

GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES, CHANGING STATUS OF JAPANESE WOMEN AND THEIR CONCERNS

Mukesh Kumar Khatwani*

Abstract

Gender equality has been one of the most important issues throughout the world. All governments throughout the world are pressurized by the human rights based national and international organizations to ensure the human rights and gender equality in all walks of life. This research paper attempts to present the social, economic and political situation of Japanese women and also their concerns regarding marital and career matters. The Japanese society is very much traditional and Japanese family's philosophy is based on the principles of Confucian "loyalty and obedience". The Japanese society originally derived from Chinese heritage; hence they value the group over the individual. Sharing of family matters outside is considered cultural shame and defame. This paper also puts a light on the initiatives and policies taken by the Japanese government for the betterment and equal rights of women in the society.

* Lecturer, Area Study Centre, Far East & South East Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

Introduction

The Japanese society is very much traditional and male-dominated, where all the family members in general and women in particular are expected to obey the orders and decisions of the family head (father). The Japanese family's philosophy is based on the principles of Confucian "loyalty and obedience". That's why Japanese prefer group over the individual. Sharing of family matters outside is considered cultural shame and defame. These cultural values and traditions have restricted the role of women within family while authorized all privileges and powers to man. Before World War II, the status of women in Japanese society was very low. The Constitution at that time did not guarantee the equality of the sexes, and women had neither the right to vote nor the right to be elected. Under the Civil Code, wives were not only regarded as incompetent, but their property, inheritance and other rights such as to exercise parental authority were restricted. The new Constitution 1946 guaranteed for the first time the equality of men and women under the law. Consequently, the Civil Code was revised; domestic laws were enacted, including the Fundamental Law of Education and the Labour Standards Law. These positive changes resulted in widespread improvements in the legal status of women in the family as well out of family. For the first time in 1960s women began to participate in economic and social activities. But the equality of men and women still remained the problem because of the deeply rooted traditional concept that women must stay at home and serve the aged ones and their children.

The raising movements and campaigns for women's equal rights, gender issues at international level and emerging Non- governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other civil society networks have provided a conducive environment

for women to take steps forward for their equal rights and respect. Realizing the international pressure and changing social values and roles regarding women throughout globe, the Japanese government took many development initiatives for the improvement of women's living standard. The Child Care and Nursing Leave Law passed in 1992, which allows one year leave to care for child or three months to take care of aged parents. The Basic Law for education prohibits the discrimination in educational system. In 1996, the Basic Plan for Gender Equality 2000 was prepared and Basic Law for Gender Equal Society was promulgated in 1999. For preventing the domestic violence against women, in April 2001, the comprehensive law for Prevention of Spousal Violence and Protection of Victims was also promulgated. In the same year, the Council for Gender Equality and Gender Equality Bureau were also established within the Cabinet Office and were given responsibility for planning and coordinating the gender equality policies. As the result of these concrete steps, forty three women were elected as members of House of Representatives in September 2005 election. With introduction of pro-women policies and initiatives by the government, the participation of women in economic, social and political sectors has increased. As the result the roles of women shifted from family to mainstream, but still they are far away from decision making policy matters and are facing social and cultural pressure regarding their changing roles and responsibilities.

Family Structure and Women

The Japanese family traditionally was the formal ordering of family and was characterized by the Confucian, Buddhism and Samurai feudalism principles of loyalty and obedience. The Japanese society originally derived from Chinese heritage, they value the group over the individual. The

traditional Japanese society supports extended family, wherein the loyalty and obedience is very high and well established value. Discussion over family matters outside is considered as cultural shame. This patriarchal family system has given authority to father who expects his orders and decisions to be obeyed without any questioning merely. For maintaining father's image as boss, mostly he remains far away from the daily life of family including his children. That is why the mother – child relationship is still stronger than father-child relationship. After 1960s, by increasing employment opportunities (subordinate positions), the promotion and improvement of women's standard has become more secure. The strong impact of western culture through electronic as well as print media, the Japanese family structure had gone under many rapid changes. The Non- governmental Organizations (NGOs) had further worked as an additional forceful inspirational factor. As a result the emergence of the modern "Westernized" family structure is seen in today's Japan. In 1993 the percentage of nuclear family became 59.5%.

