

# “Perspectives of Working Women in Japan”

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## Perspectives of Working Women in Japan<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Pragmatic and academic issues related to working women, defined in the broadest sense, are diverse and vary according to the perspective from which they are considered. Here views and facts directly and indirectly related to working women in Japan obtained from published sources and interviews are identified with respect to individual and institutional goals such as corporate prosperity, national development, betterment of women's lives, and maintenance of the household and societal health. Changes in the aspirations and expectations of women, the bewilderment and discomfort these changes elicit, and the ensuing social turmoil represents a contemporary societal transformation.

### Introduction

Japan, with its oriental value system, feudal institutions, limited space and lack of natural resources adopted capitalism as the economic paradigm for modernization in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite the country's defeat in World War II, Japan was able to rebuild and emerge as an economic giant thanks to the creativity and toil of the nation's men and women. The economic doldrums and dramatic societal changes that Japan is now facing are contemporary challenges in a country where societal adjustment is the norm rather than the exception.

One area of rapid change confronting the nation is the role of women in society. In a country with a long history of male domination, issues related to women in general and working women in particular, until recently, attracted little attention. The subordinate position of women in all ranks and all walks of life was accepted throughout society by both sexes. Obedient, subservient behaviour on the part of women was considered a social virtue. In recent years, however, such images as a woman walking three steps behind her husband and the "office flower" serving tea to her male co-workers have largely lost their acceptability. Changes in the aspirations and expectations of women, the bewilderment and discomfort these changes elicit, and the ensuing social turmoil represent a contemporary societal transformation in which the role of co-ordinated flexibility in the societal and institutional setting can be appreciated.

Japanese society has experienced dramatic transformations over the centuries. These include the agricultural revolution, the emergence of the manor system and the feudal regime, the opening of Japan to the west after nearly 300 years of isolation, the involvement of the country in World War II and its ensuing defeat and rebirth, and the recent collapse of the economic "bubble." Like these earlier transformations, the repositioning of working women in today's society is fraught with conflicting views and visions held not only by those involved in the transformations but also by those who retrospectively examine them and contemplate future directions.

With respect to the issue of working women in Japan, there are conflicting perspectives even as to an acceptable definition of "working women". In general, after finishing school, all able-bodied individuals, male and female, work. Traditionally, men have been responsible for paid labour outside the home while women have been deployed in the performance of unpaid domestic tasks. Women engaged in unpaid domestic work, often called "housework" and extending to include care of children and the elderly, statistically are seldom considered to be "working women".

Ironically, today many women seeking outside employment find themselves acting as caregivers for the young and the elderly; in other words, performing for others in exchange for

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pay, tasks almost identical to those they would be expected to perform at home without remuneration. As the French Marxist feminist Delphy (1984, p.16) points out, the exclusion of domestic labour from the market is the cause of its being unpaid, not the result. The traditional distinction between “working women” and “non-working women”, therefore, has to do neither with the nature of the work itself, nor with the location in which it is performed, but only with whether or not the labour performed falls within the market economy.

As this exploration of working women in Japan address itself to societal well-being, I have adopted a holistic definition of “working women” despite the fact that pursuing of such an approach may be inconvenient as most of the literature and compiled statistics employ the narrower definition of “working women” as women in the paid labour force. In this paper, the term “working women” encompasses women in the paid labour force as well as women working without remuneration to maintain the household and the well-being of the family. This view of women as productive, vital members of society, whether or not they are paid for their labour, is a realistic reflection of their importance (Waring, 1988 & 1996, Ueno, 1985).

Pragmatic and academic issues related to working women thus defined are diverse and vary according to the perspective from which they are examined. In this paper, a variety of perspectives associated with working women in Japan with respect to individual and institutional goals such as corporate prosperity, national development, the betterment of women’s lives, and the maintenance of the household and societal health are identified.

Sources upon which I have drawn include the literature and statistical sources listed in the bibliography, findings from my previous Japanese management studies (prior to 1992, published under the name Hiroshi Tanaka) and my familiarity with the culture having lived and worked in Japan.

## Corporate Prosperity

In Japan, as in other countries, industrialization was actualized through a committed female as well as male labour force. The reliance of corporations on female workers, for example in the development of the textile (Tsurumi 1984 & 1990) and coal mining (Mathias, 1993) industries, has been well documented. In the absence of conscripted male workers, women comprised the primary labour force for the production of armaments during World War II.

