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The 14-day study tour—my first visit to Japan—can be characterized as an educational, eye-opening, hectic, hard-working, friendly, cultural, fun, interesting, and scrumptious experience! Thanks to the Center for Global Partnership and the Japan Center for International Exchange, the entire trip was well-planned and organized. In all four cities we visited—Tokyo, Yokohama, Fukuoka, and Kanazawa—the Japanese people were most gracious and accommodating, the cities were clean and beautiful (especially Kanazawa in the snow), and the women were eager and ready for the Dialogue. The diverse backgrounds and interests of the participating Japanese women were impressive; the compatibility and comradery of the American delegation were a plus.

Some Observations

The Dialogue covered a large range of issues. While the six American women delegates will report on each of their respective professional areas, the following observations focus on human services. Throughout the tour, we discovered many similarities as well as differences between the Japanese and American women and between the two cultures.

Tax-exempt nonprofit social service systems as we know them in the United States are virtually nonexistent in Japan. The number of tax-exempt institutions approved by the Ministry of Finance is insignificant. The contribution commonly received by tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States is not a known phenomenon in Japan. Individuals do not have checking accounts from which they can conveniently send donations. There are a limited number of foundations because they, too, rarely are approved for tax-exempt status. These factors have a major impact on the development and growth of human and social service providers and the survival of NGOs in Japan.

Volunteerism as part of a long tradition of public altruism and contribution does not seem to be as common in Japan as in the United States. In Tokyo, we heard of only a few examples. However, volunteers seem to work well in small locales within their own communities. I was especially impressed with *Zenrinkan* (good neighbor house), an intergenerational facility in Kanazawa. Except for one paid

staff member, the facility is run by *minsei-iin* (institutional volunteers), who receive a token allowance of about US \$450 per year.

As in the United States, there are many “unsung heroines” who often work around the clock to meet the needs of their clients. This was especially true at the HELP Center, a women’s shelter in Tokyo, and Michaera House, a similar shelter in Yokohama staffed by Catholic nuns. Both shelters serve Japanese women as well as abused or troubled women from other countries, especially Thailand, the Philippines, and China.

With the United Nations’ push for the promotion of women’s issues, many Japanese women have become more keenly aware of the many issues confronting them. These include poverty, migration, gender equality, and their interrelatedness to jobs and economic development. Factors such as the decrease of children per married couple (1.53), longer life expectancy for women (80.08 years), and the antimarriage sentiment (54 percent of unmarried women surveyed by the government expressed a desire to stay single), have also affected Japanese women’s outlook and their decision making. One woman, for example, felt that young Japanese men and women who are the only children in their families, and therefore feel obligated to take care of their aging parents, would prefer to marry someone who is not an only child who may have a sibling who can eventually take care of his or her parents.

In spite of the passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1986, Japanese women are still experiencing inequality in the workplace. Many are hired “part-time” or choose to remain housewives. This has partially contributed to the phenomenon of “overmaternalism”—when women devote excessive time and attention to their children, especially their sons. Many women with whom we spoke were concerned that the new generation of young men would not know how to live independently and therefore will not be attractive to the new generation of women who are increasingly independent.

Throughout our trip, it was clear that the women’s movement in Japan is gaining momentum. Although they could probably learn from the more active national network model in the United States, there are a few strong local programs with dedicated volunteers. I was especially impressed with the Kanagawa Network Movement in Yokohama, where 2,500 registered members of a women’s political group promote candidates who, when elected, turn all salaries back to the group to further promote their cause.

One cannot speak of education in Japan without mentioning the “entrance examination,” a phenomenon that seems to have taken control over much of the daily energy and life of all children and parents alike. Obsession with the entrance examination has taken priority over family life, recreation, cultural activities, and family savings (tutors for the students are common.)

I feel that the Japanese are ahead of the United States in government-built and financed women’s centers. We were impressed by the Yokohama Women’s Forum

and the Fukuoka Women's Center (AMIKAS), where a range of women's and children's services and resources are provided for the residents of these communities. They also provide a forum for women's groups promoting the women's movement.

Recommendations

- The Japanese government should formally recognize NGOs and acknowledge their contributions to society. Tax exemption might be offered for private contributions to NGOs and community groups.
- The problems of illegal (and legal) aliens must be openly addressed by the government, with input from the NGOs now serving these populations.
- The concept of volunteerism can be promoted nationally with a program to get younger Japanese to buy into the concept.
- Childcare and care for the elderly can be better supported by programs that blend government resources and cultural sensitivity, e.g., government-supported programs that would hire relatives suggested by the elderly themselves. Adult children will not have to leave their jobs and the elderly would feel that they are being taken care of by their families.

Final Comments

This Dialogue has eliminated many of the myths we, the US women, held of the Japanese women and vice-versa. I felt a sense of closeness with the Japanese women, a feeling that grew as we met and talked to more and more women as we continued our tour. Being the only Asian woman on the US delegation and feeling so comfortable with the culture, I sometime forgot that I was from the "visiting delegation." This, of course, was reinforced when often I was mistaken for a local Japanese by participating Japanese women and people in the streets! I value this exchange and feel that in some small ways our delegation has helped bring the two countries closer together. I look forward to continuing this Dialogue when the Japanese delegation travels to the USA in June.