Activism among Women in the Taisho Cotton Textile Industry

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“Where are the organized women workers?” Alice Kessler-Harris asked in 1975. Her question unleashed an unabating torrent of provocative studies of proletarian women in a number of countries, particularly in the United States and Europe. This deluge of solid research notwithstanding, activist women, to paraphrase Anne Firor Scott, continue to be seen and not seen. Pre–World War II Japanese women textile workers suffer the same, if not indeed a more pervasive, invisibility. When they are not generally overlooked, they are pitted as passive victims incapable of acting on their own initiative. When instances of activism are so obvious they cannot be ignored (as when silk reelers carried out a major strike in 1885), they are dismissed as unique, aberrant events. Women’s failure to become the backbone of an enduring union move-

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ment confirms the conventional view of them as passive. Their gender, it is argued—or, as one scholar suggests, their youth\(^4\)—made them hard to organize.

Further research on women's collective action should modify this assertion. Even if the focus on collective action is limited to institutionalized, organized activism (that is, unions), we must ask whether structural factors like the organization of the factory itself or attitudinal factors like the hostility of male unionists, and not women's "nature" or "culture," explain the lower rate of female participation. Louise Tilly argues persuasively that proletarian women's lower rate of participation in collective action in nineteenth-century France needs "no special psychological or gender-attribute explanation": that is, a similar set of conditions may be used to predict men's and women's propensity to activism.\(^5\) Societal constraints, restrictions by management on the economic independence of female workers, and, in certain circumstances, the workers' own views of what was appropriate behavior for women may have slowed female labor organization in Japan; yet when conditions for activism existed, women workers responded.

The question of activism, however, should not be limited to formal political or union actions. This chapter attempts to expand the definition of the term "activism" to connote the opposite of passivity. Thus, activism manifested itself as much in the decisions of rural Japanese women and girls to enter employment in the cotton textile industry as in their collective actions as workers. To understand why farm women would be motivated to enter the mills, one must examine general attitudes regarding appropriate behavior for women in the 1920s. To be sure, what women saw as suitable for themselves as women was itself in a state of evolution. As Teresa de Lauretis notes, "Self and identity . . . are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations. Consciousness is never fixed, never attained once and for all because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions."\(^6\) The converse is equally true: women's contributions to the definition of gender helped produce shifts in their historical context.

Certainly the motives of the mill workers varied, and their perceptions of the choices available to them were affected by their individual circumstances. Yet these women shared many experiences, and their decisions were conscious ones within the limited bounds of their lives.


Their socialization as farm girls created a shared consciousness of class and gender as these were constructed in the setting of Japan of the 1920s. Many were accustomed to wage labor, either their own or that of their neighbors or families. Moreover, they were probably aware of such common 1920s phenomena as tenant strikes, labor organizing, and the Taishō youth culture that distanced itself from the Meiji culture of older generations. The women whose lives inform this study tell us that, in the 1920s at least, activism was compatible with women's notions of gender identity. Thus, as conscious actors, women helped to shape significant aspects of modern Japanese life, including labor-management relations and the remolding of farm women into proletarian women.