After the war ended, according to a government decree of December 1945, female workers were forced to surrender their jobs to the returning soldiers and retreat into the home (Oba, 1988, p. 24). In the effort to rebuild Japan after the war, corporations strove to develop as strong economic units competitive on both the domestic and international fronts. As this effort took off, especially in the manufacturing sector, corporations turned to women to fill the gap in a labour supply that was hard pressed to keep up with the demands of the rapidly expanding economy. Women continued to support a variety of economic activities requiring hard work and repetitive labour, including agriculture (farming, silk production), fisheries, and handicrafts, often for subsistence wages.

Major corporations formed *keiretsu* some of which had their origins in the much older family and or bank centred *zaibatsu* outlawed by the occupation forces. While the flagship corporations could afford to offer job security in return for employee commitment, smaller associated and/or affiliated member firms of *keiretsu* as well as smaller establishments sought a flexible labour force that could be employed at peak periods and laid off when they were not needed. In an economic milieu where lifetime employment and a seniority based salary and promotion system for men were the norm, women who excelled in manual dexterity and perseverance and were willing to be engaged in part-time employment were an ideal labour source (Owaki, 1998). These women, however, were excluded from the bargaining unit and corporations formulated inequitable pay structures that were then applied to full-time female workers as well. These employment practices helped to minimize labour costs. Low wages helped offset high energy costs in a country where more than 85% of energy resources are imported.

A clear division of labour with women assuming complete responsibility for work within home and men working outside was advantageous to corporations. With women capably managing all aspects of the household, corporations could and did extend the hours of work for men who could confidently give their undivided time and attention to the company. Corporations sought for the maximum use of corporate resources including employees. Typically, the Japanese workday starts early, often after a long commute, and continues to the late evening. It is only recently that the 5-day work week has gained a foothold.

The general pattern for female employees in postwar Japan was to enter the full-time labour force on completion of school, leave at marriage or the birth of the first child, and return, usually as part-time workers, when child rearing responsibilities lessened when the youngest child entered school. This pronounced M shape pattern of female employment continues today, in contrast with Western industrialized nations where the female employment pattern more closely resembles an inverted U (Figure 1).

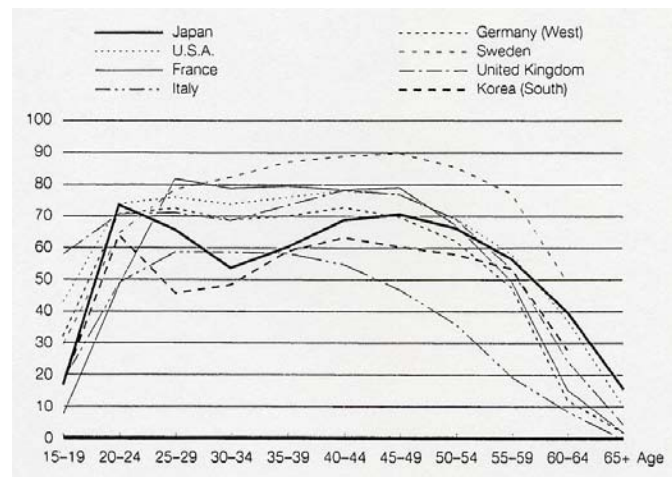


Fig. 1. Age-specific female labour force participation rates in selected countries

Note: Figures are for 1995 in Japan, 1993 in UK, and 1994 in all other countries. Source: Ochiai 1997, p. 15.

Interviews with personnel managers of 50 major Japanese corporations in the late 1970s revealed that the tendency of women to leave the workforce for several years upon marriage or childbirth was the immediate primary excuse for failure on the part of corporations to provide opportunities for women to advance up the ranks of the corporate ladder. Corporations have failed to provide equity in job training, promotion, salary, etc. arguing that female employees leave the company after a few years of full-time employment (Tanaka, 1980). Corporations also argue that the familiar responsibilities of women render them relatively immobile, making it impossible to assign them to career track positions requiring relocation either domestically or internationally (Tanaka, 1985).

