THE NEW JAPANESE WOMAN

Kathleen Costello

A new Unesco paperback, "The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan", by Takashi Koyama, brings together studies by Japanese specialists — mostly women — in the fields of labour, the family, the rural community, education, civic activities and public opinion.

Japan's New Constitution revolutionized the legal basis of Japanese new institutions. In this study, Mr. Koyama and his collaborators describe the sweeping reforms that gave women equal rights before the law and investigate the present relationship between legal and actual status.

On paper, the rights of Japanese women now compare favorably with those of any women in the world. At one bound the legal family unit passed from the patriarchial to the conjugal type, skipping entirely the intermediate marital structure sanctified in the West by the Code Napoleon. The study makes plain that it will take many years for Japan to absorb the psychological shock of this particular reform.

In contrast, the new rights of women to vote and to be elected to public office seem to have been taken in stride. In the 1958 elections to the House of Representatives, men and women exercised the right to vote in almost the same proportions, with 75.8 percent of eligible males and 74.4 percent of eligible females going to the polls. After the first post-war elections for the Diet, in 1946 and 1947, 8.4 percent of members

of the House of Representatives and 4 percent of members of the House of Councillors were women. As for local bodies like Domestic Courts, prefectoral, municipal and village Boards of Education, Eugenics Protection Committees and Civic Liberties Commissions, the number of women represented on them increases each year. In 1957, they held 21.5 percent of Public and Child Welfare Commission posts.

The gap between principle and practice is much wider with regard to the Constitutional right to equal pay for equal work — guaranteed also by the Labour Standards Law of 1947. However, if women's wages are still discriminatory, they are slowly growing less so. The present ratio of men's wages to women's — 6 to 4 — compares favourably with the pre-war 6 to 3, or 6 to 2. Among government workers there is almost no discriminatory treatment. But millions of women, particularly on farms, are still unpaid family workers.

As might be expected, it is inside the family that the conflict between old and new ideas is sharpest. Here men women have to work out their own personal terms of adjustment — here they reject, accept or compromise with the new status of women as defined by law.

Changing Patterns in Family Life

In the past, every detail of traditional Japanese family life was ritually prescribed. As a result, Mr. Koyama is able to analyze changing patterns in very specific terms.

The Japanese wife always spoke of her husband as *shujin* (master). And legally, he was in fact the master of the patriarchal household. Studies show that the word is still used 50 percent of the time; but many women now intentionally say, "my husband". When the husband addressed his wife he would call *Oi, oi* (Hey, Hey). This usage is rapidly vanishing, and the use of first names is spreading.

In the elaborate ritual governing meals, any choice food was offered first to the spirits of the ancestors, then to the patriarch and eldest son. Wife, daughters and other sons had to be content with poorer meals, which they ate after the patriarchal table had dined and wined. Only 14 percent of adult Japanese grew up in families where food was shared equally. But now, 38 percent of all families share

alike. (Fifty percent of farm families adhere to the old custom).

Bed - and - bath - times had their fixed etiquette, too. If the wife went to bed before the husband, she was called an "idle wife". In the morning, she had to get up first so that he would not see her looking dishevelled. The first bath was always for the husband. Although these priorities are still observed in rural areas, they are becoming obsolete in urban families, which now pay more attention to convenience than to custom.

The change in attitudes is also illustrated by an innovation in sharing domestic responsibility. Before the war, it was unheard of — or, if heard of, was shameful — for a man to help his wife with the housework. But only a few years after the war, a survey showed less than half of all Japanese still unconditionally disapproving.

Choosing a Marriage Partner

All these are improvements in woman's position after marriage. But what is the situation with regard to the method of choosing a marriage partner? Article 24 of the new Constitution says: "Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes.." But 1955 Ministry of Labour figures show that while 63 out of 100 Japanese thought that, "one's own choice of a spouse" is better than the "parents' choice", only 27 percent of women replied that they, themselves, would dare to oppose their parents' wishes. And a 1957 table indicates that 73 percent of marriages in large cities were still *miai* (arranged) marriages.

Mr. Koyama, however, comments: "Among young people the old procedure is rapidly succumbing to the new notion of marriage which regards a man and a woman as constituting the basis of marriage. In conjunction with the change in legal and moral norms, reform of actual marriage practices is expected to take place in the near future."

On the whole, the statistics assembled in "The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan" describe a trend, not a landslide. It cannot be said, and Mr. Koyama makes no effort to do so, that the last 15 years have effected a radical transformation of the Japanese woman's life. The impression given by this study is of creeping rather than dramatic change.

Education: The Keynote of Progress

But there is one exception. Equal education for children of both sexes became not only a legally recognized right, but a fact. Article 5 of the 1946 Fundamental Law of Education states: "Man and woman shall respect and cooperate with each other. Coeducation shall be recognized." The provisions of this law were put into effect with incredible speed.

Compulsory education was extended from six to nine years for all children; and in a country where boys and girls had been separated after the third grade, co-education was also made compulsory for the whole period. Before passage of this law, girls' secondary schools existed only to make "good wives and mothers" for middle and upper-class families. After the sixth grade, no effort was made to provide either a curriculum or level of teaching in any way comparable to what was offered to boys. Girl graduates of this system were equally unqualified for higher education and gainful employment.

Acceptance of women's right to equal education shows up strikingly in figures for enrolment after the compulsory nine years. Taking 1950 as a base year, the index of high school enrollment for girls had climbed to 173.9 in 1957 (as compared to 134.7 for boys) and to 284.7 for women in colleges (as compared to 144.3 for man).* In the same year, of the 51.2 percent of female college graduates who were employed, 63.6 percent were professional and 27.9 percent clerical workers.

This movement of women into positions that command social respect is a post-war phenomenon almost entirely attributable to the introduction of equal education. The author feels that this development, "will be likely to modify considerably the past tendency to belittle women and will contribute towards the enhancement of women's position."

The graduates of the new co-educational system of education still constitute a minority of the population of Japan. But there are already enough to make them an important leaven in Japanese attitudes. In this basic minority lies the promise of a happier, fuller life for the generation of women now growing up. (UNESCO)

*** Actual enrolment for senior high schools: 1,203,749 boys, 733,766 girls; for colleges and universities: 364,642 boys, 40,668 girls.**