THE COTTON INDUSTRY IN JAPANESE INDUSTRIALIZATION

Surprisingly little attention has been focused on the Japanese cotton textile industry by scholars writing in English. Yet cotton textile production was Japan's most important industry before the Second World War for several reasons. First, cotton textiles accounted for 26.5 percent of Japan's industrial output. The neglect may be the result of scholars' desire to study industries viewed as glamorous and "important." Although capital investment per worker was higher in the cotton textile industry than in many heavy industries owing to the high cost of the huge spinning and weaving machines, women-dominated industries like textiles have been seen as traditional or backward rather than as part of a leading sector inspiring technological advances. Such attitudes have caused contemporary scholars to view textiles as a less worthy object of study. While labor conditions and recruitment practices in the cotton and silk industries have many similarities, this paper focuses on the cotton textile industry. Silk filatures were more often located in rural areas, and silk workers' contracts were of shorter duration than those in the cotton industry; see Nakamura Masanori, Rōdōsha to nōmin (Shōgakukan, 1976), 81. Thus, silk workers may have had closer ties with their rural communities and families. Furthermore, the silk industry was less mechanized than the cotton, and although silk reeling probably required greater skill and dexterity than running the large cotton-spinning machines, silk reeling was technologically an extension of the kind of work farm women had traditionally done. Hence, silk reeling was often erroneously viewed—by both contemporaries and later scholars—as unskilled work suitable for young farm girls. See Gail Lee Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-Reeling Industry in Nineteenth-Century Japan," in Japan and the World: Essays on Japanese History and Politics in Honour of Ishida Takeshi, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein and Haruhiro Fukui (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 54-77. The methods of remuneration for labor also differed: management in the silk industry fostered intense competition among workers, which inhibited cooperation and may have slowed the development of worker consciousness; see Nakamura, Rōdōsha, 97-98. Because of these differences, my observations concerning the active role of women mill workers is confined to the cotton-spinning industry, although further study may show the industries' differences to be more apparent than real. Moreover, I focus on spinning rather than weaving, since most weaving operations, except for those in large, vertically integrated cotton mills, were not carried out in the same plant as spinning. In Japan,
cent of all Japanese exports, and 14.5 percent of all industrial output, as late as 1935.10 Second, the first large-scale private companies established after the Meiji Restoration were cotton-spinning firms; moreover, the textile industry was one of the first industries to benefit from government assistance.11 Third, starting in the 1880s, cotton manufacturers banded together to form the Japan Cotton Spinners' Association (Dai Nippon Menshi Bôeki Dôgyô Rengôkai)—one of the earliest manufacturers' associations in Japan—which attempted, none too successfully, to control producers' access to labor.12 Fourth, the "rationalization" process of studying standard motions and implementing efficient labor techniques that was so characteristic of the 1920s was most highly developed in large cotton textile firms.13 Fifth, as in the United States and Europe, the industry was the leading employer in the early-modern manufacturing sector.14

For this study, the industry is particularly important for two additional reasons. First, young unmarried women predominated among cotton textile workers. Second, the migration of these women from the countryside to the urban mills had tremendous demographic and social implications: it fueled Japan's urbanization and created a link that permitted the social and economic integration of city and countryside in an era of rapid change.15

Moreover, weaving was mechanized much later than spinning, and the scale of plants was smaller. See Sung Jae Koh, Stages of Industrial Development in Asia: A Comparative History of the Cotton Industry in Japan, India, China, and Korea (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), 25. This situation was not universal: in Shanghai, for instance, weaving was done in the same plant as spinning; see Emily Honig, Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), chap. 6, for a description of the integration of mill operations.

11. Ibid., 15
14. Statistics for employment by industry tell the story: in 1931, cotton-spinning firms employed 54.1 percent of all industrial workers (82.4 percent of women industrial workers); in 1936, 39.6 percent (80.2 percent of women); and in 1938, 30 percent (81.2 percent of women). Agriculture employed four times as many women as industry did in that period, but 70–80 percent of the women employed in farming were married, widowed, or divorced, compared to 40–50 percent for industry. See Takada Jirô, ed., Nihon rôdô kagaku kenkyûjo hôkoku: Fujin rôdô ni kansuru bunken shôroku (Nihon Rôdô Kagaku Kenkyûjo, 1940), 2–8.
15. Until the 1890s, the early cotton industry recruited female workers from the urban poor and from middle- and lower-class families in villages near the urban textile plants; see Nakamura, Rôdôsha, 159–60. This situation changed after 1890, when workers came to be recruited from greater distances. It is frequently asserted that the income of these workers recruited from afar, remitted to their tenant farmer families, permitted the fami-
FROM FARM TO FACTORY

All industrializing societies have had to draw rural labor into factories. In some cases, notably the United States, most of the jobs in the textile industries were initially held by young unmarried adult women, who only later were replaced by families including men and children. In other cases, such as England, child labor was used until prohibited by law. Many societies relied on kinship networks to supply labor, as well as to act as welfare organizations, in lieu of the state or the employer. Others developed a labor supply through paid recruiting agents, whose work was often facilitated by the decision of family members to go together to the mills. At least one society, China, developed half a dozen different recruiting methods, the most infamous of which was the coercive contract system whereby the “recruiter,” who was really more like a gangster, promised to feed and lodge the young worker (at minimal cost) in return for her wages. Thus, no single pattern of recruitment typified societies undergoing industrial revolutions: some developed paternalistic controls over workers, while others simply employed workers’ labor. Nevertheless, all had to attract workers somehow to urban factory jobs. What motivated people in rural areas to move elsewhere for work in industry?

