

Gender Issues from an Outsider Psychologist's Perspective

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Before I traveled to Japan as a visiting professor at the Institute for Gender Studies of Ochanomizu University, I studied some of the statistics about the relative position of women and men in Japan. These statistics are easily available in English on the web and are quite disturbing from a feminist perspective (see, for example, <http://www.gender.go.jp/women2001/s1.html>; <http://www.sg.emb-japan.go.jp/JapanAccess/women.html>; http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/women2004/statistics/s-index.html). I found that:

- Salaries for Japanese women are on average about 65 percent of that of their male co-workers. This is one of the largest gender gaps in the industrial world.
- The gender discrepancy is most prominent among wage earners in the 7 million yen per year bracket, which is considered the benchmark for guaranteeing an independent lifestyle.
- Only 3% of women, compared to 24.4% of men, earned this recommended salary.
- Japan ranks 41st on the Gender Equality Measure (GEM), a measure developed by the United Nations that assesses women's participation in society. The index uses four criteria - the ratio of seats women hold in parliament, the ratio of female administrators and managers, the ratio of female professionals and technical workers and the income women earn.
- Women hold only about 9% of managerial positions (compared to about 45% in the U. S.).
- Female candidates in the House of Representatives accounted for 14.4% of all candidates and

7.3% of those elected in the June 2000 general elections.

- Women comprise 6.8 percent of the membership of local assemblies and 6.4 percent of those in local prefecture government.

These are economic and political indicators of women's lower status in society as compared to men. As a psychologist, I was more interested in data on social relationships and realities. The data that most interested me were those on the relationship between the family and work roles of women and men. Some of the facts I found in this area were also disturbing (see, for example, Curtin, 2002; Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities, 2001):

- A report by the prime minister's office noted that Japanese men spend less than half an hour a day on child-rearing and household chores, even when their wives work. In contrast, women in full-time employment spent 3 hours and 18 minutes per day on household chores.
- While Japanese women account for only 35 percent of paid working hours, the report said, they shoulder more than half of the total work of society when unpaid housework is included.
- Japanese women are largely responsible for the care of elderly parents in a society where the average lifespan for women is almost 85 years and that of men is more than 79 years.

However, the most serious problem related to gender confronting Japan today is the sharp decline in its birth rate. This problem was frequently discussed by both the media and my colleagues during my stay. In 2004, the average number of births per woman was 1.29. This figure is lower than those of any other country in the developed world (Head, 2003). This low birth rate is produced in part by women's postponement of marriage and child birth. The divorce rate has also risen sharply and many more women are choosing to remain single. Conservative estimates suggest that more than one woman in four over age thirty is single (Curtin, 2003). However, some newspapers report a much larger figure: "The percentage of women in their late twenties who have not married has risen from 30 to about 50 in the last 15 years" (Tolbert, 2000).

These statistical data only tell us what women do, but not why they do it. As a feminist social psychologist, I am interested in the question of how social, economic, and political inequalities influence individual choice and behavior. I know, however, that people are not always aware of the situational context that influences their behaviors. Indeed, people often deny situational influences when explaining their own behavior although they may recognize such factors when explaining the identical behavior in others. This is known by social psychologists as the "fundamental attribution error."

When I returned to the United States, I found myself wondering whether as an outsider in Japan, I might be in a good position to understand the way situational variables have influenced young women's choice to remain single and childless. What have Western feminist researchers learned that may help understand these behaviors? One important factor is the great inequality between women and men's work and family roles. But, I have also identified a number of other social psychological phenomena that I believe are related to the decline in childbearing. These include sex segregation at many levels of Japanese society; attitudes about intensive mothering;

attitudes about the integration of work and family roles, and the problems of individualism within a communal society.

Unfortunately, there is not a linear relationship between these psychological and socio-structural phenomena. Instead, attitudes and behaviors both reflect and construct gender inequities. Neither society nor psychology can be changed in isolation from each other.

