

I Always Smile

the self-value of young women in modern Japan

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Abstract: A global leader, Japan has nonetheless continued to present one of the highest gender gaps among the most developed nations. A brief examination is made of some of the cultural and ideological forces supporting such a gap, as well as some of the effects of gender inequality on women living within the society. Results of a simple survey completed by 67 female Japanese junior college students are analyzed. Students responded regarding feminine and masculine ideals, comparison of genders and their own sense of self-valuation. Specific consideration is given to the emphasis placed upon a woman's smile.

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We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask ...

-excerpt from *We Wear the Mask* by Paul Laurence Dunbar

With the third largest economy in the world, Japan is undoubtedly one of the global superpowers, a frontrunner in business and technology and a leader amongst the world's most developed nations. And yet, in many ways Japan remains an island unto itself, a paradox of progression alongside ancient strongholds that defy the push of modern society. When one considers the most alluring aspects of Japan, it is the beauty of traditions preserved from antiquity which spring to mind; a tea ceremony in immaculately tended

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gardens, silken kimonos, martial arts and the like. And when one visits Japan, it is the very ability to observe sites and customs seemingly held in time that draws many tourists. But for all the beauty of tradition, there are some prevailing mindsets which are not as charming.

The complexities of old paradigms failing to evolve when met with present realities can especially be observed in the landscape of gender roles. In the most recent Global Gender Gap Index, released annually by the World Economic Forum, Japan placed 110th out of 149 nations, the lowest of the Group of Seven major economies. The report seeks to assess the gaps between men and women within the realms of health, education, economy and politics.

For young women coming of age in Japan, what is their own sense of self-value within such a context?

Traditional Views on Women

To understand some of the traditional views on women in Japanese society, it is helpful to look at the influences of Confucianism and Buddhism. Confucianism emphasizes male dominance. As summed up in one teaching, “A woman is to obey her father as daughter, her husband as wife, and her son as aged mother.” Basic Buddhist teachings state that women cannot be perfectly enlightened and that salvation is not possible for women, or that it is only possible through devotion to a husband.

Acceptable roles for women in Japan are further typified by the ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* or “good wife, wise mother,” a phrase coined in 1875. *Ryōsai kenbo* promotes the mastery of domestic, moral and intellectual skills to raise sons for the sake of the nation. (“Good Wife, Wise Mother”, n.d.). Expected norms within the family structure are greater elucidated in considering terms used by husband and wife to indicate one another before others. A wife addresses her husband as *shujin* or “house master.” A husband calls his wife *kanai*: “one who remains inside the home.” (Kincaid 2019)

This reflects a very real and enduring dynamic of the Japanese household where housework is still principally regarded as women’s work, even when both men and women are engaged in work outside the home. In fact, men in Japan do fewer hours of household chores and child care than in any of the world’s wealthiest nations. (Rich 2019) “In 2007, Japanese men averaged only 30 minutes of housework, child care and elder care each day, regardless of how much the wife worked.” (Kincaid 2019)

Compared to other Asian nations which share Confucian beliefs and ideals of patriarchy such as China, India and South Korea, Japan showed a surprising trend toward overall daughter preference at the turn of the 21st century. The 12th Japanese National Fertility Survey (JNFS), conducted in 2002 by the Japanese National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, revealed a marked shift from son preference over the preceding decades.

“As with other East Asian nations, Japan has had a Confucius hierarchal social system that values the eldest son to maintain the family lineage and to take care of aged parents. Not surprisingly, son preference was the norm in Japan as well, but this has no longer been the case since late 1980s.” (Fuse 2013)

And yet, with one of the highest gender inequality gaps of the most developed nations, Japan’s workplace remains heavily male-dominated with disparities which leave many women employed in part-time and/or lower-wage work. With discriminatory societal norms continuing to dictate to women major discrepancies between male and female roles, what does the future hold for women in Japan? If it is true that the Japanese want more daughters, what kind of daughters are they expected to raise?

