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**A Future for Japanese Women Managers?**

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Contrary to popular opinion and despite enormous obstacles, Japanese women have become successful managers in business, government, and education. Japanese women are among the best educated in the world, while at the same time they are the most flagrantly wasted national resource. While women provide over 49 percent of the workforce of Japan, they number only 8 percent of its managers, having increased from 6 percent a decade ago. They have been exploited as temporary, and therefore less expensive, labor, and cast out at marriageable age for a new, younger crop of female college graduates.

The fabled foundations of Japanese management--lifetime employment, the seniority system, and the bureaucratic, tightly knit nature of industrial policy--have served as barriers to women's entry into management in Japan. Institutionalized discrimination against women, while not necessarily written policy, is widespread and accepted. Examples include help-wanted ads specifying sex and age, and specific limits placed by companies on the percentage of women college graduates to be hired every April, zero percent for some companies in the latest round. Other practices, such as restricting women to staff positions, not including them in informal meetings or off-site training sessions, and limited transfers and travel, all serve to restrict their advancement. Attitudes that assign women to decorative and service roles serve as unwritten, but powerful, institutional practices.

A sizeable number of women have made it into management in spite of these barriers. I interviewed over 150 successful women managers while researching my book, *Gender, Economics and Power: The Evolution of Japanese Women Managers* (forthcoming), and found them in every industrial category. The Equal Opportunity Act of 1986, combined

with the bubble economy, provided increased opportunity for women who were ambitious and willing to work harder than men to become managers.

The public's perception is that women are managers only in "feminine" industries such as fashion, cosmetics, and retail businesses. But they can also be found in finance, manufacturing, construction, and transportation.

The call for Japan to become a 'normal' nation has been associated with security treaties and its own military defense. But as Ichiro Ozawa points out in his *Blueprint for a New Japan: The Rethinking of a Nation* (Kodansha, 1994), normal "begins with the autonomy of the individual and needs an accountable government as a member of the international community." Becoming a responsible member of the international community requires a re-examination of exclusive and isolationist management practices dominated by "old boy" networks.

To support an internationalist vision and a "normal nation," women often have language abilities and relationship skills ideally suited for international operations. Many Japanese officials at the United Nations are women, the most notable being Sadako Ogata, whose competency is universally admired. Women bring unique and needed new talents for both creativity and internationalization to the table.

An aspect of Japanese women's changing attitudes may be found in the nation's declining birthrate, now 1.4, which--combined with a rapidly aging population--presents important social challenges. Some analysts maintain that the declining birthrate is a function of a housing shortage, which could be remedied fairly easily. A different message from women is that they are no longer willing to shoulder total responsibility for family, children, and elder-care. Young men are also expressing a desire for a life outside of their careers.

The exodus of young Japanese women from Japanese corporations to start their own businesses or go to foreign companies and international organizations also gives an inkling of their changing attitudes. Senior male executives tend to interpret this as meaning women don't really want to work hard. An alternative explanation expressed by many women is the paucity of advancement possibilities for them in Japanese corporations.

This failure to provide advancement has also left some major corporations with a glut of women in their forties, top college graduates who were hired in their twenties for secretarial positions and expected to retire by 30 or 35. Many of these women have continued to work after 30 and after marriage, still limited to secretarial work even as their salaries continued to rise with seniority. Relieving companies of these "excess" women, as they are called, is such a delicate and onerous task it is often being delegated to expatriate male managers who are called home for this mission.

Will the desire for reform and the wish to become a "normal nation" be strong enough to encourage Japan to use women's creativity in the workplace? Japanese management is undergoing what seems like a sea change to many older Japanese, with lifetime employment, seniority and male prerogatives being threatened. The choices the nation will

make between evolution or retreat are not clear. A complete evolution is a long-term process requiring changes in societal attitudes, corporate culture, and management. Collaboration among corporations, the government, educational institutions, and women and men will be needed. Those with greater power have greater opportunities and responsibility for change.

Examples of changes possible immediately include making recruitment, promotion and job allocation processes more transparent. Women can also expand and use existing networks, such as consumer action groups, Leadership 111 (an exciting networking group of women leaders in different fields), and professional associations to make contacts, obtain credit, increase technical skills, and market themselves.

Educators could implement already recommended changes for remedying gender-biased education, and government could examine tax and employment policies and enforce rules prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender.

