

A Japanese Woman's Life Journey through Narration

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Abstract: This study focuses on a Japanese woman's life journey. Adopting a narrative inquiry methodology, the participant's perceptions of marriage, family, work and life value were summarized. As a senior citizen active in her career, the participant reflected on her life's "reality" which has been shaped and influenced by the political and socioeconomic backgrounds. Although the Japanese government has implemented a series of policies and laws to improve gender equality since the post-war period, according to "The Global Gender Report 2022" by the World Economic Forum, Japan's gender gap continues to be the lowest among the developed countries, with a ranking of no. 116 among all the 146 countries. The situation calls for the need of having more women's voices to be heard and reflected. This study will analyze the political and socioeconomic backgrounds, and examine women's changes from the past to the present as well as the possibilities in the future.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, Japanese, woman, gender, gender gap

1. Introduction

This year marks the 20th year of my residence in Japan. As a woman who had worked for a few years as an English teacher and had some experiences in companies in China, it was a huge decision for me to come to Japan in pursuit of higher education and more diverse experiences. Now that twenty years have almost passed, looking back, I have had to face numerous challenges that were deeply rooted in the perceptions of gender roles, with many nearly impossible to adapt to and accommodate with. Apart from my own experience, I have also witnessed the slow change of attitudes towards gender and gender gap, and have met some amazing Japanese women in various contexts. Although many of them have received high levels of education with excellent performances and communication skills, they are like "fish without water", not being fully appreciated and treated as they deserve in the Japanese society.

Ten years ago, while I was teaching a teacher training course to some university students who wanted to work in the future as certified English teachers in secondary schools in Japan, I had a very special participant. Unlike others who were around 20 years old, she was 60; and she was commuting to this weekly class while working at an elementary school nearby. What struck me most was that she was always cheerful, enthusiastic. This was the beginning of our friendship and planted the seed for this study.

Terms such as gender, gender equality or diversity have become very common in Japanese society in recent years. In 2015, the United Nations adopted "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", and its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) "which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership." Among the 17 goals, No. 5, Gender Equality is aiming to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".

As a developed country, Japan is the lowest in its gender gap index (World Economic Forum, 2022), and has numerous challenges in gender equality. Not only have the general public become more familiar with SDGs, issues of gender inequality have been frequently picked and reported in the mass media, the awareness of gender equality has improved. However, although

more and more women are joining the workforce, their voices have not been fully heard and reflected, and they have to face the challenges and learn to cope with them by themselves.

2. Literature Review/Background Information

2.1 Gender Gap

Since 2006, the World Economic Forum has been working on the Global Gender Gap every year. There are four subindexes/pillars to the global gender index: educational attainment, health and survival, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment.

The following table shows the scores of Japan's gender gap reports in 2006, 2021 and 2022.

Table 1. Gender Gap Report: Japan

Gender Gap Report: Japan							
Subindexes		2006 score (among 115 countries)		2021 score (among 156 countries)		2022 score (among 146 countries)	
	Global Gender Gap Index	80	0.645	120	0.656	116	0.650
Educational attainment		60	0.986	92	0.983	1	1.000
Health and survival		1	0.980	65	0.973	63	0.973
Economic participation and opportunity		83	0.545	117	0.604	121	0.564
Political empowerment		83	0.067	147	0.061	139	0.061

According to the latest gender gap report (World Economic Forum) published in July 2022, among 146 countries, Japan, overall, ranked as no. 116. In general, the gender gap index in 2022 has dropped in comparison to that of 2021. Specifically, in the four subindexes, educational attainment ranked as no. 1, health and survival no. 63, economic participation and opportunity no. 121, and political empowerment no. 139. This indicates that compared to the high educational attainment, women's economic participation and opportunity as well as their political empowerment are extremely low.

