portrays the textile workers as meek, submissive, ignorant peasant girls who were hopelessly entrapped by superior forces which they could neither understand nor confront. Furthermore, so devoted were they to their families' well-being that they were willing to sacrifice their very lives. Again, although this was true of some, there is sufficient evidence in the number of attempted escapes and suicides to suggest that it was not true for all.

While the documentation is limited at this time to newspaper accounts and local histories, there were incidents of walkouts, strikes and boycotts by women which, to varying degrees of effectiveness, caught the attention of factory management. Though women were generally regarded as "unorganizable" and thus ignored by union leaders, they constituted the beginnings of Japan's modern labor movement. That their protests have been largely ignored by labor organizers and historians is further evidence of the tendency to reduce the contributions of women by categorizing them as meek and helpless and regarding them, in essentially utilitarian terms, as a cheap labor source for an expanding economy.

The contribution of women in the labor force has historically been a necessary part of Japanese expansion and economic growth. Nevertheless, though few women enjoy the leisure of remaining solely within the home, the feminine ideal of the domestic caretaker lives

on at least in the values of the culture. To illustrate how pervasive and enduring is this ideology of women, the following statements, appearing in an article by Robert J. Smith in the journal of Japanese Studies, 1987, are juxtaposed. The first was written by Baron Kikuchi Dairoku, who served as Minister of Education, and was published in 1909.

Our female education, then, is based on the assumption that women marry, and that its object is to fit girls to become "good wives and wise mothers." The question naturally arises what constitutes a good wife and wise mother, and the answer requires a knowledge of the position of the wife and mother in the household and the standing of women in society and her status in the State... [The] man goes outside to work to earn his living, to fulfill his duties to the State; it is the wife's part to help him, for the common interest of the house, and as her share of duty to the State, by sympathy and encouragement, by relieving him of anxieties at home, managing household affairs, looking after the household economy, and, above all, tending the old people and bringing up the children in a fit and proper manner.³⁷ (p. 8)

The second passage comes from a speech given by the president of an apparel company in 1985 to an assembly of his employees, most of whom were women.

Thinking of Japan's past, when we ask who was greater, men or women, it is true that it was the men who were in the foreground, engaged in activities such as politics, economics, and education. But in the background there were always the women who, with firm hand, maintained the household and brought up the children, encouraging their husbands and sharing their hardships...The post-war recovery, which required tremendous strength, is also due to such women.

However, when I came to this realization I began shaking with fear. Nowadays, women have totally changed. The women who had a wonderful tradition and extraordinary strength have now begun to fall. They no longer maintain the household. They dislike raising children. That is what it has come to. And women, just like men-perhaps more so-have become lost in amusements. Today, who is going to maintain the household?

Azumi is a company founded with the grand purpose of making women beautiful, but beauty is not only a matter of form. A splendid heart and beautiful spirit are even more important. I want to make this anniversary an occasion to instill this kind of thinking firmly into the women of Azumi. [In the past], as fitting complements to such splendid women, there were great men. However, when the women changed the men began to fall as well. Men no longer have strength. There are few manly men nowadays and I feel that it is the result of this kind of [modern] woman.³⁸ (p. 8)

This reiteration of the traditional women's role as wife and mother must have sounded somewhat odd to these female employees, many of whom were married and had children. Regardless of how women have expanded their areas of involvement to include outside work, political participation, and academic achievement, nostalgic sentiments such as this are not uncommon. Whatever other realms of influence women have come to occupy, the domestic role still overshadows all else.

As part of the post-war reforms the *ie* household, which was thought by U.S. occupation authorities to be a major contributor to the over-zealous nationalism which had propelled Japan into war, was intentionally dismantled. The new constitution guaranteed the equality of the sexes and the injustices of the Meiji Civil Code were largely

reversed. However, although relatively recent legislation has enhanced and improved the status of women, many remnants of the Meiji era exist as undercurrents in modern thought and continue to circumscribe the participation of women in society.

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MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN IN MODERN JAPAN

GROWING UP FEMALE

Young girls in urban Japan today are enjoying a more leisurely childhood than their mothers had. Improved household technology has had much to do with reducing the responsibilities of daughters and allowing them more free time. Chores which took hours to complete can now be accomplished with relative ease much more quickly. Having fewer people to care for within the household, due to the transition from extended family living arrangement to the nuclear household, as well as a reduction in the number of children per family, is another factor.

