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## No Womanly Women?: Blurring Gender Boundaries in Contemporary

Yoichi Shimemura

### Borderless World and Changing Gender Roles

As they say, we are living in a borderless world, in the sense that traditional boundaries are becoming blurred or disappearing completely, thanks to developments in communication technology and means of transportation. This is taking place not only in the economic and financial spheres but increasingly in the area of men's and women's roles as well.

In my presentation I would like to discuss a disappearing border phenomenon that has been noted in the world of men and women in contemporary Japan, with particular reference to the younger generations.

### “Separate spheres” of women at home and men at work

Let me start off with a broad overview of the changing gender roles that I am concerned with here. With the advent of modern industrial society, the home lost its function as a productive unit and the system of division of labor based on sex became much more distinct. Work became segregated from the household and greater differentiation and specialization of male/female roles emerged. This meant that men gradually belonged to the public sphere of work, and women to the private sphere of home; men and women were separated into two isolated worlds — the world of work and the world of the household.

Women were confined to the household, and housewife became the sole occupation of women. A woman's primary responsibility was to take care of home and children. Her role was clearly defined as a homemaker and child-carer. It was considered natural that women's place was in the home. She was expected to give top priority to the family. For women, work outside the home was considered to be temporary before marriage and, if they were married, work was only secondary and supplementary to the family. It was clearly subordinated to the needs of the family.

A man, on the other hand, was the provider of the family and his primary responsibility was to fulfill his duties and role as the head of the family. His role was clearly defined as the breadwinner of the family.

To put it simply, the general structure of industrial society was that the men and women lived in two separate worlds —men lived in the world of work outside the home as the breadwinner and women lived in the world of home as the housewife.

But as society started to move into a post-industrial phase, or become a knowledge-intensive society, the once clearly demarcated men's and women's worlds began to merge. A growing number of women began to participate

in the labor force and the firmly-fixed gender roles and gender differences started to change, and consequently the men's sphere and women's sphere increasingly overlapped.

Actually, one of the revolutionary changes that we have experienced in the last half a century or so is the dramatic change in relationships between men and women and I think that the most important factor that has brought about this gender revolution is the increasing numbers of working women who have actively pursued fulfillment outside the home. With the diminishing importance of biological and physiological differences between men and women in terms of the type of work available, more and more women have entered into the world of work which was once dominated by men. This increase in working women has brought about the current trend toward egalitarian male-female relationships, with shared power and tasks.

In the United States this gender role revolution was triggered by the best-selling book *Feminine Mystique*, written by Betty Friedan, published in 1963. The book of course ignited the women's liberation movement in the United States and urged millions of middle-class American women to get out of the narrow walls of their homes which trapped them and stereotyped them as wives and mothers, and to get out into the real world to seek fulfillment as individual people. This women's liberation movement in the United States has greatly influenced Japanese women's consciousness and values, and their outlook toward life. As a result, Japanese women have become increasingly career-oriented.

Today, more and more Japanese women are pursuing careers and are not interrupting them to marry and have children. They have become less and less dependent on men economically and psychologically. I'd say that just as in the United States women's increasing commitment to work has been instrumental in altering gender roles in Japan.

### **The Americanization of Japan**

I would like to emphasize at this juncture that Japan's gender relations have been greatly influenced by those in the United States, despite underlying cultural differences. Politically, economically, and culturally America is by far the most influential foreign country in Japan. If you walk around any major city in Japan, you'll soon realize that Japanese society is flooded with American cultural goods. Ever since Japan embarked on modernization after Commodore Perry forced her to open her doors to the outside world in 1853, and ended Japan's 200 years' seclusion, the nation has pursued a policy of catching up with the West. After World War II, Japan switched its role model from Europe to the United States and ever since Japanese society has been certainly Americanized in many ways,

In fact, in my view Japan is probably the most Americanized society in the world. There are branches of McDonald's, Starbucks, KFC, and Tower Records everywhere; and people wear American jeans, American T-shirts, and American shoes; listen to American pops and watch American movies and TV shows; young people these days dye their hair blonde or various shades of brown to look like Americans; and everything American is extremely popular in Japan. When the Japanese seek outside models, it is largely to the United States they look.

