Japanese Fleeing a Thick Glass Ceiling

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When she visits home, there are times when Reiko wants to blurt out, “You’re wasting your lives.” Instead, she listens quietly to her Japanese friends chatter on about their favorite trendy restaurant, their next vacation and their dead-end “office lady” jobs.

And she gives thanks, privately of course, that she has a very different blueprint for her future. All it took was moving 6,500 miles away.

Reiko, who asked that her real name not be used, is one of an increasing number of young Japanese women who choose to work in the United States or in other Asian countries, rather than face bleak employment prospects at home.

Someday, Reiko—who works for a U.S. subsidiary of a Japanese bank in Los Angeles—hopes to go back. But not until she has enough experience and clout to return in a “career” job rather than the more traditional secretary-stenographer-coffee server position held by many of the 27 million women in the Japanese workforce.

Career prospects for women had improved in Japan, spurred by the passage of equal-opportunity legislation nine years ago. But much of that progress seems to have vanished in the harsher light of Japan’s recession. Women too often were the first fired in a society where they still are not taken seriously in the workplace.

The result has been an exodus of some of the country’s most talented women to the United States, Hong Kong and Singapore, where—despite continued discrimination—attitudes toward women are far more open and their skills and backgrounds are embraced by international-minded companies.

“When the economy was good, Japanese companies had a lot of capacity to deal with” hiring women, said Masahiko Hata, a 35-year-old Japanese accountant in Los Angeles. “When the economy got really bad, they didn’t feel they had the luxury to be politically correct.”

These are hard times for many Japanese who grew up during an era of meteoric stock and real estate prices only to see the bubble burst, leaving them jilted at the altar of economic restructuring. The Japanese corporate giants that used to fight over the nation’s top university graduates are shifting production abroad and trimming their domestic work forces to counteract the strong yen and sluggish domestic economy.

In December and January, the unemployment rate reached 3.4%, the highest since the government began collecting data in 1953. Young people, women and the elderly were hit hardest during the recession, according to the government’s figures.

It has been particularly tough for women.

They still encounter a thick glass ceiling in business and politics. Even with improved employment prospects, women account for 7.9% of Japan’s administrative and managerial workers, compared with 40% in the United States and Canada, according to a 1995 study.

Employers still frequently specify a gender preference when they advertise jobs or interview applicants. And college seniors looking for work last year found there were 45 openings for every 100 women, compared with 133 openings for every 100 men, according to Recruit Research Co. Ltd., a Tokyo-based research firm.

The Labor Ministry said discrimination complaints from June to October by female employees or job seekers leaped by 150% over the previous year.

George Mu, minister-counselor for commercial affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, said at a U.S. business conference recently that more than half of the women graduating from Japanese colleges this spring are not expected to find jobs, up from 40% last year. He said the giant Mitsubishi trading company, for example, has not hired any Japanese female graduates for at least two years.

The brain drain is good news for U.S. firms, including Japanese subsidiaries operating here and internationally oriented companies that do business with Japan. The Big Six accounting firms, which have been expanding their Japanese practices over the past decade, are well represented at annual job fairs in Boston and San Francisco that attract 3,000 to 4,000 young Japanese job seekers, about half of them women.

Under the law, U.S. employers cannot hire foreigners before taking a series of steps—including advertising any open jobs—to demonstrate that no American applicants can provide the same skills or background.

Even so, not everyone welcomes this foreign talent. After intense lobbying from U.S. businesses, Sen. Alan K. Simpson (R-Wyo.) reluctantly agreed to drop provisions from a controversial immigration reform bill that would have severely restricted the ability of foreigners to work in the U.S. But he still believes the U.S. economy no longer can support present levels of legal or illegal immigration.
U.S. companies argue they would be severely crippled if they were unable to hire foreign talent, such as accountants, interpreters and software engineers. They said their future competitiveness depends on creating products or services for a global market, which often means moving talented people from one part of the world to another.

Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu International, one of the Big Six firms, employs 98 people in its Japanese practice in Los Angeles. Of those, 52 are Japanese nationals, half of them women.

Tom Iino, a managing partner for Deloitte's Los Angeles office, said his firm has hired a number of female Japanese accountants in recent years because they were the best all-around candidates. Many graduated from U.S. business schools or graduate programs at the top of their class.

Iino suspects many of them will never return to Japan—because of the opportunities they find overseas, the chance they will meet and marry Americans and the difficulties they would face as Japanese who had stepped off the traditional career path.

"The Japanese clearly feel, once you've left, you've really left," he said.