One of the most detailed studies of the migration of farm girls is that of Thomas Dublin on the textile mills of nineteenth-century Lowell, Massachusetts. Dublin found that between 1830 and 1860, rural economic disasters predisposed young farm daughters to enter the mills. A significant minority of women, citing the value of selfless duty to their parents, took jobs in the hope of contributing to their families’ total income. Most girls, however, cherished the wages they earned and kept them. Their families, in any case, were often too proud to accept a daughter’s earnings. Moreover, most factory girls ceased being dependent on their families when they left home to live in carefully proctored, company-administered boarding houses. Thus Dublin found that the
real motivations of mill girls to work generally deviated from the selfless reasons often cited in contemporary moralistic writings: the girls had specific, personal reasons for wanting to earn money. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall found that American textile workers two generations later had similar reasons for seeking mill jobs. Most expected to help their families and to find some type of personal fulfillment. These young girls, four-fifths of whom were between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one when they went to work, "saw factory labor as a hopeful gamble rather than a desperate last resort." That is, they made informed choices that served not only their families' interests but, significantly, also their own.

The influential study of women, work, and the family in England and France by Louise Tilly and Joan Scott contrasts with Dublin's findings for New England and Hall's for the rural South. Nonelite women in Europe had always contributed to their families, even in the preindustrial era, either as part of the "family team" or as servants doing undifferentiated work as domestics and artisans in other's houses. Married women blended economic activity with reproductive work, often using the undesirable expedient of wet nurses to permit them to maximize their economic contribution to family subsistence. Child labor was taken for granted, especially after age seven or eight. As European industrialization began, factory work continued to be tightly integrated with the family economy; men, women, and children contributed all their earnings to the family.

The advent of industrialization and certain changes in farm conditions, such as the disappearance of the family farm in eighteenth-century England, accelerated the movement of women and children into wage work. Many rural families migrated to the cities to find mill work for their children. In other cases young women, especially those who had been hand-spinners before industrialization left them underemployed, migrated alone or followed a close relative.

Elsewhere, Tilly calls the trend toward female wage labor "proletarianization," which she defines as "the increase in the number of 'people whose survival depended on the sale of labor power.'" She adds that "although proletarianization was a common experience, how it occurred in given populations varied markedly, as did the timing of the process." As we have seen, many women in Europe, both single and married, became "modern" wage earners to support the "family wage economy"; by contrast, American women workers showed greater idi-

22. Alice Kessler-Harris objects to this interpretation; see her "Problems of Coalition-Building: Women and Trade Unions in the 1920s," in Women, Work, and Protest: A Century
vidual autonomy at an earlier stage in the development of the cotton textile industry in the United States. Gradually, however, the ties of unmarried European women to their rural families weakened as the number of proletarianized, propertyless families unable to offer their daughters dowries or inheritances increased. In both the United States and Europe, factory girls, especially those who made a large percentage of family income, were unlikely to return to their place of origin but instead would marry "mechanics"—working-class men—from their new locale. Thus, specific motives to work varied among individuals and societies, but in both Europe and the United States women and girls themselves decided to work in the mills. Some showed autonomy not only in deciding to work but also in increasing the separation from their families—that is, by retaining some or all of their wages or by remaining in the cities to marry.