The changing role of women in Japanese society is also shown by their employment patterns. Traditionally Japanese women have worked until marriage and then they "retired" to become housewives. In recent years women have increasingly worked longer until "retirement"¹. This traditional mentality of over all Japanese society clashes with the interest of employers' (multi national companies) criteria and requirement of hiring female staff. On the other hand the less economic dependency of women has shaken the chains of traditional structure of family and then social acceptance of nuclear family, love marriage and divorce in the society is increasing day by day. The pattern of mate selection also shifted from arranged- marriage to love - marriage. On the issue that "love marriages are better than arranged marriages," 57 percent responded affirmatively

and 36 percent, negatively. The divorce rate has been rising in recent years, and in 2000 it stood 23 percent of all marriages². In 1990, the divorce rate (per thousand populations) was 1.28 and it increased to 2.25 in 2003. The changing roles of Japanese women and increasing number of unmarried and divorced women have disturbed the family patterns but the most affected of this phenomenon are women particularly children. Some conservative commentators suggest that young people have been spoiled and no longer have the social skills, patience and mental toughness to cope with the ups and downs of married life³. No doubt the family patterns and values regarding the women have been changed from time to time but yet the male dominance is still observed in Japanese society. These changing roles of women and male dominance have further doubled the responsibilities of women and due to this women have been suffering a lot socially and psychologically.

Once upon a time, when Japanese women had preferred family and were devotees of serving the family particularly old ones but after 1980s they have become worried about their career and future. Now a days one in four Japanese women aged 30-34 prefer to her career not getting married and having children. Hiro Shibata (35) who works for a multinational pharmaceutical company said that her priority was career. She further added, "I am not against the marriage. It is just not happening to me now". She said that she loved children but when asked if she was worried about her biological clock, she replied: "I have the time, then I will have to think about it"⁴. For many women, the pressure of living with in-laws is considerable, and in particular women are often reluctant to live with their husbands' mothers. Mothers-in-law have traditionally played and still are playing a vital and powerful role in the household hierarchy in Japan. Jolivet quotes one source as saying 'most of

country women who came to see me want to divorce their in-laws rather than their husbands'⁵. It is clear that they like the behaviour of their husbands but can not adjust themselves with in-laws because of complicated and congested family structure. Japanese society is more traditional rather than liberal, where women are expected to serve for their male family members particularly old ones following the social norms and values. A survey of new brides reported that only 12% expected their marriage to be happy. There is an old Japanese saying, "Kekkon wa josei no hakaba de oru" which translates as "marriage is a women's grave." One author noted that "Japanese still regard marriage not as the culmination of a romance but as a commitment that is primarily social and practical in significance⁶.

Women's Movement

The women's suffrage movement emerged in Japan during pre war days, centering the women's suffrage league. The right to vote and to be elected was conferred upon Japanese women in 1945, when the war ended. After 1960s many women's groups and networks were established and they focused the equal status of women in the society. The Seikastsu Club Co-op, a group of political women activists was established in 1965. In 1995, organized through Seikastsusha Network, the group doubled its representation at the local assembly level, going from 80 to 150⁷. In 1975, Liaison Group, comprising 49 women's NGOs was established. The groups organized conferences on women to establish goals for actions towards realization of gender equality from the stand point of female citizens. Other important women's groups are: Violence Against Women in War-Network Japan (VAWW-Net Japan) and the Working Women Network. The group Asian Women Liberation formed a feminist international core in Japan, which

themetized economic and sexual exploitation and appealed to political and work oriented groups. Its work opened communication and cooperation with popular women's movement in Asia. The second network the Asian Women's Conference (Aija Josei Kaigi) was formed in 1992, which embraced many important action groups or family /relationships the body and cultural issues⁸.

The Japanese women's movement during 1990s again underwent transformation, which was marked by the turn to gender equality and establishing the linkages with global and regional civil society. The 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, helped Japanese women and civil society organizations to present the situation of women and also create communication and contacts with regional and international networks and organizations. United Nations declared 1990-2000 as a decade for women; as the result many changes took place in the status of women throughout world and to some extent women took a breath of rest and relief. The increasing communications and contacts in East Asia as well as global level, the Japanese women movement was also accelerated and broadened.

Women's Participation in Politics

The effective traditional and cultural values, norms, rituals reflect the magnitude of existing gender difference in the society and on the basis of daily life observation and experience one has to accept that political values and social behaviour of women is quite different from that of their men. Japanese women being more religious and devotees of family's values, have a secondary position in family matters, and mostly spend much time in taking care of children and older members of their family. All these above mentioned factors are definitely responsible for a lack of women interest as well participation in politics and also these

factors put hindrances in the well employment (High Positions) of women. In 2000, Japan ranked 41 out of 70 countries based on United Nations criteria for gauging the level of women participation in society, below El Salvador and Botswana⁹. More recently, Patterson and Nishikawa (2002) argue that the gender gaps in the policies references mainly account for gender – based patterns of support and rejection of parties. They argue that women, who focus on women's issues such as social welfare, the home and environment, are more likely to support left-wing parties, whereas men, who focus on economic recovery, the budget deficit and tax reforms are more likely either to be non – aligned or to support one of the opposition parties¹⁰. Some commentators suggest that house wives are apolitical because they are not subject to the politicizing interference of the workplace. After 1990 the number of women is increasing to show their involvement in political activities and electoral process. In 1990 and 1996 elections older women and older men equally liked to vote¹¹.