The presence of a large number of single and childless young women in Japan represents a fascinating psychological puzzle in terms of both antecedents and consequences. In the rest of this paper I will identify some of the psychological factors that appear to influence women's choices to delay marriage and childbearing and discuss the consequences of such decisions on women's attitudes and behaviors. I will also discuss the implications of their choices for society as a whole. And, finally, I will discuss briefly whether these psychological factors are unique to Japan or may be predictive of social trends in other developed countries.

Sex segregation in all aspects of society

One of the aspects of Japanese society that is most noticeable to a Western observer is the extent to which it is sex segregated. Males and females seem to exist in two different spheres. Some of this separation is due to the definition of appropriate gender roles. Although gender roles were also dichotomized in the United States before the so-called feminist revolution of the 1970s, the definition of work and family roles as male and female domains is much sharper in Japan today than it is in the United States and other developed countries. This is due, in part, to the culture of its work world. Traditional Japanese employment patterns mandate long hours, unpredictable transfers to other cities, and the expectation of social activities after work with one's fellow workers which exclude spouses or partners.

Most of these fellow workers are male because changes in the sex distribution of positions in business have been slow. Few women are on career tracks because of norms involving seniority and life time employment, the lingering impact of protective legislation that "protected" women from night shifts and overtime, and stereotypes about the roles of women in the work force. Women are still frequently employed as "office ladies" who do clerical work, serve tea, and have limited chances of promotion. Thus, women and men have little opportunity to develop informal relationships at work or to become friends with each other.

This pattern of sex segregation begins early. Even when they attend mixed sex schools, children tend to remain in same sex groups for sports and leisure activities. Even when my husband and I saw teenagers together in groups during visits to cultural sites, they did not appear to interact with members of the other sex. Throughout our stay in Japan, most groups we observed in restaurants were single sex. Even on weekends, when we saw family groups with children, it was often grandparents and not parents who were accompanying the youngsters.

It was also rare to see couples of any age in professional contexts. During the period that I

was a visiting professor at the Institute for Gender Studies at Ochanomizu University, two other scholars from outside of Japan visited the institute—one from India and the other from Israel. Although each of us was accompanied by her husband, I never met a husband of any of my Japanese colleagues during the time I was in Japan.

Even academic contacts appear to be sex segregated. During my time at Ochanomizu, I met only one male psychologist interested in gender issues and he was concerned about the problems of feminized males. At the one meeting of the board of the Institute for Gender Studies that I attended, the men sat on one side of the table and the women on the other (although I was told this was not always true).

Stereotypes about the characteristics of women and men justify and maintain patterns of sex segregation. For example, when the Nissan plant opened in 1961 several dozen women were hired—but only to sew seat covers using old-fashioned sewing machines. As sewing became more automated, the job was shifted to men. Nissan has added a few women to its assembly line recently, but gender stereotypes about women and work persist. For example, a Japanese newspaper quoted a male personnel manager at the Nissan plant, who stated that women add “vitality” to the assembly line. “The workplace becomes more cheerful,” he added, saying that men behave better and the factory has become cleaner (French, 2003).”

The content of gender stereotypes and attitudes about women's family roles

In general, gender stereotypes in Japan and the United States do not differ in content or kind. However, gender stereotypes in Japan appear to be more intense, focus more on motherhood, and there is greater agreement between women and men about the acceptability of gender-biased beliefs. For example, a 2002 poll found 47% supporting and 47% opposing the statement, “Husbands should work outside the home and wives should take care of their families (Curtin, 2003).” There was no significant difference between women and men in these attitudes. Similarly, although a cross-national study found that Japanese respondents were about in the middle of the sample in terms of sexist attitudes, the attitudes of women and men in their acceptance of hostile and benevolent sexism was more similar than in the other societies studied (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Men and women in Japan are also strongly supportive of the need of infants for intensive mothering. In a 2001 poll, 57% of women and 55% of men in the survey's child-rearing group agreed with the statement “When children are small it is best women devote themselves to child-rearing and wait until the child is older before returning to work.” Some views were even more conservative. 36.6% of the individuals sampled thought women should only return to work once their children have grown up; 9.9% stated that they should only work until pregnancy; and 6.2% said they should quit when they marry. There is intense social pressure for mothers to be involved in every aspect of their children's lives (particularly in their schooling). And, mothers are blamed if anything goes wrong.