In the case of Japan, most scholars have promoted the view that female factory workers of rural origin, their major contributions to Japan's development notwithstanding, passively accepted their role in the textile industry. Since the publication in 1925 of Hosoi Wakizō's Jokō aishi (The pitiful history of women workers), the classic study of female employment in the cotton textile industry, it has generally been thought that young girls right out of elementary school were lured to work in the mills by unscrupulous recruiters who offered their parents or guarantors a prepayment of at least several months' wages in return for a contract that effectively made the girls indentured laborers. The received interpretation further asserts that the girls bowed to their fate because of their underdeveloped consciousness as workers. The Japanese value system, with its emphasis on filial piety and, for girls, on docility and obedience, contributed to their passivity. According to this interpretation, most young women returned to their villages to marry after saving for a dowry, and remained unsullied by their industrial experience.

This view of women's employment, from their passive recruitment as short-term workers to their return home as dutiful daughters, has endured for a variety of reasons, including, of course, its resonance with stereotyped images of women in Japan. Perhaps equally important, this interpretation parallels another common assumption that needs reassessment: that is, that the rise in labor activism in the 1920s was due principally to the increase in male industrial employment. Let us now look more closely at the received wisdom in an effort to revise the overall argument.

Farm girls of the 1920s played a major role in initiating and implementing the economic decision to leave the family to go to work, often


against parental wishes. Many did so, paradoxically, because they bel-
lieved they could better serve their families' interests, as did the Euro-
pean women in the study by Tilly and Scott. Others did so for more
personal reasons, as Dublin's study found of American women. In ei-
ther case, the fact that they made the decision to enter the mills on their
own belies their depiction as hapless pawns. After entering the factory,
many attempted to overcome their disappointment with the abysmal
conditions they encountered and made a second economic decision to
transfer to a new factory. Whether or not their expectations of im-
proved conditions were fulfilled—and usually they were not—it is sig-
nificant that, contrary to the standard interpretation, a large number of
new hires in cotton factories were not young, inexperienced girls right
off the farm. Rather, they were older, more skilled transfer workers
who had already had several jobs.

Furthermore, not all female workers in the textile industry quietly
accepted unhealthy labor conditions. By the 1920s, cotton textile work-
ers, working in a highly mechanized and electrified industry, were, like
other workers in the more modern industrial sector, staging successful
strikes for improved conditions. Clearly many activists saw themselves
first as workers and second, if at all, as farm daughters who would event-
ually return to the farm. The growing sense of personal autonomy that
permittted the development of increased worker consciousness also
helped to make employment in industry a viable option for young girls.
Thus, labor actions and positive motives for employment can be seen as
interrelated forms of activism among textile workers.

What of the argument that workers eventually returned to life on the
farm, regardless of youthful expressions of labor activism? A significant
minority did return—and many firms used this fact to keep from having
to retain older girls and women whose wages should presumably in-
crease with experience and seniority. The overwhelming majority of
farm girls, however, either remained industrial workers throughout
their teen years and often even after marriage to fellow industrial work-
ers, or else retired at marriage to lead the life of urban working-class
housewives. Even during the depression-ridden 1930s, only 22.5 percent
of the mill workers of rural origin returned to the farm, and of these
only a quarter were in registered marriages within a year of their retire-
ment. To be sure, nonregistration of common-law marriages before

24. Tanino Setsu, "Bóseki jokö taishokugo no kisu," in Sangyö fukuri 12, no. 11 (No-
vember 1937): 22–23. She found that 45.5 percent of workers who had left their jobs in
spinning were employed in another factory one year later; of these, 22 percent were work-
ing in cotton spinning, 15 percent in silk reeling, and 13 percent in weaving.

25. Nakamura, Ródösha, 168. Nakamura states that just 6 percent returned to their
villages to marry. Along these same lines, it is interesting that Kawasaki was the fastest-
fertility was proven was typical in many rural areas, a fact that probably skews the evidence. Nevertheless, even if all returnees did marry quickly, their numbers were fewer than those of women who went from factory to factory in search of better and more remunerative jobs.