To take a further look into the details, there is a big leap in educational attainment. In 2006, the index was 0.968, and dropped slightly to 0.983 in 2021; in 2022, it increased to 1.000. Health and survival was ranked as no. 1 in 2006; however, in 2021 it fell to no. 65, and stayed at no. 63 in 2022. Regarding economic participation and opportunity, there is not much change in the 2006 and 2022 scores; but compared to 2021, the score is 0.04 lower. This decrease may

be partly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the 2021 global gender gap reported on the “impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic gender gaps”, “female workers often perform a proverbial ‘double shift’: a day shift in formal employment and a night or morning shift on care work in the home” (p. 53). “Although fathers have increased their time spent on childcare during the pandemic, on average women continue to perform a larger double-shift, leading to reduced working hours, a reversal of gain on entry into leadership positions and a larger incidence of labour force drop-out” (pp. 54-55). As the 2021 gender gap report (World Economic Forum) showed, although women constituted 72% of the workforce, the number of women employed part-time was almost double that of men, and women’s average income was 43.7% lower. Although more and more women are joining the workforce, the gender gap is big. It is hard for women to get fully employed, while working part-time doesn’t guarantee them a sufficient income and their welfare is not provided for. During pandemics, it is still common that mothers are usually the ones who have to sacrifice their time and career in order to take care of most of the domestic work, which in turn increases risks on their career and leadership opportunities.

The lowest is the score of political empowerment, with both 2021 and 2022 holding the same index of 0.061, but 0.006 lower than 2006. According to the 2021 report, there were 14.7% women in management, only 9.9% women in parliament, 10% in ministerial positions, and no female head of state during the past 50 years. In other words, important policies are made mostly by men, and do not sufficiently represent and reflect the voices of women who are playing a more and more important role in Japanese society.

2.2 A Brief Overview of Japan’s Economy and Gender Since World War II

To help understand the background that has influenced the perceptions of gender and gender roles in Japan, it is necessary to take a look at the economy since the post-war period. In general, the Japanese economy since post-war is usually categorized as the following: 1. 1945 – mid 1950s: post-war economic reforms and rehabilitation; 2. mid 1950s – early 1970s: high economic growth period; 3. early 1970s – mid 1980s: economic stable growth period; 4. mid 1980s – early 1990s: economic bubble; 5. early 1990s – present: period after the collapse of the bubble economy.

2.2.1 1945 – mid 1950s: Post-war Economic Reforms and Rehabilitation

This period is featured with Japan’s economic recovery from the defeat of World War II. A number of policies and social changes were implemented during this period. In 1945, the *ie* (patriarchal family) system was abolished. In 1946, the Constitution went into effect and the equality of the sexes was recognized. Women, for the first time, were guaranteed the same rights as men in politics. In 1947, the Fundamental Law of Education ensured the equal opportunity of education of men and women as “the people must be given equal opportunities to receive an education suited to their abilities, and must not be subjected to discrimination in education on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin” (Japanese Law Translation, 2006). This act has allowed women to receive higher education just as men do and also learn in the same classroom with them. In 1955, the *Nihon Hahaoya Taikai* (Japanese Mothers’ Convention) was first held in Tokyo, indicating a change in women’s social position in the rights in politics and freedom of marriage. The convention still continues, and this year marks its 67th anniversary.

2.2.2 Mid 1950s – early 1970s: High Economic Growth Period

Since the mid 1950s, Japan entered its high economic growth period. As The Society for Research on Women's History (1993, p. 231) describes the lifestyle change of the 1960s, "people are leading a more diverse lifestyle with more domestic electronic products, bicycles, etc. The number of women working even after getting married has increased. Different from the past when single women were the major workforce, there is an M shape change in women's work which is working, quitting after getting married or giving birth, and starting part-time when the children are old enough." There were also many challenges for women who wanted to continue working after getting married or giving birth. Systems such as marriage retirement and young retirement set by the companies became the barriers for women to pursue their career, and court cases originating from the lack of working rights were not rare (The Society for Research on Women's History, 1993, pp. 231-232).

2.2.3 Early 1970s – mid 1980s: Economic Stable Growth Period

In 1973, Japan's economy stepped into its stable growth period triggered by the oil shock. Problems such as environmental destruction, deterioration of education, and death from overwork became major issues of Japanese society. Meanwhile, at an international scope, women's rights and freedom continued to be acknowledged and improved. In 1975, the United Nations named the year 1975 as the International Women's Year, and since that year, March 8th has been celebrated as the International Women's Day. This has helped accelerate women's social status in Japan.