A recognition of the rewards of increased productivity for corporations, and of increased freedom for men in sharing income production and household management, will accelerate the evolution. I am hopeful that the positive forces unleashed, not only among women but a more widely shared vision of a better quality of life, will not allow Japan to retreat. My experience with Japanese women managers makes me believe that evolution toward increased use of their talents is the productive route for Japan.

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## **Role Narcissism and Suicide in Japan** **by Sheila K. Johnson**

On January 14, 1996, my local newspaper reported the death of a Mr. Shigeo Nishimura under the headline: *N-plant whistleblower kills self: Official had exposed cover-up of damage at nuclear reactor*. On March 15, 1996, the *New York Times* reported Takumi Ogawa, the Deputy Mayor of Kobe, had bought a can of kerosine and immolated himself. He had been placed in charge of the city's rebuilding after the January 1995, earthquake; the Mayor of Kobe commented that Mr. Ogawa "must have been very tired."

These are the kinds of stories that make the average American shake his head in amazement and conclude that he will never truly understand Japanese society. In the United States, almost every city of any size has a "Suicide Hot Line," which distraught individuals can call to talk to someone about their problems. There are psychiatrists and social workers to help them overcome their urges. But in the United States, as in Europe,

most people who kill themselves do so for private emotional reasons--love affairs or marriages gone bad, loneliness, feelings of worthlessness, old age or severe illness. To be sure, these are also the reasons for some Japanese suicides.

But there are other people--in both the U.S. and Japan--who kill themselves not because they feel isolated but because they are too deeply embedded in their social roles. The suicide of President Clinton's friend, Vincent Foster, so baffled many Americans that they preferred to believe he was murdered. But I suspect his suicide didn't surprise Japanese. Foster, a White House lawyer trying to help contain allegations of scandal against the President, felt personally responsible for his inability to be more effective. If he also felt the President was culpable in some way, he may have been doubly torn between his desires to tell the truth and to protect his friend.

Most Americans would say he took himself too "seriously." They would expect a mature individual to stand back from the dilemma, and to act dispassionately. But Americans, with a few, exceptions, do not identify with their jobs as deeply as do many Japanese. Americans expect to hold several jobs during their lifetimes. As corporations "downsize," even highly placed managers find themselves expendable to companies to which they have devoted large portions of their lives, energies, and enthusiasm. The protagonist of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willie Loman, has become the archetype of the common man discarded by society through no fault of his own.

Even so, Americans remain devoted enough to their jobs to want to do them well, and to be troubled and morally outraged when they see things go wrong. Some years ago an American manager for Honda in great despair and described illegal practices--kickbacks from dealers, gifts, payoffs--that he had tried to bring to the attention of managers in Tokyo. They ignored his warnings, and ultimately he and others went to the prosecutors who indicted--and convicted--many of his colleagues. I do not think his decision to "go public" was easy for him. But he certainly didn't turn around and commit suicide afterward, as a form of apology to Honda.

George DeVos, one of my teachers in anthropology, has written about what he calls "role narcissism" in Japan--"an intense identification of one's total self with one's professional or social role." The phenomenon, says DeVos, leads "in a socially positive way to careers involving long-range endurance of hardships and to lives of seemingly selfless dedication and loyalty of both men and women." But "in the negative sense, such rigid dedication leads to an inability to regroup one's psychic forces should the role to which one has given such priority of meaning in life be compromised."

Mr. Nishimura did a brave and good thing by any society's standard to expose the doctoring of the videotape that showed the damage to the Monju reactor, and the attempted cover-up that followed. But in doing so he broke ranks with his fellow workers and the company that had nurtured him. He may have felt that life afterward would be unbearable--that he would be an outcast among his former friends and colleagues. And he could not see beyond that, to the notion that others in Japan might honor him for his devotion to the higher civic cause of nuclear safety.

Mr. Ogawa undoubtedly threw himself, body and soul, into the massive problems of rebuilding Kobe after the earthquake. Perhaps there were too many people complaining to him every day that things were not being done fast enough, or well enough, and he saw it all as his personal responsibility and failure. If it was a pity that Vincent Foster didn't simply quit the White House and go home to Little Rock, it is equally a pity that Mr. Ogawa (at age 64) did not turn his task over to a younger deputy and retire.

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