These reasons do not fully explain the current situation, however. In a Prime Minister's Office survey conducted in 1976, teenagers responded to the following question; "What domestic chores do you consider yourself responsible for?" A variety of duties were mentioned, including shopping, cleaning, babysitting younger siblings and the like. Only 1.4 percent of American teenagers, both male and female, responded "nothing in particular," whereas 47.3 percent of Japanese boys and 25.9 percent of Japanese girls selected this answer.¹ Admittedly, girls take on a substantially larger share of household chores that boys do. While Japanese children may not be assigned specific duties in some cases, daughters are more apt to aid

over-burdened mothers than are sons.

One important distinction of Japanese society is an extreme preoccupation with academic success and the resulting pressure placed on young people to compete and perform. The educational system is based primarily on a series of examinations which channel the best and brightest students into the most prestigious universities, and delegate the others to universities and colleges of diminishing rank in accordance with their test results. Many of the top-ranking universities have their own examinations which are extremely demanding and hopeful students often attend *juku*, or supplementary private tutoring, to improve their chances of entrance.

Also built into the system is the hierarchical ranking of elementary and secondary schools which feed into the universities. Some of these schools are famous for the high percentage of graduates who continue on to elite institutions and from there are guaranteed lucrative positions in business and government. These preparatory schools have entrance examinations of their own and also have feeder schools from which they draw the majority of their students.

Thus for the ambitious parent, guiding one's child's academic career can begin as early as preschool. From toddler age upward, then, many youngsters are encouraged to study and to study diligently. Both boys and girls may find themselves driven toward academic achievement by overzealous "*kyoiku mamas*," who are obsessed with their child's actualization of their potential.²

Problems of teenage delinquency, ranging from shoplifting to rebellion to aggression, are frequently attributed to the pressures of

the examination-based school system and to the interference of oppressive mothers.³ Other targets of criticism are, conversely, the decline of parental authority and discipline, the warping influences of the media, and the inadequacy of teachers to instill values in the classroom. Another source of concern is the widespread popularity of violent and sexually explicit comic books, in which male and female characters engage in a variety of socially unacceptable behaviors.

Statistical studies in the early 1980's reveal that a considerable shift in youth perspectives has occurred. Less likely are they to confide in parents and teachers and to seek approval in these "vertical" relationships. More influential in these young people's lives are the opinions of their friends.⁴ These "horizontal" ties within their peer groups may contribute in some degree to their perceived rebelliousness. However, some social critics disregard the entire display of popular concern over "trends" in adolescent violence by charging the media with sensationalist presentation of isolated cases.

Pertinent to the issue of adolescent delinquency is the broadly defined concept of motherhood in Japan. From infancy, dependence on the mother for emotional comfort, as well as for physical needs, is strongly encouraged. For many years children may "sleep like a river," that is between their parents, imitating the pictorial kanji for "river," which is composed of three evenly-spaced vertical lines. It is thought that the complex interdependency of the greater Japanese society is rooted in this early mother-child relationship which transitions into various forms of reliance on others as the child matures.

Conversely, this intense mother-child relationship is currently being criticized. Many are concerned that modern youths are responding to parental pressure and interference by asserting their freedoms in unhealthy ways. Over-protectiveness and excessive identification with the child are two commonly noted problems for mothers. Juvenile delinquency is not as serious in Japan as in many other countries. Nevertheless it is a topic of much interest and motherly influence, much more than paternal authority or lack thereof, is being blamed for this generation's unruliness.

In another survey conducted in 1976, this time by the Bureau of Citizens Affairs of the Tokyo metropolitan government, 63 percent of over 1200 parents affirmed that society attaches greater importance to academic background than to ability.⁵ Furthermore, 47 percent predicted no change in this state of affairs and 5 percent believed that academic affiliations would increase in importance.⁶

While this survey indicates that roughly half of the parents polled felt that Japanese society was likely to continue in its schooling consciousness, the results probably reflect the optimistic hopes of many parents rather than their actual beliefs. Although 70.5 percent agreed with the statement, "There is something wrong with a society that measures people's worth by their level of education or the school they attend," 69.2 percent also admitted that "...one is forced to compete, since everyone else takes part."⁷ When questioned on this point, adults are likely to respond with a regretful but noncommittal "*shikata ga nai*;" it cannot be helped.

