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'Women Change, Men Change, Society Changes': women of Japan today

MARJUT POKKINEN

SUMMARY The writer, a young Finnish female scientist, has been working in Japan as a researcher since November 1988 and has experienced and learned the Japanese way of life and work. In this article the general features of Japanese society are outlined and the traditions which still bind Japanese women are elaborated. In theory the field of engineering is open to women but the weight of societal customs and values makes it rather demanding for any woman to try to make a career in any technical field.

Japanese Way of Thinking

Japan is a modern, high technology country where people have a high standard of living. Japan is often considered a part of the Western world, but this is true only in terms of politics and economy. Japanese society and people behave according to 'Eastern' or 'Asian' ways of thinking and values of life. One of the basics of the Japanese way of thinking is to divide people to insiders and outsiders. One's first insider group is the family, then other relatives, people from the same town, colleagues and other company people. This goes as far as the whole of Japan being insiders and rest of the world outsiders. People are treated and addressed differently depending on whether they are insiders or outsiders. Japanese people are very loyal to the group they belong to and the sense of belonging to a group is very important.

The Japanese way of thinking and their values are sometimes strikingly different from those of 'Western' societies. Most of the differences are hard to learn without living in Japan and getting to know its people. This causes problems to Western people entering Japan or, vice versa, to Japanese people settling, for example, in Europe. It is also difficult to compare Japanese and Western statistics concerning life and society due to these differences. This fact is very often forgotten even by the Japanese who are eager to compare their life with American statistics. Thus it is necessary to learn some basics about Japanese life, work and family life before discussing women in the field of technology in Japan.

Life of a Japanese Person

Throughout its history, Japan has been, and is still today, a very hierarchic society. In each group that the Japanese people belong to horizontal and vertical hierarchy is very clear to all the members of the group. Every group member has his or her place and job within the group. This applies also to a family. Roles are divided into those of a father, a mother, a son and a daughter. A father earns the money and is the head of the family.

A mother is normally a housewife, though 40% of Japan's workforce consists of women. A mother takes care of the household, family finances with her husband's salary that she receives and gives some allowance from it to her husband. A mother's job is also to push her children through Japan's competitive education system. In Japanese society the academic record, i.e. the university from which one graduated, affects one's career. It can guarantee access to high levels of society, and thus it is overemphasised. The children's part is to study hard in school and after school in private lessons in order to pass the entrance exams of the best schools and finally the ultimate goal, the best universities. The chain of good schools goes back to kindergartens. Even though equal rights for men and women are guaranteed by a law passed in 1986 more emphasis is given to men's education. Statistics show that 24.4% of the Japanese working women had only an elementary school education, 53.6% were high school graduates and 22% were junior college, college or university graduates.

Work: long hours for lifetime

Work has a different meaning to Japanese people compared to Western people. Employment is usually lifelong within the same company. University students are recruited by companies usually in the beginning in their last year of university. It is important to enter a good company because of the lifetime employment. This requires a university degree from a good university. After entering a company new employees go through a training period during which company organisation, history, correct business manners, such as speaking on the telephone, and handing out business cards are explained. New employees become members of a new group and the spirit of the new group is adopted. In the employment process the actual field of studies is not so important; university name and personal appearance are much more important. This is why university students tend to stop studying hard and start enjoying life after entering a university. The training and skills needed for work are taught in the company. Companies have also a custom of rotating employees around different departments and jobs within the company, so new skills are taught constantly. Older employees whose working efficiency has decreased are not fired but given less demanding jobs.

Work place has a very strong social meaning in Japan. In Japanese the word *uchi* meaning home is also used for one's place of work. Hierarchy is also very clear in the working environment and people are placed and paid according to their age and the number of years in the company. This prevents, for example, young, talented scholars from reaching professorships in a Japanese university. A boss takes the role of a father to his employees and so in a Japanese wedding ceremony the groom's boss is an honoured guest and speaker. Japanese attitudes towards work is to do it as well as possible because it is to the benefit of the group to which one belongs. The Japanese are in general also proud of their work and their company.

Working hours of the Japanese people are very long. After official hours almost all employees stay on for a few extra hours. These extra hours are then very often followed by a couple of drinks with colleagues in some small bar or pub or by some other social activities with colleagues. The working day with the extra hours and on average 2 hours travel, in a day, especially in the Tokyo area, makes one's day very long and gives only Sundays for some time for the family to be together. In most companies every second Saturday is a working day. Only during this year some companies, e.g. some banks, have introduced a 5-day working week.