Women are caught in a double bind between the demands of childcare and the demands for total loyalty to one's job or company. One newspaper recounted the story of a woman who abandoned a career in marketing after similar experiences in two companies. She took leave for three days to look after a sick child. "After that I was not included in new projects," said the woman, who spoke on condition that she not be identified, "and after that I felt they saw me as an unreliable person. I finally decided that if I work in a company, I must understand the company's spirit, which means I couldn't feel comfortable taking maternal benefits (French, 2004)."

It is difficult for women to resist conflicting social demands. A saying that was told to me several times and applied to independent women is "deru kugi wa utareru '-the' nail that sticks out will get hammered." This phrase was used in a recent newspaper story about Princess Masako who has been caught up in a double bind involving motherhood and the desire for a model of a strong modern woman (Head, 2004). In comments made on his 44th birthday, the heir to the Japanese throne said his wife was suffering from the accumulated burdens of motherhood, her official duties and the relentless pressure to produce a second, male heir to the throne. She has been widely publicized as becoming psychologically depressed and physically ill from stress. Princess Masako gave up a promising diplomatic career to marry the crown prince... Many Japanese feminists had hoped for change at the highest levels because Princess Masako was regarded as a role model of a strong woman who "stuck out." Instead she has become a cautionary tale for women who wish to maintain individuality and independence as well as marry and have children.

Although close to 70% of women say they want to be able to work and have a family, female employment continues to follow the traditional pattern of women giving up their jobs between their late twenties and mid-thirties in order to raise children. Partly because of rigid gender roles, women with higher levels of education and income are less likely to marry than similar women in the U. S. or Sweden (Ono, 2003).

The single woman in Japanese society

As noted earlier, the choice not to marry has become a popular alternative for many Japanese women. This choice is influenced by economic as well as psychological considerations. Psychologically, it is difficult for most women to resist the stress involved in dealing with socially defined double binds. And, if mothers are willing to accept some level of societal disapproval and work part time, state supported child care is scarce and baby sitters are expensive. Because of the high cost of housing and the small size of apartments available in cities, three-generation families in which grandmothers provided support with childcare have also become less common.

Many Japanese women expect a drop in their standard of living when they marry and have children. On the other hand, most (more than 70%) single women live at home with their parents, pay relatively little rent, and their disposable income has helped to ameliorate the stagnant

Japanese economy. Some media accounts suggest that their opinions and lifestyle define a kind of Tokyo yuppie devoted to leisure and luxury (Tolbert, 2000). Their lifestyle is also sex segregated. These single women tend to socialize primarily with female friends.

Women's decision to remain single is often viewed negatively. Single women in their twenties and thirties are often targeted as selfish. In one extreme example, they have been labeled "parasite singles" by one sociologist because their relatively affluent life style is supported by remaining at home with few domestic responsibilities and paying relatively low rent to parents. He noted that many more single men than women are living on their own and stated that: "Guys want to get married so they don't have to do the housework they've been doing all along (Tolbert, 2000)." If such views are common it is understandable why women are not eager to marry.

Women are also particularly likely to be blamed for the falling birthrate. Former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, a member of a government commission charged with finding solutions to the population crisis, was widely quoted as saying the main reason for Japan's falling birthrate was the over-education of its women. And, a top aide of Prime Minister Koizumi's was recently quoted as saying that often women who are raped deserve it, while a legislator from the governing party said, approvingly, that the men who carried out such acts were virile and "good specimens." The latter comment came at a seminar about the falling birthrate (French, 2004)...