Encouragingly, parents are nearly as committed to the higher education of their daughters as they are to that of their sons. Fully

85 percent of fathers and 92 percent of mothers hoped to send their high school daughter to college, according to a 1975-76 poll of the parents of 405 senior students in Hyogo Prefecture.⁸ (The figures for sons were 95 percent and 98 percent respectively.) However, many more parents of daughters than of sons had two-year colleges in mind rather than four-year universities. In actuality a little over one-third of female high school graduates in urban areas go on to some form of higher education.

An increasing number of students, especially girls, are choosing to continue their education beyond the completion of high school. They do this to both their benefit and to their detriment. While they enhance their personal academic careers and gain the opportunity to experience college life, they also join the pool of over-qualified women workers who at this point have few outlets for the application of their training.

This is partly due to the institutions and majors they select. The popular two-year colleges equip graduates with practical skills, preparing them for clerical and secretarial work; some are little more than refinement schools for young women awaiting marriage. Unlike U.S. junior colleges, the Japanese versions do not enable students to transfer to four-year institutions. When women do enter four-year universities they frequently gravitate toward majors in the humanities and education, avoiding typically "masculine" subjects such as economics and engineering.⁹ Only in the last few years have women begun to tackle these male-dominated fields and their numbers are still minuscule.

Some criticism of these female university students

(*joshidaisei*) has arisen due to their somewhat sensational image. The stereotype suggests a carefree, self-centered subculture of spendthrifts more interested in fashion and sightseeing trips than in academics.¹⁰ They are nearly all supported by their parents and, as many work part-time for supplemental income, have adequate financial resources for their leisure activities. Although their male counterparts are also dependent on the financial support of their parents and similarly regard the university years as a well-earned vacation for having succeeded in the entrance exams, they seldom draw fire from social critics.

Young women not enrolled in colleges or universities may pursue *hanayome shugyo*, or "bridal training." The traditional disciplines included the performance of the tea ceremony and the art of flower arranging. Today additional skills may involve cooking, English conversation, word processing, and driver's education.¹¹ Another method of bridal training is living at home and perfecting the art of housekeeping as a *kaji tetsudai*, or "housework helper." Even well-educated young ladies content themselves with performing these disciplines in anticipation of marriage, although this practice is decreasing as more graduates enter the work force.

Even if a young woman opts for a full-time job, she will almost certainly remain in her parent's home, as employers would question the moral character of an unmarried woman living alone. This seems to be largely an extension of the over-protectiveness both parents and employers display toward these sheltered daughters. Expressed by the phrase *hako-iri musume*, which literally means "daughter-in-a-box," is the attitude that young maidens need the

nurturing and moral instruction which the home provides.¹² This living arrangement benefits the company in more than conceptual ways; low wages are considered adequate for girls with few living expenses and more can be demanded from employees whose domestic responsibilities are minimal.¹³

Japan is predominantly a marrying society and young women in their 20's are frequently asked, "So when are you going to get married?" Singleness has long carried a social stigma and women in this category have typically been regarded as oddities. This standard is changing nowadays as more women are choosing not to marry for the sake of pursuing their careers. According to the 1985 census, 30.6 percent of women aged 25-29 and 10.4 percent of those between the ages 30-34 had never been married.¹⁴ In Tokyo these figures were higher, 43.4 percent and 19.5 percent respectively.

These figures represent the changing attitudes of young women who are choosing to attend college or university and are expecting to work after graduation. Most of these women will marry eventually. Some however, particularly those relatively few who have demanding careers and want to continue working, prefer not to marry at all. A 1982 survey by the Ministry of Health and Welfare indicates that of single women aged 30-34, 23.6 percent intended to remain single.¹⁵ The custom of regarding persons as members of the adult community when they marry must now accommodate these modern demographics.

ENTERING THE WORKING WORLD

Trained and educated and eager to work, Japanese women are ready to tackle the world of employment, but is this world ready for *them*? In general, the favorable economic climate has greatly expanded employment opportunities for women within the last few decades. The shift away from manufacturing to information and service industries has also redefined the job market, providing an abundance of openings in offices, department stores, and smaller shops. Clerical and secretarial posts comprise the majority of jobs in these industries. Positions as waitresses, beauticians, seamstresses, tour guides, and shopkeepers are also common for women.

