

**Irene Redondo-Churchward**  
Executive Director, Project Info  
Community Services  
Whittier, California

First of all, I want to offer my sincere appreciation to the Institute of International Education and to the Japan Center for International Exchange for arranging this magnificent opportunity for our six-woman US delegation to participate in a "Dialogue with our Japanese counterparts in an effort to create a better global understanding of our roles in promoting change and transformation in our societies." I also want to commend, as well as thank, the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership for its vision as evidenced by the support it has given this project.

On a very personal level, my visit to Japan did much to correct many misperceptions that I had about the status of women in that country. Their awareness of the existence of these misperceptions became clear when one of the Japanese women we met asked us if we were surprised that they were not "walking three steps behind our men." We met many interesting women from a variety of backgrounds. The added benefit of getting to know the rest of the US delegates of the Japan-US Women Leaders Dialogue made the trip even more special, not only because we were so compatible, but because we were able to check out our observations with one another and learn from each other's area of expertise.

Reading all the background information I was sent, as well as anything else pertaining to Japan that I could get my hands on, provided me with a frame of reference more consistent with the reality we experienced. In spite of this, there were still many surprises, because, of course, nothing can take the place of actually being there and talking to people in their own familiar surroundings. The two weeks we spent in Japan were like looking into a constantly changing kaleidoscope, with many different exposures to people, venues, and experiences.

The women we met were intelligent and well-educated with much to say about their current status and the need for more changes in Japan that directly affect them. They were concerned about human rights, education, quality childcare and care for the elderly, and environmental issues. They were so open and eager to share their thoughts and ideas. Since many of them had gone to school in the United States, it seemed they knew a great deal more about us than we about them, though two of our group had attended a year of schooling in Japan and knew more about the country and the culture than the rest of us.

## Tokyo

During our first orientation, we learned that the concept of “nonprofit corporations or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” is a fairly new one in Japan. It seems that “the best and the brightest” are always tapped by the government, which reduces the pool that might be interested in this area. But there now appears to be a growing awareness that government and business do not hold all the solutions for the Japan of the future. We were told by Tadashi Yamamoto, the president of the Japan Center for International Exchange, that “thinking Japanese want change, and women need to be involved as change agents.”

From him we also heard the word “internationalization” for the first of what was to be many times during our visit. We were told that it no longer means just learning to speak English. It now includes the goal of transforming Japanese society to make it more compatible with the outside world and consistent with being a global power.

It was acknowledged that in fact some of the leaders in Japan perceive other groups as inferior because they are not “economically efficient.” But at the same time, it was also stated that Japan is now examining its emphasis on economics and its goal of “catching up with the West” at the expense of the values surrounding the “quality of life.” In addition, the Gulf War brought about much self-examination, as most Japanese were surprised at the reaction of the rest of the world to their involvement—which was limited to financial support only. Their failure to provide manpower while smaller, less powerful nations were doing so brought into question whether or not Japan could remain an economic power without becoming a more visible participant in global politics as a military power. It is in this larger context that one begins to see the changing conditions in Japan and what roles women will be playing in this transitional period.

Professor Yoriko Meguro from Sophia University gave us her definition of internationalization as “people to people exchange, not just goods and trade,” and a “sharing of global key concepts of equality, human rights, justice, and fairness.” She indicated that the United Nations Year of the Woman, which began in 1975 at the Copenhagen Conference and went on to become the Decade of the Woman (with the 1980 and 1985 conferences in Mexico and Nairobi, respectively) had significant impact on the lives of Japanese women.

She lamented the fact that though the government started to offer conferences on gender equality, only women attended them which, unfortunately, limited the impact. She also said women at that time were more interested in equality than in peace and development, but now they see the interrelatedness. She felt strongly that Japanese women must share with other women from different countries in order to reconceptualize how they relate to others around the world.

