

"JAPANESE WOMEN SINCE WORLD WAR-II: THEIR POSITION AS A RESULT OF AMERICAN OCCUPATION AND INFLUENCE"

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries the role of women in Japan has been structured by traditional values. During the feudal period, the position of women sank extremely low. The intelligence and moral nature of women began to be questioned and their equal status with men diminished. Relegated solely to the home, their contact with the outside world was severely limited and education neglected. The characteristics of an ideal Japanese woman were obedience, subservience, humbleness etc. The Meiji restoration in 1868 sought changes in the political and economic system but wanted the social system to remain the same. Thus women were refused the right to vote and to hold political office. They were granted the right of education, which helped to widen their horizon somewhat. This ideology remained effective until World War-II.

Japan's defeat in World War-II and the subsequent American occupation was instrumental in redefining women for the first time as a legal being. During and after World War-II women played an increasingly important role in the development of the economy and gained many new rights. Today the social status of women in Japan is protected by a series of laws, including the principle of sexual equality enshrined in the constitution and by civil code amendments enacted after the war.

Change in the status of Japanese women has become more especially evident only during the post war period. Since then their legal rights have been broadened. The new constitution of Japan (which was passed in 1946) provided for equality and respectability of individuals. Other laws were passed abolishing discrimination between the sexes in conformity with the provisions of the said constitution. Older women (20 years and above) were given the right to vote and to be elected to public office. In the

same year i.e. 1946, about 67% of the women electorate casting their ballots, and 39 out of the 89 women candidates were elected to the National Diet.¹

Education, on the other hand, took the form of co-education where boys and girls combined in a class for formal learning. The popularity of co-education became so influential that 85% of public educational institutions in Japan are now co-educational. This has given the girls more chances to get higher education and the number of girls is almost equal to that of boys as they move from junior high school to senior high school. Also, with the introduction of better education for women, better quality employment has been opened to them. Thanks partly to increased educational opportunities and partly to the labour shortage in Japan, women have become doctors, bureaucrats, professors and businesswomen in numbers.

The entry of women into various kinds of occupations started during World War-II when they were called to replace the workingmen. After the war, however more and more women began to take additional jobs. In 1948, the total number of workingwomen reached about 3,00,000 and in 1970, it grew to about 10,960,000 then composing 33.2% of the total employment. In 1976, the female population of the labour force reached 19,960,000 which was 38% of the country's labour force.²

During the ten years from 1960 to 1970, a most remarkable increase in the number of workingwomen took place in the manufacturing industries, in the private or non-government service industries, and in the wholesale and retail trades. Statistics in 1974 showed that more than 80% of workingwomen concentrated in manufacturing, private or non-government services and in the wholesale and retail trades, though, before 1950, as in pre-war times majority of the Japanese workingwomen were engaged in agriculture and forestry. With the growth of Japan economy i.e. in 1955, the number of workingwomen in agriculture and forestry declined greatly and in 1974, only 17% of workingwomen remained in these industries.³ Today, Japanese women hold professional and technical jobs. Many of them have

become teachers, doctors and pharmacists. Many others are in such fields as advertising, foreign trade, mass communications and even science technology. New opportunities have recently been opened to them where only men used to occupy positions of authority.

In discussing today's Japanese workingwomen, we cannot help but think of the traditional Japanese society where a girl from a good family was rarely permitted to work before marriage. Thus, we can see that today's Japanese society has shed off its prejudice against workingwomen.

The position of Japanese women in marriage has also been liberalized since the war. Since 1947, the principle of equality between the sexes has been established in relations to freedom of marriages and divorce, property and in inheritance rights, and so forth. Art. 14 of the constitution of Japan 1947, says, "Marriage shall be based on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual co-operation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis". Divorce is no longer a unilateral act of the husband. According to the new code, infidelity by the husband, not only by the wife, can be a ground for judicial divorce. Women can therefore obtain a divorce as easily as man.⁴

As for inheritance to property, equal division between children has become the basis for partition with a reserved position for the surviving parent. The new provision also removes from the husband his previous power to restrict his wife's exercise of property rights. Husbands and wives now cooperate together and determine their place of residence by mutual consent. Where once, only father was the sole authority under the law, parents now share authority in upbringing and education of their children. The new code eliminates the position of the house head and his power over other family members. According to it, "the husband and wife shall live together, and shall cooperate and aid each other and any property in regard to which it is uncertain whether it belongs to the husband or wife, is presumed to be property in their co-ownership."⁵

Traditionally, the loyalties of the husband were directed towards his parents and blood relatives rather than his wife. If necessary the dutiful and obedient Japanese son gave up his wife if his father or mother disapproved of her. This attitude is being modified in modern Japan to the same extent that other traditional social attitudes and customs are being modified. Increasing urbanization is creating smaller families in which the orientation of the husband is towards the wife rather than toward the blood relatives. Under these conditions there is more companionship between husband and wife: they live more freely and more intimately without fear of criticism. This kind of environment tends to give the wife greater freedom and greater influence in home.