Additionally, many have gravitated toward elementary level school teaching, nursing, day care supervising, and pharmaceutical work, fields women have come to dominate in recent years. Even the language reflects the preponderance of women in certain fields. Day care workers, for instance, are known as "*hobo to kangofu*," or "sustaining moms and watchful protectresses."¹⁶ The word "*hobo*" is also used in other contexts to mean "nurse."¹⁷

A smaller proportion seek jobs in the fields of business, politics, law, the media, higher education, and medicine with some degree of success. The proportion of women in selected professional fields as of 1984 are as follows: scientific researchers 6.1 %,

doctors and dentists 10.9%, judges and lawyers 3.1%, elementary school principals 2.1%, and national civil servants 14.1% of whom 0.5% were in managerial posts.¹⁸ These are the career women whose professional objectives frequently conflict with societal pressures and with other roles that they have assumed. They are the elite, whose much publicized advances into male-dominated careers have most visibly expanded women's opportunities in the workplace. Furthermore, their presence and proven ability have called into question the prevailing assumption of gender-based labor division.

While women are finding a wider range of employment options available to them, there is no doubt that exploitation and discrimination persist in the work environment. The case of office secretaries is one of the more obvious examples of this. Women of any age may be "office ladies," or "O L's" in short, but only young, attractive women can be called "office flowers," (*shokuba no hana*) for the decorative quality they lend to the business atmosphere. The duties of these ornamental employees are typically no more demanding than serving tea, making copies, and answering the phone.¹⁹

The large majority of them work only three to four years until marriage when they retire, either willingly or under compulsion, to take on domestic responsibilities. Occasionally office matches are made between employees who meet on the job. These women are considered especially desirable for their insight into the rigorous demands of the business world, and are thus assumed to be more sympathetic towards their husbands' preoccupation with work.²⁰

Whatever their duties, office secretaries have much in

common; extremely low wages amounting to less than half of the salaries of male workers hired to comparable positions, the expectation of their performance of "womanly" duties to improve the office atmosphere, virtually no opportunity to be cross-trained in other departments, and ineligibility for promotion.²¹ The most favored women for these positions are high school and junior college graduates, who will work a typical two to four years longer than their university-educated contemporaries. Since these employees are expected to retire upon marriage, generally at age 25, or upon the birth of their first child at the latest, younger, less educated women will give the company a greater return on their investment.

This scenario has been reenacted with such consistency as to become nearly institutionalized in the business sector. So prevalent is the acceptance of women's role as wife and mother that mandatory retirement has rarely been questioned. It was simply regarded as "the way things should be." If other, more demanding and more lucrative business career tracks were also available to women, such treatment of secretaries might seem less unjust. After all, there are secretaries in all industrialized nations that earn relatively low salaries, have few career advancement opportunities, and are expected to serve coffee.

The difference is that in Japan women have been consistently relegated to secretarial status even when their capabilities have far exceeded such limitations. Even worse, those with credentials are sometimes denied employment completely. According to a report issued in 1985 by the Nippon Recruit Center, a private research firm, some 80 percent of Japan's top 1,118 companies affirmed that they

would not interview any female university graduates during that year. They were, however, accepting high school and junior college graduates for office positions.²² When women are hired to work at positions comparable to those of their male peers, it is often not due to an employer's confidence in women's capabilities but rather stems from a need to reduce the company's payroll. As a manager at a major bank stated,

Recently it has been difficult to save on labor costs except by hiring women, and we plan to replace male workers with female to reduce the cost. Most women workers get married in about four years. This is the most important point in hiring them.²³ (p. 77)

Although a few women have gained promotions, the proportion has changed little since 1975. Only 7.3 percent of working women have a subordinate, and a recent survey of 1,000 large companies revealed that just 150 of them have any women section chiefs (*kacho*) and fewer than 20 have women in positions above this level.²⁴ In the civil service the figures are not much better. In 1987, of 1,669 recruits to low-ranking administrative positions, 128 were women. At the middle level, where actual authority is exercised, female officials numbered just 36 out of 6,500. Beyond this rank, less than five upper level positions were held by women.²⁵

Women who do attain high-ranking positions may be confronted with discriminatory attitudes regarding their competence. In some cases, they may find themselves targets of undeserved negative attention. Saisho Yuriko, who directs an advertising agency run exclusively by women, recalls that when their company began attracting larger accounts, competitors shrewdly tried to undercut

their success. They approached Saisho's clients with comments such as, "It's amazing that you could implicitly trust such an agency. Do you really think a company run by women can last indefinitely?"²⁶ While combatting damaging rumors is frustrating and tiresome, Saisho regards her adversaries' tactics as evidence that her company has "come of age."