Media expert Akira Kojima brought to our attention some key issues related to the “quality of life.” The Japanese birthrate at 1.5 children per family, and the world’s longest life expectancy at 81 years for women and 75 years for men, are combining

to create major problems for the future. In addition, a recent survey found that 54% of the young women interviewed wanted to remain single. If these trends continue, he predicted the extinction of the Japanese in 800 years.

We learned that there is a shortage of farmers and that farmers are mostly over 65. There is also a shortage of spouses for younger farmers. We heard from others that a solution chosen by some is to bring in and marry women from other Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Thailand. We also learned that these women are expected to work the farms, that they are not treated respectfully, and that they are often victims of domestic violence. Others that spoke later stated that Asian immigrant women get all the "dirty jobs."

It is interesting to note that while "change" is the main agenda for both government and business in Japan, Mr. Kojima feels men are less qualified to handle it than women because "men are hostages to companies," and therefore lack freedom to explore and be innovative. It was also noted by Professor Meguro that men are afraid to change because they don't know where they will fit.

As a third-generation Mexican-American, I see similarities in cultural thinking between countries. I have felt the same struggle with "traditional sex-role concepts" from some of our men. However, though we still need to improve and are a long way from where we need to be, I have also witnessed tremendous growth by men in general, and Hispanic men in particular, in the last 10 years. I see more acceptance and appreciation of womens' strengths and abilities to rise to all challenges and deal successfully with "change." I also see them recognizing womens' ability to manage several things simultaneously (as opposed to being singly focused) as something to be emulated.

Akiko Domoto, a member of the House of Councillors in the Japanese Diet since 1989, said she is often surprised by how little people around the world know about Japan. She spoke of her many interests, including biodiversity, which has to do with how culture is determined by the shape of the environment surrounding it. She spoke of meeting then-Senator Al Gore when they were both members of "Global Legislators Organization for a Balanced Environment (GLOBE) and was very glad to hear him say "it's time to hear women's points of view for problem solving."

She is also very involved in trying to change the Eugenics Protection Law, which is the embodiment of the eugenics ideal to promote the increase of a population with desirable characteristics and prevent one with inferior genetic ones. She sees it as discriminatory, because some eugenic surgery cases can be performed without the patient's consent. Moreover, compulsory sterilization was forced on women at a rate four to five times that of men and completely ignores women's rights. She wants to promote a new law that guarantees every woman's right to decide whether or not to bear children, as well as every woman's right to contraception and abortion. Her statement was very consistent with how most of the women I know in this country feel about that issue. It seems incredible that the outcome of this issue,

which has such a significant impact on women, could be determined primarily by men. It brought to mind how many women felt in the United States during the "Anita Hill" portion of the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings.

From Wakako Hironaka, another member of the House of Councillors, we learned that, though they are few in number, there are more women elected on a national level than on a local level. This is definitely the reverse of the trend in the United States, though we are making significant gains nationally. Overall actual positions of power for women, however, seem much more limited than in our country.

Professor Iwao said Japan is a "singles culture" while the United States is a "couples culture." Her description of the independent lifestyles led by married couples bore that out. Of great concern, it seems, is the issue of men who, having worked all their lives, retire with the expectation of being "taken care of" by their wives. However, since little energy has gone into working at the marriage relationship, the expectation proves to be unrealistic, because women have learned to lead independent lives while the men have focused almost exclusively on their jobs. It appears that, while men focused on "material satisfaction and quantity," women were more focused on "spiritual fulfillment and quality." Since one of their major concerns is the rapid "graying of Japan," this could be a source of significant problems in the future.

Because of my professional background in social services, particularly in the prevention of abusive behaviors, I found it interesting that there are no statistics to show to what extent such behavior exists in Japan. For example, when asked about the incidence of rape, we were told that crowded conditions don't allow for it to happen. In addition, "domestic violence" seems nonexistent, though it was acknowledged that in fact it could be seriously underreported. With regard to alcohol abuse, we were told that Japanese lack the enzyme to metabolize alcohol, and therefore it appears that things done under the influence are not judged too harshly. There was reference to "kitchen alcoholics"—women who drink at home alone—but again there was very limited information.

