

Kamiko Wants to know the Challenges of the Working Woman in Africa

I was not present at the World Conference on Women, Nairobi 1985, as well as that of Beijing 1995; I was too young, and was naturally distracted with growing up experiences and fantasies. Presently, I am one of the many women that have lived through the post-Nairobi and Beijing era, and have continually experienced and observed the different challenges women grapple with, especially in the age of globalisation, an era quite different from that of the pre-Nairobi world. One of the remaining intractable challenges is the plight of working women forced by circumstances to work outside the home in the wage labour force. The call for contributions to this special issue of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* on African women, with the theme: 'Looking Back, and Still Looking Forward: Nairobi + 20, Beijing +10', inspired me to reflect on my experiences in Japan, especially my observations of the Japanese working woman vis-à-vis the African woman.

For an African woman who has never been to Asia before, I was happy when my husband enticed me and our children to join him for a one-year academic sojourn in Japan. Prior to this time, I did not really have a good idea of the nature of Japanese society, nor of the lifestyle of the average Japanese woman. On our arrival in Japan, it was initially difficult to adapt to our neighbourhood and understand the Japanese mind set, until I enrolled my children in both private and public Japanese schools. The enrolment served the very important purpose of providing a point of contact with other parents whose children attended the same school. At this point, it was easier for me to make friends, as the school management graciously introduced me to other parents. This was how I met Kamiko.

Kamiko is a mother of two, very pretty, cheerful and friendly. At forty-one, she looked twenty-five and fortunately happens to speak English. This made it possible for me to ask the many questions that I had wanted to ask about Japanese culture and lifestyle, especially the life of

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the Japanese woman. My curiosity about the life of Japanese women was aroused because of certain observations. The first observation was that every morning I noticed the women in my neighbourhood gather in groups of about five to ten, sometimes with their little children at the park, chattering or just relaxing leisurely for as long as three to four hours. I felt that this was a bit odd, especially judging from my background, where ideally, able-bodied women and men were expected to be at work or be engaged in productive activities at that time of the day. The second observation was very amusing to me as I felt that it was not normal for the very efficient Japanese postman, likewise the many home advertising agents, to knock on my door at 10 o'clock in the morning, expecting me to be at home to receive my mail or the numerous products and pamphlets that they were advertising. Based on these experiences, I confronted my new friend with these observations. She responded frankly. According to Kamiko:

In the Japanese society, women are expected to be 'Okusans' as wives are called in Japan, meaning 'women at the back of the house', while society frowns at those that choose career over the family. I resigned from my job sixteen years ago, as an accountant with an insurance company in Tokyo after I got married. Before my marriage, I was happy, I had a career, I was also sent to England to study the English language and I had very tall dreams. However, I got pregnant and was encouraged to resign from my job, because I needed to stay home for my children. My husband works very hard, but like most Japanese men, he is never home early enough. It was very difficult at first, but I think I've gotten used to staying alone... I still feel there is something missing and I wish I could do something about that.

I wish the society can assist us hold on to a career and still be good mothers and wives without feeling very guilty about it.

Then Kamiko asked me the following question: 'Do African women experience such difficulties?' Before attempting an answer to this insightful but difficult question, let us take a quick look at the issue of the working woman in Japan and Africa, especially in Nigeria, with which I am very conversant. In doing so, it might be possible to give a fitting answer to the question asked by Kamiko.

The Japanese dimension

When a woman wants to start a family at the height of her career, she is sure to encounter a serious dilemma: whether to quit her job or not. This is one of the largest problems facing most women in Japan. A typical M-shaped curve in the figure of the 'Percentages of Workers by Age' indicates that many of the working women leave their jobs between the ages of 25 and 35 (Sugimoto 2003). Two major reasons for such early retirement are marriage and childbearing (Japan's Statistics Agency 1997). Women quit their job despite the Maternity Leave Law of 1972 (originally applied only to public servants), the Child-Care Leave Law of 1992 and the public nursery school system available to them (Tada 2003). According to an Asahi newspaper article, the retirement rate of full-time female workers owing to childbearing is 40 per cent and that of part-time workers is 79 per cent, the reason for the latter figure being that the majority of part-time workers cannot take Maternity and Child-Care Leave (Tada 2003). However, persistent social customs and company employment policies have hindered such government laws from functioning effectively. Japanese society has assigned women the role of care-takers and has criticised mothers who work outside the home, leaving children at day-care centres (Shinotsuka 1994). Japanese companies have also not regarded women as an efficient workforce, because of their burden of caring for the family, and have relegated them to a marginal status, at lower wages, or just hired them as tempo-

rary workers in order to utilise them as a buffer against economic downturns (Molony 1995). As captured below:

Tanimoto knows how to serve tea, she can do far more than that, of course, but the 33-year-old newscaster says her Japanese male bosses – and they were all males – weren't overly interested in her non tea-pouring skills. At the Securities firm, which Tanimoto joined in 1997, as an in-house newscaster, she was chided for daring to voice her opinions on news content – and for cropping her uniform skirt from mid-calf to a scandalous length, just below the knee. The company was looking for cute, non-ambitious girls, says Tanimoto, we are supposed to make copies quietly, not think (cited in Beech 2005).