Not only are discriminatory hiring and promotion practices unfair, they are technically illegal. In an effort to improve the status and rights of women in the workplace, and in response to pressure to conform to the United Nations standards for the treatment of women, Japan's Equal Employment Opportunities Law, seven years in the making, was passed by the Diet in 1985. Progressives predisposed to welcome legislation addressing the inequities in Japan's labor market railed against the document's supplicating tone and paternalistic wording. More significantly, the legislature neglected to attach provisions stipulating any punishment for violators. Without penalties, it has served as a recommendation rather than a law.

Nevertheless, the publicity generated by the controversy has itself aided women in their attempts to secure better jobs. Some companies have taken the initiative to establish two distinct job options for women, the common "clerical position" (*ippan shoku*) for those who only want to work until marriage, and the "general" (*sogo shoku*) position for those interested in promotion. Entrance into *sogo shoku* status is generally by examination, as it has been for male employees. The number of women admitted to this status is increasing but is currently extremely small. In 1988, Sumitomo bank claimed that 50 out of 12,000 *sogo shoku* employees were women.

Others such as Nomura Securities and Marubeni had fewer still.²⁷ Some believe this approach to be tokenism, undertaken to improve the company image. Moreover, it attempts to justify the exploitation of the vast majority of working women by granting a very select few the opportunity to advance. In the words of a male manager before the passing of the equal rights bill, "Even if it passes, the spirit of the law will not be implemented. We want to remain above women, we don't want to take orders from them."²⁸

THE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Not all vocational discrimination against women stems from male chauvinism. From the manager's perspective, investing in female workers is simply judged to be unprofitable. The Labor Standards Law, which was implemented shortly after WWII to protect working women from harsh factory conditions, by granting, among other provisions, maternity leave and restricting overtime and late night work, has become a curfew for women employees. Although these restrictions have been abolished for women managers and professionals, they still apply in some cases to office women, impeding their progress toward management status.

Staying late at the office is standard in Japan's diligent and highly competitive business world. Women who leave the office as soon as they are permitted, usually to cook dinner for their husbands or to pick their children up from day care, miss the opportunity to collaborate with co-workers on major projects and are thus outside

the mainstream of corporate life. In addition, certain business functions are simply regarded as unsuitable for women. Entertaining customers at bars and restaurants after work is not a responsibility most companies would assign their female employees.

Promising men are usually trained in other skills at their level within the company. Every three or four years, they are rotated to another division where they can master a new assignment. Their accumulation of knowledge of company procedures and understanding of various functions within the organization increase their value to the company over time. Women, on the other hand, will probably retire at 25 or 26, management reasons, so even if they start out at 20, they will have mastered only one assignment and will leave before having completed another. In the case of high school graduates, the company's investment can be recovered in the seven or so years they work.

University graduates, however, are not worth training for the mere three or four years of service they provide.²⁹ As female employees have not accumulated much in the way of training and expertise, the management feels justified in maintaining their relatively low wages while granting raises and promotions to male workers. In a seniority-based wage scale system, women who quit work to marry and then reenter the labor force after childrearing are severely disadvantaged.

This is the standard hiring and promoting procedure found throughout most of urban Japanese society. Even if men and women hired the same year earn the same wages initially, by the time they reach their 40's, women junior high school graduates will be earning

26 percent less than what their male peers earn. For senior high school graduates, women will earn 29 percent less and among university graduates the figure is 35 percent. The Japanese system is very unfortunate for women in that the wage gap increases with the level of education achieved.³⁰

The corporate position on women is currently a choice between two options. It can assign all women employees to non-specialized secretarial jobs, minimizing the risk of wasted investment, or it can select out the motivated career aspirants and put their talents to effective use. If the latter option is chosen, the company can still expect substantial benefits from the employment of women.

Inevitably, many women wanting both careers and families will discover that the stress of maintaining two separate realms of responsibility is too great and will retire. If such a woman quits after even eight years she will have provided the company with, firstly, hard work at relatively low wages, secondly, freedom from outlaying pay increases at just the time they would be coming due, and thirdly, a decrease in the competition for higher management positions.³¹

The remaining women, either unmarried, divorced, or extremely adept at balancing home and work, contribute on the long term to the company's success as well as enhance its public image. This somewhat discouraging picture sums up the difficulties women are likely to face in Japan's "bottom line" business economy. In brief, "the primary corporate purpose is to increase profits, not to help women establish themselves."³²

RETURNING TO WORK

Middle aged women are reentering the workplace in numbers nearly equal to those of young unmarried women taking jobs for the first time. The "M-shaped" graph, which charts the percentage of women who are employed, reveals a drastically steep incline in employment levels for young women which peaks at over 70 percent between the ages 18 and 23. The figure plunges to about 50 percent for women aged 27 to 32. Then it curves upward again levelling into a plateau at about 68 percent for women aged 38 to 48.³³ Overall, nearly 60 percent of women either work outside the home, are self-employed, or are involved in family businesses. Their numbers constitute approximately 40 percent of the total workforce.

