

# Decision Making of the Japanese Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Viewpoint from Intercultural Communications in the Borderless Era

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## I. Introduction

In recent times, it is easy to question the malfunctions of our government, what with the almost daily revelations of yet another misappropriation of public funds or abuse of official authority for personal gain, and then let the matters pass as if they were of no consequence. It is so common an occurrence that most of us feel no shock and take it as a natural thing. We tend to treat such an event as we would when someone breaks wind (*onara*) noticeably in a gathering of polite company, causing momentary embarrassment but being quickly dismissed and forgotten after the murmured “*Gomen nasai! Moshiwake arimasen.*” (“Pardon me. I have no excuse for it.”).

Why should law-abiding citizens of Japan feel so callous toward such immoral conduct and contemptuous treatment of public trust? Are we all men and women who are so personally inept and powerless that we cannot stand up to such abuse? Will we never be able to realize the meaning of the word commonly used throughout the rest of the civilized world, “empowerment”?

Taking the viewpoint of adult women of modern Japanese society, it is certainly tempting to place the blame for this foulness in our midst to the men of our society. This is easily done since, as the statistics later cited show, government in Japan is necessarily male dominated and it is almost certain that a man will be the perpetrator of the illegal act. And again it will be a man or men who were in a position to have prevented the crime or who covered the matter up by delaying its discovery or who controlled a further delayed and ineffectual punishment.

Yet we women cannot escape our share of the blame so easily. After all, we comprise half the population and yet we allow ourselves to be under-represented in most facets of our society. Japanese women have been empowered to elect a more honest and representative government for more than half a century, yet we willingly

perpetuate the political status quo from a time before that enfranchisement. For some reason, we consciously avoid entering into positions of power and decision making where our moral, upright representatives and officials could make a better society.

## II. Objective

One of the things that Japanese women in this 21<sup>st</sup> century must work toward conscientiously is to make a special effort to join in and represent the general views of women in the decision making processes. We need to be active and responsible participants within all facets of society from personal family affairs up to the national Diet and government offices.

Under the influence of Confucian teaching as applied in Japan, it is felt that the traditional role of women is to support men and family in domestic chores and daily activities. Yet as more women every year receive higher education, it is time now that Japanese women should be actively aware and practice their roles as leaders of various professions and vocations where their special talents are needed. It is the objective of this paper to discuss a few points of importance that women should consider for developing their own potential and to become better able to represent themselves in decision making positions and venues in our society.

## III. Elements of Awareness

Thinking of the term “decision making”, it may be helpful to look at what is involved in a “decision”. The Meriam Webster Dictionary defines “decision” as being a determination arrived at after consideration.<sup>1</sup> This indicates there is a rational thinking process undertaken before the final choice is made. It might be suggested then that the “consideration” part may consist of the following three items:

### 1. Critical judgments

Perhaps the first challenge for women will be to sharpen our awareness and start looking at things with a more critical eye. What is meant here is that we have to look with a sense of evaluating the significance of events and actions toward bettering our society, not just shrugging our shoulders and thinking “*Shikata ga nai.*” (“Nothing can be done.”). When we see something foul or unfair, we need to honestly attempt to get the matter corrected and prevent such from happening again.

Therefore, we want to look at what is crucial or critical to affecting the future of our society. These will be social, political or economic judgments that are made by representatives of large groups of people and from positions of leadership.

From a historical viewpoint, Japanese, along with peoples of other Confucian countries such as China or Korea, have formed a vertical society, and the significant decisions in every aspect of life (except personal level) were made by the man at the very top of the relevant hierarchy, the head of the family, chief of a business unit, or local political headman. This vertical society has shunned women participating in decision making since the accepted pattern for women was to engage themselves in child bearing and raising and other domestic operations, certainly not leadership roles. Such societal arrangement became established orthodoxy which women themselves perpetuated in the training of their children. To be sure, women have made decisions in such capacities, but most of such are menial and of very limited effect, not of the significant societal-steering nature where more than minimal logical thinking is required and where lives and economies affected are more than personal.