Actually, there is an anecdote, probably a kind of intercultural urban myth by now, that illustrates how deeply Japan is Americanized. When an elementary school kid went over to the United States for the first time and saw a McDonald's restaurant in Los Angeles, he exclaimed, "Look! There is a McDonald's, even in America!"

So, as I was saying, American influence has been great in Japan in the social sphere as well and, therefore, the idea of egalitarian relations between the sexes which derived from the United States after the end of the Pacific War has enormously affected the Japanese, especially Japanese women, and they began to seek equality with men and attempted to expand their roles outside the home.

### **Declining popularity of marriage and increase of single people**

One of the significant changes that have occurred as Japanese women have become more and more career-oriented and less and less dependent on men is the increase in unmarried women. In Japan, the institution of marriage was sacrosanct, and up until the mid-1970s it was strongly believed that women's happiness lay in marriage; women were expected to find their satisfaction in being a housewife and mother. Furthermore, they were expected to marry by the age of 25, and this was actually formally conceived of as an appropriate age for marriage (*kekkon tekireiki*). Women, if not married before the age of 25, were derogatorily called "leftovers" or referred to as being "on sale" or "reduced to clear". Work for women in those days was meant to be temporary until they found a suitable partner. Even for college graduates, their jobs were restricted to either making photocopies or serving tea. They were expected to quit their companies after they got married. Therefore, marriage was not only a social norm, but also a necessity for women to make a living because there was no job for them outside the home.

But this strong ideology extolling the housewife and motherhood has waned as more and more Japanese women have become more educated, and as society itself has demanded more and more female labor force. The more women began to work outside the home, the more they became individualistic and, therefore, less family-oriented.

One indication that Japanese young women have become more career-oriented and less family-oriented is the rising age of first marriage. Although it had been stable at around 24 for women until the mid-1970s due to the strong societal pressure to get married, it began to rise after that period. It rose to 28.3 in 2007, which is an increase of more than 4 years.<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1980s, single working women were already enjoying high standards of living, especially if they lived at home with their parents. In fact, they were called *dokushin kizoku*; *dokushin* means single and *kizoku* means aristocrat, so *dokushin kizoku* is "single life aristocrat", because of their relatively wealthy lifestyle. But recently a new phrase was coined and has become popular to refer to single men and women in their late 20s and 30s who still live with their parents and enjoy their single life to the full extent. They are called "parasaito shinguru"—parasitic singles. It might be shocking to you Americans if I tell you that roughly 70 % of unmarried Japanese women in their early 30s still live with their parents. According to American cultural norms, children are expected to leave home once they reach college age, but in Japan children are expected to live with their parents until they

get married. After the bubble economy burst and economic insecurity spread from the 1990s onwards, many young people became reluctant to get married because they feared their living standards would decline.

Because of this situation, with the steady rise in the average age of first marriage, the number of single men and women has inevitably been rising. In fact, the percentage of single people has risen dramatically over the last 30 years. In 1970 only 18.1 percent of women were not married in the 25-29 age group, and 7.2 percent in the 30-34 age group, but in 2005 these figures had risen to 59.0 percent and 32.0 percent respectively. So the percentage has more than tripled in the 25-29 age group and more than quadrupled in the 30-34 age group over thirty years. This means that more than half of women aged 25-29 and one third of women aged 30-34 are single. In Tokyo these figures are, of course, much higher; 70.1 percent of women aged 25-29 were single, and 42.9 percent of women aged 30-34 were single in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

According to a survey conducted by one of the major newspapers in Japan, only about 30 percent of men and women in their 20s, and 36 percent in their 30s, agreed with the statement that “generally speaking people should get married,” and as many as 68 percent of respondents in their 20s and 62 percent in their 30s said that there is no necessity for people to get married.<sup>4</sup> According to another survey conducted by a matchmaking company, 88 percent of single Japanese women in their 30s said that they don’t mind being unmarried and, in fact, would not get married if it meant giving up their present lifestyle.<sup>5</sup>

What these surveys demonstrate is that marriage is not necessarily considered to be an essential institution among young people, and that singlehood is becoming a more acceptable way of life to Japanese men and women.