The migration of farm women seeking employment, moreover, was not a new phenomenon that came only with modern industrial labor opportunities. In a study of one typical village between 1773 and 1868, Akira Hayami found that 74 percent of the women and 63 percent of the men at some time in their lives left the village to work. Many of the women were employed locally, but significantly, 25 percent of the women left their village permanently during those years. Thus, working women in the twentieth century were building on a long tradition of female migration.26

RECRUITMENT IN THE COTTON TEXTILE INDUSTRY

As Hosoi noted, most textile workers, especially after the turn of the century, were the daughters of poor farm families.27 But virtually all young textile workers, rather than being forced against their will into the mills, expressed a desire to work. When questioned by researchers in 1927, most workers cited economic reasons for wanting to work in the mills: 17.2 percent wished to earn money for personal use, such as self-support or for their trousseaux, and 69.3 percent wished to contribute actively to family finances.28 These responses parallel the conclusions of Dublin and of Tilly and Scott: the women believed their work contributed to personal or family well-being.29 The 1927 survey is cor-

growing city in Japan in the 1920s; see Gary Allinson, Japanese Urbanism: Industry and Politics in Kariya, 1872–1972 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 82. I suggest that the presence of a large Fuji Böseki plant in Kawasaki contributed to this permanent increase in population.


27. Nakamura, Rōdōsha, 159.

28. Izumi Takeo, The Transformation and Development of Technology in the Japanese Cotton Industry (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1980), 36. Elsewhere, surveys indicate similar motives. The following reasons for entering the mill were given by 2,000 workers: family circumstances (493); family finances (289); to earn money (189); to rise in life (146); to study (131); to associate with one’s betters (96); to get away from home (82); to earn a living (77); to be with one’s friends (66); to go to the city (54); and so on. See “Watakushi tachi wa ikani shitagerarete iru ka?” Rōdō fujin 4, reprinted in Nihon fujin mondai shiryō shūsei, vol. 3: Rōdō, ed. Akamatsu Ryōko (Domesu Shuppan, 1977), 238.

29. Transcribed interview with Yonematsu Kame in a publication of the Kawasaki Okinawa Kenjinkai, February 1983, 113. Yonematsu stresses her desire to help her family; she even returned a second time from Okinawa to Kawasaki to work at Fuji Böseki.
robated by the data I use in this study: published reminiscences and personal interviews with seven retired women workers and two retired male workers.30

What recruiters offered prospective workers varied from factory to factory and from recruit to recruit, and women were often deceived into believing conditions were better than they turned out to be. Most were promised comfortable working conditions, good food, steady wages (at least sixty sen per day, similar to wages offered Japanese women in other jobs), and a prepayment ranging from about five to fifty yen.31 A large part of the prepayment was often retained by the worker’s family; a worker’s acceptance of this condition was thus her implicit contribution to family welfare, similar to that seen in Europe. What seems to have been of greatest interest to the young girls themselves, however—at least in retrospect—was that the recruiters offered money to buy decent clothes and the opportunity to continue their education in factory-operated schools. (Early Lowell workers also saw the mill as a route to higher education.) Most women whom I interviewed mentioned these highly personal desires to improve themselves even before citing their desire to contribute actively to family finances. Clearly, then, the importance of personal autonomy was growing, and it played a major role in many girls’ decisions to enter the cotton industry.

By the 1920s, most school-age children were completing at least elementary education. The fact that many farm girls wished to continue schooling is significant because school, perhaps subconsciously, was a means of self-improvement and, through testing, of self-evaluation. Former textile worker Kumagai Kikuko was attracted to Tōyō Muslin by her expectation that she could continue her education there; she had once hoped to become a teacher.32 Yamanouchi Mina, a pivotal feminist

30. Because four of these individuals were labor activists, some argue that they were atypical of workers in general. Yet none was an activist before entering the mill; all were radicalized by the conditions of their employment. Furthermore, their activism meant that they were perhaps bolder and certainly more articulate than their peers. The latter joined the strikes led by the activists because the activists expressed sentiments they shared. Thus, the activists’ ideas are no less valid than those of more “typical” workers.