## **2. Rationale versus emotional judgments**

In everyday life it has been noted that Japanese decision making is more emotion and reaction based rather than rationale or objective based. Perhaps this is a consequence of our historical experience as a feudalistic society where there were dire consequences when one made a decision that displeased his or her superior. We have some anxiety about how our pronouncements will be received by the listeners or receivers, and until a positive response can be noted we are on edge. Also we are concerned about the harmony within the group and thus tend to avoid decisions that may stir up ill feelings, even though there may be solid reasons for such a decision.

If we were able to disregard the emotional and disharmony factors, or at least give them lower priority, then problem solution should be pretty much a matter of logical, rational reasoning. Women need training somewhere in their education in logic and scientific method so that they can utilize analytical and rational thought processes in evaluating problems and formulating solid, well thought-out solutions.

## **3. Intercultural context of decision making**

The events of the closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first year of this new 21<sup>st</sup> century have made us aware of the accelerated pace at which international exchanges are taking place in every aspect (social, economical, educational, etc.) of our

lives. This cultural interweaving and the exchanges will be more and more evident particularly in the area of international business as well as political exchanges. In what we call a "borderless society", we will become more integrated into larger regional blocks than before in the political and economic sense. In the future we are going to have to make use of ever wider networks of communication through IT (information technology), and we need to become more aware of what is occurring in the foreign countries around us than ever before.

In this respect we must be mindful of the international and intercultural effects of the decisions made within our nation, even if the intent of such a decision is only for domestic purposes. Increasingly the social or economic activity of one event will create waves of effect that will be felt and observed beyond our borders. We need to be more aware of these consequences.

#### IV. Two Proposals

If we are indeed looking toward more significant roles for women in our Japanese society, we need to do more than just make Japanese women aware of their own responsibilities at local and national levels of decision making. In that regard there are two areas of enhancement that might be suggested as being particularly helpful. One is training in logical thinking which is basic to good decision making processes as mentioned above, and the other is developing the ability to debate contending issues effectively.

As the parents and advisors of our youth, we should insist that our children be educated from early childhood in more systematic, logical reasoning processes so that they can come to conclusions or decisions independently by the process of syllogism rather than decisions based upon emotion, personal opinion, or group pressure. Even in early, pre-school situations a child can be guided in this by a mother taking time to explain how her own decisions are based on solid reasons, not just "Because I said so." Also when the child takes a particular action, he or she should be trained to provide solid reasoning to support such behavior. Of course, instruction and training in logic and rational thought processes can be integrated into almost any formal educational programs.

Regarding the second suggestion, debating ability, this would probably be best done in special classes designed for extensive training in public speaking skills. Not only women but also men lack expertise in this area. Probably from our historical background, the Japanese have been taught not to argue. To argue against or to

object to the other party's view, especially that of a superior or elder person, has been considered impertinent or not appropriate in various phases of life. Yet in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is felt that it is time for Japanese women especially to be more aware of the value of their own opinions and to have better understanding of how to influence decisions not through emotional exchanges, but by means of logic-based debating ability which can persuade the listener.

## V. Japan's Relative Standing Internationally

For purposes of our discussion, it might be helpful at this point to look at the present relative status of women in Japan by use of two internationally recognized indices developed for United Nations Development Plan programs related to the status of people throughout the world. From these perhaps we can get a better picture of where we are and where we can go. From the intercultural perspectives the Japan's relative status in comparison with other nations will be shown below. One of these is called the HDI and the other is referred to as the GEM.

The HDI, Human Development Index, focuses on the expansion of the human ability. That is, HDI reveals the extent of achievement of people in basic human ability. Factors in determining this are (1) the quality of healthy life and longevity, (2) literacy or educational attainment, and (3) the living standard of the people of the subject country. So in actuality, HDI is measured by average life expectancy and average national educational standard (that is the literacy rate and education levels of adults) as well as national per capita income. In this regard, HDI reports Japan as ranking number 4 (among the 174 nations listed) in 1999. Japan attained a statistical rate in the HDI of 0.924 (where 1.0 is maximum attainable). From this it is apparent that Japanese people fortunately enjoy a very high level of quality of life as a whole.

The GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure) Index, on the other hand, focuses on the extent to which women are able to enjoy various opportunities in life. It is a measure of how much women can actively participate in the area of economic and political life and join in decision making. The GEM is derived from the following three factors; (1) women's income, (2) rate of women holding positions in professional and technical level jobs, and (3) the rate of women occupying administration and executives positions or seats in the national legislature. Considering these factors, in 1999 Japan achieved a ranking of 38<sup>th</sup> among the 102 nations registered in the United Nations, with its statistical rate at 0.494.<sup>2</sup> In the report for the year

2000 AD, the GEM Index showed Japan dropping further down to 41<sup>st</sup> place among 70 nations in this ranking.<sup>3</sup>

Why is it that Japan enjoys among the best standard of living in the world (as indicated by the HDI) and yet we are ranked down near the middle and dropping (as indicated the GEMI) in the extent of our achievement of women's potential? Detailed analysis of the rating factors may be necessary for a precise answer, but it is fairly easy to see some of the contributing reasons from the following example.

In the last election for the House of Representatives in Japan in the year 2000, 35 women were voted into the seats out of the total of 480 seats. This is the second highest number of women elected in history -- the highest being way back in 1946 when women gained the voting rights for the first time. And yet proportion of women occupying seats against the entire number is only 7.3%. As far as the world international ranking goes, Japan stands at 106<sup>th</sup> among 164 countries as to the percentage of women national legislators. Among the G8 countries, it holds the lowest in ranking.<sup>4</sup> And in the current Koizumi cabinet the fact that we have five women in it is rather remarkable phenomenon in history.

It is important therefore for Japanese women to be closely aware of daily happenings and news in the international setting and global news level, and form their own opinion and awareness of the people of the different ethnic, historical, religious, socio-economic backgrounds. In turn they should reflect this advanced awareness by either voting for other women or running for political seats themselves in order to reflect their viewpoints as seen in other countries, such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Those Scandinavian countries occupy the top ranking of both HDI and GEM almost every year according to the UN reports. Thus it is the author's strong recommendation that Japanese women be consciously aware of their role and responsibility to actively support and participate in the decision-making centers of our society.

According to Kazuyo Yamamoto<sup>5</sup>, the educational system in Japan was such that pre-1945 women and men were separated in the educational system. After elementary school women usually went on to the so-called "Jo Gakko" (Girls' School) and then to a "*senmon gakko*" for vocational or professional school, while men went on to junior high school, senior high school and university levels. In 1947 university education in Japan was finally opened to women. In the year 2001, one out of two 18 years old high school graduates are going on to higher education, of which the greater part are women (the women enter 4-year university are 27.5% of all graduates from high school). In 1997 the rate of college graduates going on to graduate

school was 11.0% of the men and 5.6% of the women. In that same year, 1997, those completing junior high school who went on to high school were 96.0% of the boys and 97.8% of the girls.

With all these various indicators of the current state of things, it would seem that women must now acknowledge their own responsibility in perpetuating their lower status by clinging to the idea that somehow they are the weaker sex and that men are naturally superior. This is evident in examples from various aspects of Japanese culture. For instance in Japanese Tea Ceremony, it is thought that the first guest or main guest, called "*shokyaku*", ought to be a man rather than woman if there is a man in the group. In the Parent and Teacher Associations of most local schools, whose active memberships are composed of mostly women, it will almost always be a man who is appointed the President of the group. In schools themselves, the class representative in each grade will usually be a boy with a girl functioning as his vice representative. Traditionally, even the secondary school rosters for students in each class have been listed with boys' names first and girls' appearing in the latter half, and only recently have some schools adopted a mixed order in such rosters.

Therefore it may be said that among women themselves there has been a lack of awareness of their individualities. It is time for them to be responsible as an individual to have leadership not only in the domestic decision-making area, but outside the family situation in the community, in the workplace, or in the governmental offices and agencies. To do so it is felt that life-long education or post-school education for learning self esteem may be a key to learning self-awareness.