These remarks and labels are ways of blaming women for the ills of society. But individual choices are constrained by society. As long as women remain economically and socially unequal to men, it will be almost impossible for women to combine a career and children. Few societal mechanisms exist to help them do so, they receive little help from husbands with whom they rarely interact, and are condemned as poor wives and mothers when they attempt to maintain their careers. It is not surprising, therefore, that few of my colleagues at Ochanomizu were married and even fewer had children.

On the other hand, there are positive rewards for remaining single. Although their salaries are not as high as those of men, women who remain at home have a considerable amount of disposable income which they use to buy name brand clothing, eat out in restaurants, and travel at home and abroad. The sex segregated nature of Japanese society makes it easy for them to find female companions to share these activities so they see little reason to marry. Unlike the United States, they will not be subject to a declining pool of eligible men if they decide to marry in their thirties. And, since few Japanese marriages are companionate and sexual relations outside of marriage are socially acceptable, there seems little reason for Japanese women to marry at all unless they wish to have children. Moreover, as the number of women in their late twenties and early thirties continues to grow, those who choose marriage and childbearing will deviate more and more from the normative behaviors of their female peers.

Individualism and nonconformity in a communal society

Single women in Japan appear to be pioneering a model for individualism and nonconformity within a communal society. They appear to form groups that deviate from past cultural norms but which conform to norms within their peer group. Many single women appear to be conforming in their nonconformity. For example, Japanese women sometimes dye their hair, but the reddish-blond color seen most frequently seems to differ little from one woman to another. Concerns about appearance and a growing problem with eating disorders also seem to be widespread (Ito, 2001; Tanaka, 2001). And, finally, shopping for designer clothing and other aspects of a materialistic life style may have helped the Japanese economy but may not be predictive of psychological health.

The portrayal of Japanese women on television appears to encourage psychologically unhealthy behaviors. This is, of course, not simply a Japanese problem as media images of women have been found to be remarkably similar across cultures (Crawford & Unger, 2004). Like ads in the U. S., women in Japanese TV ads are more likely than men to be portrayed as youthful and beautiful (Anima, 2003). And, although some studies indicate that an equal number of women and men now appear in prime time commercials, gender stereotypes in setting, product type, and voice-overs remain (Bresnahan et al., 2001). Clinical psychologists are troubled by women's greater concern with weight and the increasing numbers of young women with eating disorders (Kawano, personal communication). They point to the pernicious role played by the mass media in constructing an unrealistically thin body image in young women.

The images of women found in Japanese pop culture are more disturbing. Cuteness, eroticism, and violence are the cornerstones of anime and manga. These forms of pop culture also encourage women to be both childlike and sexual. "Lolicom" (Lolita complex) themes are a staple of the Japanese pop culture consumed at home and abroad (McNicol, 2004). Many anime and manga products feature sexy school-girl heroines. Some extreme varieties of lolicom manga are clearly pedophilic pornography. Such images are considered sexually attractive by many Japanese men. Japanese society as a whole shows "little recognition of the abuse involved, let alone exploitation." Commentators point out that media reports fret about immoral and out of control young girls, but barely consider the issue of why older men are paying for sex with schoolgirls in the first place.

Sexual relationships between adult men and women have become more difficult in recent years. Clinical psychologists report lack of libido even in recently married couples and a rise in affairs between affluent single Japanese women and men from Southeast Asia who they meet on trips abroad (Kawano, personal communication). The women claim that such men are less sexist than men in Japan, but other psychological issues need to be explored. Are these women reaching out for companionate relationships which are denied to them by a gender segregated society? Or, are they attempting to reverse the power dimension in their relationships with men? Given the homogeneous nature of Japanese society, it seems unlikely that these relationships will develop

into successful long-term partnerships.