2.2.4 Mid 1980s – early 1990s: Economic Bubble

From the mid 1980s to early 1990s, Japan experienced a bubble economy. Prices rose sharply. Ohno (2002) listed a few peculiar phenomena during the late 1980s during the rising phase of the bubble, such as people "who had land became very rich and those who didn't had little chance of buying their home", and "this increased the sense of inequality and social injustice". "Too many office buildings were built in urban areas. They stood empty for many years to follow."

Hata (1984) discussed women's crisis in their gender identity management saying that women had anxiety resulting from the generally imposed identity as a mother, wife and housewife by the social norms and the desire to seek social position as an autonomous individual (p. 162). In 1985, the Act of Equal Employment was approved and put into effect in 1986. This law prohibits discriminatory and unequal treatment of men and women based on their sexes, and protects women from being forced or imposed to quit their jobs because of marriage or child birth.

2.2.5 Early 1990s – Present: Period after the Collapse of the Bubble Economy

The bubble economy collapsed in the early 1990s. Land prices dropped sharply, many house owners failed to pay for the house loans that were high during the bubble economy, and they were left with debts. It was hard for the young generations to find jobs and the competition was harsh.

In people's lifetime, their thirties is a period where a couple's psychological and social gaps come to be obvious. Men start to get settled since they have started working; however, it is a time for women to feel uneasy and anxious. As husbands and fathers, men's social status quos don't have to go through many changes, yet women have to go through various identities, and

face many “have-to-dos” in their twenties, thirties and forties as a wife, mother and housewife, all of which are imposed by the social norms. Compared to men who have less challenges and don’t need to manage their identities and consolidate their social statuses, women feel that “they are nothing” and this feeling very often reveals itself as jealousy, hatred or anger toward the husband and his social status. The anxiety that occurs requires women to reconstruct their identities not just as a parent, but also as an individual in society (Hata, 1984. pp. 177-179).

Since the post-war period, women have been through numerous social and economic changes, and so have their identities. The current situations of women in Japanese society cannot be fully understood without a good understanding of the past that shaped and influenced the present. The identities women withhold or prioritize will also have an impact on Japanese society in the future.

This study aims to have a better and deeper understanding of Japanese women’s life journey on a micro and individual level, to gain more insight of the participant’s perceived “reality” which has been influenced by larger contexts such as the political and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as her family members’ influences on her perceptions and identities.

3. Methods

The participant is Japanese, female, 70 years old and works as a yearly contracted English teacher in a public elementary school. The researcher has known the participant for approximately 10 years.

This study has taken a narrative interview approach and used an unstructured, in-depth interview. “The method of narrative interviewing often depends on a close, long-term relationship with participants, being familiar with each other’s background and developing an ethos of equality” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.182). According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) in *Narrative Interviewing*, Schütze (1977) has suggested that its basic idea is “to reconstruct social events from the perspective of informants as directly as possible”. “By [story] telling, people recall what has happened, put experience into sequence, find possible explanations for it, and play with the chain of events that shapes individual and social life.” “Narratives are always embedded in the socio-historical. The particular voice in a narrative can only be understood in relation to a larger context” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

4. Results

The interview was conducted in the researcher’s office at the convenience of the participant. At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the study and confidentiality were explained and clarified, and approval for recording was also taken. The participant was encouraged to tell her story in the sequence she wished. The interview lasted for about 2 hours and after the interview, the recording was transcribed. Following a structuralist analysis of narratives (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000), major life events and episodes narrated by the participant in a chronological order were compared, summarized and categorized as the following: marriage, child rearing, work, and the present.

Here is some basic information about the participant: she was born in 1952, and was 70 years old at the time of interview. She graduated from a university in Tokyo in 1972, at a time in which it was rare for women to go to college. She had worked at a gift shop for about three years before she got married and quit the job. She became a housewife and focused on her family and children. When her children started going to kindergarten she started learning and working part-time.

4.1 Marriage

The participant was 23 when she married her husband. He was her high school classmate, and a mutual family friend played the role of a matchmaker between both families. She talked about the reason for her marriage and how her family had pushed her into her unintended marriage. As she said, her marriage was incidental and happened when she went back home to visit her family during one summer holiday. She described her husband who came to visit her family every day at that time as the following:

毎日家に来たので、なにこの人と思ったけど... まあそういう人が家に来てうちの家族も誰あの人といいながら、それ田舎だったので、我が家に来る人はいいい加減には付き合えないでちゃんと結婚とかね、そういう人だったら。それから毎日来るようになって、結婚するって言いだしてそこが始まりなので、え～て思い、って結婚したのは始めなんですね。

[He literally came to my house every day; I was wondering what kind of person this was. Since it was the countryside, my father was a public servant and had his pride, so they were wondering if he came to visit every day for the purpose of marriage. Once this became obvious somehow I ended up marrying him.]