While they are numerous, they are not yet powerful. The great majority do not pursue professional careers but, rather, marry and have children. When women do return to work, generally after children have started school, when marriages have failed, or as financial need necessitates, they find that their employment circumstances have worsened. Euphemistically classified as part-timers, nearly half of them work 35 to 48 hours per week in the service industry, wholesale and retail industry, and in manufacturing.³⁴

The average hourly wage in 1984 came to 572 yen, which was 74.8 % of the hourly pay of full-time female employees.³⁵ Typically

earning between \$2.50 and \$4.00 an hour and receiving few fringe benefits, these women perform routine duties with little opportunity for promotion. They are often not guaranteed any fixed period of employment and are considered an expendable resource.

Abundant and willing to accept unfavorable conditions, these workers are Japan's economic buffer, keeping wages down by creating a labor surplus, and by allowing Japan to maintain large profit margins in U.S. exports.³⁶ Part-time employees are excluded from union membership, a fact which has little bearing on the unfair treatment they receive since most of these unions serve to control workers rather than to promote their rights.³⁷ The presence of the part-time labor pool acts as a control valve which accommodates the fluctuations of the market; workers are mobilized during periods of expansion and retired when production slows. "In Europe and the U.S. they use immigrant labor," says economist Yoko Sano of Tokyo's Keio University. "In Japan, we use women."³⁸

Perhaps surprising to many westerners, Japanese part-time women workers do not seem to be particularly hostile in their feelings about their low status and limited options. This may stem from a variety of issues. The socialization of women, in regards to their influence and responsibilities in the domestic sphere, is one of the most significant. The idea that mothering is the noblest, most attractive, and most meaningful function of women is stressed and is reiterated in the workplace, where vocation is viewed as secondary to one's wifely and motherly role. The nurturing bond between mother and child is a tenet of womanly character which is evident in the constant closeness they share in the early stages of the child's life.

Finding a sense of self in caring for children and managing domestic life, many women are not compelled to seek independence through their outside work.

Understandably, many women are not interested in entering the exhausting and consuming professional world which demands most of their husbands' time and vitality. Overworked, glassy-eyed, chain smoking, career-obsessed husbands are hardly the most encouraging models of the liberating value of white-collar employment. Obviously this is a gross stereotype. There is, however, growing concern over the number of long hours Japan's salarymen have been investing in their careers. incidentally, attention has recently been directed toward a startling phenomenon known as "karoshi," literally "death from overwork." It is thought to be a sudden acute circulatory condition brought on by prolonged high blood pressure due to occupational stress, although Japanese companies are slow to acknowledge these findings.³⁹

More practical explanations certainly figure into the issue of women and work as well. In Japan it is virtually impossible to combine household responsibilities and full-time employment, without special circumstances facilitating this, such as the presence of a live-in female relative.⁴⁰ Day care centers generally operate only during business hours, allowing no time for commuting to and from the place of employment. Babysitting is essentially non-existent and relying on friends and neighbors for assistance would be considered extremely irresponsible.⁴¹ Husbands are little help around the house, contributing only a few minutes a day to domestic chores. This fact does not disturb most women, although

the younger generation seems more hopeful that men will take an increasing interest in household affairs.

Wives are also often responsible for the care of elderly parents. Although the nuclear family is the dominant living arrangement in Japan, frequently sons and daughters will be called upon to assist their parents in their old age. Elderly men are especially inclined to live with children or grandchildren, while older women choose to live alone.⁴² In 1980, 69% of those 65 and older lived with a married or unmarried child, which is down from the 87% of 1960, yet still reflects the acceptability and prevalence of such arrangements.⁴³

A recent trend among middle class housewives is engaging in outside activities and clubs geared toward exercising the mind and the body. Some women, needing an interesting diversion from their household duties, have joined study groups on topics ranging from economics to literature to child psychology.⁴⁴ Others take part in fitness classes or play on local sports teams.⁴⁵

Volunteer activities, on the other hand, are unpopular in Japan. In a study of urban Japanese housewives conducted by Anne Imamura, only 3.9 percent of those surveyed were involved in some type of social service.⁴⁶ Inconveniencing their families was the priority concern and several women, who had taken on some sort of social service, had made special efforts to ensure that their outside interests would not interfere with their families' mealtimes and sleeping habits.