It appears that the main deterrent to abusive behaviors is the very admirable value of "not bringing shame to the family." This is one for us to emulate for prevention purposes. However, since this value could also be the reason why such behaviors are seriously underreported, and thus a reason for the government to perhaps reject abuse prevention as a priority item, it would seem that NGOs would be the appropriate vehicles to respond to the issue of abuse.

The Director of the Prime Minister's Office for Women Affairs informed us that there is a "National Plan of Action" to improve all aspects of women's lives. When asked to describe the mechanism for input from women around the country, she told us that all ministries have advisory councils, and that she is often asked "informally" to make recommendations. The impression is that, while government wants to establish policies that create favorable conditions for combining work with family life, it will happen neither because of a great push from women in power,

nor because of significant input from women in general, but rather for economic reasons.

As we began to meet the women working on the local community level, it became apparent that they were actively involved in solving what they saw as problems in their respective communities without waiting for government action. I loved the passion they showed for the multitude of activities they were involved with and was thankful for the opportunities we had to really "dialogue" with them.

At the HELP Asian Women's Shelter, we learned that the main recipients of services are women from the Philippines and Thailand. I felt great admiration for the director and was inspired as she spoke of her battles as a human rights activist. Her concern for the welfare of these women she felt had been exploited and physically and/or emotionally abused was followed with significant action on their behalf. She felt strongly that the underutilized women's centers found in each prefecture should accommodate those women victims from other countries who married Japanese men. I saw parallels with our country in terms of similar exploitations of some undocumented farm workers in California.

### **Yokohama**

Our visit to the Yokohama Women's Forum provided us with a very modern example of some of the facilities available to women for growth, support, and enrichment. We saw examples of their activism, including the production of videos to create awareness of environmental hazards for women and the elderly and the translation of books while giving them a female perspective. Their pride was evident as they shared their work with us. They also have counselling and women's support groups that are now beginning to gain momentum. Over dinner we discussed and agreed on the importance of "women helping women."

Visiting the Alternative Lives Opportunity Center gave us a good example of how community women are taking charge and going forward with environmental concerns. Their co-op buying and recycling concepts have expanded to other quality-of-life issues with, priority given to "ending consumerism and depletion of resources." One woman had even started her own successful restaurant which operated on the first floor of the three-story building; she graciously provided us with an "American" style meal.

Another woman had political aspirations and was part of a group that seeks to support women candidates. Believing that the future of Japan lies in the development of systems to access government, she realized that becoming an elected official is one important avenue. She told us how other women came to her aid when she ran for office by helping to take care of her children, cleaning and cooking dinner, etc. It was encouraging to hear of this type of a support system, an example of how women often work differently than men. Again, I see parallels in my own life to the support I received from women who joined me in a common cause and

helped in whatever way needed, with no expected reward other than making strides for women in general.

### **Fukuoka**

Fukuoka is an impressive city with many impressive women as well. Here we met two women lawyers who were involved in and won the first sexual harassment case in Japan's history. Tsujimoto-san said she used the US definition and won on the grounds of "hostile environment." She spoke of the lack of effective laws for divorced women seeking alimony or child support, and that many women seeking her counsel were not economically self-sufficient. Japan, unlike the United States and especially California, is not a litigious society, so there are only 40,000 lawyers, of whom only 700 are women.

In conversation later, she shared how, in spite of her professional career, she was feeling guilty being at the reception because she still had to go home and fix dinner for her children. We talked about the difficulties of single parents. I empathized as I recalled similar feelings when my children were younger, and how very difficult it was to "find the right balance," in spite of the fact that I was blessed with a very supportive husband who would fill in for me on different occasions. It appears that this is an issue that women with young children in both countries share in common. The constant desire to be the "best mother," as well as the "best in the working world" is a demanding challenge, but one that will become more manageable as society becomes more responsive to working mothers.