The loser is Japan, which has seen some of its brightest young people, particularly women, seek their fortunes abroad. And while the United States is a favored destination, there has been a sharp increase in Japanese moving to Hong Kong and other areas in Asia with less restrictive immigration policies and a growing appetite for technical or middle-level management skills.

"Those women who have a high educational background tend to go overseas," said Bill Kita, executive director of the Japan Business Assn., which represents Japanese companies in Southern California.

Many Japanese initially come to the United States to attend high school or college and adapt to an American lifestyle that offers greater personal freedom than they had at home. Others, including many young men, leave Japan out of frustration at a corporate culture that traditionally has rewarded consensus-building and teamwork but stifled individuality and creativity.

Miyo Terada, who is majoring in accounting at the University of Southern California, has been discouraged by employment horror stories she has heard from friends who attended school here and then returned to Japan. That has fueled her determination to stay in the United States after she graduates in December.

"I keep hearing from them all the complaints they have about working in Japan," said the 22-year-old snowboarding enthusiast. "They wish they could come back here."

Reiko is equally appalled at what she hears about the Japanese job market. "A friend of mine recently applied for a job at a good Japanese company and was asked whether she had a boyfriend," said the articulate woman in her 20s, who holds a graduate degree from a major U.S. university.

She cautions against blaming everything on Japanese men. She said many female friends have told her that they don't want the high-pressure path she has taken, preferring to bide their time until they get married and can start a family. That fuels the country's corporate tradition of pushing women to quit their jobs when they have children.

Reiko has watched the Japanese recession whittle away at her friends' ambitions. Many have forsaken any hopes of a career and are working in high-demand temporary positions that offer good pay and limited responsibilities.

Bonnie Elliott, 24, a newspaper advertising sales representative in the Los Angeles bureau of Nihon Keizai Shimbun Inc., agrees that an ambitious Japanese woman has many more opportunities in this country, particularly given the economic malaise back home. She was the product of a marriage between an American and a Japanese and grew up in Japan.

Elliott, who views herself as bicultural, respects the importance Japan places on the role of women in maintaining the household and family. But she voices frustration that many Japanese still can't accept women as equals, whether they choose to stay at home or pursue careers.

Both she and her older sister attended college in the United States and have chosen to pursue careers on this side of the Pacific.

Women working for Japanese firms or serving Japanese clients in the United States must still battle some of the same barriers. But the pressure to conform to U.S. labor practices and employment laws, and the fear of getting sued, lessen the likelihood that Japanese firms will engage in blatant discrimination in the United States.

"American women complain about the [same thing], but as someone who has seen both sides, there's so much privilege here," she said. "The ground zero is different in Japan than in the United States."

Kaori Sasaki, the 37-year-old founder of the Tokyo-based Network for Aspiring Professional Women, aimed at nurturing female entrepreneurs, would like to attract Elliott and other talented women back home.

She is working with Japanese banks to create a start-up fund for female-owned businesses and holds classes for budding entrepreneurs. One of the toughest things is getting her students to speak up in class, since many have worked only in companies where they are expected to serve up tea, not opinions.

Sasaki, who visited Long Beach recently to discuss the creation of an international network for female entrepreneurs, challenges these women to join her in the battle. The former reporter for TV Asahi in Tokyo started a management consulting firm called Unicul International Inc. She is married and has one child.

"I think they could accomplish much in Japan if they have the guts to do so," she said.

It might indeed take guts.

Kazumi Sudo, a graduate of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, has grown comfortable voicing her opinion or even contradicting a male co-worker in her job as an auditor in Deloitte's Los Angeles office.
But she feels it would be difficult to maintain that assertive stance if she worked in Japan. And even if she had a sympathetic boss, who most likely would be male, she fears it would create other problems at work, especially with women.

Sudo misses her family and friends, although she is so busy that there is little time to dwell on her loneliness. With tax time looming, she must work nights and weekends. The payoff for this pressure-cooker lifestyle is a long vacation in the slow summer months. Last year, she visited Europe and Australia.

Sudo hopes to marry someday but is not willing to sacrifice her career. That could make it tougher for her to find a husband in Japan.

"It scares me because I'd like to go back," she said.

Caption:
PHOTO; Kazumi Sudo, left, is an auditor in Los Angeles. . . .
PHOTOGRAPHER; PERRY C. RIDDLE / Los Angeles Times
PHOTO; . . . Miyo Terada, right, is studying accounting at USC and hopes to find a job in the United States.
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