According to "Report on the Study of the Political Parties' Replies to the Questionnaire on their Policies regarding Women" conducted by "Beijing JAC" in June 1998, the proportion of women among the Party members then was as follows; The Komei-to showed the highest record with 47.1%, followed by 40.5% of the Kyosan-to (Japanese Communist Party), 38.3% of the Jimin-to (Liberal Democratic Party) and about 30% of the Shamin-to (Social Democratic Party).¹² The figures clearly show sufficient number of women members at party, but the active and leading role of women in party as well politics is still very low. The position of women member in Diet and Local Assemblyman is also very poor, however; to some extent it is increasing but not sufficient. The number of women member in Diet was 27 (3.6 %) in 1984, that increased to 70 (9.7%) in 2004, and again it decreased to 66 (9.2 %) by 2005. At present, there are 43

(8.96%) women in lower house out of 480 and 34 (14.05%) in upper house out of 242. The figures show that percentage of women in lower and upper houses is very much low and it comes on 96 rank in the world and is less as compared to Pakistan which is 73 (21.35%) out of 342 seats in lower house and 17 (17%) out of 100 in upper house.

Table-1

Women in Diet Member Positions (1984-2005)

The Diet (percent)			Local Assemblyman (percent)		
Year	Number	Ratio	Year	Number	Ratio
January 1984	27	3.6	1984	1,078	1.5
July 1985	29	3.8	1985	1,102	1.6
March 1986	29	3.8	1986	1,154	1.7
March 1987	29	3.8	1987	1,447	2.2
February 1988	29	3.9	1988	1,480	2.2
July 1989	40	5.3	1989	1,562	2.4
February 1990	45	5.9	1990	1,633	2.5
March 1991	46	6.1	1991	2,102	3.2
July 1992	49	6.5	1992	2,158	3.3
March 1993	49	6.5	1993	2,238	3.4
March 1994	52	6.8	1994	2,279	3.5
March 1995	51	6.8	1995	2,757	4.3
March 1996	48	6.4	1996	2,849	4.4
March 1997	57	7.6	1997	2,954	4.6
March 1998	60	8.0	1998	3,070	4.9
March 1999	68	9.1	1999	3,872	6.2
March 2000	68	9.1	2000	3,982	6.4
March 2001	79	10.8	2001	4,147	6.8
March 2002	74	10.2	2002	4,231	7.0
March 2003	72	10.0	2003	4,670	7.9
March 2004	70	9.7			
March 2005	66	9.2			

Source: White Paper on Gender Equality, Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, Tokyo, May 2005.

Employment and Japanese Women

The changing in social norms, gender behaviour and attitude due to globalization and modernization, Japanese women have succeeded to come out of home to take part in economic and social activities, but yet are seen only engaged in manual jobs such as working on building sites, farms, driving trucks, and such type of labour work. Most of women are part time workers, and so are not enjoying the same benefits as their male colleagues. Despite Japan's remarkable economic growth during the postwar period, very few Japanese women have obtained positions of power and authority within the country's political, bureaucratic or economic structures.¹³ This presents how the roots of patriarchy and discrimination against female workers (gender discrimination) are deepened in Japanese society. The most prominent example is the "office ladies", young white-collar female employees, who are just helpers in the offices, assisting their male colleagues in sharpening pencils, taking messages, photocopying and distributing memorandums.¹⁴ Often women are obliged to take care of elderly relatives, especially in-laws, and have difficulty in balancing these demands with close of the workplace. For these women, unskilled part-time work is common alternative; another is running a small business. Sugimoto argues that most women who work part-time are not frustrated would-be career women, but women who are not sufficiently well-off to become full-time housewives; their ideal is to become women of leisure.¹⁵

Generally, it is seen that women by their 20s enter job/workforce but by their late 20s and early 30s quit job for getting marriage and caring of children and old family members (particularly male). In their 40s again they seek for the employment, at this stage of age it is very hard for women to have the good positions. This trend of entering,

quitting and re-entering is a major hurdle in the sufficient employment of women. That's why a great number of women are engaged in low standard work rather than managerial and executing positions.