Another argument put forth against the placement of women in career track positions is that they do not have the appropriate educational background to warrant their placement in senior positions.

For some years now, however, the education level of women has been on the rise and major corporations as well as foreign corporations operating in Japan have begun to recognize the value of the underused female segment of the workforce. Whether improvement in job opportunities for women will open up in all fields or not remains to be seen. In 1990, a Ministry of Labour

survey confirmed that 50% of firms limited recruitment for technical-related jobs to men while one quarter made no attempt to recruit female graduates for administrative or sales jobs (Japan Ministry of Labour 1990, p. 4).

Statistics suggest, however, that the higher the level of education, the more likely a woman is to withdraw from the paid workforce during the child rearing years. The professional wife and mother is highly regarded in Japan. Generally women who can assume this role are of a higher than average social class. That the wife can remain at home full-time lends a certain status to the family, particularly to the husband (Hendry 1993, pp. 239-240).

The flexibility that the female labour pool has enabled corporations to enjoy has at the same time created inflexibility for women in the employment arena limiting them to "fill in" seasonal and/or fluctuating positions with minimal advancement possibilities. Of those women who remain with the corporation in full time employment only a handful advance to senior managerial positions. In 2002, only 2.4% of directors (heads of groups comprised of more than 20 employees or more than two departments) were female (Japan Ministry of Health Labour & Welfare 2003).

### **Betterment of Women's Lives**

The economic security of the woman performing unpaid labour within the household depends on three conditions: her husband does not die, he does not lose his job, and they do not divorce. With the current life expectancy of Japanese males, widowhood before the husband's retirement is unlikely.

The second and third conditions, however, are much less stable. With rationalization of Japanese corporations full-time employment is eroding, threatening the security of the single income family. A 1998 survey of major corporations revealed that only 79 % believed that they would be able to retain their current full-time employees until retirement age, down from 88% in 1985 (Chunichi Shinbun, 1998).

Divorce is on the increase. While still low compared with other nations (higher only than Italy and France and below that of Germany, Sweden, the UK, and the USA), the divorce rate has risen from 1.28 in 1990 to 2.30 in 2002 (Japan Ministry of Health Labour & Welfare 2003). These realities are the backdrop against which contemporary married women are seeking meaningful employment outside the home. For the younger generation, working outside the household provides a degree of freedom and financial independence. Almost 44% of single women give as their reason for delaying marriage either that they feel they can enjoy a fulfilling life without marrying or that they can earn their own living (Nipponia, 1999, p. 11).

While most women do eventually marry, the average age at first marriage has risen from 23.0 in 1950 to 27.2 in 2001 (Japan Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, 2003). Child rearing in Japan is highly regarded. As the popular wisdom says "the soul of the three-year-old lasts till a hundred." Children's behaviour and success are believed to be determined largely through the treatment they receive during the early stages of development. Although nurseries are available, these facilities serve families unable to live on a single income. For those who can afford the luxury, the best caregiver for the children is their mother.

This may be why nearly 60% of young unmarried women feel that when they marry the focus of their attention should be their husband and children rather than themselves according to a 1998 government survey. Eighty-five percent feel that it is alright for married women to work outside the home, but they must still be responsible for household and child rearing duties (Japan Ministry of Labour 1998, pp. 47-49). The sharp division of roles by sex, nurtured over time, is supported not only by men but by women themselves. Attitudes are beginning to change though. In the past, majority of female employees were unmarried, 55% in 1962, for example. By 1997, however, the majority, almost 58%, were married. As divorcees and widows are included in to the "married" category, the figure rises to 67%. Men's attitudes are changing as well. Since 1967, love marriages have outnumbered arranged marriages at a growing rate (Nipponia 1999, p.10) and younger men are becoming more willing to participate in household and child rearing responsibilities, and less willing to devote their entire time to the company.

Perhaps because of the limited opportunities and workplace constraints a few women take the initiative and strike out into independent entrepreneurial ventures. In 1998, some 59,000 women ran their own businesses. Seventy-six percent of these women were married, widowed or divorced and 62% of these 76% had one or more children. Most of these businesses were within the service industry and employ an average of 40 people each (Japan Ministry of Labour 1998, pp. 95-99). Such entrepreneurial activity provides women with an avenue through which they actualize their capabilities in their chosen fields without gender or age limitations.

