

Once Docile Women Flex Economic Muscle

By Suvendrini Kakuchi

Japanese women, long viewed as docile and entertaining “flowers” in the office, are bucking the trend to become “tigers” and “economic locomotives” that make key economic contributions these days, say analysts.

“More women are walking a new road, changing from office “flowers”—a term that describes their traditional role as decorations to please men—to becoming indispensable in the work place,” explains Mitsuko Yamaguchi, spokesperson for Ishikawa Fusae Memorial Association, one of Japan’s oldest feminist organisations.

This trend for women, according to analysts, has made Japan’s rising number of single women a key source of economic growth in the country.

Statistics indicate that unmarried women in their twenties and thirties now make up 40 percent of that group living in the big cities like Tokyo.

The importance of the single-women sector in Japan’s drive for long-term growth was documented

in a report on Japan’s 2005 economic outlook by Mizuho Securities, a leading financial organisation.

Respected economist Nobuyuki Saji, who says the Japanese economy has pulled out of the 10-year-long recession and

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has begun a sustainable recovery, includes the purchasing power of single women as one positive sign to support his forecast in the report. While the report points to the reduction of bank debt and the manufacture of high-technology machinery as factors that would help boost national product performance and economic recovery, Saji mentions higher female labour participation in consumer spending as another vital point. “Working women in their twenties and thirties have seen their income increase these

past two years as corporate restructuring shifts towards a meritocratic pay system that sees income distribution in favour of young people,” he explains. (Irene—I take it that Saji’s report appears in the Mizuho report? The writer is not clear on that but that is my sense in the way the article is written)

Real consumption spending among people below the age of 50 has increased to 52.6 percent from around 35 percent of all consumption between October 2003 to the same month, this year.

Saji says his research on consumption shows a rapid increase in the purchase of apartments as well as automobiles and stocks by single women, making them a key target for Japanese companies.

Indeed, data compiled by large real estate companies show that purchases by unmarried women in their twenties and thirties have risen to almost three-fourths of new sales this year, a dramatic trend compared to a decade ago when married men were the largest group.

Women owners of properties reported average annual incomes of between US\$60,000 to

US\$80,000 and bought homes that were priced around US\$300,000.

Women also account for 67 percent of sales of mini-vehicles priced at around US\$12,000 dollars, a record since 1999. Data on stock investing also show that women buying shares in their twenties and thirties have increased to 33.9 percent, higher than the 24 percent recorded for those in their forties and fifties.

The rise of the female spender is also seen as the key to the growth in Japan's service industry—annual growth rate of 3 percent or higher for companies that offer health—and beauty-related services, restaurants, travel and recreational outlets.

Hidehiko Yanagisawa, an analyst at Hakuhodo Research company, says more younger women are becoming decision-makers even after they start families. This is a huge contrast to the older generation where women played second fiddle to men. This social change is here to stay and is closely observed by companies as an important business opportunity from now on, he explains.

“Non Parasite Single Women,” a book released by author Kiyo Yamamoto in April, documents the lives of single women who live on their own because they do not want to lose their independence by getting married and settling down

to start families. Single and ambitious women in Japan have well-paid jobs, boyfriends, and enjoy themselves. Their goal is to live for themselves, writes Yamamoto in her book.

Single and energetic Akemi Ozaki, 37, cannot agree more. Ozaki launched her own aesthetic and hairdressing shop two years ago and says she does not even dream of marriage. “I am too busy with work and enjoying life to adjust to another human being in my life,” explains the slight woman, whose work schedule ends after midnight most weekdays. She caters to a growing number of working women who want to relax with a shampoo or facial after they leave office in the evenings.

Women are reporting inroads in the more conservative job market as well. Trenders Inc., a company offering placement services for women, says their single clients are now being snapped up as managers by companies that have begun to report a doubling of their sales in the past two years. “Women managers have an edge over men when it comes to handling consumer goods and other services for companies in that field,” notes Kahoko Tsunazawa, who runs the company.

Source: Inter Press Service, 28 December 2004, <<http://www.ipsnews.net>>

Women in Action promotes the empowerment of women through information sharing, communication, and networking. It is published by Isis International-Manila, an international non-government women's organisation, founded in 1974. Isis has sister offices in Santiago, Chile and Kampala, Uganda. Its network reaches over 50,000 individuals and organisations in 150 countries.

Isis International-Manila acknowledges the support and financial assistance of the following partner-donor organisations: Church Development Service (EED) (Germany), Communications Assistance Foundation (The Netherlands), Global Ministries-The United Methodist Church (USA), Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (The Netherlands), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norway), Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Denmark), Swedish International Development Authority (Sweden), United Nations Development Fund for Women, and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (USA).

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Errata on Women in Action No. 2, 2004: photos on pages 14, 16, 34, 40 were taken by Susanna George Footnote No. 2 on page 33. The Babri Masjid mosque is located in city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh and not in Gujarat.

WOMEN IN ACTION NO. 3-2004