She mentioned the strong influence of her family because her father was a school principal (public servant) who took great pride in his work and social status. In the rural areas at that time, if a young man came to visit a young girl every day, then it was not just an issue between these two individuals, but two families. As a public servant, her father would feel a great sense of losing face if the young daughter didn't get married to the young man who visited every day. So when she reflected on why she got married, she has learned to accept her reality and shifted her focus on her children.

結婚したのは何故かふとした事したんですけど、しまったと思ってもしょうがないし、もう子供を育てることが私の仕事かなと思ひまして。

[An incident led to my marriage, and there is nothing I can do even if I regret it. So I started to see taking care of my children as my responsibility.]

Many things happened in her marriage life and she had to go through many challenges. One example is about the monthly expense. During that time, it was a norm that men worked and women stayed at home as housewives; the wife would receive a certain amount of monthly expenses and manage all costs within the budget. Her husband considered this as the wife's job and when she was short of money and asked her husband for more, he would blame her for her incapability.

なんかその時代の背景って男の人って自分の給料で食べさせてやってるとか、なんかお金が足りないって言うと、全部をやってるのにできないあなたが悪いってなるわけですね。

[At that time, if a wife said the monthly money she received from the husband was not enough, the husband would take it as it was your fault, I was providing everything to the family, and yet you failed to use it.]

Because the husband was supporting the family financially, he felt that he was the breadwinner, the giver, and the wife and children were dependent on him. This perception created a hierarchy of power between the husband and wife.

Another incident that has caused her to feel deeply disappointed at her husband was in 2010, when she was 62 years old. She said that a boy poured a large box of hot soup over her arms accidentally when she was with all her family on a short trip, and she was badly burnt in her arms. To her great disappointment, her husband just sat there, not doing a single thing. It was her son and daughter who hurriedly helped her and called the ambulance.

大丈夫とこうしてくれたのが主人じゃないんですね、娘と息子。何もしない。気づかないのかな？わからないのかな？だからそのまま何もしてない…もうそんないっぱいあるんですよ。結婚生活の中ではこの人やっぱり人間は孤独なんだ。

[It was my son and my daughter who asked if I was okay, and tried to help me. My husband didn't do anything. Nothing. Was it because he didn't notice? Or he didn't know what to do? Anyway he just stayed there and didn't do anything...My life is full of stories like this, and I feel all human beings in marriage are after all lonely.]

This incident triggered her to reflect deeply on her marriage life. Not only did she have a hard time understanding why her husband was not doing anything, she also felt helpless, sad and exhausted. Even if she is married and has a family, she feels deeply lonely.

4.2 Child Rearing

At the age of 24 she gave birth to her son in 1976, and her daughter in 1978 when she was 26. As noted previously that she was not happy with her marriage, she has learned to shift her attention to her children. She considered raising children as her job and responsibility and believed that it is very important to spend time with the children before they turn age three. Her husband did nothing to share the responsibilities of housework and taking care of the children. Although she couldn't speak it out because it was a norm then, deep inside she was questioning this situation.

内心では何で女の人だけがこんなね家事をして育児をして二人の子供なのになんで話し合わないのってずっと持ってましたね。でもそれが言えない言えない。

[Deep inside me I had been thinking why as parents only women had to do all the housework, taking care of the children, why can't the husband and the wife have a conversation on these? I was not able to speak it out, no.]

Once her children got a little older and started going to kindergarten, she started to take all opportunities to learn and was hoping to find a job in her 30s. In her late 20s, she started taking lectures on radio in preparation for new job opportunities.

もう子供を育てることが私の仕事かなと思ひまして、それで子供が3歳過ぎて4歳になる幼稚園に入る時に社会デビューしますよね。幼稚園に入ってたかその時までには私も社会もデビューしようと決心しました。

[I thought taking care of my children was my job. So when my younger child was three years old and started going to the kindergarten I would start working. I had made that decision.]

