

GENDER IN JAPANESE HISTORY

Background Lack of written records inhibits evaluations of gender relations in early Japanese history. It has been speculated that inequality between the genders may have been limited – for example, that women shared property rights with men – and that family descent may have been traced from mothers rather than fathers. Whatever the specifics, traditional patterns began to change considerably once Japan developed more active contacts with China, from about 400 CE onward. Japanese leaders became keenly aware that their society lagged behind the Chinese in many ways, which prompted a variety of efforts at imitation – with gender relations included

Japanese patriarchy Imitation and political change definitely included a shift to male control over property, as the legal system was revised by the 7th century. Male control in the household was more firmly established. Men gained rights to divorce that women did not have, and emphasis on obedience to father, husband and son replicated the Chinese pattern. This shift was enhanced, in the upper classes, by elaboration of a warrior code and emphasis on manly honor. To be sure, the Chinese model was not uniformly adopted. Most notably, footbinding was not imported, though Japanese standards of beauty definitely began to emphasize the charm of small feet for women.

Complications Two factors complicated the shift to a more patriarchal system. In the first place, Buddhism, also imported from China, could emphasize women's spiritual equality, and indeed some Japanese leaders were particularly vocal in defense of women's ability to contribute to religious discourse – more than their counterparts in China. One Japanese Buddhist sect stressed that women should have “every opportunity for salvation.” A few women actually rose to positions of leadership; one aristocratic woman for example oversaw fifteen temples and convents. Buddhist pilgrimages also offered women a chance to get out of the home. Tensions did exist in Japanese Buddhism: some temples were closed to women, for example, because they might bring defilement. A second complication in the period of peak Chinese imitation was more short-lived, but fascinating. Increasing admiration of things Chinese meant that many educated men began to devote themselves to studies of Chinese literature and mastery of Chinese poetic styles, excluding women from this pursuit. This ironically created some space for some upper-class women to write prose in Japanese (using modified Chinese script). Thus the world's first novel, the *Tale of Genji*, was written by a woman, around 1000 CE. Women also wrote Buddhist materials. Beyond their literary efforts, some educated women gained informal positions as advisors to leading political figures. None of this fundamentally undercut the shift toward patriarchy, but there were some interesting twists.

Later developments Patriarchal emphases deepened in the early modern period, particularly during the Tokugawa shogunate. Opportunities for Buddhist leadership and literary authorship distinctly declined as Confucian values were more vigorously emphasized. New limits were placed on women's dress, to keep them humble. A 1683 law prohibited embroidery and certain kinds of dye. Women also lost ground in court cases: in one instance, a woman who (accurately) reported that her father had killed her husband was condemned to slave status because she had violated a daughter's obligations to the father. Women were also held back from much participation in the expanding Buddhist and Confucian schools, though some upper-class women did break through. By the early 19th century about 40% of Japanese men were literate, only about 10% of all women, and most of them were limited to the basics. It was also in the Tokugawa periods, amid expanding commercial prosperity, that some women gained roles as courtesans and entertainers for upper-class men, mastering elaborate tea ceremonies, emphasizing costume and beauty, and developing talents in dance and music, while in some cases offering sexual services as well. Beneath this level, urban prostitution also developed widely, and for a period in the 16th century a number of Japanese prostitutes were sold abroad. The Tokugawa regime introduced new regulations in this area, among other things confining prostitution to a few clearly-designated areas.

The period of Meiji reforms, 1868 As the Japanese began to venture study trips to the West after the country began to be forced open after 1853, they were taken aback at what they saw as the powerful role

of women. One observer noted, after a visit to the United States, that women were treated as elders were in Japan – and he did not approve. On the other hand, the same study trips produced evidence that some change was essential. In this vein, the massive educational reform, introduced in 1872, dramatically insisted that primary education should be universal for girls as well as boys. This was a huge development, but it also embraced contradictions. While some opportunities developed for higher education, they were distinctly limited compared to those available for men – and some upper-class women may have actually seen their horizons curtailed. Japanese authorities, even more than their counterparts in the West, insisted that the goal of women's education was the creation of “good wives, wise mothers”, not independent actors. Early industrialization also placed great strain on many lower-class women. Many rural families essentially sold at least one daughter either to prostitution or to work as semi-slaves for the silk industry, dependent on low-wage labor at long hours. By 1900 about 62% of the factory labor force was female – well above Western figures. At the upper-class level, many Japanese men continued to emphasize their control over wives and daughters – refusing for example to participate in Western-style dinner parties where women might have some wider contacts. Yet other changes did creep in, particularly in the early decades of the 20th century. The emphasis on strong families could give women some new roles, as husbands were encouraged, for example, to participate in family meals. By the 1920s a number of young women were indulging in a rising consumer culture, buying new cosmetics and other items; and an interest in romantic love gained ground. Even as the military took over the Japanese governments, women's groups began organizing for new political rights, particularly at the local level, setting a basis for further change.

Since World War II Building on earlier changes; rapid intensification of industrialization; and additional foreign example, Japanese gender patterns continue to shift 1945, while on the whole retaining somewhat greater distinctions than was true in some other regions. Male authority, though now more informal, continued to count, and emphasis on female modesty and restraint persisted as well (though foreign observers sometimes exaggerated this point.) Women did get the vote (in 1945), and began to gain a minority role in political leadership (including, at one point, services at prime minister) (though the percentage of women in national elected positions, at about 18%, remained low). The old culture around special female entertainment for upper-class men was scaled back. Rapid reductions in the birth rate created huge changes in the lives of many women. Opportunities for travel and wider participation in consumer culture expanded steadily. On the other hand, women's participation in the economy continued to lag. Limited facilities for child care prevented many mothers from full work roles, in a culture that particularly emphasized long hours on the job and devotion to a company's priorities. This situation did begin to change in the 21st century, and the government also began to introduce new measures to reduce job discrimination. Still, the male-female pay gap remained unusually high, and reports of sexual harassment were common. The situation was fluid, however. Growing numbers of young women also began to reconsider interest in marriage or motherhood – a crucial element in the further rapid reduction of birth rates.

Study questions

1. What were the principal impacts of Chinese example on Japanese gender relations? What were the main complexities in this pattern during the postclassical period?
2. In what ways did women's situation deteriorate in the Tokugawa period?
3. Is it accurate to discuss changes in Japanese gender relations since 1868 in terms of Westernization? What are the most obvious drawbacks to this model?

Further reading

Kim Haboush and Joan Piggott, eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures: in premodern China, Korea and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Maria Patessio, *Women and Public Life in Early Meiji Japan: the development or the feminist movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

Marnie Anderson, *A Place in Public: women's rights in Meiji Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard Asia Center, 2010).

Kuniko Fujimara-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda, *Japanese Women: new feminist perspectives on the past, present and future* (New York: Feminist Press, 1995).