Gender Inequality and Discrimination

To examine the current gender conditions in Japan, consider the place of women in education, business and government. “The chance to pursue higher education helps women to achieve economic independence and is indicative of an equal access to education in general. Women educated at universities are more than able to fulfil leadership roles, be they managerial, educational or governmental. In the developed countries, more women tend to attend university programs than men (United Nations Statistics Division, 2011).” (Klingorová and Havlíček 2015)

Today, more than half of Japanese women are college or university graduates. And the difference between college enrollment ratios for male and female students has been shrinking every year. (Mishima, et al. 2018) “Still, Japan is one of only three industrialized countries that sends more men than women to university.” (Eiraku 2019)

The 4-year college enrollment ratio for males is 56.3%, 50.1% for females... That means the gender disparity in Japan is significantly worse compared with other member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where more female students than their male counterparts go to universities. Further, the graduate school enrollment ratio for

female students is one-third that for male students. (Mishima 2018)

A recent scandal at Tokyo Medical University – found to have given additional points to the test scores of male applicants to reduce the entrance of female applicants - only confirmed what for many was common knowledge, or at least suspected; namely that it was more difficult for a woman to gain entry than a man. And while the unfair practices of one university may have leaked to the public, undoubtedly similar biases have persisted in various educational and professional vistas throughout the country. A subsequent education ministry survey found “that in nearly 80 percent of 81 universities polled, the success rate of men was higher than that of women in entrance exams for their medical schools over the past six years.” (Shirakawa 2019)

As one female doctor currently employed in a private hospital in Tokyo explained, “I don’t want to show my understanding of such practices. But I’m also aware of the fact that many women struggle to juggle work and child-rearing, and leave the university hospital, which could result in a shortage of staff, and was the excuse by which Tokyo Medical University tried to justify the practice.”

It’s tough to continue pursuing a career in medicine once you have a child, especially in certain departments such as surgery where doctors are expected to work long hours and be on call around the clock regardless of what day it is, some female doctors said. [...]

Japan indeed lags far behind other countries when it comes to the ratio of female doctors. In 2015, the share of female doctors in Japan stood at 20.3 percent, the lowest among 34 countries according to data compiled by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development... The proportion of females was even lower in departments known for long working hours, such as in surgical departments at 7.8 percent and neurosurgery at 5.2 percent, according to a 2014 health ministry survey.

(Mizuho 2018)

The ideology that women are not as reliable or dependable as men because they are bound to have children and then leave the workforce, has impeded the progress of many women. And there is a correlating discrimination that goes on within many Japanese HR departments towards potential female candidates. In 2007, Japan’s Health, Labor and Welfare minister Hakuo Yanagisawa was famously quoted as describing women as “birth-giving machines.” Unfortunately, such an attitude succinctly quantifies the hiring bias faced by many women.

Yuko Ogasawara, professor of sociology at Tokyo's Nihon University, published her book *Office Ladies and Salaried Men* some twenty years ago. In it she detailed "the typical Japanese office space where women were supposed to handle clerical work and serve tea while men could climb up the executive ladder." While Ogasawara concedes "much has changed since then," she still notes that, "70 percent of women leave the work force after having their first baby." (Bauwens 2013)

A Necessary Shift

With a declining birthrate and aging population on the rise, Japan needs more workers to support its economy. As Bauwens highlights, from an economic standpoint Japan needs the female segment of its population as workers perhaps more than any other time. Yet the disparities and discrimination which have persisted in the workspace can at best discourage women from their highest potential, and at worst disqualify them altogether. Just as changes of necessity took place around WWII, so too must the current population decline force change if the economy is to remain stable.

Despite the troubling trends, Japan does seem to be making some progress in the right direction. The Ministry of International Affairs reported 74.3% of women between the ages of 15 and 64 were employed in 2017, the highest amount since the government began tracking numbers in 1968. But such data belies the fact that many women are not holding the more favorable jobs of their male counterparts. Many women remain in unstable, temporary and part-time positions. Moreover, their wages are about 27% lower than men.

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of female CEOs and management-level positions. Though the numbers are still highly unbalanced, progress is progress. And the numbers seem to at least be continuing in the right direction as society realizes not only the need, but the valuable contributions women make.

A recent study of more than 3,000 men and women (albeit not conducted in Japan) suggests that women may be more productive than men in the workplace, completing up to 10% more assigned work. Although the study also evidenced further echoes of gender disparity: "women are assigned and spend more time on non-promotable tasks than men. These non-promotable tasks are any activity that is beneficial to the organization, but does not contribute to career advancement. So basically, things men don't want to do are being handed to women." (Berman 2018)

Nicholas Kristof, a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for *The New York Times*, while speaking

on the oppression of women and girls worldwide, called it the “defining issue of the 21st century.” He went on to expound on the many benefits eradicating such injustice can have for a society.