One of the obstacles for women to work outside the home has been the necessity of being physically at the workplace. The emergence of telework – working outside the office using telecommunication and information networks – is reducing that necessity. Many teleworkers have made the decision to work from home and have sought out companies wishing to outsource work possibly with the help of SOHO (Small Office/Home Office) Japan, a voluntary association formed in 1997 to facilitate the development of an alternative avenue of work (Focus Japan 1997, p. 3). Piecework (the manufacturing, assembly or finishing of goods at home rather than in a workshop or factory) traditionally carried out by “lower-class” wives has largely disappeared. The newly emerging, challenging techno – piecework is thought to provide educated women with both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

### **Maintenance of the Household (*Ie*)**

The *ie*, or household, is the basic unit of traditional social organization in Japan. A corporate body encompassing household property and often a family business, the *ie* has ensured the continuation of the family line and family business over successive generations.

The *ie* differs from the purely patrilineal Chinese *jia* in that in the absence of a son the headship may be inherited by a male adopted into a family for the express purpose of carrying on the family line. Unlike the traditional joint family system in China and India where all male children continue to live with the parents after the marriage, the *ie* is a stem family where only one male child continues to live with the parents after marriage. Other married children establish independent households.

In the Japanese *ie*, the relationships within the household group are considered to be of greater importance than all other relationships. Thus the “imported” wife and daughter-in-law are far more important than one’s own sisters and daughters who have left the *ie* to join other households upon marriage (Nakane, 1973, p. 5). The maintenance of the *ie* presupposes the addition to the family each successive generation of a daughter-in-law who assumes responsibility for the domestic tasks within the family, the production of an heir, education of the children, care of the aging parents, performance of daily and periodic Buddhist rituals to honour the ancestors, and often a role in the age-old family business. Another important responsibility of the wife/daughter-in-law is the financial management of the household the dispersal of the household income lies almost completely within her control.

The *ie* can be considered as an economic and corporate unit with various positions that have to be filled (Bachnik, 1983). Even now when the *ie* is said to be in decline, elite internationally-minded business families still rely on variety of marriage strategies to fill the main positions in their *ie* (Hamabata, 1990). Since 1950, the birth-rate in Japan has been in decline placing the future of the *ie* in jeopardy (Ueno, 1990). When it reached two children per family, one in four families (the two girl family) would have been in danger of dying out each generation if the *ie* had been strictly patrilineal (Tsubouchi, 1992). In all girl families marriage may be delayed for the eldest daughter until a partner can be found who is willing to relinquish his name and be adopted into her family.

Today, as three out of four men are eldest sons with obligations of their own, this is not an easy task. In other words, younger or “spare” sons are few and far between and those who are available are perceived as highly eligible marriage partners by women who seek a more independent lifestyle than marriage into a traditional *ie* would allow.

While a perceived cause of the demise of the *ie* is the hesitation of women to take on the role of daughter-in-law in a traditional family system, the root cause is the declining birthrate. For years, the government has attempted to manipulate the birthrate to serve national goals.

## National Development

As in other nations, the government of Japan is concerned with demographic transition. Today, Japan's population is 127 million, a 297 % increase over 32 million at the beginning of the Meiji era (1868). Prior to 1868 it had taken 300 years for the population to realize a 75% increase. During the Meiji and Taisho periods (1868-1926) the government actively encouraged population growth through a rising birth-rate according to policies for national development. A popular slogan of that period was *fukoku kyohei* or "a strong nation with a strong army" which presupposes a growing number of young healthy males.

The birth-rate reached its peak around 1920 and has been declining or remaining stable since then with the exception of a three year postwar baby boom from 1947 to 1949 when men returned from the war and couples waiting to have children were finally able to do so. It's interesting that the government's policy during World War II summed up by the slogan *umeyo fuyaseyo* ("Have children! Boost the population!") did not result in a significant rise in birthrate.

The birth-rate remained stable from the early 1950s to the mid-70s; to have two or three children were the norm that's why married women as a rule did not work out of home and family business. A declining infant mortality rate and increased life expectancy resulted in a rapidly growing population despite the stable birth-rate. By 2001, the birth-rate had dropped to 1.33 (Japan Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, 2003). This is far below the 2.08 replacement level required to maintain a stable population (Ochiai, 1997, p. 51).