Also, there is no discrimination between the sexes regarding freedom of assembly, association and speech. Japanese women have begun to organize themselves into political, religious and economic grouping such as, "The Housewives Federation", the league of women voters, YWCA. The women's Christian Temperance Union, the Council of Regional Women's Clubs, the Council of Widows Organization etc. Today, nearly two-third of the female populations belong to some kind of an active women's association.⁶

In addition to the legal protections and safeguards afforded to women, technological changes have also freed the Japanese housewife from much drudgery, which used to keep her busy in the house all day. The introduction of modern house appliances has given her more free time. Electrical appliances such as refrigerator and washing machines have minimized the time spent on shopping and laundering. Television has also been of tremendous support in the emancipation of Japanese women.⁷

On the whole, the increase in social mobility associated with urbanization has weakened the traditional extended family concept. Consequently, many young couples are now setting up their own nuclear family - a family comprising of the married couple and their children. Thus, in 1965, it was observed that the average number of persons in a household was 4.05 but this

decreased to 3.7 in 1972.⁸ This change brought about by the nuclear family set up has not only liberated the Japanese housewife from the harshness of her mother-in-law but also facilitated her in the management of her household duties.

The government, on the other hand, has introduced family planning in the country and encouraged couples to practice birth control. "Thus, in more recent years, the birth rate in Japan has only been about 17 per 1,000, one of the lowest in the world."⁹

Because of many changes in the Japanese life structure, Japan's social values have also altered. Relations between the sexes have unquestionably become far freer than they had been in the past. Young couples are commonly seen strolling hand in hand through the streets. Young boys and girls gather in coffee shops for long hours. Mostly young Japanese women, too, have adopted the western clothes and are no longer wearing the "Kimonos", in fact the western dresses have become an integral part of the Japanese life style.¹⁰

Pre-found changes in the economic, social and political status of Japanese women were set in motion during the Allied occupation after World War-II. Constitutional guarantees and other reforms introduced during that period gave women a full legal basis for equality. Over the decades since then, prosperity, urbanization, the spread of educational opportunity and other factors have supported further improvements in the position of women.

CONCLUSION

The tradition of women's being the servant of, and subordinate to man, have existed in many civilizations and in many ages in the world. It is most unique to Japan for, most societies have been misogynous and have developed ways to ensure the subordination of women to men. In Japan, tradition has made the domestic role the feminine ideal.

When one thought of a Japanese woman, the geisha and submissive housewife came to mind. These were the women living

by a rigid traditional feminine ideal, which defined woman as a being always dependent on man, a practice widely followed until the end of World War-II.

The Meiji era, with its spectacular transformation and modernization in most areas remained socially conservative and committed to the traditional family system. The Meiji civil code delineated woman as basically "good wife and wise mother" and subordinated her legally to men. Women were not given any status, according to law. They were unable to own or to transmit property or to divorce. This ideology and legal disability remained in effect through World War-II.

It is beyond doubt that Japan has changed significantly in the post war period its women along with its men. Women are exercising their new legal rights to vote and hold office, to own and transmit property and to divorce. More women sit in the Japanese Diet than in the United States congress. They have contributed too in significant ways to Japan's miraculous economic growth and power. What has been traced here is how these external objective changes have altered the lives and values of Japanese women. Urbanization, the nuclear family system, increased participation in the labour force and new political rights have changed the pattern of life of the Japanese women. Japan's defeat in World War-II and the subsequent American occupation was instrumental in redefining women for the first time as a legal being, a person with the right to vote, to hold office, to own property and entitled to divorce. Constitutional guarantees and other reform introduced during that period gave women a full legal basis for equality. Since then, prosperity, urbanization, the spread of educational opportunities and other factors have supported further improvements in the position of women contributing to the liberation of the Japanese women from the restraints of the past.

It can now be said that as the result of the Second World War and the occupation of Japan by American forces, education, new laws, exposure to the city and the world, rising expectations and economic necessity have all contributed to the enlarging independence and equality of the Japanese women. Today, the

Japanese women are among the most progressive women in the world. These women who were once the victims of social change are now among the driving forces behind such change.

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