まだ30だったらまだ就職できると思ってたんですよ。そしたらその就職がやっぱりいざとなったら自分のできることがなかったんですね。その時就職してるお母さん多いですかね。働いてる女性がほとんどね結婚したらやめてみたいで。

[When I was 30, I thought that I could find a job, but I couldn't. At that time many mothers were working, but it seemed that most of them quit their jobs after getting married.]

Her strong motivation and drive to work cannot be separated from her children. The first thing she mentioned at the beginning of the interview was the reason she became an English teacher.

どうして私が今、英語教師として小学校で働いているかということは、私が結婚して子供を産んでからそれがそこに原点があります。何の原点かと言うと子供が生まれて1年の間の成長がすごく感動しました…この子供達にとって1年間ってなこんなに成長するんだから、この子達が二十歳になる時にやはり子親の役目はその時代の子供達と話が合う親になっていたいなと思ったのがきっかけですね。

[Speaking of the reason why I am working as an English teacher in elementary school, it lies in the birth of my children. I was deeply touched witnessing my children's significant growth within just a year after they were born...since they can grow so much within just a year, then when they become 20 years old, as a mother I need to grow too so that I can be a parent of the new time instead of falling behind. So that was the starting point of my career journey.]

As she explained, her journey to her current situation dates back to the birth of her first child. She felt deeply touched by the child's rapid growth and development within just a year, and therefore decided to be a mother that keeps learning and growing with her children, and also someone that would not be left behind in the society.

4.3 Work

To reach the current situation, she has made great efforts for years. She has been trying hard to keep up her learning process; meanwhile, she also had to do multiple part-time jobs before she got a full-time position in an elementary school at the age of 60. She described her life patterns in her 30s and 40s when she was extremely busy.

30代40代が1番働いたかな、パートに行って昼から英語教えて夜が塾に行って。

[I think the hardest time for me was when I was in my 30s and 40s. My daily life was like doing a part-time job in the morning, teaching English from noon, and then going to cram school at night.]

Since she had to learn to manage the monthly expenses within the limited budget from her husband's salary, there was not enough for her own studying. She not only had to work part-time in order to pay for her learning, but also to keep practicing her learning in order to gain more experiences and be always prepared for better job opportunities.

Her family influence has been huge and deserves much attention. First, her attitudes towards the education of her children were deeply influenced by her mother who was, as she described, "a very very devoted education mom". Her father was the school head of an elementary school, which at that time was considered as "public servant" and had much respect from others. She later realized that her father also dedicated himself to the school, his students and colleagues.

今思えばねやっぱ母が一生懸命してくれたんだなーって思いますね。母の影響がすごく大きいです。母はとてとてもとても教育ママ。

[Not that I come to think of it, after all my mother had really dedicated herself to us. Her influence was huge.] [She was a very devoted education mom.]

父としては本当にあの小さな学校の校長だったんですけど、すごくやっぱ教育熱心だったんだろうな一って思って、学校を見て思いました。

[My father was the head of that small school. When I went to that school I just couldn't help thinking that he must have dedicated himself to education.]

She talked about the strong influence of her parents and her family, especially what it means to be a mother because her mother devoted herself to the children's education and had all her three children finish university, which was not very common at that time.

4.4 Present

So what does she think of her life now? Since both of her children have become independent, she can finally focus on herself. She has her own time and job; she is financially independent.

自分ができる時間は自由にできるだから、もう1日自由です自分の時間にあの全部自分のタイムスケジュール自分の好きなようにできるの。初めて自分のためだから、自分のための自分のお仕事で自分のお金をもらえる、自立できそうそれが一番。

[I can do whatever I want with my time, really, I can schedule my time freely as I like. It was the first time I am living for myself, working for myself, and earning my own money. Being able to become independent is the best.]

For the first time in life, she expressed that she felt free, free with her own time and money, free to make choices for herself.

Although she has thought about divorcing her husband countless times, financially it doesn't sound like a wise decision to her. She justified her relationship with her husband as "living under the same roof, but minding their own businesses".