According to Imamura, aside from involvement in PTA, which is the duty of nearly all housewives with school-age children,

participation in civic affairs and political groups is minimal.⁴⁷ Of those who do participate, some are suspected of neglecting their families while others are advised by friends and neighbors to take on part-time jobs instead to increase the family income.⁴⁸

When women do return to work, it is frequently the need or desire for extra income that motivates them. Some do seek a sense of purpose, others enjoy the friendly rapport between co-workers, and many appreciate the feeling of independence that work provides. As women are having fewer children and are living longer, the years potentially available for work have expanded and many are doing what they can to make the best use of their time. Confronted with ever-increasing inflation, the exorbitant value of real estate, and the skyrocketing costs of providing modern luxuries and education for urban youngsters, wives are shouldering part of the financial burden of maintaining a middle class standard of living. They are defining fulfillment in their own way and are striving for their goals, making the necessary sacrifices to see these goals realized.

CONCLUSIONS

Many dramatic changes have occurred in the post-war era which have greatly increased the status of women in Japanese society by empowering them with legal rights, opening up institutions of higher learning, and calling for equality between the sexes. The Occupation's democratic reforms served as major catalysts for raising the position of women. The provisions of the new constitution

established marriage as a mutual arrangement granting equal authority to both partners. It removed the system of primogeniture by dividing up inheritances and requiring the separate registry of each nuclear household. Women received the right to vote and to organize for political activity. These and other such reforms have turned the tide toward the expansion of women's participation in many realms of society.

However, imposed by an outside force, as this legislation was, it is evident that much of Japanese society has not yet conformed to the legal ideals its constitution promotes. As one critic commented in 1974, "A revolution in legislation could not bring about a revolution in practice, and the *ie* system still survives in custom."⁴⁹ The tenacity of Meiji values continues to restrict the roles of women and eclipses the scope of their contributions to the nation and their pursuits of personal fulfillment. Still strong in Japan is the "good wife, wise mother" feminine ideal which, significantly, yet serves as the primary tenet of education for women whether in "finishing schools" or in similarly oriented two-year colleges.

The exploitation of women as a temporary, low-paid, severely restricted and expendable labor source in modern economic expansion is derivative of practices found in the factory management of Meiji industrialization. Even the justifications for such discrimination persist in the form of regarding young women as "seat warming" employees who will work only a few brief years before retiring to the domestic sphere upon marriage. In essence, the Meiji era has left a legacy for women which permeates the societal attitude towards women's status and capabilities. The consequences of this for modern

women have been buffered by progressive legislation but the manifestations of these ideological restrictions have significantly shaped and defined the role of women in Japanese society.

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1. Sodei Takako, "Family Stability in an Age of Working Women," *Japan Echo*, vol. 9, no. 4, (1982), p. 97.
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7. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
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16. Cherry, p. 99.
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22. Leslie Helm, Kyoko Takahashi, Bob Arnold, "Japan's Secret Economic Weapon: Exploited Women," *Business Week*, Mar. 4 (1985), p. 55.
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26. Saisho Yuriko, *Women Executives in Japan*, (Yuri Intl., Tokyo, 1981), p. 157.
27. "Japanese Women: A World Apart," p. 22.
28. Helm, p. 54.
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33. Helm, p. 54.
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35. Ibid. p. 24.
36. Rob Steven, "The Japanese Working Class," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1980), p. 45.
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44. Anne Imamura, *Urban Japanese Housewives*, (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987), p. 121.

45. Goto Aki, "Where Are Japanese Housewives Heading?," *Japan Echo*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1982), p. 105.

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PROJECTIONS

The current trend among adventuresome women to opt for unique and specialized jobs will most likely continue, as will the media coverage of their bold exploits. It seems that newspapers and television reporters have developed quite a penchant for marvelling over their sensational achievements, treating them "like giant pandas."¹ The first women air traffic controllers, Imperial Palace guards, orchestra conductors, jockeys, chemical analysts, police detectives, and mountain rescue specialists have all been eyed with curiosity in the last decade, and more will follow.² Perhaps the publication of their stories will rouse the imaginations of young girls and encourage creative work options for women. However, more wide-spread, substantial gains in women's status in the work force will be necessary before women are truly respected as equals and are ushered into higher level management and welcomed into typically male occupations.