Ending that oppression is an issue not only of justice but also of economic progress. Educating girls and empowering women to enter the labor market or run businesses - even on a small scale - makes a huge difference in a community’s economy. Empowered women may help lower poverty rates and diminish support for terrorism. Women are more likely to invest money or assets in their children or small business, and men are more likely to spend on instant gratification.

The disproportionately low number of women in management positions in the business world is similarly reflected in the Japanese government. In 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed “womenomics,” part of his larger plan of economics initiatives, with goals to “create a Japan in which women shine.” And yet, arguably the policies have done little to create real change, largely perhaps because they lack quotas that might translate to measurable improvement.

A report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking the percentage of female politicians holding seats in lower or single parliamentary chambers, echoed similar results to the Global Gender Gap Report. Japan placed 165th out of 193 countries.

The updated data for 2018, released just ahead of International Women’s Day on March 8, showed that only 47 of Japan’s 463 lawmakers, or 10.2 percent, were women, as of Jan. 1, 2019. That’s the lowest percentage among the Group of 20 nations and a seven place drop from the previous year, when the nation was also the lowest in the G20 for its percentage of female lower-house lawmakers. [...]

“It’s a real shame that Japan’s ranking is the lowest among the G20 countries,” said Atsuko Miwa, director of the Osaka-based Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center and co-chair of this year’s Civil 20, the group of civil society organizations that provides recommendations to G20 members. “I think that a major reason is that while more than 100 countries have introduced gender quotas (to raise the percentage of female lawmakers), Japan has not. Doing so would be one positive action to address the imbalance,” she said. (Johnston 2019)

The Value of a Woman

Being raised in this environment of inequality, what is a Japanese young woman’s sense of self-value? Does she recognize the disparity for what it is, as a flawed and oppressive

system outside of herself, or has she integrated the prevailing systems as normative?

A simple survey was presented to 67 female junior college students. The questionnaire first posed a series of statements with a sliding scale from 0 “strongly disagree” to 10 “strongly agree.” To the statement, “Men and women have equal value,” half of the women reported strong agreement. While this might initially seem positive, the stark reality is that half of the women fell somewhere below strongly agreeing they had equal value with males, and about 15% reported in disagreement. Because they were born female, these young women inherently felt their value was lower than males.

To a similar statement, “My opinions, thoughts, and feelings are as important as a man’s,” approximately 1/3 of the women gave strong agreement. And while most agreed somewhat, about 1/4 remained neutral and about six percent disagreed.

Over a quarter of the women agreed that “a woman’s value is largely based on her outward physical appearance.” And when asked, “Which is more important, what a woman looks like physically or her inward character?” about 45% voted in favor of inward character, but another 45% reported they are both “equally important.” The remaining 10% sided on physical appearance.

But perhaps the most interesting find of the survey were the open-ended responses to the question, “How would you describe your own value? What do you like most about yourself?” A broad range of responses was expected, with answers as varied as the many individuals who took part in the study, and more to do with the personality or internal character. Surprisingly a disproportionate number of answers were given with the same curious reply.

Nearly 20% of the young women surveyed, when describing their own value and the thing they liked most about themselves, responded in some variation that it was their “smile”:

- I think my most important value is [my] smile.

- I’m [a] very cheerful girl and I can make people around me happy.

- I always smile, so I think that is my good point.

In another question, which asked the women to describe their personal view of an ideal woman, responses were similar: “always smiling,” “keep a smile on one’s face,” “makes people happy with her smile.”

Undoubtedly smiling can be a beautiful and positive action as well as an encouragement to others. Research suggests smiling has multiple benefits for both the one who smiles as well as those on the receiving end. Smiling can help to fight stress and relax the body,

lower heart rate and blood pressure, and elevate mood. A smile can also make one appear more attractive to others and create a symbiotic relationship between givers and receivers. (Stevenson 2012)

So while it is not at all to detract from the benefits of smiling, it is worth examining why an inordinate amount of the young Japanese women surveyed considered smiling as the apex of their own value and/or the prototype of an ideal woman. In this, insidious correlations must be questioned. What undercurrents or motivations are behind the perpetually felt need to smile?