Table-2
Women in Managerial Positions (1984-2004)
(ten persons)

Year	Directors		Section Manager		Chiefs		Non- Managerial	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
1984	27,221	287	67,107	1,015	68,488	2,758	1,083,782	392,765
1985	26,705	275	67,947	1,074	75,656	2,933	1,102,311	392,542
1986	27,591	310	68,240	1,185	72,732	2,782	1,080,110	387,478
1987	28,551	355	69,058	1,217	72,768	3,291	1,073,481	381,491
1988	30,502	293	74,042	1,509	78,969	3,624	1,157,417	417,129
1989	33,398	421	78,335	1,574	78,367	3,576	1,154,073	418,074
1990	35,649	409	82,281	1,658	80,964	4,017	1,182,929	423,109
1991	38,561	449	89,451	2,098	82,897	5,101	1,242,213	453,127
1992	39,735	662	92,214	2,706	83,834	5,567	1,221,881	454,227
1993	39,396	622	89,309	2,243	88,294	6,455	1,220,633	454,485
1994	38,070	535	84,968	2,213	79,099	5,056	1,169,454	428,315
1995	39,926	537	88,916	2,448	78,510	5,711	1,224,180	446,186
1996	36,732	518	89,984	2,792	84,451	6,159	1,181,760	428,014
1997	39,508	886	90,338	3,359	84,932	6,621	1,175,547	422,025
1998	38,776	774	89,476	2,830	84,187	6,778	1,173,835	416,776
1999	38,861	815	91,336	3,069	85,669	7,000	1,135,329	402,659
2000	37,725	838	88,087	3,514	80,390	6,537	1,141,792	395,256
2001	38,241	701	85,653	3,124	80,067	6,649	1,085,119	372,171
2002	38,497	920	84,614	3,799	74,162	7,105	1,052,331	365,270
2003	36,491	1,115	82,732	3,779	71,555	6,739	1,025,559	355,832
2004	38,022	1,010	88,734	4,402	72,255	7,934	1,114,985	383,743

Source: Basic Survey on Wage Structure, Statistics and Information Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Government of Japan, Tokyo, March 14, 2005.

Notes: Director: Head of a group comprised of more than 20 employees or more than 2 departments.

Section Manager: Head of a group comprised of more than 10 employees or more than 2 sections.

Chief: A person usually called "chief" regardless of the number of the people in a group.

This survey was taken among companies which have more than 100 employees.

The multinational companies prefer to hire young unmarried girls, as the result of this attitude of companies, the number of unmarried women as well as divorced women is increasing rapidly. Economic independency, quest of career and specific requirements of multinational companies for hiring unmarried females have left negative effects on family environment and as the result the number of unmarried and divorced women is increasing. According to Labour Force Survey, in 1984 there were 5,000,000 unmarried and 2,320,000 were divorced or widowed out of 2,263,000 female employees, where as the number has increased to 7,530,000 unmarried and 2,910,000 divorced or widowed out of 26,330,000 female workers in 2005.

Table 3
Female Employees by Marital Status (1983-2005)

(ten thousand females)

Year	Total	Never Married	Married	Divorced or Widowed
1983	2,263	500	1,531	232
1984	2,282	517	1,532	232
1985	2,304	523	1,543	237
1986	2,327	542	1,547	237
1987	2,360	559	1,562	237
1988	2,408	581	1,585	240
1989	2,474	606	1,623	243

1990	2,536	638	1,645	252
1991	2,592	670	1,661	260
1992	2,619	689	1,663	265
1993	2,610	693	1,647	268
1994	2,614	705	1,636	271
1995	2,614	719	1,623	271
1996	2,627	730	1,625	272
1997	2,665	738	1,649	277
1998	2,656	746	1,627	282
1999	2,632	740	1,609	282
2000	2,629	742	1,602	284
2001	2,629	749	1,592	284
2002	2,594	736	1,571	275
2003	2,597	742	1,564	284
2004	2,616	746	1,573	287
2005	2,633	753	1,579	291

Source: Labour Force Survey, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Government of Japan, Tokyo, January 31, 2006.

Note: Female Employees:

Actual number of those working, including females with a job but not at work.