Also, Ninoko had an advanced degree in photojournalism but was told she was unqualified because she wasn't male. 'That was my start in Japan', she says. 'A very clear "No thank you". And those who get "Yes" for an answer know they are fortunate'. Yukari, who develops satellite photographs for the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, works for an open-minded agency, so her hours are regular. 'I'm very lucky', she says, 'half of my female friends from university have quit their jobs as astronomers. They wanted to continue working, but they had no choice. The working environment is almost impossible for women, especially mothers'.

Such disadvantageous employment conditions and a sense of guilt have haunted women and made them hesitant to become working mothers, while men seem to be indifferent to women's efforts to balance their tasks of work and family, obviously because of the deep-rooted gender-role mentality that homemaking is solely a woman's job.

In theory, younger Japanese men are far more open to equality than their fathers. They have to be, two incomes are often the only way that a family can maintain a comfortable lifestyle in Japan's big cities, famed as the most expensive in the world. Still, the pressures of a workaholic culture dissuade men from cutting out early and doing a little dusting. Work in Japan can extend to late-night drinking sessions with the bosses, and men who don't guzzle beer with their peers may find their career prospects

stunted (Minoru Nakamura, cited in Beech 2005).

'We know that men's attitude would be slow to change', says Hiroko Nomura, a magazine editor in-chief, 'but we found that women's own expectations of what they could do were changing too. They were putting the brakes on their own careers'.

While the working women who can balance work and family appear to be in minority, a record number are foregoing marriage altogether. A national survey in 2000 showed that one in four Japanese women aged between 30 and 34 were single. 'As a consequence, Japan's fertility rate fell to a record low of 1.29 in 2004, compared to 2.13 for the US, giving it one of the lowest birth rates in the world. If present trend continues, Japan will shrink from a nation of 127 million today, to 64 million by the end of this century. The declining population will adversely affect the economy' (Beech 2005).

Ironically, the falling birth rate was alleged to be the women's fault, while many would prefer to see them return to the role of housewives. Some also argued that single and childless women, often described as being selfish, should not receive pension benefits. 'This is a critical period in Japanese history', says Hiroko Hara, a member of the Advisory Committee for the Prime Minister's office on Gender Equality. 'We have to figure out whether to keep fighting for our dream of equity or just give up on having it all'.

Junko Sakai, author of the bestselling collection of essays on the lives of modern women in Japan, *Howls of the Loser Dogs*, observes

Japanese society venerates the 'Winner Dog', the house wife who waits at home with a vat of *miso* soup for her husband and kids, and abhors the 'Loser Dog', the independent, unmarried career woman, frequently accused to be at the root of Japan's falling birth rate, and also described as 'pitiable women who direct their dissatisfaction at being ignored by men towards society'. To Junko Sakai, 'society may call us loser dogs, but we are happy and independent' (cited in Beech 2005).

In a way, some may argue that there is nothing special about the issue of the working woman in Japan, because women in both developed and developing world have played out variations on the work

versus home theme for decades. But the stark reality of the choice between a career or kids in Japan has created a demographic nightmare which could serve as a lesson for other countries.