Wearing the Mask

Much has been written about the phenomenon of *honne* (one's true feelings/thoughts/opinions) and *tatemae* (those which one expresses publicly). And while a comprehensive study of *honne/tatemae* will be bypassed for the purposes of this article, suffice to say that "wearing a mask" is part and parcel to Japanese society, some of the oil which - it is believed - keeps the gears flowing smoothly so to speak. Thus, the question raised is if smiling is not simply seen as a beneficial trait, but as an unquestionable imperative for women. It is not an option. Rather at all times when one might be observed by others, a smile is felt to be compulsory.

If such is the case, what implications does this have regarding women's ability or freedom to express their true feelings and opinions? Is it ever acceptable? If so, in which context(s)? If not, is part of the burden of womanhood in Japan a forced denial, disregarding or covering of the internal emotions thought unfit to be shown in society?

The 2000 short documentary *Smile School: the Japanese Learn How to Smile* reports on Japanese companies which send their employees to school to learn how to smile. In the short, we hear from Professor Hiroshi Harashima, who studies faces in Japan.

The professor believes the history of the Japanese face finds expression - or lack of it - in Noh theater. For many Japanese, facial expression is limited ... For centuries, it was considered inappropriate to use the face as a tool of expression ... The ideal was a mask-like appearance. And a smile had its own meaning, according to Harashima, "We show [a] smile to [...] hide ourselves."

But the aforementioned "smile schools" are not limited to teaching employees how to smile. They also instruct students on how to appear sad at a funeral, happy at a wedding, angry

if someone interrupts them when they don't want to be disturbed. In essence, these classes are utilized to teach Japanese people to present appropriate emotion *outwardly*. The training is not on how to express (real) emotion, but rather how to *give the convincing appearance of an emotion* in a culturally and situationally desirable way. To use an old acting adage, it is how to "look the part."

Some may see such lessons as innocuous, even necessary equipping for service industries, born of a commendable desire to provide excellence to customers. But this view discounts the extremity to which smiling is emphasized in Japan, as well as the more serious, detrimental effects the painstaking creation of such a façade at all costs can cause. One researcher has suggested it can even lead to a psychological disorder, dubbed "Smile mask syndrome."

Professor Makoto Natsume of Osaka Shoin Women's University coined the term from his experiences counselling students. Natsume reports how some of the students "had spent so much time faking their smiles that they were unaware that they were smiling even while relating stressful or upsetting experiences," with the result being that the women "start to suppress their real emotions and become depressed." Natsume says the women can also develop physical illness, muscle aches and headaches as a result of the prolonged smiling. ("Smile mask syndrome", n.d.)

Certainly the emphasis on smiling in Japan is particular to women. In the context of business, service and hospitality industries, the imperative to smile necessarily extends to men. Yet in related questions on the survey given to the young women, which asked about both cultural and individual views of an ideal man, a "smile" did not show up in even one response. Instead, if the one word given to epitomize the value of women, "smile," were replaced for men, it would be "work" -- occurring in 30% of the responses. And while a traditional Japanese view of a woman's place is in the home, the counterpart for men is most certainly full-time work - and in many cases, perhaps more accurately, *overwork* - outside the home.

But there is hope. When asked about their personal view of an ideal woman, some of those surveyed answered in counterpoint to the prevailing mindset of uniformity and keeping a cheerful appearance. Some examples include:

- *people who can do [their] favorite things and can do things [which] we want to do really*
- *She can assert her opinion to anyone.*
- *speak to anybody and speak own opinion clearly*
- *She has her opinion by herself and [can] tell everyone.*

- *express her opinion confidently*

- *Some people might think that [being] ladylike is very ideal. But I think it is not necessary. So my ideal woman is true to herself.*

In describing her view of an ideal woman, one respondent simply wrote “equal to men.” As with many countries, fundamental advancements are needed for Japan to ensure women are afforded equal opportunities socially, economically, politically and otherwise. The time and lengths it will take to achieve such equality in Japan are yet to be seen. Perhaps one way women themselves can help remove the division is by taking off the mask.

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