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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.

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<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