The Nigerian dimension

In Nigeria, the position or status of women has been no less ridiculous than anywhere else in the world. Nigerian society, like most societies, is essentially male-dominated. In the past, and even today, when a male child is born, the parents are happy, the society is happy, but when a girl is born, especially if there are other females before her, the environment is usually charged with muffled disappointment. In the past, educating the girl child was considered a waste of money, time, effort and resources, as they would eventually end up in another man's house or kitchen, unlike the males. Thus, the education of girls was not favoured by parents, while traditional forms of education were employed to prepare them for future roles as mothers and wives. Most often, girls' education was terminated at the primary level, thus very few girls proceeded to secondary school, as illustrated by the following statistics. In 1959, the distribution of pupils in Nigerian primary schools comprised 92,480 males, and 23,106 females. In 1965, the figures were 151,807 males and 60,072 females; and in 1970 there were 205,959 males and 104,095 females (Alele-Williams 1988). In 1975, according to *Statistics of Secondary Education in Nigeria by Sex: 1975*, there were 580,889 males and 200,736 females. In 1980 there were over a million male pupils but only 543,564 girls in school (Federal Ministry of Education 1985). This showed that girls formed as low as 19.99 per cent of the primary school population in 1959, and worse still, as low as 3.45 per cent in the secondary school population in the 1975 school year. A constant problem for the continued attendance of girls in schools at this early stage was withdrawal for early marriages. However, various efforts had been geared towards ensuring active attendance of girls in schools, also at higher levels of education. It was reported that as far back as in the 1950s the colonial government in Nigeria began to seek ways of increasing the population of girls in secondary schools. These steps took the form of scholarships and laws forbidding early marriages. Later, the federal government introduced its policy regarding the girl-child education as well as bursary allocations to assist both male

and female students in the higher institutions.

Today, judging from common experience, Nigerian women, although still a long way from achieving equality with the male counterparts, are found in enterprising occupations. Unfortunately, even with education and advanced social and analytical skills, Nigerian women face obstacles that prevent them from reaching the height of their profession and personal potential, while also saddled with continuous negotiation as wives, homemakers, mothers, single women and workers. An examination of the difficulties Nigerian women as well as African women face in a fast changing global environment shows that globalisation has recast gender relations and altered the global economy and the life conditions of women. More women now work outside the home in the wage labour force. While this has undermined traditional patriarchy, it has burdened women with a double load of work, exposed them to harshly exploitative conditions in the work force, and scarcely improved their emotional well-being.

One such obstacle as discussed at the 2006 World Social Forum in Bamako, Mali, was the discriminatory policy of Nigerian banks against women. Stakeholders at the forum condemned the insistence of banks on employing single women as opposed to married women and the requirement that single ladies employed must not be pregnant for a certain period. It noted that 'in many establishments, practices of sexual harassment and pregnancy test have been reported especially in the banking, aviation and advertising companies'. Discussing a report titled 'Gender and Labour Market Liberalization in Africa', stakeholders noted that such policies have forced women who should have been in the formal sector into the informal sector, thereby disempowering them (Komolafe 2006). Often, the implication is the fact that working women, especially in the private sector, are not expected to get pregnant and single women often delay marriage and pregnancy until their thirties. Even at that, they may still have to get permission from their management to raise a family. Also, the married women may resort to telling lies about their family status, which gives rise to the disturbing trend of leaving their children at the mercy of the house-helpers, who, in most cases, are children themselves. Such children grow up with what a friend once de-

scribed as 'house-help mentality' – a situation where children think like and act like their care-takers, who sometimes bring with them certain manipulative mannerisms employed to survive in a clearly disadvantaged environment.

Indeed, it is an unwritten and unspoken speculation that quite a significant percentage of single ladies in the banking sector in Nigeria have been coerced at one stage of their career to utilise their God-given feminine assets to attract large deposits for their establishments. Trade unionists in a report have accused the Nigerian government of ignoring core labour standards, with which the country is obliged to comply by international law. They complained that unions are hindered in their work, women are discriminated against on the labour market, and an estimated fifteen million children are working in Nigeria. Discrimination in employment and wages was said to be pervasive in Nigeria. Surveys had also shown a wage gap between men and women in a highly segregated labour market. Few women are employed in the formal economy due to social discrimination in education and training and a gender-based division of labour. Moreover, Nigeria's Minimum Wage Act excluded many workers, in particular, those groups where women are disproportionately represented such as part-time workers and seasonal agricultural workers (*Afrol News*, 10 May 2005).

It suffices to observe that there is still a lot to be done in terms of entrenching equal employment opportunities and limiting the discriminatory and exploitative tendencies of men folk in Africa. The African Labour Research Network blamed the policy on the attitude of the Nigerian government, which had not paid adequate attention to human interest in its drive for economic reform.

Has Kamiko's question been answered?

The answer to Kamiko's question is clearly evident in this review of women's experiences in Nigeria provided above. I told Kamiko that Nigerian women, like most African women, experience similar difficulties to the Japanese working woman and that the implications are also quite similar. I told her that just like Japan, government policy, as well as that of many companies, had not taken new realities into consideration, thus making the life of the working woman in Africa much more difficult. While Japanese society insists

that a career woman's decision to remain single is at the root of Japan population crisis, in Nigeria, more and more children may end up with what we had earlier identified as 'house-help mentality' if adequate measures are not taken to accommodate the plight of the working women. These women are oftentimes forced to work outside the home because of the prevailing poverty and hardship existing in Africa. I also told her that the demographic nightmare currently experienced in Japan had not been reported in Nigeria, though a sizeable number of single, career women, with such private decisions and conviction, could be observed from time to time. Still a closer look at the sometimes unwritten and unspoken policies, especially in the private sector with respect to employment of single women only, with many risking dismissal should they become pregnant, is a clear reminder that the Japanese demographic problem may soon have a Nigerian face, if care is not taken to address this problem.