Already many Japanese business-minded women have set their hopes on U.S. and other foreign companies to provide opportunities where Japanese companies are deficient, and they are not being turned away. Foreign companies are recognizing the potential of these young university graduates and many banks, in particular, are willing to employ them in operations, credit analysis, and personnel.³ They are not yet being groomed for marketing positions but have been

given responsibility in other areas. Said John Johnson, a vice president at Bankers Trust, "These women are the cream of the crop, and Japan is giving them all away."⁴

Interestingly, one thing that has already boosted women's visibility in the business world has been the desire of many companies to introduce products and services geared toward the young, unmarried female secretaries and clerks, whose income is nearly 100% disposable. Targeting these consumers is especially worthwhile since most of these women will eventually control the family expenditures of a new household. Jobs in advertising, marketing, distribution, department store management, and the like have recently opened to women, who have proven their keen eye for anticipating the needs and wants of women shoppers.⁵

Although it is likely that women will increasingly advance into these fields, and that more women will reach higher levels within various organizations, the "good wife, wise mother" orientation will persist. A few young, college-bound women wanting to study, travel abroad, and work are postponing marriage, sometimes indefinitely, but most will likely pursue more traditional paths. Married women, continuing to take nearly complete responsibility for household affairs, will frequently be handicapped in the working world unless special conditions allow them to pursue full-time employment. Companies experimenting with such progressive concepts as "flex time", extended leave of absences, and job reinstatement are as yet a tiny minority.

As Japan faces the rapid aging of its population, it may become necessary to rely even more heavily on women workers and to develop

their potential. Longer life spans and the reduced number of children per couple, averaging at about 1.7, are producing a rapidly growing elderly population. Statistics show that it will have taken only 45 years for the percentage of people aged 65 and older to increase from 5%, in 1950, to 12%, in 1995, and some estimates predict a further increase to 25% by the year 2025.⁶ While this may encourage business and industry to invest more in the hiring and training of female workers, it will also increase the domestic burden of providing care for elderly parents. Unless alternative solutions are found, this opportunity to improve the working conditions of married women may be curtailed by the necessity of tending to the needs of the elderly.

Recently, women have made gains in the political scene, electing 22 women from opposition parties to the Upper House in the July 1989 election, an advancement for which women voters were largely responsible.⁷ However, it seems that a vital interest in political matters has not filtered down to the bourgeois level, but applies to only a elite group of women activists.

Susan Pharr, a researcher in Japanese women's political activity, attributes this to the yet early stage of "role redefinition" occurring in Japan.⁸ It may be that most women, socialized to accept proper feminine roles, do not see themselves as rightful participants in the political arena. It may be, however, that they are simply more interested in the concerns of family life and financial stability than in the innerworkings of government. Time will tell whether or not changes in role definition will encourage the political participation of more women.

Ultimately it is women themselves who will decide how to order their lives. For all the discussion on megatrends within Japanese society, the question of values and fulfillment is, after all, a highly personalized one. Much has changed for women in the last century in Japan. Industrialization, urbanization, and war have colored the fabric of Japanese society and dark threads of the past are still visible in modern life. The gender-based division of labor and its ideology in Meiji times, the slow progress of education for women, and the exploitation of women workers to build industry and save capital have all contributed, along with other factors, to the status and roles women claim in modern society.

Some women, in response to these pressures, have taken a confrontive and competitive approach and have challenged societal standards by entering "non-feminine" spheres. Others have accepted the limitations of domestic life but have found ways to improve their standard of living and to provide better opportunities for their children. Young people hope that strategies will be implemented to encourage their participation in both vocational and domestic realms.

Increasingly women are moving out of the confines of oppression and into new, albeit limited, freedom. The factors outlined here are some of those which influence the lives of women in Japan today. These are not formulas, however, but building materials, with which women connect their lives to the framework of society. As "nails sticking up" many are ahead of their time, forcing their way into places some feel they do not belong. All are redefining the conditions of their lives, paving the way for the next generation, shaping the definition of women's status, and adding another chapter

to the lengthy and complex history of women in Japan.

NOTES

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