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I came on this trip wanting to learn everything I could about the experience of Japanese women. I brought with me the baggage of my own experience: my struggles to juggle the many roles in my life and my efforts working with nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to effect social change. These two issues quickly became the focus of my questions and discussions with my Japanese peers.

### **Balance**

One of the burning issues I face daily is the question of balance in my life as the mother of a six-year-old, a spouse, a community volunteer, a professional, and an individual. As I traveled around Japan, I asked women everywhere we went how they dealt with this issue of balance. I received many answers to my question, but the clear pattern which emerged was this: Most Japanese women don't balance all these aspects of their life because they can't—yet—in Japan. Some few manage to continue a life-long professional career, but usually they are either wealthy or blessed with an older relative who cares for their children; they are also very dedicated, as they must be to overcome the obstacles they face.

There are all sorts of challenges facing women who want both a career and a family:

Legally, women are not well-protected against discrimination in hiring or promotion.

Changing jobs is not a normal part of doing business, so if a woman quits for any reason—because she wants to stay home until her child enters school or because her spouse is transferred—it is unlikely that she could return to an equivalent job anywhere in the country.

Part-time workers—of whom over 80 percent are women—receive significantly lower wages, few or no benefits, and have no job security. This is the main work avenue open to women with children.

Women do not have the same access to higher education as men. More than twice as many men as women enter four-year universities (34 percent to 16 percent in 1991). At Tokyo University, perhaps the most prestigious college in the country, there were 65 women in a class of 2,500 30 years ago; today

the number is 200 women out of the same 2,500 students. It is nearly impossible to enter a graduate program later in life—unless one goes abroad—so women can not further their education after having children.

Women are not represented in the decision-making levels of the society. Less than one percent of managerial positions in the civil service are filled by women. In business, women managers range from one to five percent of the total, depending on the level. In politics, 6.2 percent of the national Diet are women, and at the local level 3.2 percent of elected officials are women.

Daycare centers, while numerous, are geared toward part-time workers and often are located far from suburban areas, so they rarely serve the needs of full-time professional workers.

There is no widespread belief that men and women should share household chores and the provision of care for children or elderly parents, so women who work outside the home almost universally return to a second job in the home.

In spite of these difficulties, we met many pioneering Japanese women, who as volunteers, mothers, part-time workers, and full-time professionals are forging ahead, changing their own lives and the life of their nation. Here are some of the stories I heard as I asked about balance:

A professor spoke of spending a year abroad on a fellowship. Every day she would look at the sky and weep, knowing that her children were back in Japan also seeing the blue sky. After months of grieving, she managed to arrange for her mother to bring the children abroad and they lived together for the duration of her studies.

A journalist told of being devastated because her employer fired her as soon as it was known that she was pregnant. With her children grown, she now has an interesting position, but is responsible for the care of her elderly parents and wonders how she will manage, since leave to care for sick relatives is not available.

An attorney, one of the five percent of attorneys who are women, could not find a job after graduating. Eventually she started a law office run by women for women. Contrary to what many firms require, they don't work nights so that they can spend time with their children.

A judge explained how she managed to continue her career: first, she had the resources to hire full-time help, and second, when it came time for her mandatory three-year assignment to a branch court, her supervisor chose a city close enough that she could commute. (It would have been inconceivable for her family to relocate for her job or for her to live elsewhere during that time.)

A father, when asked if he missed his children since he's so seldom home, replied that he was always giving orders when he saw them, so they didn't

like it much when he was home. He added that there is a Japanese saying that it's better for the father not to be at home.

Several women spoke hesitantly about being divorced, which is not common and carries some stigma. I was told of difficulties divorced mothers faced in getting child support from ex-spouses.

Hearing these stories and others, I came away believing that, until and unless basic changes are made in the social infrastructure, Japan will not be able to fully utilize the human resource that its women represent. This will require a fundamental change in a cultural way of thinking, both for women and for men. Men, too, are short-changed, missing out on their children's lives, lacking much quality of life outside their incredibly long work hours, being viewed and valued as "work animals," and then nicknamed "big garbage" after they retire. This is a daunting task—to change a culture, a way of thinking—but it is happening slowly, with forces external to Japan, as well as internal, pushing the process along.<sup>1</sup>