Another piece of evidence of the declining popularity of marriage and housekeeping for young women is that once very popular magazines targeting full-time housewives, and dedicated to the role of housewife and mother, went out of publication one after another starting in the mid-80s. The last such magazine, called “Housewives’ Companion”, which started publication more than 90 years ago in 1917, finally decided to stop publication last year.

### **Blurring Boundaries between Men and Women: Feminization of men and masculinization of women**

As I have said, modern industrial society created distinctly different spheres for men and women, and at the same time created the differentiation between masculinity and femininity. The traditional gender ideology dictated that there were inherent men’s roles and inherent women’s roles, men’s inherent characteristics and women’s inherent characteristics, all of which derived from the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. A man should be “manly” and a woman should be “womanly.” But as egalitarian ideology has been replacing the traditional discriminatory ideology based on sex differences, we have been steadily escaping from the binary thinking of male and female, masculinity and femininity and the values implicit in it.

In 1985, Japan ratified the U.N. Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the following year enacted the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. As a result of these laws and later laws to

ensure gender equality, I think that starting around the mid-1980s our society has been moving toward gender roles based on gender equality and less on sexual stereotypes.

As a result, the boundaries between men and women have become fluid, more and more young women now advance into spheres once monopolized by men, and also more and more men advance into what were once exclusively women's domain. In the area of occupations, we now have male kindergarten teachers, male nurses, male caseworkers, and female firefighters, female astronauts, plumbers, bus drivers, and truck drivers. It seems to me that the division of labor based on sex has almost completely broken down and most jobs are now open to applicants of either gender.

Around the time that these changes were first becoming really noticeable, in the 1990s, there emerged a buzz word to symbolize young women trying to infiltrate into men's spheres. The expression was *oyaji gyaru*. *Oyaji* means "big buddy" or "middle-aged man", and *gyaru* is the English word "gal", short for "girl". This expression refers to young women in their 20s and 30s who behave like middle-aged men by getting into sacred places only middle-aged men commonly frequent, like pachinko parlors, race tracks, golf courses and Japanese-style pubs called "Izakaya."

Born and raised under the cultural regime of gender equality, the Japanese young women of today have increasingly taken gender equality for granted and do not have much hesitation in getting into men's spheres once considered to be off limits to women. They have become accustomed to sex-blind and gender-free ideology, so it's natural for them to pursue their own individual happiness and pleasure, unrestricted by narrow family and gender roles.

Now I was saying that young Japanese women have become independent of men and do not think highly of the traditional women's role of housewife and mother, as they have infiltrated into spheres once considered to be sacred to men. Then what about young Japanese men? It seems to me that young Japanese men today are not interested in acting manly. They both look and behave unmanly. They seem to have thrown away the traditional social value of men acting manly.

Many young men these days are no longer macho, or far from the male chauvinist pigs they might have been called in the past. It used to be that macho type actors were popular among young women, but these days some of the most popular celebrities are found among comedians and feminine-looking actors.

Just as young Japanese women have become career-oriented and have infiltrated into men's spheres of work and entertainment, Japanese young men have infiltrated into an area once dominated by women, that is the area of beauty care. In other words, young men have become more and more concerned about their physical appearance. Starting sometime around the mid-80s, a number of men's fashion magazines were published. one after another. These men's magazines were very similar to women's fashion magazines. Starting with the introduction of fashionable clothes and how to coordinate them, they even showed how to wear make-up. My favorite clever

message in one of the magazines is this, “They say what counts in men is the heart (or inside) but after all what counts is the face or looks.”

It seems to me that these days Japanese women and men have gone in opposite directions; women are working hard to pursue power, whereas men are working hard to pursue beauty. Japanese young women have become career-oriented, whereas Japanese young men have become fashion-conscious. In fact, today’s young men’s pursuit of beauty is truly boundless. They go to beauty salons, nail salons, aesthetic salons; they wear pierced earrings, perfumes, and shape their eyebrows. They put on sunscreen lotion to avoid getting suntanned.