Many men may consider that the question or problem of gender is a women's problem, however it is of benefit to men as well to have women occupy and be active in the decision-making processes. As the world has more women attaining higher education and better business positions, there is a trend for the number of children being fewer every year, resulting in an aging society. In Japan, in which one out of four will be above age 65 in the year 2001, such has come into reality. Thus it is felt that partnership between the two genders is of utmost importance. We need to have equal relationship in sharing the domestic burdens as well as outside of the domestic decision-making process.

To site an example from the nearby Asian country of Korea, in January 2001 the government under the Kim Dae Jun cabinet established the new Ministry of Women and prescribed a quota system for women in their legislatures coupled with recruitment to encourage women candidates for legislative entry. Also they established a

new Center for Gender Bias Report. Perhaps even more so than Japan, Korea is very strong in adhering to the teachings and principles of Confucius teachings. They have had a patriarchal system and has been a male-centered society. Therefore Koreans, even though they had similar problems as Japan, are quickly moving ahead.<sup>6</sup>

The statistics of the United Nations Development Plan mentioned before have indicating Korea's standing as being low. The 1999 HDI showed Korea as being 30<sup>th</sup> in ranking with its HDI score being 0.852. Moreover Korea was below 50 in the GEM index, so it was not even listed.<sup>7</sup> Therefore you may say in 1999, Korea was in a worse situation than Japan, which was ranked 38<sup>th</sup>. This is undoubted the impetus to the above cited actions to increase women's status in society, and it will probably cause Korea to move rapidly up in future ratings.

## VI. Conclusion

These questions and problems about the advancement of women in our society have been addressed and are being looked at in various ways in our present society. Many universities are adopting gender studies, and programs to raise public awareness of gender issues are occasionally being initiated in some municipalities. Perhaps one of the more visible manifestation of this heightened awareness is the rash of newspaper and magazine articles recently featuring women in executive positions of business and industry. This is certainly positive, but the mere fact that these are considered to be newsworthy events highlights the oddity and rareness of such accomplishments. When we get to the point that these become so common place that they no longer merit news coverage, then we might be able to say we are closer to a gender-free society.

There is still work to be done. Perhaps we don't have to go to the extent of the complex legislations and governmental regulation established by the Affirmative Action programs of the United States, but we do need some governmental regulation to see that meaningful advancements are made and enforced. The practices of offices and agencies at all levels of government should also be altered to provide for means of establishing more equal representation by women on councils, committees and other organs where decisions affecting our society are made.

But no matter what official programs we might try, it still is up to women, individually and collectively, to show they want to move forward in these matters. As the Chinese proverb states, half of the people under heaven are women, and so we



have just as much responsibility as men to decide on all the significant aspects of our society. If we avoid this responsibility, then we should not complain when we are pushed into inferior positions. We all must be willing to actively participate and assert our opinions to make sure they are reflected in the decisions that are ultimately made.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 1993. Merriam-Webster, Inc. 299.
- 2 総理府男女共同参画室、1999. 男女共同参画社会の実現を目指して—男女共同参画社会基本法のあらまし—男女共同参画社会の形成の必要性、女性の政策方針決定過程への参画、人間開発に関する指標の国際比較、2.
- 3 名古屋市総務局職員部人事課 総務局総合調整部男女共同参画推進室、2001. 政策・方針決定過程への女性の参画拡大、日本の現状、9
- 4 藤枝滂子、桂谷子、2001. 「女性・ジェンダー」女性と政治、+2001. 朝日新聞社、495.
- 5 山本和代、2000. 「女性の人権—21世紀アジアの課題」女性のエンパワーメント—男女共同参画社会の確立を目指して—その2. 大学婦人協会、22-24.
- 6 キム、ジュンク・シル、2000. 「女性の人権—21世紀アジアの課題」女性のエンパワーメント男女共同参画社会の確立を目指して—その2. 大学婦人協会、20-22.
- 7 総理府男女共同参画室、1999. 男女共同参画社会の実現を目指して—男女共同参画社会基本法のあらまし、2.

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名古屋市総務局職員部人事課 総務局総合調整部男女共同参画推進室 2001 平成13年度 キーワードは“男女平等” 名古屋市