The low birth-rate is tipping the scale to an aging population. The government shares industry's concerns regarding a shrinking labour supply as well as a diminishing number of consumers to absorb the economic output and stimulate corporate investment, not to mention the pressures on the old age pension system. That there will be a growing labour shortage well into the next century seems unavoidable. Predictions vary, but by 2020 the shortfall is expected to be somewhere between 7 and 18 million people (Oobuchi, 1992, p. 478). Japan has faced a similar problem in the recent past. During the rapid economic expansion of the 1960s, the nation faced a skilled labour shortage in the manufacturing sector. The primary solution for larger corporations was robotization. The introduction of computer controlled Flexible Manufacturing Systems reduced labour requirements by 50% (Tanaka, 1986).

For the time being, however, with the unemployment rate having climbed to an unprecedented 5.4% in 2002, job shortages especially for youth seem to be a greater concern than the shrinking labour pool. A government survey found that 80% of all university students in their final year had found jobs by December 1<sup>st</sup> 1998, down 4.5% from the previous year. The situation was worse for young women. Less than 60% had secured employment guarantees by December, compared with 74% in 1997 (The Canada Japan Trade Council Newsletter 1999, p. 6).

While well-educated youth are having difficulty finding employment, skilled manual labour is in short supply. In recent years Japan, a country long closed to immigration, has opened its doors a crack to foreigners of Japanese descent and migrant workers from a number of countries to fill blue collar jobs. In the mid-nineties, there were 1.5 million foreign residents in Japan, engaged in study, teaching, entertainment, etc. Out of 213,000 foreign residents who are employed as skilled workers in factories, 80% were from Asia (Japan Nyukan Kyokai, 1999). The coming labour shortage, however, is likely to be felt most strongly in the service sector, predicted to be the fastest growing sector of the economy in the coming decades, where communication barriers make the use of foreign labour particularly difficult.

The Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry are looking to women to help fill the skilled labour shortage. As far back as the early 1980s major electronic firms began recruiting female university graduates and training them as software engineers in order to combat the acute shortage of skilled labour in information technology (Lam, 1993). At the

same time, the Ministry of Health and Welfare is relying on women to be the primary home care providers for the aged. How can women satisfy both of these expectations in the workplace outside and inside the home?

While arguments can be made to support the view that continued economic growth supported by an expanding population is necessary to maintain the current standard of living, it is also possible to endorse the view that what is needed is a national vision that would emphasize improved quality of life through structural adjustment built around the current declining birthrate. With a population density of 337 people per square kilometre, among the highest in the industrialized world, it can be argued that perhaps the country has reached the limit of its ecological carrying capacity. The current population shortage at the lower end of the scale is creating problems and pain today, but in the long run the declining birth-rate will result in a corresponding drop in total population, providing an excellent opportunity for Japan to reposition itself towards the future.

## Societal Health

Among many issues that fall within the broad topic of societal health there are two ones in particular related to working women. The first is the equal employment opportunity with regard to gender and the second is the care of the elderly.

Despite the significant societal contribution of women over the centuries, women have been treated unequally in the social, political, and economic arenas in Japan. Such treatment stems from a deep rooted collective view of women as subordinate beings, and the corresponding sharp division of roles by sex, nurtured over time (Inoue, 1967). I have alluded to the issue of gender inequality on the home front and the overburdening of women with domestic responsibility.

On the societal level, the government has tried to address the problem of gender inequality in the workplace through legislation. The 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law attempted to reduce the tendency to employ women only in a variety of minor jobs supplementary to the major jobs performed by men. The passage of this law indicated a desire of the part of the government to bring Japan in line with other industrialized nations in its treatment of its female labour force, but the law lacked teeth and relied on voluntary corporate cooperation only.

In April 1999, revisions to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and to the Labour Standards Law came into effect in response to domestic pressure and in accordance with section 156 of the ILO agreement to which Japan became a signatory in 1995. With these revisions, every attempt at sexual discrimination by the employer is prohibited and compliance with the law is mandatory. Sexual discrimination is prohibited in applications for positions, hiring workers, job assignments, promotion, employee training, age of retirement, making workers change jobs, and dismissing them from employment (The Japan Economic Review 1999, p. 4).