Governments' Initiatives for Betterment of Women

Encouraging gender equality is an integral part of the structural reforms, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi appointed Prof. Kuniko Inoguchi, as Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs, the first ministerial post to deal exclusively with these issues in October 2005. As a result of the general election that took place in September 2005, there is now an unprecedented number of female members of the House of Representatives - forty-three (43), an increase by twenty-six (26) percent. While women's participation in society is growing and more women are

involved in decision-making processes, yet the proportion of the whole they represent still remains unsatisfactory.

At the national as well as international level, Japan has taken concrete steps for the advancement of women following the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which has **proven** effective in protecting the human rights of women and promoting gender equality. To promote the participation of women in the policy and decision-making process, the Government of Japan set a specific numerical target in this regard in 2003: women will account for at least 30 percent of the leadership positions in all sectors of society by the year 2020.

Japan announced "The Initiative on Women in Development (WID)" at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Since then, it has been making a significant contribution to WID-related activities, especially in the areas of education, health, and the economic and social participation of women. In this conjunction, the Japanese government drew up the "Initiative on Gender and Development (GAD)," with the idea of changing the environment surrounding women in developing countries and stressing the importance of gender mainstreaming in development. Under this new initiative, Japan will further strengthen its efforts to promote gender equality and empowerment of women in developing countries. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law, passed in 1985, revised in 1986 enforced in 1999 prohibits gender discrimination in every stage of working lives starting from classified advertisements, recruitment process, and employment until retirement. Within the law, articles to prevent sexual harassment and to implement positive action were established, and the protection of maternity and maternity leave was enhanced. The Child Care and Nursing Leave Law passed in 1992, gives one year

leave to care for child or three months to take care of aged parents. The Basic Law for education prohibits the discrimination in educational system.

In 1996, the Basic Plan for Gender Equality 2000 was prepared that paved the path for promulgating the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society in 1999, this law also pushed the cabinet to approve the Basic Plan for Gender Equality in December 2000. Japan government has also taken efforts to prevent domestic violence against women. In April 2001, the comprehensive Law for the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims was promulgated. In December 2004, an amended and strengthened law also took effect, and a basic policy was adopted in accordance with the amended law. By the passing of this law, the system of patriarchy has been weakened and women's rights are protected.

In 2001, the Council for Gender Equality, chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary, who is also the Minister for Gender Equality, was established within the Cabinet Office as a new forum where ministers and intellectuals can share their knowledge and experience and discuss the broad range of issues related to gender equality. The Council was given a mandate to monitor the implementation status of government policies and to study and deliberate on the impact of government policies on the formation of a gender-equal society. At the same time, the Gender Equality Bureau was established within the Cabinet Office and given responsibility for planning and coordinating the gender equality policies of the Government as a whole. By strengthening the national machineries, policies on gender equality are being implemented under the strong leadership of the Cabinet Office.

The Government of Japan is also taking initiatives to promote the participation of women in the policy and decision-making processes. Since 2001, Prime Minister Koizumi has appointed eight female ministers in his cabinet. Also, at the local level, there are four women governors currently holding office. These facts clearly show an increase in the political empowerment of women in Japan. Furthermore in 2003, the Japanese government set a concrete goal that by the year 2020 women should occupy at least 30 percent of the leadership positions in all sectors of society.

Conclusion

The emerging concept of modernization and easy access to modern source of information and communication has brought about rapid social and cultural changes throughout world. Developing concepts of gender equality, gender mainstreaming, gender sensitization and gender balance throughout the globe has provided a platform liberal and middle class to come forward for getting rid of the expired and defective concepts and rituals. By this the monopoly and dominance of male members in the society has become weakened. As the result of these rapid changes at the global level, Japanese society has also gone under many social and cultural changes. The old family patterns shifted from extended family to nuclear family, arranged-marriage to love- marriage and the male dominance over family members (particularly women) shifted to equal rights and respect based. Japanese women started to take part in the economic and social activities. These sudden and unexpected changes particularly the changing roles of women affected the old family system and as the result violence against women, increasing number of divorces and single family is seen in the Japanese society.

The Japanese government has also taken sufficient initiatives for gender equal society. Many laws were promulgated and council for gender equality was established within cabinet office. In 2001, Prime Minister Koizumi has appointed eight female ministers in his cabinet and in 2003; the Japanese government set a concrete goal that by the year 2020 women should occupy at least 30 percent of the leadership positions in all sectors of society. As the result of these pro women policies and initiatives women have succeeded to break the chains of male dominancy but having a lack of social acceptance of women's role out of family, they are facing many social problems. Now a days there is a vital need to aware and sensitize the public about the social acceptance of women's roles in the social and economic development. For this, civil society organizations particularly women's right based NGOs and feminist groups have to come forward to raise public awareness.

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