今ずっと振り返るとね、そういう人だったから自分が勉強せざるえなくなって今があるのかなって思うようになりましたけど、もその時はねその悩みは誰にもあまり言えないし、つらかったですね。結婚したことによって自立のチャンスをもらったと思えば、今は思いますよ。だから本当に自分が一生を終えてなくなる時にありがとうって言える自分にならないといけないなと思ってますので、だから自分がやっぱ好きなようにして、そしてこういう風に勉強したのはまあその人だったからできたのかな一っていう風に思えるようにね。

[Now that I have often looked back, although I can justify it as I wouldn't have been able to become independent if I hadn't married him and experienced it all, it was hard and I couldn't talk to anyone. So I can think in a way that because I married my husband I had a chance to become independent. So right now I am doing things I like, and living the life I like, I have to think in a way that thanks to him there is me today. I need to be able to say thank you to him before I die, I have learned to think that without marrying him I wouldn't have become the me now.]

Although she is not happy with her marriage, she has learned to see it in a more positive way so that she won't regret her life choices and her perceived self.

5. Discussion

The participant has gone through Japan's high economic growth period (mid 1950s – early 1970s), economic stable growth period (early 1970s – mid 1980), economic bubble (mid 1980s – early 1990s), and the collapse of the bubble economy from the early 1990s till the present.

During the high economic growth period, it was typical that many women joined the workforce, but would quit their jobs after getting married or becoming pregnant to focus on family. Many of the publications at that time portrayed a good housewife as someone who takes care of laundry and clothing, maintains a clean house and hygiene, cooks good meals, and takes good care of the children in order to make sure every family member is living with vitality and energy for the following days (Hara, 1979).

「家庭全員がいきいきと暮らし、明日のエネルギーを再生産するために衣服をととのえ、家をかたづけ、清潔に保ち、おいしい食事を作り、育児に心をくばるのがいい主婦です」ということになっているようだ。

[It is said that “a good housewife should be a housewife who prepares clothes, keeps the house clean, cooks delicious meals, and takes good care of the children so that the whole family can lead a lively life and regenerate energy for the next day.”]

According to NHK's survey on Japanese perceptions of women's ways of living (Inoue, 1994), in the 1970s, women's top priority was child rearing, followed by caring for the family, over 70% among all.

Women's roles are not limited to being a good mother, a good housekeeper, but also a good wife. A good wife is, according to the interviewee, being obedient to the husband.

夫婦関係。だから昔はそうよ。お母さんの役目だったから家にいて、そうそうあの夫唱婦随とかいう言葉があるじゃないですか、夫に従って妻がついていく。

[Marital relationship. So it was like this in the past. A mother had to stay home because it was her job. There is a saying '*fushofuzui*', right? Which means being obedient to the husband and following him from behind.]

When their children became old and independent enough, the women would go back to work, but mostly part-time. Even though some women would like to continue working after getting married or giving birth, the environment was not in favor of them due to some barriers made by companies such as marriage retirement (The Society for Research on Women's History, 1993, p. 231).

Since the economic stable growth period of the early 1980s, the number of people who refused to marry but chose to stay single increased (Inoue, 1994, p. 31). Hata (1984) pointed out that women had anxiety in managing their identities due to the fact that they had been imposed on with the identities of being a good mother, wife and housewife even though they were seeking other identities as individuals through social participation. In the economic bubble (mid 1980s – early 1990s) period, more changes in perceptions occurred. According to NHK's survey in the late 1980s, different from the 1970s that prioritized child rearing and family, there was a change in the balance of work and family. Child rearing still remained at the top, but keeping the balance of work and family became the second priority. In 1998 balancing work and family became the top (Inoue, 1994, pp. 30-31).

The participant's life pattern represents many other women of her age, with men working outside and women dealing with domestic responsibilities. Power exists not just in the companies, but often in the family as well. For her generation, housework, taking care of children as well as the parents-in-law all fall on the shoulders of the wife, while the husband

mostly provides financial support to the family and very frequently sees himself as the one who is more powerful and in a higher position. The wife would often have to bear with the situation, and with the husband's complaints of her being incapable of managing financial situations well over many years, until *jukunen rikon* (熟年離婚). This term came from a Japanese TV drama named *jukunen rikon* in 2005, referring to couples who divorce after more than 20 years of marriage (Wikipedia), and since then it has been commonly recognized and used. This phenomenon often happens when the children become independent and the husband becomes retired. Women feel that as their major responsibility of raising the children has been completed, there is no need any more to continue putting up with the husband and burdening themselves with all the daily chores such as cooking three meals a day. Many of them started saving money a long time ago for this moment to come so that they can be released from this burden and be free to do whatever they like and want for the rest of their life.

