

The Future of Japan: Women, Food and Health

Connie Reimers-Hild, PhD, CPC

December, 2018

Japan is a place of beauty, hospitality and wonder. It is also a country full of passion, possibility and potential. Rural Japan has grand challenges that are similar to those in many countries around the world; however, the strong current of positivity and creativity that runs through the communities and the people we met is a strong asset. This combination of positivity and creativity is truly inspiring and also foundational to the innovation needed for a thriving future.

The intention I set before the trip was threefold. First, I wanted to learn more about the role of women in Japanese society. Second, I was curious about the overall aging situation but also the aging process itself. Japan is known for having a rapidly aging population but also known for an aging population that is healthier compared to many countries, such as the United States. Third, I wanted to learn more about how the healthcare system worked. How was it similar to other countries? And, how was it different? What learnings would inform the work of the Rural Futures Institute as well as Wild Innovation, my strategic foresight firm focused on the future of women? I learned more than I could ever imagine on this trip of a lifetime and will limit this paper to the following observations:

1. Women need representation, their own voice and economic independence.
2. The Japanese relationship with food is unique and has the potential to drive a larger share of the economy.
3. Japan's population appears to be less dependent on traditional healthcare and more focused on health.

Women and the Future

We had the opportunity to meet with several women on our tour and learned a great deal from these interactions. The women we met seemed very independent, entrepreneurial and innovative. However, there is still a need to empower women. When we met with women as part of a group, they rarely led conversations or spoke without a man interrupting them. My assumption is that women are rarely represented in key or high ranking leadership positions, which makes it difficult to identify female innovators. Therefore, we naturally were not able to meet many high-ranking females. My other assumption is that women are still culturally subordinate to men, which is a norm in many places around the world — including the United States.

We had several conversations about women that framed my assumptions. For example, in one meeting we discussed the lack of women in political offices. We were told that women could not afford to run. When we asked for additional information, the details were sparse. Our group was finally told that most men would threaten to divorce their wives if they wanted to run for office. I assumed this meant that women could not afford to run for office because their husbands would leave them.

Our university engagement was also very male-dominated. Only male faculty and administrators spoke with us during our introductory discussion at Ehime University. Although our host was a female faculty member and Japanese innovator, she was ill during our time in Matsuyama. This interaction made me wonder about the number and general status of female faculty members and administrators in Japanese universities, which is important. If society wants to empower females, young girls and women must see themselves in leadership roles.

We met a number of young, female students during our trip. It was a delight to meet so many young and talented women. However, many struggled to speak confidently and with authority. Most were friendly and curious but also shy and unsure of themselves. While there is room for growth and innovation in the space of female empowerment, there is evidence that women are rising in rural Japan.

One of the most exciting and enlightening aspects of the trip was learning about the growing interest and support of entrepreneurs, especially female entrepreneurs. It was refreshing to see female entrepreneurs and creatives expressing themselves, pursuing their passions and creating economic prosperity for themselves and their communities.



A female entrepreneur with her own bakery. She sold amazing baked goods along with many other items. People line up in the morning when the store opens so they can buy her food items. People also enjoy gathering in the beautiful space she created.



A female artist painting a beautiful mural on the side of a building.

Women also appear to serve as social entrepreneurs focused on community betterment through cultural betterment and advancement in a variety of ways ranging from community beautification to the preservation of traditions. We saw an artist painting a mural people could enjoy as they walked down the street. She paused her work to tell us about the mural and even posed with us for a few pictures! We also met a woman dedicated to preserving Japanese traditions.



Our group enjoyed eating a bento box lunch in a traditional Japanese dwelling with many innovators, including a woman committed to preserving certain traditions. She is wearing a kimono in the above picture.



We learned about the culture and history of sake as we toured a historical fermentation facility where the mother of the owner personally connects with customers. Our group even had the distinct pleasure of enjoying a tea party with (mostly elderly) who decided to get together once a week to keep themselves happier and healthier by connecting with one another.

The mother of the man who owned the sake fermentation plant we toured. She and I exchanged many gifts with one another, and she enjoyed visiting with the members of our group. She was very generous and gave our group a huge bottle of sake to enjoy that evening!



The tea party with women in a rural village was both entertaining and enlightening! I found myself wearing a kimono and making many new friends who knew how to enjoy life at every age!





The inside of a Japanese shrine

Personally, one of the most profound moments of the trip for me was experiencing a Japanese shrine. We had an amazing shrine experience. Each one of us washed our hands, bowed and rang the bell before entering. We were greeted with history, art and awe upon entering the shrine. For the first two minutes, “I can’t believe that I am actually in a Japanese shrine” is all that ran through my mind. I was in such a state of adoration and amazement that I couldn’t even pay attention to the tour.

I bring up religion as a point of discussion because religious beliefs often shape the role and treatment of women in society. As beliefs and norms evolve, new challenges and opportunities emerge. Japan appears to be in a similar shift when compared with other countries. The roles and desires of women and men are changing, which will challenge the cultural norms and stereotypes that currently exist. This evolution has the opportunity to shape society in new and positive ways. Entrepreneurship is a pathway women are pursuing in large numbers in countries such as the United States. Why? Because traditional workplace environments and cultures do not provide women and their families the flexibility they desire or the opportunities they crave. Studies have shown that women are leaving traditional work environments to either establish their own businesses or to participate in the “Gig Economy” where they can generate income by using their skills, talents and desires while also creating the lifestyle they want to achieve and experience. Entrepreneurship is becoming an important pathway for not only women but for men as well.



