PART 2

GENDER
Sex Equality for Japanese Women

Social change in postwar Japan has conspicuously affected the status of women. The new Constitution proclaimed sex equality, and legal reforms have gradually been implemented to emancipate women from their second-class citizenship. Moreover, change has gone beyond legal formalities; women have actually benefited doubly from Japan’s accelerated economic growth over the last two decades. Industrialization has made possible an unprecedented degree of mechanization of housework, liberating women from heavy, full-time domestic responsibilities. Moreover, the insatiable demand for workers in industry has lured a large number of women into the labor market, providing them with an economic base for independence.

The general trend is thus toward ever greater sexual equality, however tardy it may appear. Nevertheless, a clear consensus as to what equality really means in Japan has not yet emerged, and there is by no means unanimity with regard to whether equality is possible, or even desirable, from the standpoint of women’s welfare. In the meantime, male dominance in most institutions remains basically unchallenged, and the Japanese women’s liberation movement is the object of mockery rather than serious consideration, at least in the male-dominated press. In short, the contemporary trend toward sexual equality is complex and ridden with dilemmas in Japan, as it is elsewhere.

It is clear that the direction in which Japanese women are moving in relation to men is far from merely unilinear. My personal observations plus a cursory survey of available literature on the status of Japanese women, including government-sponsored statistical reports, popular magazines, and the publications of women’s liberation groups seem to suggest a trilinear pattern. The three directions in which sexual equality seems to lead may be characterized as ‘dimorphic,’ ‘bimorphic,’ and ‘amorphic.’

DIMORPHISM

Dimorphism refers to an extension and intensification of the traditional differentiation of roles, or division of labor, between the sexes. Men assume a full-time occupation outside the household while women occupy themselves full-time with domestic chores. This ‘in-and-out’ role differentiation has progressed alongside urbanization and family nucleation, and it is typically evident in urban, middle-class families composed of a ‘salary man’ husband,