Adolescence and psychological disorders

Because of their lack of financial and familial responsibilities, peer groups of single women appear to manifest some aspects of adolescence—including a need for sexual exploration. But, adolescence is also a period of vulnerability to many kinds of psychological distress. Sources of distress that have been identified in Western societies include coming to terms with one's adult body; uncertainty about the transition into adult roles, and peer pressure to conform to the norms of one's group (Crawford & Unger, 2004). In Japan, cultural demands for communal responsibility also intensify during this period. One may ask, therefore, whether some of the psychological issues of unmarried young women are similar to those found in adolescent girls?

At first glance, problems of the two cohorts seem to be quite different. Nonconformity—and outright rebellion—take more extreme forms in younger girls (and boys) in their attempts to escape cultural demands for communal responsibility. Some of these acts of rebellion among adolescents were extensively covered by the news media while we were in Japan. Many of these problematic behaviors took place in middle and high school.

Schools are important sites for the socialization of cultural norms about communal responsibility. But they have also become sites of alienation and violence. Incidents of violence on school grounds have increased fivefold in Japan over the past decade. Violence by children under 14 has risen particularly rapidly. One study by a children's research institute found that as many as 30 percent of high school and middle school students had experienced sudden acts of rage at least once a month (Faiola, 2004).

Unlike the situation in the United States, youth violence is not related to poverty and female-female incidents of violence are not uncommon in Japan. Aggression is more often initiated by high status children and directed against atypical or nonconforming peers. The smaller gender differences in physical aggression in Japan than in the U. S. is surprising. Unlike the U. S., however, media aimed at girls can have a great deal of violence. For example, children can view popular anime, such as "Gunslinger Girl," a tale about murderous cyborg schoolgirls in plaid miniskirts (Faiola, 2004).

One killing that shocked the country occurred while we were in Japan. It involved an 11-year-old girl who killed a close girl friend with a box-cutter. The girl was an avid fan of "Battle Royale," a popular teen movie turned Internet game in which students kill one another through blood sport. Although the girl is still undergoing psychological evaluation, she is believed to have been set off by a seemingly minor offense. The victim had called her "overweight" and "prissy" on a website (Faiola, 2004)

However, some indicators of rebellion and alienation do take different forms for teenage girls and boys. For example, an estimated hundreds of thousands of Japanese students are suffering

from a behavioral disorder known as *hikikomori*—sometimes called “school refusal.” They refuse to go to school and some are unable to leave their homes or cope with daily life, according to specialists and sociologists who have studied the phenomenon. There are gender differences in the ways such students (mostly in middle- or high-school) spend their time. Boys are more likely to spend their time at home playing computer games whereas girls tend to spend time in groups at shopping malls. Although the phenomenon has not been studied systematically, authorities claim that thousands of teenagers, mostly girls in Japan’s large cities, have entered into what authorities describe as voluntary prostitution, marketing themselves to adults through Internet sites to earn money for designer handbags and brand-name clothing (Faiola, 2004). We do not know whether these latter behaviors are an attempt to model older women or a manifestation of a similar desire for a materialistic lifestyle which they cannot yet afford.

Tying this all together

Do all of these social, structural, and psychological processes relate to each other? They appear to interact in a complex fashion. At the structural level, more men than women have been negatively affected by the struggling Japanese economy. At the same time, more women have entered the work force and despite the fact that they earn less than men, they have more income and greater educational and career opportunities than preceding generations of Japanese women. The increasing overlap of male and female roles conflicts with traditional views of male power and the social order. These trends may contribute to the greater separation of the sexes although Japanese society has always been more sex segregated than Western cultures.

Gender segregation in Japanese society has made companionate male-female relationships difficult to develop and maintain. Both women and men socialize in single sex peer groups. Because they are more likely to remain at home if they are unmarried, young women have more disposable income than comparable men even though their salaries are, on average, lower than those of their male peers. In Western societies, single women are stigmatized and often have difficulty finding friends with whom to socialize (Crawford & Unger, 2004). In Japan, single women do not encounter such social difficulties and may also have more money with which to finance a comfortable and independent life-style. Therefore, they feel free to postpone marriage and childbearing longer than women in Western societies do. The lifestyle of many single women has some of the characteristics of an idealized adolescence—free from familial and financial responsibilities. The completion of schooling also frees them from overt demands to conform to communal needs as well.