A young (and very happy) entrepreneur who established his business in a community where he has access to both the Internet and fishing!

We spoke to a male entrepreneur who fixed and created leather goods. He was self-trained in everything from his craft to his business acumen. Connectivity provided him with the opportunity to purchase goods online and create custom orders from clients in places like Tokyo. This young entrepreneur told us that he chose to live in a more rural community so he could start a business that allowed him to fully enjoy life. For him, this meant having plenty of time for family and fishing! Entrepreneurial endeavors are also connecting people with areas that produce the food they value and enjoy.

Food and Fan Clubs: Innovating Agriculture

Other examples of entrepreneurship and innovation included Fan Clubs, rice contracts, the *Taberu Journal*, hops celebrations and other community engagement strategies developed by Japanese innovators. In each case, communities were connected through products, services and other innovations. Agriculture is clearly connecting people and communities while serving as a key economic driver. The idea of providing more people with unique experiences related to the production and preparation of food has the potential to engage more consumers while supporting the economy of the Japanese nation as the future evolves. These innovative ideas serve as examples of strategic engagement growers and leaders throughout the world can use to grow or expand their enterprises. Japanese producers and crops are supporting the economy beyond the selling and buying of goods. The agricultural industry also supports the economy by providing healthy foods that decrease the need for expensive healthcare interventions.



The Nippon Taberu Journal League connects producers and consumers and urban and rural areas. Consumers become raving fans through information and experiences, and producers continuously learn from consumers. Atsuhisa Emori, General Manager of the Nippon Taberu Journal League (top left,) holds up an example of the information subscribers receive. Jun Sasaki, scallop fisherman and member of the Ryori Fisheries Cooperative (top right and bottom left), presents the outcomes and ideas associated with creating fans through innovations, such as the Taberu Journal. Junichi Tamura, Chief Director of Next Commons Lab and CEO of the Tono Brewing Company (middle person in photo on the bottom right), celebrates the hops harvest that created a new beer with two colleagues. The release and first tasting of the beer took place at a celebration honoring the producers, partners, consumers and the hops crop.

The Exponential Impact of Japanese Agriculture: A Healthier Population?

Entrepreneurship and innovation appear to support aging and health throughout Japan, especially in the agricultural sector. It was evident that fresh fruits, vegetables and meat were central to the success of both rural and urban areas. Further, most of the Japanese leaders we connected with during the trip were focused on health through eating well, connecting with others and realizing their passions. As research suggests, these factors are central to the more positive aging process. Japan's rapidly aging population is typically healthier than those in other countries, such as the United States.



An independent elderly woman driving around town

When asked about the healthcare system, many leaders mentioned that care was available when needed. Doctors and healthcare providers were available in the community where we had tea with the elderly women; however, providers was only intermittently available. There was a small building where healthcare professionals would tend to the people living in the area from time to time.



Women connecting with one another and talking about the future at the reception after the final public forum. One female entrepreneur, who attended the forum and reception, told me the presentations and leadership exchange created by this program changed her life and would change the world!

The mindset appeared to be much different than that of many aging people in the rural Midwest. No one expected to go to the doctor very often; rather, they only went when absolutely necessary, if at all. Many of the older people we talked with did not discuss retirement or health ailments. They focused on what was bringing them joy in their lives and appeared to genuinely appreciate life. The tea party served the purpose of getting women out of their homes but also was a genuinely great time focused on sharing stories, healthy food and

fun experiences that surprised all of us! Well-being, which includes healthy eating, was central to community and economic development in many of the models our Japanese innovators are leading. Their ideas connect people to their food, their bodies, their communities and to one another. This is an idea worth exploring in greater detail.

Parting Thoughts: What Future Do We Want to Create?

Rural communities and leaders in both countries have much more to offer one another, and this rich exchange must grow if we are truly going to support rural innovation that helps people and communities prosper. The leadership exchange between Japanese and American innovators changed my life. I miss the hospitality, creativity and passion Japan so eagerly shared with me and everyone in our group. The open hospitality made it easy to explore ideas and possibilities. It is time to question cultural norms as well as the systems we currently have in place to serve rural communities. We need to create a future that works for everyone, which means more voices need to be included in the process. This includes the voices of women.

A week after returning from Japan, I found myself on a plane headed to Paris, France. I served on a panel at the 2018 Women in Leadership Global Summit designed to stimulate discussion on the future of cities. The summit itself focused on the importance of including and empowering women so they had a role in developing and leading the future. My own work and life, the trip to Japan and then the trip to Paris reinforced the need for not only empowering women but also encouraging them to be the entrepreneurs and leaders who create the cultural norms and systems we need as a collective society moving forward. Women are ready but society and organizations are not. This needs to change, and I am committed to making this happen at an even deeper level than before the trip to Japan. This trip changed my life, my mind and my ideas about what is possible. If the lives and leadership of other participants has changed as much as I have changed, then this program has the potential to change the future of humanity and beyond. The question that remain to be answered is this — what future do we want to create — together?



My final thought at the public forum: What future do we want to create? I believe it is positive and full of possibility!