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"Inconspicuous Revolution" Increasing Woman Power

By the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO)

Japanese women are undergoing a quiet but revolutionary change in their actions and thinking. Increasingly, they have greater control over their lives and, therefore, more freedom to pursue chosen paths. Being increasingly active and better educated, they are participating in society more and more, and with growing influence.

Educated to high levels alongside males, Japan's postwar women now realize they are not intellectually inferior to men, and this is prompting them to seek equality, but on their own terms. Women are marrying later and having just one or two children (see the previous chapter, Family Sizes, Gender Roles Show More Diversity), to the alarm of Japan's political and business leaders who are now talking of the need for good child-care facilities. Fewer women are content to work exclusively as mother and housewife, and more are remaining in or returning to the work force, and taking a bigger role generally in society.

This undercurrent of change, which has a variety of important implications for Japan's future, has been dubbed the "inconspicuous revolution" by Sumiko Iwao, Professor of Social Psychology at Keio University's Institute for Communications Research. Dr. Iwao is the author of several publications, including the *booklet Japanese Women in Transition: Trends in the Early 1990s* published in 1993. In this chapter, we draw heavily from this informative booklet, which portrays women's issues squarely from a woman's point of view.

I. Women and Men

Dr. Iwao makes the observation that regarding freedom at least, men and women have changed places: "Once it was women who were chained in their role as the person responsible for family and household while men were free to pursue power, wealth, and adventure outside the home. Now Japanese men have become increasingly chained to the organizations and institutions they have set up, with their commitment to long-term employment and the promotional ladder rigged to seniority.

"Many of their wives, meanwhile, have been set free by the development of home appliances and other conveniences, and their ability and energy is being absorbed by a waiting labor market and a broad range of culturally enriching activities. They can work outside the home, and they have great freedom to decide how, where, and under what terms they will work. The female side of society has become extremely diversified, while the male side has grown more homogeneous and is trapped by inertia and peer pressure," she writes.

"Being outside the mainstream of society was ironically what ultimately provided Japanese women with increased options. While their existence and voices may have been pretty much ignored by men in formal arenas, the resulting 'inequality' gives women great freedom to act and think as they wish in a surprisingly wide sphere."

Women "More Creative, Adventurous"

"This is facilitated by the traditional separation of the daily activities of men and women, still a strong tendency in this society, in work as well as leisure pursuits. Although perhaps a dangerous generalization, I believe one is likely to find more truly creative and adventurous women than men in Japan today. Women are the intellectual and economic upstarts of today's society, spending freely and utilizing their energies in diverse ways. Men, meanwhile, remain largely restrained by the old norms and codes of traditional hierarchical society."

Dr. Iwao points out that the Japanese Constitution of 1946 stipulates equal rights for men and women. Japanese women, therefore, are more concerned with equal opportunity rather than rights, and the concern with equality is more a multidimensional balance to be achieved over the longer term, rather than on each individual point. If advantages and disadvantages in a working or husband-wife relationship balance out in the long term, Japanese women are willing to accept the relationship as fair and equal.

"Many Japanese women believe that happiness for both men and women would be better assured by a model of equality in which men currently alienated from their families and deprived of culturally enriching pursuits are given the same freedom, rights, and options in the three main areas of life (work, family and leisure) that women currently enjoy. The balance ultimately maintained in the three areas would depend on the specific needs and preferences of the individuals concerned," she writes.

"But Japanese women, through their less-than-eager pursuit of total equality with men reveal their awareness that having to bear equal economic responsibility with men does not always serve their best interests. True equality with men would limit their options and level of enjoyment of life considerably, and consequently many prefer to evade the subject."

This is an astute recognition that Japanese women would like men to have more of the benefits women have, but, in not wanting to be like men, women are reluctant to shoulder equal financial responsibility to help implement the change. She says elsewhere in her booklet: "When men realize that the affluence women are enjoying is made possible at their expense, they may begin to demand

that their wives shoulder part of the household expenses. And once a wife 's earnings are considered indispensable to the running of a household, women will no longer be free to quit their jobs at will. In that sense, Japanese women today may be enjoying a golden age of freedom."

Men Note Women's Freedom

But men already appear to have a greater sense of women's financial and psychological freedom than women do, if a Prime Minister's Office survey is to be taken as truly representative of views. Or perhaps there is a perception gap regarding the definition and degree of freedom. In any case, in the Public Opinion Survey on Women's Lives and Work, conducted in November 1991 and released in June 1992, 72% (up 10% on 1987) of the total 2,137 male and female respondents replied that women are financially independent (32% said fully financially independent and 40% partially independent). However, just 58% of the 1,230 female respondents agreed, registering 17% for totally and 41% for partially.