Here we also heard from Takahashi-san who believed "women are like silk, i.e., soft, smooth, and beautiful, but also of high quality and enormous strength." She talked about the need to divert the current emphasis and obsession from "competition and economics to earth and people." Hearing her words inspired me to think of creating a "SILK Earth Network" of women who shared the same ideas and beliefs. SILK could become an acronym for "Sisterhood of International Leaders, for a Kinder Earth Network." Such a network could become a viable tool for creating more international exchange of ideas and support.

It was also in Fukuoka that two of us from the United States were invited by Professor Kano, who teaches Modern Japanese Literature at the University of Kurume, and by Imamaru-san, a film maker, to eat at a sidewalk *udon* noodle shop. We later went for a walk and talked about our families and special challenges in our lives, our joys and disappointments, with one of them saying to me: "Well, *que sera, sera*," which of course in Spanish is "what will be will be." Later we stopped at a place where we sang *karaoke* in English, Japanese, and to my surprise, in Spanish as well. Though I could only attempt to hum along with the Japanese songs, my fellow US delegate, Susan, was able to sing them well, having spent a year in Japan as a student. I was thoroughly impressed with the women who could sing the Spanish songs along with me. Though we were all very tired at the end of the evening, it was sad to say goodbye to our new friends who now

felt like old friends because we had shared so much laughter and enjoyment. And it also pointed out how we are much more alike than we are different.

I enjoyed talking with the Deputy Mayor of Fukuoka, Dr. Kato, who formerly practiced medicine at the University of Kyushu Hospital, and who at the age of 67 looked at least 20 years younger. She spoke of the need for health promotion in this aging society. She also said she preferred the term "ageless" to "aging."

### **Kanazawa**

Kanazawa provided us with the most in-depth look at the arts in Japan. We were treated to spending time with two very famous artists, a father and son combination, who not only welcomed us to their home, but graciously prepared a formal "tea ceremony" together with all the needed explanations. Later we were their guests for dinner and were invited to visit their gallery the next day. They are the seventh- and eighth-generation creators of world-famous Ohi pottery.

We learned from the Mayor that this beautiful city was not damaged during World War II and consequently is well preserved. However, students now are more interested in modernization than traditional preservation. He felt strongly that the younger generation needs to be better educated to appreciate the value of preservation and to respect history more. He wants to promote his city as an "international community" and spoke of the city's 30 year history with its sister city, Buffalo, New York. He was also very proud that he had appointed one of the only two women school superintendents in Japan.

It was here too that we learned women cannot return to a university education in later life, since most students are the same age and entrance requirements are rigid. This made a strong impression on me, as I was a "returning student" and graduated from the university at age 38 when my three children were all in school.

Though we were assured that some things are changing, I regard this as a significant block to achievement for many women in Japan. And I could not help but think of the many women I have known and encouraged over the years to return to school and the avenues of empowerment that it opened for most of them. We were asked more than once if we were "normal" or "typical" women. My response was that I was indeed a very average housewife and mother after my children were born, though, like many housewives, I had worked prior to having children. The difference for me, of course, was pursuing my college degree as a mature woman and then becoming a professional. It is my sincere hope for the women of Japan that, in the near future, continuing education will not be limited to life enrichment courses as they are now, but will include academic courses as well.

Shijima Elementary School provided us with a first-hand look at an example of the educational system. We enjoyed having lunch with the students and heard from one young man of his concern for the environment and his plans to address it in the future. It was interesting to note that all children, regardless of grade, were

seated or worked in groups of four, two boys and two girls. There seemed to be no separation by gender in any of the classes, and girls were even operating woodshop tools in the sixth grade. Perhaps this will be a significant factor in continuing the trend that more girls in Japan graduate from high school and junior colleges to the university level than do boys.

