ABSTRACT. Women make up about ten per cent of the scientists and engineers in Japan. The aim of this essay is to make clear why, even in the year 2001, there are so few women in these disciplines. I will suggest that the socio-economic structure and gender ideology of Japan since the Second World War is responsible for this shortage which is often erroneously attributed to the cultural traditions of feudal Japan.

INTRODUCTION

In August 1945, the Second World War in the Pacific ended with the surrender of Imperial Japan. The General Headquarters of the Allied Occupation Power promptly issued a decree requiring the radical reform of Japanese society. An important part of this programme was the establishment of women’s rights. Japanese women acquired the right to admission in institutions of higher education and the right to participate in local and national politics. Both had been major objectives of the Japanese feminist movement since the early twentieth century. When the new constitution became effective on 3 May 1947, Japanese women assumed a status equal to that of women in northern Europe and North America.

Before the war, those ambitious Japanese women who wished to study the natural sciences had to go to traditional women’s colleges, which were technical schools or teachers’ colleges. The 1945 reform of higher education enabled some to transfer to research universities, which became co-educational institutions. In the impoverished circumstances of defeated Japan, it was difficult for women to complete their studies and pursue careers as professional scientists. Some did so, but, paradoxically, this hopeful trend declined in the 1960s, just at a time when the Japanese economy flourished.

1 Kazuko Motizuki. ‘Path of a Woman Scientist’, Butsuri, 45 (5) (Physical Society of Japan, 1990), 347–349. Motizuki was honoured as a world class solid state physicist.

Today, more than a quarter century later, women make up only about 10 per cent of the Japanese scientific community. The UN Commission on Science and Technology has drawn attention to the low participation rates of Japanese women in science and technology. Discrimination against women is frequently observed by Westerners, as well as by Asian students who study in Japan. In the 1970s, an effort was undertaken in the United States to increase by affirmative action the number of women in academic positions. However, in Japan the Women’s Liberation Movement made no impact on the academic community, and during the mid-1970s, the gap in status between Japanese women and their Western counterparts actually widened. This is often explained by the persistence of Japanese tradition, but this argument fails to explain why women’s rights fell behind in the 1960s, just at a time when Japan was making significant progress in business and industry. Therefore, the lack of progress can be explained by Japan’s contemporary socio-economic structures, and by a gender ideology that developed as a result of the rapid industrialization of Japan after the Second World War.

CURRENT STATUS OF WOMEN IN JAPANESE ACADEMIA

During the 1980s, Japan became an internationally competitive nation in research and development. Driven by a strongly nationalistic programme, the government promoted science and technology as a priority. The ideology of a society built on science and technology was easily combined with the deep-rooted notions regarding gender, which held that science and technology were the business of men. This ideology permeated science departments, engineering schools, national laboratories, and secondary science education. In such circumstances, women were hesitant to enter the science and technology community, and remain so today.

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