Views on psychological independence showed a smaller overall perception gap, but more men than women were positive regarding degree of independence. Of the total male and female respondents, 38% replied that women fully think for themselves and 47% replied that women think for themselves to a certain degree (for a total of 85%, up 8% over 1987). Women themselves registered 27% (totally independent) and 54% (partially), for a total of 81 %.

Regarding men's perceptions of and reactions to the changes in women, Dr. Iwao writes that men aged over 60 find the changes in female roles and male-female relations beyond comprehension, noting that the things their wives (and daughters) say and do are so different from those that their mothers said and did. Men aged 45 to 50 are much cooler towards the advancements of women - they are carrying the heaviest burdens in the workplace and cannot see why a woman would want to give up her greater freedom and work as hard as them.

Men aged 35 to 45 have mixed feelings, she writes. They have been educated on an equal level with women so intellectually they know they should not be discriminatory. But they do not think it is fair that women demand they help in the house; they feel threatened by the capable, ambitious women in their workplaces; they do not like to deal with confident, independent women; and they find it difficult to respond to their wives' desire for a "friend-spouse," which is a post war invention.

Younger Men More Attuned to "New Woman"

Having grown up with the "new woman" younger men are more likely to treat women on a "comrade-to-comrade" basis — in school it was often the girl students with the energy and drive, and in the home the mother was a far stronger influence than the father, Dr. Iwao writes. Many younger men have adopted what are considered more feminine traits (personal grooming and cleanliness, more modest and polite speech rather than gruff language, and considerateness for others). They prefer a wife who works because of the extra family income and because they do not want the responsibility of a wife sitting at home all day awaiting their return.

What women these days want most from men is greater companionship, she writes, adding that this is difficult for men to fulfil, particularly in the case of younger men, who are "tenderly reared by attentive mothers, are more notable for their gentleness than for their strength of character and body. In fact, one wonders if they will make satisfying partners for female peers who are growing stronger in both character and body and will continue to do so year by year."

II. Women at Work

In 1992, the female percentage of Japan's work force of 50 million people rose to 38.6%, compared with 33.2% in 1970, according to Prime Minister's Office statistics. More than half the women aged 15 and over were employed. Japan's characteristic "M-curve" persisted, however, as women temporarily left the work force in their early 20s to mid-30s for child rearing. The U.S. and Sweden, for example, have up-side-down "U-curves" as women tend to continue working during child-rearing years, thanks to greater support from husbands and child-care facilities.

Although the "M-curve" remains, Japanese women annually are clocking longer consecutive work years. In 1991, 26.8% of working women had been in the work force continuously for 10 years or more, compared with 51% of men and up from 17.5% in 1975, according to Labor Ministry statistics. After child rearing, women cite taking care of sick relatives and their own health as the main reasons they record broken service in the work force.

Most Work in Service Sector

Most working women (26%) are office workers, followed by skilled or process workers in manufacturing (15%), professionals (10%), and salespersons (9%), according to The Labor Conditions of Women, 1992, published by the Labor Ministry in February 1993.

The service sector employs most women, followed by the wholesale/retail and restaurant sector, and the manufacturing sector. These three main areas of business together employ about 83% of all working women. Of all employees, women make up 50.8% of staff in banking, insurance and real estate; 49.8% in service industries; and 47.8% in wholesale/retail and restaurant businesses.

Interestingly, most women work in smaller companies. Of the women who are employees of enterprises rather than self-employed or members of family operations,36.9% are employed by companies with 1 to 29 staff members,16.6% are employed by companies with 30 - 99 staff, 16.4% work for companies with 100 to 499 people, and 20.5% work for companies with more than 500 employees.

The typical female employee, therefore, is an office worker in a small to medium-sized company in the service sector, or perhaps a process worker in a small to medium-sized manufacturer, or a salesperson in a department store.

Motivation for Working

Women work primarily to supplement household income, according to the 1992 Public Opinion Survey on Women's Lives and Work by the Prime Minister's Office. In reply to a multiple-choice question on reasons for working, 41% of women respondents gave this as their main motivation. Next, 36% indicated a desire for their own discretionary spending money, and 34% replied for the purposes of making a living and saving. Other main reasons included to get satisfaction out of life (31%), and to broaden horizons and make friends (30%). Working men, on the other hand, overwhelmingly indicated that they work to make a living (87%), followed by because it is the expected thing to do (46%), to save for the future (39%), and that working gives them satisfaction in life (36%).