### **Soshokukei Boys**

The current fashionable new word describing today’s young men is soshokukei which means “herbivorous” or “herbivores.” The word has been widely picked up in the media in the last year or so. In fact several books have already been published bearing this word in their title over the last year or so. The “herbivorous boys” have the following characteristics:

- \* They are not as competitively minded about their jobs as men in older generations.
- \* They are fashion conscious and eat lightly so they can stay thin and fit into skintight clothes.
- \* They are extremely noncommittal in their relationships with girls. They are not interested in having close relationships with them; they just want to be friends.
- \* They don’t have the idea that men should support their wives and children.
- \* They don’t have the idea that men should treat women. When they go on a date they split the bill.
- \* Most of them live with their parents. They are on very friendly terms with their mother. <sup>6</sup>

### **Shrinking gender distinctions between men’s and women’s language**

Now lastly I’d like to touch upon language. Language is a reflection of society and change in language reflects change in society. Language change is very fast both in Japan and the United States, because both societies love change.

Generally speaking, in the Japanese language there are clear differences between men’s speech and women’s speech, and a number of words to describe men’s characteristics and women’s characteristics, based on traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. In a Japanese novel, for example, you don’t need to add “he said,” or “she said,” to every speech, because sentence endings clearly show the speaker is either male or female.

And yet, as young women are becoming more masculine and young men more feminine, and the concept of masculinity and femininity has been losing its meaning, young people are ignoring the language’s gender-based usage and its distinct vocabularies.

Recently I was surprised, or even shocked, on several occasions to hear young women speak like men. In Japanese, women usually finish their speech with feminine words like *yo*, *ne*, or *noyo*. However, they ended their sentences with *da*, *sa*, or *daze*, which are typical male endings. Many young girls these days tend not to use traditional female endings in their conversation. At the same time, young men these days, at least some of them, tend to avoid using typical male endings. So men's speech and women's speech are crossing over and as a result gender distinctions are disappearing from the speech of young people. This means that, as far as the younger generation is concerned, masculinity and femininity of speech has been diminishing and the Japanese language is moving toward being gender-free.

Another interesting change that I notice is that young women these days call their male friends by their first name. Actually, one of my female students in my seminar told me recently that when she asks for a boy's name he will usually reply by mentioning his first name instead of his family name. This was quite shocking to me because Japan, unlike the United States, is not a first-name-basis society. The use of first names was almost completely restricted to family members. For example, when I was in school none of my friends, either male or female, called me by my first name. Only my parents and my elder relatives called me by my first name. Even my wife doesn't call me by my first name. We tend to use family relation titles instead, such as "mother", "father", or the polite form of "you" —of which our language still has several forms.

I would say that as far as young Japanese are concerned, distinct linguistic characteristics of Japanese based on gender seem to be diminishing.

### **Conclusion: A Borderless World for Men and Women?**

As I said at the outset, once clearly-defined male and female social roles and once clearly-demarcated male and female spheres have become blurred or fluid and have overlapped. But I do not believe that women's world and men's world will be completely merged. Men and women are equal but they are different, and that is not something we should try to completely ignore. I believe that there are innate gender differences between us and we should appreciate and respect those gender differences so that we can build a better society which should be comfortable to both men and women.

### **Notes**

1. This paper was presented for the "Symposium on Gender Studies across Languages and Disciplines" held at Western Michigan University on September 21, 2009.
2. Cabinet Office, *Heisei 20nenban shoushika shakai hakusho*, p.12.
3. National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Shoushika no genjo to shourai no mitooshi*, p.110.
4. "Kekkon ga subetede ha nai," *Yomiuri Shinbun*, September 19, 2003.

5. “Japanese Women say single life fine—if they’re financially independent,” *The Japan times*, April 15, 1999.
6. “Blurring the boundaries,” *The Japan times*, May 10, 2009.

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(示村 陽一 武蔵野大学教授)