Asahi New Digital (2022, Aug. 24, 17:40) reported that the ratio of *jukunen rikon* has reached its highest 21.5% since 1947, based on the 2020 data of couples who married for more than 20 years by Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan. According to the latest statistics of lifespan in Japan by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2022), women's average life expectancy is 87.57 years old, about 6 years longer than men's average of 81.47. Since the retirement age is mostly 60 years old, there are still many years left for women to seek a better life and make choices for themselves. This may also contribute to the rise of divorce.

During the past 40 years, women's life has experienced significant changes. Diversity is increasing. Getting married and staying in the family as a good wife and mother is no longer the only option for women, and the typical stereotype doesn't apply to the current situation anymore.

There has been a major change in the younger generation's attitude towards marriage and marriage life. In 2014, *Jiji Tsushin* (June 17, 8:11) reported a survey result by the Cabinet Office of Japan that the top reasons for women's (age of 20-30) choosing to stay single or marry late were "not wanting to lose the freedom of being single", followed by "willing to concentrate on career and study", whereas the same age group men perceive "lack of financial strength" as ranking top. This result indicates a significant gap in how men and women view marriage. Most men still see themselves as the major breadwinner of the family, whereas women voiced a strong need to maintain their "freedom" and don't want to sacrifice their perceived "freedom" for marriage. Watching the older generation's lifestyle, especially women who have to deal with numerous house chores, taking care of the children, and caring for the husband's parents without enough support, understanding and respect from the husband, many young women don't see marriage in a positive way, but as an obstacle to their freedom. Now the time has changed drastically during the past few decades, and women are no longer happy and satisfied with their stereotypical roles. Through social participation, they can not only gain financial independence and confidence, but also have more freedom to explore their social values and meaning of life, and make social contributions.

However, the old stereotype of women is still deep-rooted and can be commonly observed. Responsibilities of child rearing, caring for the family, and housework still heavily fall on the shoulders of women. Women still sometimes face a dilemma of making choices between choosing to live as they wish and following the perceived roles based on gender stereotypes (Inoue, 1994, pp. 30-31).

Understanding how the participant reflects on her life in the past enables us to take a closer look at the "reality" through her eyes and understand the present better. There must have been many other women who have constantly tried their best to live the life they want even though the big environment seems very challenging. Through her narration we can see a life role model

who showed us the spirit of trying the best living, despite all the difficulties and hardships. Her story also provides details in understanding the larger contexts over the decades.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals a more concrete picture of women in Japan since the post-war period. Through the narration, we are able to have a closer look at the lifestyles at different economic periods, and the norms, as well as dilemmas and hardships the participant and many other women had to face. Although the interviewee had to face various challenges, now the time has changed, and women can have more freedom and opportunities.

However, the situation in Japan remains very challenging. With increasing numbers of divorce, and decreasing birth rate as well as the decrease of marriage, Japan's population is facing a severe decrease. According to Kyodo News (Apr. 15, 2022: 22:51), Japan's population has fallen by a record 644,000 to 125.5 mil. in 2021.

Japan's population had its largest drop on record, falling by 644,000 to just over 125.5 million in 2021, reflecting a decline in foreign residents amid tighter border controls over the coronavirus pandemic and the rapidly aging society, government data showed Friday.

Japanese nationals totaled 122,780,000, a drop of 618,000 from a year earlier. While Japan saw 831,000 births in 2021, the number was outpaced by the year's 1.44 million deaths.

Tesla Inc. CEO Elon Musk responded to this (Kyodo News, May 9, 2022: 14:44) and pointed out that in 50 years Japan will disappear.

"At the risk of stating the obvious, unless something changes to cause the birth rate to exceed the death rate, Japan will eventually cease to exist. This would be a great loss for the world."

Even though it may sound over exaggerated and terrifying, it rings the bell for the Japanese government to understand the emergency and take prompt actions to improve women's social status, truly realize gender equality, and create an equal society for both men and women. To do this, more women's voices have to be heard, reflected and integrated in social changes.

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