In response to a multiple-choice question on how women have changed as a result of working, 58% of the total male and female respondents said that women's horizons have broadened. This was followed by the statement that they now have more friends and acquaintances (53%); they are financially better off (51%); they can now be financially independent (44%); and they gain satisfaction in life through work (43%).

Equal Opportunity Improving

Comparatively few Japanese women have risen to managerial positions. In companies with 100 employees or more, women comprised just 1.6% of managers, according to The Labor Conditions of Women, 1992. These private-sector managerial positions include the categories of buchoo (department head), kachoo (section head) and kakari-choo (team leader).

Separated out, in 1992 this tiny group of women occupied these posts in the following proportions: buchoo 5.9%, kachoo 27.4%, and kakari-choo about 67%. Of the total men and women in these positions, l .2% of buchoo, 2.3% of kachoo and 6.2% of kakari-choo were women. This is unimpressive, but the good news is that the percentages have been rising for the last 10 years.

Japan does have its Equal Employment Opportunity Law, implemented in 1986 with the aim of encouraging employers to give equal chance to women. However, the law is toothless, lacking penalties for companies that do not comply with its spirit. As of 1993, half a decade after implementation, women were still faring far worse than men. Many companies had announced larger cuts in their hiring plans for female graduates than for males, and were reducing clerical worker ranks, which are comprised primarily of women.

Women's salaries remain far lower than those of men for similar length of service. According to Labor Ministry statistics, female starting salaries were 88.3% (20 to 24 year olds) and 91.8% (18 to 19 year olds) of those for males in 1991, but women in their 40s were earning as little as 69% and women in their 50s as little as 67.4% of their male colleagues' salaries. The lower salaries at retirement mean that women's retirement packages are much smaller than those of the men that entered the company with them four decades ago, as these payments are based on salary levels as well as length of service.

The radical disparity in salaries is primarily a result of the traditional shunting of women into non-career track positions such as clerical work. Since the implementation of the EEO law, many larger companies are working to modernize personnel policies. They are providing a choice for women between the full career track and a lesser career track that includes promotion but does not entail transfers to branch offices in other prefectures, for example. Because of their child-rearing responsibilities, most women have been unable to comply with this traditional career-track requirement.

Another improvement since implementation of the law has been prompted by the legal requirement that companies provide the same educational opportunities for men and women. Equal training lessens the chance for companies to cite the usual "unqualified" as a reason for not promoting women. Thus, although the pace is slow and problems remain, many companies are making progress in their plans to make full use of women's capabilities, or josei no nooryoku furu katsuyoo.

"Office Ladies" Form Own Culture

A member of Japan's army of female clerical workers is called an OL (oo-eru), meaning "office lady." OLs have developed a sort of culture and even language of their own, and provide ample stereotypes - amusing or ridiculous - that have fed the creative founts of television, films, and manga (comic books).

There is the "cute young thing" OL who brightens up the office with her akarui nature that includes a happy face, extreme cooperativeness and polite speech. Then there is the older, unmarried OL, who may be victimized by cliques of younger OLs that label her eikyuu zangyoo, which is a rather cruel pun that means eternally left behind in the company (because she has been unable to marry).

The pun is on the word zangyoo, which can mean both overtime and left over or left behind.

OLs are hired to support male career-track bosses, who, predictably, prefer the akarui type of "office lady." However, respect for (male) superiors is not automatic these days among young female employees, and many jokes are made at the expense of male bosses, who come in for their share (or more) of derision. One mischievous but amusing term in the OL vocabulary is chuuken fakksu, or "loyal dog" fax. This refers to a male superior who, unfamiliar with electronic office equipment, nervously stands guard over the fax machine while waiting for his fax to go through.

OLs love to go out drinking with friends, provided they are not office colleagues, and strongly dislike drinking with the boss and other superiors, according to the results of a survey announced in February 1993 by Daiichi Seiyaku, a Japanese pharmaceutical company. The survey, amusingly titled the White Paper on the Modern OL Drinker, revealed that 64.7% of the 300 women polled said that their first choice of drinking companion at a bar are female friends from outside the company. The (male) boss polled last, with half the women saying they would not want to drink with him, even though bosses pick up the tab and drinking with them is part of Japanese business life.