The senior daycare center we visited was unique in that it offered cross-generational opportunities for interaction, since there was a childcare center at the same facility together with social services. Among the most important challenges Japan faces in the future are its rapidly aging population, which is approaching 25 percent over age 65, and the question of who will be responsible for taking care of the elderly. We heard from many women that they are the ones who must bear the responsibility not only for taking care of their aging parents, but for the husband's as well. Combine this with the world's longest average life span, and it appears that more attention will have to be paid to maintaining healthy lifestyles after age 65.

In the United States, seniors are a very powerful lobbying group and as a result have many centers that encourage involvement and participation in a wide range of activities that help keep them physically and emotionally fit, as well as mentally alert. There is generally a component that allows for home delivered meals to the frail elderly who may live alone. In some cases there are also respite caregivers who take over for the primary caregiver for a limited amount of time. This then prevents or delays the onset of the type of problems that require 24-hour individualized care from family or others. Perhaps the feasibility of using the same model in Japan could be an area for greater information exchange.

One of my special memories of beautiful, snowy Kanazawa will be of the elderly lady in a department store who, recognizing me as not being Japanese, took it upon herself to guide me onto an escalator and showed me how to get off as well. I found it charming that she was concerned that I, a perfect stranger and a *gaijin* (foreigner), not hurt myself, in the event that I didn't understand how this machinery worked.

### **Tokyo Revisited**

Upon returning to Tokyo, and after our last official meeting, I was asked by Akiko Mashima, a member of the Niigata City Council, to join her for lunch at a Mexican restaurant as she wanted my opinion on the quality of the food. This provided us with an excellent opportunity to discuss issues on a one-to-one basis. We talked about the lack of a systematic training or mentoring process to help younger women learn how to effectively access the current power structures. Her conclusion was that most women who are in a position of power, herself included, need all their energy to maintain it. Further, she believed serving as a role model was equally effective.

While this is undoubtedly true, I shared how valuable the training was that I received from the *National Hispana Leadership Institute*, which is dedicated to "creating



positive global change through personal integrity and ethical leadership.” It was not only excellent training, but was also significant in that it was started by women in power with a vision of helping other women be the best they can be, and simultaneously created a national network that has grown and multiplied every year. I believe that a similar model could be started in Japan and that the rewards and benefits could be substantial, not only for women in general, but for the entire country as well.

On my final day in Japan, I went back to spend more time with the director of the HELP Center, who then introduced me to the women at the Christian Temperance Union. We spoke of the problem of vending machines, which dispense alcoholic beverages along with soft drinks and are everywhere, making them easily accessible to teenagers even though the official drinking age is 20. It seems that it is difficult to get government to see this as a problem, since the vending machines provide a great source of tax revenue. Furthermore, because of the significant amount of money spent on advertising by the alcohol industry, they did not feel enough support could be gained by approaching the newspapers to cooperate on this issue.

We talked about how advertising was an issue for us in the United States as well, not only regarding liquor but tobacco products as well. When I suggested approaching the PTAs as a source for advocacy, it was stated that most PTAs are controlled by the principal, who in turn is a government employee. Therefore, this seemed like it would not be a workable solution. They were, however, hopeful that in the near future vending machines may in fact be removed from the sidewalks because they take up too much space and don't allow enough room for pedestrians. This approach then seems less confrontational and much more consistent with their value system. For me, it was a valuable lesson in understanding and respecting how we can solve problems very differently and still achieve the same desired results.

I left Japan with a variety of impressions and thoughts. I know they have a “bamboo barrier” that corresponds with our “glass ceiling.” I also know that frustrations over limited opportunities in some areas is something else we have in common. But I was also very impressed with the women in general and with some of the supportive men we met as well. The level of awareness of the need for change is growing, and women need to create national networks to assist each other in finding the places where they can be the most effective.

I'm looking forward to the Japanese delegation coming to the United States in June. I only hope we can offer them an experience as gracious, informative, and enlightening as they did for us.