### **Social Change and Voluntary Groups**

A second major issue I have faced for 20 years is the challenge of using nonprofit organizations as vehicles to effect social change. As we traveled around the country, we were introduced to dozens of groups—usually led by women—working to bring about change in their society. One group committed to preserving tropical rain forests studied the issue and discovered that forms for pouring concrete are the biggest use of such wood in Japan; the group created a "picture-show" that is now traveling throughout Japan educating the general public about rain forests. (Incidentally, their city government is now researching whether to ban concrete forms made from tropical wood.) Another group became aware of the exploitation of Asian women who are brought to Japan for prostitution, set up a shelter for them and their children, intervened with their sometimes underworld bosses to retrieve the women's passports and airline tickets (held for "security"), and are providing counselling support, legal advice, and medical care to them. Yet another group studied garbage patterns in their city, began publishing the "Garbage Times" newsletter to inform citizens and businesses about the problem, and figured out how to make milk cartons into lovely postcards, which they sell to support their activities.

<sup>1</sup>Some of these driving forces bringing about change in Japan include: internationalization; *gaiatsu*, or foreign pressure; the dramatic decline in the birth rate (were the present rate to continue, we were told, in 800 years there would be no Japanese people); the graying of the population, with 25 percent expected to be over age 65 by the year 2003; the United Nations International Decade of Women; the shift from a production/supply economy to a consumer/quality of life economy; the aspirations of Japanese women; Japan's reaching highest net creditor position and thereby economic superpower status in 1985; the uniquely important role of female part-time workers in building the economy, working in boom times, and being let go in slowdowns; etc.

As we met with these organizations, I tried to ask probing questions about their structure, legal status, and financial situation, coming out of my entrepreneurial experience with nonprofits in the United States. Most of my questions turned out to be irrelevant, since there is little opportunity for innovation or entrepreneurship, as we know it, in the Japanese equivalent to our nonprofit sector. Social change is happening, yes, but without the support of a nonprofit organizational infrastructure.

Groups such as those we met are effective in spite of the legal, financial, and cultural constraints imposed on them. In Japan it is extremely difficult to achieve the equivalent of our nonprofit status, since it requires, among other things, a cash reserve of one million dollars and permission from all topically related government agencies. Even if this status is achieved, there is no incentive for the public or businesses to donate to such organizations because there is no tax deduction for charitable contributions, so there are in fact few contributors. The work of such voluntary groups, being outside the mainstream, mostly male, corporate structure of the society, is usually not recognized, valued, or even considered of any import. To support these groups and enable them to flourish in their important work of grassroots social transformation would require basic changes in the legal infrastructure relating to nonprofits. It would also require changes in the cultural infrastructure, acknowledging the importance of such work and thereby encouraging more participation in it. For instance, the Japanese government honors outstanding artists with the designation of "Living Cultural Treasure." A similar category of honor could be created for the life-long volunteer or the social innovator who have immeasurably enriched the lives of others.

In spite of the difficulties voluntary groups face, there are women throughout Japan giving their time, energy, and even money to causes they believe in. These are some of the examples I was told about where women are making a difference:

A volunteer told of the efforts of her woman's group to translate a non-sexist fairy tale featuring a strong, smart girl. Because they found that inequality is implanted in children, with very strong sex-role stereotypes, they wanted to publish at least one book telling a different story. Initially no publisher would take it, but with the help of a women's organization, they went ahead with printing and eventually sold 70,000 copies. They simplified the story, created fabric artwork to illustrate it, and published a second book for young children. Finally, they published the original English version as a supplementary textbook for use in high school English classes.

As an alternative to returning to the part-time work force, which offers low pay and little influence over one's own work, women are creating hundreds of worker's collectives. These small businesses, ranging in size from 8 to 50 or more workers, allow women to put their energy into things they believe in, to earn some money, and to self-organize and direct their own affairs. Collectives sell dozens of different services and products: they make videos; they run print shops; they make soap from waste kitchen oil; they open shops to sell recycled



products they have gathered or created; they make box lunches and open restaurants; they offer home nursing care for dependent elderly or brand new mothers, they are translators; they are bakers; they are marriage counselors. They typically charge less than the going rate for their products and services, as their aim is to improve their community rather than to maximize profit. What they offer for sale is often a superior product because of their values; for example, the food collectives typically make all their products from scratch, using natural ingredients.