Sexual Harassment Alive and Well

In the 1990s, the problem of sexual harassment, or seku-hara, is receiving long overdue attention in the news media and workplace as women, who previously have suffered in silence, expose their victimizers in the courts. Japan's first successful seku-hara case was won in 1992. Since then women have been encouraged to come forward in increasing numbers to bring to light cases that reveal the persistence of an unpleasantly archaic mentality in some companies.

The problem is quite widespread, according to a March 1993 Prime Minister's Office survey, which reveals that 12% of women and 4% of men have suffered sexual harassment at work, or are aware of such incidents. Of women in their 20s, 14% have suffered sexual harassment, while another 15% know of someone else who has.

Nikkei Anthropos, a popular monthly magazine, published in mid-1993 a six-page spread on the topic aimed at increasing awareness and educating male readers on just what constitutes seku-hara on the job or when out socializing with female staff. The article listed up according to age group words that women do not want to hear from their bosses, and these words reveal clearly many of the insults Japanese women suffer daily at work.

All age groups resent being referred to as fat or overweight, according to the article. Older women also complain of rude speech from male colleagues and younger women complain of being treated as "young and cute" and not being taken seriously. Some of the specific complaints are highlighted below, according to age group.

Women in their 20s don't like: being called "girl" (onna-no-ko) and o-joo-chan, which is a familiar way of saying "young lady"; being asked if they are going on a date or having an o-miai (arranged meeting with a prospective marriage partner); being asked to go out and buy cigarettes; and being asked "Have you managed to find a man yet?" and "Aren't you quitting (to get married) yet?" They also dislike hearing bosses voicing comparisons of the (mostly female) clerical track (ippan-shoku) and the (mostly male) career track (soogoo-shoku), no doubt because the latter is spoken of in more elevated terms than the former.

Women in their 30s do not like: questions regarding whether they intend to remain bachelors or why they haven't married; questions such as "Are you still coming to the office" (that is, "Why haven't you quit yet?" which is related to the marriage question); hearing men joke that they are "fearsome";

being referred to as a "veteran of veterans" (dai-beteran), or an "aunt" or middle-aged woman (o-b--san - one of many terms in Japanese that label women according to age); and being addressed by the familiar honorific chan, which is condescending and unbusinesslike in a work situation.

Women in their 40s complain of bosses saying "I guess you are no longer of an age to be shy," and "If I butter you up, perhaps I can get you to do this job for me," and using rude and impatient speech such as "Didn't I just say that? How many times do I have to repeat myself?" These women also complain of being called ba-chan, which is an even more familiar form of "aunty" or middle-aged woman that lacks the honorific prefix o, and of being asked if they plan to stay in their current job or company for ever.

Other Irritants Remain

Other irritants Japanese women face on the job include the custom of (male) employers requiring or preferring that young women live at home until they are married. To modern, independent young women, many of whom have travelled abroad or whose parents live far from their workplaces, this is a ridiculous requirement. Worse, they may suffer insulting questions regarding their living arrangements and even their morals if it becomes known at work that they do not live with their parents.

Another lingering irritation for women in many companies is being lumbered with the job of making tea or coffee for male staff and visitors, regardless of job status or work load. Furthermore, some companies still require women to arrive at work 30 minutes early to clean the office, including the desks of their male colleagues of the same age group. More progressive companies are introducing policies where men and women share these tasks, but widespread change is slow. No doubt the pace will increase in proportion to the decreasing reluctance modern women are showing to clearly voice their complaints and expectations.

"The performance of the mass majority of working women is influenced not so much by the prospects for promotion later on but by how matters stand at present. Their work can be heavily affected by the way their boss treats them. If properly encouraged, they will hustle, but if not they will simply do as they are told. Bosses who in bygone days were surrounded by young women who anticipated and attended to their every need now have to devote much time and energy to soft-soaping their female subordinates," writes Dr. Iwao.

But the changes women are bringing to the workplace can only benefit men. For example, women tend to take all their holidays and use all other benefits whenever possible. With greater numbers of women coming into the work force, men are beginning to follow suit - to their advantage. Also, women generally are more outspoken at work and therefore are better at achieving improvements in conditions. Men, on the other hand, traditionally have refrained from making waves to avoid jeopardizing promotions and to maintain smooth relationships in a company to which are tied until retirement.

Balancing Work and Children

In April 1992, Japan brought in a child-care leave law. In October that year, 90% of the total 1,200 respondents to a Labor Ministry survey of companies listed on the first and second sections of the Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya stock exchanges said that they had introduced child-care leave. Separated out, the figures were 69% for the companies among them with fewer than 300 employees and 99% for the giants. Only a third of all companies said that they grant any sort of financial support during child leave.