General Impressions of Japanese Women

In my opinion, and I can truly only make comparisons with the women in Finland, one major impression of Japanese women is their strong femininity that is balancing the masculinity of the men and society. Women dress and act in every way more feminine than I am used to. In the Japanese language there are different levels of politeness which are used depending on whom one is addressing. Women always use a more polite language than men. Also women are more polite in their manners and more quiet than the men. Things that fall under the category 'traditional household work' are strictly women's work also in the office. Female colleagues serve the tea to visitors and clean the cups, even if they are engineers.

In television advertisements, which usually reveal very much of a society, two images of women are shown. One image of a Japanese woman is a traditional housewife, good mother taking care of her family. Another image is of a young lady working in a modern office, taking care of her outlook and enjoying her life. These women are called office ladies (OL) in Japan. One interesting minor detail typical to Japanese women is their tone and voice, more feminine and more high-pitched. Thus listening to speeches by the chairwoman of the Japan Socialist Party, Ms Takako Doi, held with low, masculine tone of voice typical to Japanese men, gives a proof that women have to give up their femininity to some extent in order to reach high positions in Japan.

Women and Work

Japanese women's attitudes towards working and their role as a mother can be seen from a survey carried out in 1987 by the Office of the Prime Minister, Table I.

TABLE I.

	1979 (%)	1987 (%)
Better to continue working even after marriage or childbirth	20.1	16.1
Better to stay at home after marriage and return to work when the children have grown up	39.2	51.9
Better to stay at home after marriage	11.3	10.2
Better to stay at home after having a child	10.8	11.3
Better not to work	7.0	3.4
No comment	11.6	7.0
	100	100

A typical pattern for women is to graduate from high school, college or university, work until marriage or childbirth, stay at home until children are 10 years old and then work as a part-timer, meaning less than 35 hours per week. Part-time employees generally have lower salaries and job security.

But changes are taking place which can also be read from the table by comparing the numbers of 1979 and 1987. The model of continuing a career after marriage and child care break is becoming the popular model for the woman of the future in Japan. Also the importance of marriage is changing, 24.3% of the interviewed women in 1987

said that if they could support themselves a marriage would not be needed. The same was said by 22.8% of the women in 1979. The statement 'women's happiness is found in marriage' was approved in 1972 by 40% of women and in 1987 by 24.3%.

Recent Upper House elections held in July 1989 in Japan also gave a hint that women are stepping out of their roles as housewives. In the elections records were broken by numbers of women being elected to the Upper House and women became a power that caused Japan's long ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party, to lose its majority in the Upper House for the first time in more than 40 years. It was named Madonna-phenomena. The two female ministers in the new cabinet of Japan reflect the politicians' need to consider women now as a power that can bring victory or loss to a party.

In Japan the traditional beliefs of society seem to be the biggest barrier to women who want to make a career. When equal rights legislation was passed in 1986, there was a concern about the rush of women to work places and the destruction of families, and by that also the destruction of Japanese society.

Lifetime employment systems give women less equal chances. Many companies think that it is not worthwhile to train a woman who is going to leave the company after marriage or childbirth. In this kind of employment process where academic capabilities are overruled by gender, women do not have much chance to compete with men.

The lack of a good child care system in Japan also affects women who want to combine family and work. This is a difficult problem since long working hours are a custom in Japanese companies. This might also change since Japanese people are now aware of their long hours and few holidays. Today Japanese people are offered plenty of leisure activities, domestic and abroad, and with the growing economy people have more money to invest in these kind of activities, only time is missing.

In Japan attitudes do not prevent the women interested in technology from entering technical universities; so far they have an equal chance to take the entrance examinations. Since the field of university studies gives only a rough outline for the future profession, women in theory have an equal chance of good employment just by entering the right universities. But in practice the women who actually want to work and make a career in the field of technology have to challenge all the traditional values of society.

Changes Will Take Place

In today's Japan it is not current to speak about how to increase the number of women studying technology or working in the field of technology. The current topic is whether to work or to stay at home. Japan's growing economy and falling birthrate make women valuable and so far an unused resource of employees. This is recognised by the companies and there are now Japanese women working in various fields and positions. Big changes are needed in society in order to increase the number of working women and thus it will take time. Only a generation ago women believed that their place was at home. The slogan of the Japanese Women's Week organised annually by the labour movement was in 1989: "Women change; men change; society changes". It gives proof that changes are taking place all the time. One must also recall history and remember that Japanese society has gone through drastic changes after the Second World War. In only 40 years has Japan gone through a similar development as Europe did in 200 years.

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