

SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN JAPAN TODAY



Camera assembly line

Kyoko Kosaki, a six year partner in the Hinoki Academy, the Japanese Language Training School in Ottawa provides us with her personal insight on the subject of women in Japan. Ms. Kosaki and Kawasaki Mitsuko provide translation, interpretation and consulting services in business and modern-day Japanese culture along with intensive language training.

As you know Japan had been isolated for about 250 years from early 1600 to the middle of the eighteen hundreds. In 1853, Admiral Perry came to Japan with four war vessels in order to negotiate trade with the Japanese government. In 1863, the New Meiji Restoration Government was formed. This new government realized that

Japanese society was far behind the western world in industry, business, medical and education systems. Therefore, the government sent many government officials and students abroad to England, France, Germany and the United States to study western affairs. The government also invited many foreign scholars, teachers, doctors, business authorities and missionaries into Japan. The government built elementary schools, high schools, and colleges all over the country, to educate Japanese youth.

Missionaries had important roles in education, especially education for women. They built many mission schools. I went to the oldest girls' mission school in the north of Tokyo named Iai Girls' High School in Hakodate, Hokkaido, which was one of the first three ports to open after 1856. "IAI" means enduring love.

In the early 20th century, about my mother's time, girls from good families were not allowed to go to work. After they finished schooling, which is 6 years in elementary school and 2 or 4 years in the girls school - equivalent to junior high school - the majority of them stayed home and were trained in the arts of tea ceremony, flower arrangement, cooking, sewing and preparation for marriage. Their objective was to have a good marriage. Less than 0.5% of the girls went on to higher education to become teachers or nurses.

In the 1950's, most of the girls finished their education at Grade XII. After the World War II, the Japanese Education System adopted the American System. Maybe 2% of high school graduates continued to higher education. About half of them stayed home for bridal training and less went into the work force. However, because of a lack of professional training, their positions in the company and government offices are very low - such as answering telephone, simple book-keeping, filing and making tea for male co-workers. Most of them worked only two or three years, then retired to get married. They didn't stay in workforce after marriage, because companies usually did not want married women.

In the late 1960's, as the economy continued to improve, education at colleges and universities improved. In 1955, only 10% of high school graduates continued their studies at the college or university level. By the 1980's, 40% of high school graduates continued their education, approximately 1/3 of them, female. In the late 1960's, major private universities opened their doors, and by the early 70's, all universities opened for female enrollment. There are now 446 four-year universities in Japan, almost double the 228 in 1955. Enrollment is up to 1,835,000. If you include