The number of women taking paid or unpaid child-care leave rather than quitting work outright is increasing, and a few men, too, are taking advantage of the equal-opportunity provisions of the child-care legislation. Eleven male teachers took child-care leave in fiscal 1992, compared with 21,650 women teachers, according to an Education Ministry announcement in September 1993.

Meanwhile, no doubt alarmed at the dropping birthrate, the Health and Welfare Ministry and the Federation of Employers' Associations (Nikkeiren) announced in August 1993 plans to set up a Children's Environment Foundation to help finance private nurseries at companies for employees' children. The foundation would also help private nurseries to extend services into the night and educate parents on nursing.

The improving conditions for women will encourage more to remain in the work force after marriage and childbirth. However, conditions are still far from good enough to overcome the attraction some young career women begin to feel towards being a full-time housewife. The surprise associated with women unexpectedly quitting a career for marriage is captured in the term kyaricha shokku. The first word is a combination of career and culture, and the second word, no doubt recognizable, is shock. The expression is a pun on "culture shock."

The word was explained in this way in a small "Family New Word" column which appeared in the Nikkei Shimbun, Japan's largest business daily newspaper, in mid-1993: A 25-year-old woman, the only woman among her peer student group to be recruited into a coveted career-track position in a large corporation, announces happily to shocked friends at a high school reunion that she has decided to quit to get married. Her friends have known her as a go-getter and she has professed in the past a desire to remain unmarried and pursue a lifetime career.

Working Women and Stress

With more women in high-pressure positions, struggling up the career ladder, coping with inequalities and obstacles, and balancing career and family while still doing almost all the housework and shopping, it is not surprising that reports of stress are emerging. Acknowledgement of the stresses and strains is changing, and the stereotypical picture of the well-dressed "superwoman" achiever gradually is being replaced by an image more in line with reality.

An example is the working woman stereotype feature in an energy-supplement television commercial in 1993, starring one of Japan's favourite and most famous actresses: "The woman in the business suit collapses onto the sofa and lets out a sigh. As if to underscore her long day at work, she tilts her head to see if her shoulders are stiff. 'I'm really tired. I wonder if I should just quit,' she says to herself. 'What are you going to do if you quit?' asks a young man in the background, presumably her brother. 'Hmmmm. . . well. . . ,' she replies, looking for an answer which she realizes is nowhere to be found." This transcript was provided in an article in the August 25 edition of the Asahi Evening News.

"Slowly, the image of businesswomen dressed sharp and strutting with confidence is being replaced by one that reflects today's more difficult economic environment - including harder working executives' grunting and groaning," the article comments. The writer adds that the commercial is the fourth in a series since 1990, and that the previous three showed the actress "career woman" as full of vitality and giving a pep talk to a tired-looking male colleague. The latest in the series reflects the tougher economic times of the early 1990s, which are making it more difficult for women, the advertisements' creator is quoted as saying.

"Rather than to say that the way working women are portrayed has changed, I think it is more accurate to say that the presence of women in the workplace has become more common," Michiko

Shimamori, Editor in Chief of Kokoku Hihyo, a magazine that comments on the advertising industry, is quoted as saying in the article. "As more women get an idea of what the workplace is about, people realize that the image of the strong woman seems somewhat unreal."

Management, Work Atmosphere the Main Culprits

The main sources of stress for women in the workplace are no chance of displaying or developing ability, role and duty ambiguity, the traditional work-oriented, freedom-oppressive work atmosphere, and problems arising from poor organizational relations, according to a survey on working women and stress. The survey of women in services such as retail, finance, insurance, travel and medical care was conducted in 1992 by the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute for Labor.

The survey was summarized by Takashi Asakura, Lecturer at Tokyo Gakugei University's Department of Health and Sports Science, in the April 1993 edition of the Japan Labor Bulletin. He compared the survey with a similar one by the TMIL in 1988, when the main sources of stress were more personal rather than career-oriented. In 1988, a typical stressful situation for women was the "transfer or retirement of a person who understood me." In the 1992 survey, while female managers enjoyed greater fulfilment and use of their abilities the higher they were promoted, they also showed greater stress.

"When women have a male boss who is not active in fostering and promoting women, they are likely to feel unable to develop and display their own abilities, thus experiencing more mental stress," writes Mr. Asakura. How women perceived personnel management policies on promotion was important: "It seems that when they (women) accept personnel management as a system which also allows women to be promoted, they feel less depressed and (more) mentally healthy." He noted that women's role conflict in the home added to the incidence of poor mental health among working women.

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