Under the revisions, the penalty for failure to comply with the law is public disclosure of the name of the guilty corporate party, an effective deterrent in a culture where being singled out for any reason is undesirable. In a high context culture like Japan, formal confrontation is a last resort (Hall, 1977, H. Tanaka, 1985). Until the revisions, mediation could not be sought unless both sides applied. Now either side can instigate the process of labour dispute mediation. The strengthened legislation will go a long way towards assisting women who wish to find and retain meaningful employment out of home.

Ironically, it comes to a time when, more than ever, the services of women are needed to care for aged parents at home. As has been widely reported, Japan has a rapidly aging population.

By the year 2020, one in four Japanese will be 65 or older with a life expectancy in excess of the current 76.6 for men and 83 for women. In a country that has always revered its elders, the care of the older generation is of paramount concern.

Although their numbers are declining, in 1990, 65% of seniors in Japan lived with an offspring compared with less than 20% in major western countries (Figure 2). The Japanese government is promoting what has come to be known as its "gold plan", building seniors' residences and healthcare facilities. The elders, however, aspire to "dying on the tatami straw mat", and wish to remain at home. The government is responding through the development of home care services.



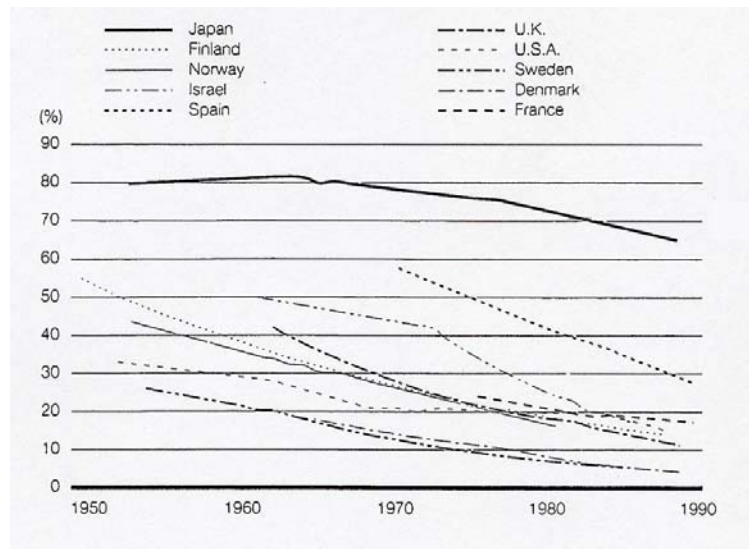


Fig. 2. Percentage of elderly people who co-reside with their children

Note: For each country, figures represent ratio of persons aged 60 years and over, with the following exceptions: Norway, 1953, and Sweden, 1954: persons aged 67 years and over. France, 1990: persons aged 60 years and over. Denmark, all years: persons aged 70 years and over. Source: Ochiai 1997, p. 201.

*Karoshi*, the Japanese term for death from overwork, is widely discussed in reference to company employees, mainly men, and there is a system of compensation for such deaths. For women working at home the possibility of *karoshi* looms ever larger. With the increasing life expectancy, the elders are living into their 80s and 90s and beyond while their caregivers may be well on in their 60s and 70s. According to a 1991 government survey, 58% of seniors in extended families were living with offspring 65 years or older (Higuchi, 1992, p. 493). Cases where the mother- or father- in- law outlives the daughter-in-law caregiver who dies of a stroke or heart attack or some other work-related cause are not uncommon (Ochiai, 1997, p. 224).

For the woman working at home, despite the fact that her husband may be enjoying his retirement years, the prospect of her own retirement is receding farther and farther into the distant future creating additional stress to the family and society at large.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have considered Japanese working women in the broadest sense of the term in order to illustrate the difficulty of achieving often conflicting interlinked individual, corporate, national, and societal goals. Actualization of a particular agenda intended to improve one dimension of a societal issue often leads to increased tension in other related dimensions. Historically Japan has shown its own distinctive rigid as well as flexible behaviour towards societal challenges. Whether or not Japan can find workable solutions to the contemporary challenges presented by the changing role of women in society depends on understanding of many perspectives from which the issue can be addressed and reconciling the diverse implications.

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