Some may readily argue that women are to be blamed for the population decline in Japan and that women in Africa appear to be distracted by the struggle for gender equality, but women know exactly how to make the right choices given a conducive and benign social and economic environment. Thus, women need an environment where they can raise a family and also keep working if need be, without feeling guilty about such decisions. So far, the government and private sector employment policies have not shown them exactly how they could ease their burden. Women have come a long way over the past thirty years, from a journey that began in Mexico City in 1975, to Nairobi +20, and the world has within the same period changed dramatically in many ways. Beijing +10 has given rise to enormous expectations in all areas and in all countries regarding continued change in existing systems which promote discrimination, exclusion and lack of opportunities for so many women. Therefore, what is now needed is the political will to promote development in such a way that the strategy for the advancement of women seeks first and foremost to alter the current unequal conditions and structures that continue to define women as secondary persons, especially in the labour market. Development should now move to another plane in which women's pivotal role in society is recognised and given its true value (see the Nairobi Forward Look-

ing Strategies for the Advancement of Women, Paragraph 2).

The problem of the working woman in Japan is not far from being the problem of the working woman in Africa, as they share the common situation of male-domination and the relegation of women to the background. Africa's only consolation so far is, alas and ironically, its low level of development and therefore fewer opportunities for women to be absorbed into the labour market, unlike in Japan. Believing that African countries will one day attain the same level of economic development, the working woman in Africa may as yet face more hardship and discrimination if we do not intensify and sustain the struggle now.

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Plenty Done, Plenty More to Do: Women's Involvement in Politics and Decision-making in Uganda

This paper examines Uganda's record on women in politics and decision making vis-à-vis the commitments made at the World Conference on Women in Nairobi, through the Beijing Conference, and now ten years after Beijing. The main conclusion of the paper is that while plenty has been done in Uganda in involving women in politics, plenty more needs to be done.

The road thus far

Uganda is often cited as a success story with regard to the issue of women in leadership – specifically political leadership. Indeed, the 1995 Constitution contains various articles that address women's (political) leadership. The National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Constitution stipulate that the state shall ensure gender balance and fair representation of marginalised groups on all constitutional and other bodies. Article 32 addresses the need for affirmative action; Article 33 spells out rights specific to women. Article 78 states that every district shall have one woman representative in parliament, and article 180(b) ensures that one-third of members of each local council shall be women.

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One of the first demands that the Women's Movement made of the new National Resistance Movement (NRM) regime¹ was in the area of women's political rights. At independence in 1962 there was a 2: 88 female to male ratio in parliament (Tripp 2000: 70). Emasu (2001) aptly captures the situation over three decades: In 1967 no women served in parliament; in 1980 there was only one out of the 143 members. In the 1989 National Resistance Council elections, the NRM government brought about significant improvement in women's political participation. Thirty-four seats were reserved for women; two women won their seats in open contests against male candidates, three women were nominated by the president, and two were 'historical' members, appointed because of their participation in the guerrilla war led by the National Resistance Army. By 1996, 52 women held parliamentary seats, 39 of them reserved, and they constituted 19 per cent of the members of parliament. By 1995, women constituted

17 per cent of all ministers, 21 per cent of all Permanent Secretaries, 35 per cent of all Under Secretaries, and 16 per cent of all District Administrators. Women were also represented on National Commissions such as the Constitutional Commission, the Electoral Commission and the Human Rights Commission, as well as on parastatal boards.

Through affirmative action, women made considerable headway in parliament. Women now make up 24 per cent of the parliamentarians in Uganda. Despite the ongoing discussion of the merits or demerits of such a policy, one of the positive results is that women have been given exposure, political experience, and increased confidence. When asked about the changes to women's status after the 1986 NRM takeover, women overwhelmingly responded that the biggest changes related to women's participation in politics, standing for office, becoming public and government leaders, and being able to express themselves publicly to a greater degree than in the past (Emasu 2001).

In 1997 the Local Government Bill raised issues relating to women's access to political leadership. Although parliament had passed the Local Government Bill in December 1996, President Museveni vetoed