The consumer co-op movement in Japan is an incredible success story. Here is the history of one of the best-known national coops: A housewife in Tokyo began a food-buying club in the mid-1960s, which, over time, spread to other parts of the country. This co-op became concerned about food quality and went on to buy directly from organic producers and then to construct their own organic dairy to supply milk to members. When they realized that detergents were polluting local rivers and eradicating fish, co-op members switched to natural soaps and collected 300,000 signatures on petitions to local governments asking them to ban harmful detergents. When the governments ignored the petitions, the co-op realized they had to get their own members in office. In 1987 in the greater Tokyo area, 31 of these women won election to local governments at one time. This co-op, with over 700 full-time staff, is the ninth largest of some 700 consumer coops located throughout Japan. One of its prefectural divisions is celebrating its 20th anniversary by building a special home for 50 to 100 low-income elderly persons who live alone—a socially innovative project in Japan. This group, representing about one-third of the total national membership, has capital assets of \$228 million; has built its own soap factory, which uses recycled kitchen oil to make natural soap; and now plans to start its own foundation to fund citizen-to-citizen international exchange and overseas aid, by asking co-op members to donate the equivalent of one meal a month.

## Questions

As I reflect on my experience in Japan, several questions come to mind. Were I to return to Japan, these are the issues I'd like to hear more about:

1. Given the tremendous underrepresentation of women in the corporate, educational, professional, and governmental spheres, who has the power in these spheres to change policies that keep women out? And, just as important, who has the behind-the-scenes influence needed to persuade these corporate and political decision-makers to move ahead? What kind of process—lobbying, arm-twisting, consensus-building, grassroots organizing—is required to bring about new policy and how can such a process of change be encouraged and supported?
2. Is there any way to enact legislation that legitimizes and supports the work of voluntary groups throughout Japan, which in effect would provide a legal

infrastructure (easier access to a nonprofit-equivalent status, tax law changes, etc.) to support and encourage the work of such groups?

3. I am impressed with the workers' collectives, often formed in conjunction with consumer co-ops, as a model of the flourishing of entrepreneurial spirit in Japan. Women are starting and running their own businesses, responding to real market needs. Many collectives focus on quality and fostering the social good, rather than maximizing profit, and in this regard are very similar to small nonprofits in the United States. How can Japanese institutions support and encourage this promising and innovative development?

For instance, government tax policy currently allows a second worker in any household to earn a small amount of wages that are tax-free. How about raising or entirely removing this cap, if the second worker is involved in a workers' collective? Or a business could establish a partner relationship with a workers' collective, exchanging information, skills, and even workers. The collective could benefit from the connections and some basic legal and financial assistance. The business could benefit by being exposed to the risk-taking, socially responsive nature of the collective. These suggestions may be the wrong answers to this question, so I ask those with more knowledge: How can Japanese institutions support and encourage the spread of workers' collectives?

4. To my mind, the success of the consumer co-op movement in Japan is phenomenal and represents a blending of entrepreneurial skills and social consciousness, with some co-ops doing everything from setting up national delivery systems and running organic farms to building soap factories and spawning political parties that get their members elected to office. Co-ops self-finance their own expansion into new areas through on-going monthly member investments coupled with small loans from banks or other sources. These co-ops represent not only innovation and entrepreneurship, but, with their self-financing mechanisms and political spin-offs, model a fairly self-contained mechanism for change in the society. My question, once more, is how can Japanese institutions support and encourage the flourishing of such co-ops? For instance, could the unusual low-income elderly project being built by one coop be studied and, as appropriate, promoted as a national model? Is anyone researching the access of these co-ops and documenting key aspects which could be copied in more traditional sectors of the society? Or if these suggestions are inappropriate, what are the ways that Japanese business, educational, and legal institutions could encourage and support the further expansion of consumer co-ops and their spin-offs?

## Closing

Besides the richness of women's lives shared with us and the wealth of information and useful models we received, I felt encompassed by a warm and welcoming acceptance by women throughout Japan. These things I will always treasure: late

at night, sitting scrunched inside a tiny, portable, sidewalk *ramen* stand, being treated to the famous local ramen by a feminist college professor and an environmentalist high school teacher; huddling off to the side with a professional woman, sharing seldom-told stories from both our pasts involved in the heady days of the student power movement; listening to a grandmother describe the significance of each piece of cloth in her fabric art for the new fairy tale ("this one is from my baby's first dress, this piece was part of my wedding outfit, this one came from my husband's *yukata*"). And I learned yet again: As women, we use the scraps and pieces of our lives to weave ever new, ever more beautiful works of art.

I do want to thank all the inspiring women in Japan who shared their stories with us. Although all our formal sessions were professionally interpreted, I apologize if, during our informal conversations, my elementary Japanese resulted in my misinterpreting what I was being told. I look forward to hearing about what these powerful, caring, and altogether savvy women continue to do as they work to create a new future in Japan.