However, this protracted period of remaining single also makes women vulnerable to a number of psychological risks. Media images present a young woman who is both childlike and sexually enticing (McNicol, 2004). Such images may explain the increasing rate of eating disorders and depression found in this cohort. They may also fuel the growing anger and

aggression found among teenage girls.

Young women are the major targets of blame for the precipitous drop in the birth rate which has accompanied their choices about marriage and childbearing. Perhaps reactively, there have been numerous attempts recently to distinguish men from women. Some of the comments made recently by male public figures (mentioned earlier in this paper) appear to confuse aggressive male sexuality with masculinity. The sexualization and dichotomization of male and female bodies as well as their gender roles are also evident in the representations in anime and manga as well as other forms of popular culture.

There has been little attempt to understand the societal forces that underlie apparent individual choice. Some of these issues could be clarified by more research on the psychology of women and gender, but Japanese psychiatry appears to follow a medical model and few male psychologists appear to be interested in gender issues. Instead the government has opted for an individualistic approach which advocates greater communication between men and women, but seems unclear about how to facilitate this process. Some of my colleagues at Ochanomizu humorously recounted attempts by the Japanese government to sponsor courses designed to teach men how to relate to women. Of course, any attempts to increase dialogue is laudable, but given the complex and often unconscious dynamics involved, it is likely that little will be accomplished with such policies.

Nevertheless, there are some reasons for optimism. First, Japan has relatively little class inequality. This means that those who seek change can focus on gender inequality more than in societies where a great deal of poverty exists and poor people lack access to many social services. Second, there has been an increase in gender egalitarian attitudes in both sexes. However, women and men have more similar sexist views than do men and women in most other countries studied (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Third, there has been a growth of individualism among women and more toleration of nonconforming lifestyles. However, this is a double-edged sword because it is driven by materialism and is partially responsible for a dramatic decrease in the birthrate and future economic and social upheaval. Finally, interest in feminism is strong and growing. A number of women and gender programs have been inaugurated by Japanese universities and many feminist texts have been translated into Japanese (c.f., Unger, 2004). The four lectures I gave on the psychology of women at the Institute for Gender Studies of Ochanomizu University were well attended and the audience appeared to be stimulated by them.

It is also important to acknowledge that ideas can flow in both directions. My brief encounter with gender issues in Japan has taught me much about gender issues in the United States. It has reminded me that women (and men) do not exist in a societal vacuum. Visions of change in women's lives must take into account the societal impact of the ways individuals choose to live their lives. Personal freedom without social responsibility is not a viable feminist choice!

I have also learned that similar outcomes do not necessarily have similar causes. The birth rate has also dropped precipitously in the United States as well as in many European countries. But in these Western societies it has not been accompanied by a major decline in pair bonding.

Women postpone marriage and childbearing, but tend to leave their parental home and live with male partners. It is important to explain what accounts for such cultural differences although I suspect they are related to the relatively better economic situation of Western women and the greater social stigma associated with remaining single as well as the lower rate of sex segregation in comparison to Japanese society.

Finally, I have learned that comparisons across cultures are important because they enable us to avoid biological explanations for so-called gender differences. Physical aggression among females appears more common in Japan than it is in the West. But, violence in the media directed toward girls and female adolescents is also more common in Japan. What is the role of the popular media in creating gender differences? This question can be phrased in another way too. What is the role of the popular media in creating similar negative psychological symptoms among women in many cultures? A focus on women's attractive bodies is remarkably similar across cultures while masculinity remains more culturally specific. The growing incidence of eating disorders and other symptoms of depression in Japanese women is a wake up call for studies of these phenomena in other societies. In short, feminist collaboration among and across cultures may help us all to avoid future problems involving the interface between the individual and social aspects of gender.

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