31. Fifty yen was a significant part of a farm family’s annual income, yet at least one interviewee believed it was a typical payment; Kumagai Kikuko, interview, March 10, 1985. Gary R. Saxonhouse, in “Country Girls and Communication Among Competitors in the Japanese Cotton-Spinning Industry,” in Japanese Industrialization and Its Social Consequences, ed. Hugh Patrick (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 112, notes that daily wages for women entering jobs in cotton spinning were just 85 percent of those for women in agricultural work, but that women in textiles worked 300 days per year compared to 180 days in agriculture.

activist in both the women's suffrage movement and the labor movement, cited her love of education in her autobiography.\textsuperscript{33} Hosoi Waki-zō's wife, Takai Toshio, noted in her recent autobiography that she, too, craved a life of study and personal freedom, even as she transferred from company to company, each as dirty as the last, each with its own peculiarly loathsome conditions.\textsuperscript{34}

Of course, most workers who wished to take advantage of the "corridor schools" (classes were conducted in the corridors of the dormitories) found themselves too exhausted to study after their twelve-hour shifts ended. Yamanouchi, who tried to attend classes at Tokyo Muslin, noted that of the three thousand girls living in her factory's dormitories, only sixty had the energy to attend classes, and just thirty graduated from the program of study.\textsuperscript{35}

Although women in textiles tended to have less education than those in some other occupations such as typing or office work, their level of schooling was consistently rising after World War I.\textsuperscript{36} As girls stayed in school longer, and as legislation limiting child employment began to be enforced during the 1920s, the average age of beginning factory workers rose. With fewer vulnerable children under thirteen working in the mills, the incidence of disease decreased, producing a generally healthier, more vigorous work force.\textsuperscript{37} Older girls were also less susceptible to family dominance in the decision to leave the farm.\textsuperscript{38}

Factories seem to have preferred recruiting girls from great distances, thereby binding them more firmly to the dormitory and company. Fuji Bōseki, for instance, employed surprisingly large numbers of Okinawans in its Kawasaki and Hodogaya plants (probably at least one-fourth of the work force at Kawasaki), as well as numerous girls from the Tōhoku region in its Hodogaya plant.\textsuperscript{39} Other large firms showed a similar preference. Female commuting workers had

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Yamanouchi Mina, \textit{Yamanouchi Mina jiden} (Shinjuku Shobō, 1975), 11.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Takai Toshio, \textit{Watashi no "jokō aishi"} (Sōdo Bunka, 1980), 46.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Yamanouchi, \textit{jiden}, 32.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Tōkyō Shiyakusho, ed., \textit{Fujin shokugyō sensen no tenbo} (Tōkyō Shiyakusho, 1931), 81-82. Textile workers showed increasing levels of education outside Tokyo as well, as Allinson notes for Aichi in \textit{Japanese Urbanism}, 45.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Kumabe Toshio, \textit{Joshi rōdō no shokugyō gakuteki kenkyū} (Ōsaka: Ginkō Shintakusha, 1943), 371-75. It should be noted that even before World War I (in 1914) just 5.9 percent of the cotton textile work force were girls under fourteen, a decrease from 14.6 percent in 1897; Takamura Naosuke, \textit{Nihon bōsekigō shi josetsu} (Hanawa Shobō, 1971), 2:209; 1:301.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Yamanouchi, \textit{jiden}, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Sunabe Matsumitsu, interview, March 12, 1985; Umezu Hagiko interview, March 11, 1985. Sunabe Matsumitsu, in an interview published in \textit{Kuotari Kawasaki} 4 (1984): 8, says there were at least one thousand Okinawans at Fuji Bōseki.
\end{itemize}
a higher rate of absenteeism because of family responsibilities and could not be coerced to work as dormitory residents could. Japanese women who lived at home were likely to think first about how best to blend work and family responsibilities, unlike workers living in dormitories.

Although many women workers, as boarders who came from poor families, were fairly vulnerable to layoffs, they were hardly incapable of making economic decisions about their employment. Some of these women had themselves initiated the decision to leave the farm for the factory. For example, Yamanouchi Mina's family was neither rich nor poor, but her parents had insufficient funds for an adequate dowry, having spent their money on her elder sisters. Nevertheless, she had to spend a week trying to persuade her reluctant parents to permit her to go to work. Umezu Hagiko's family was quite poor, but she ran away from home and into the Hodogaya plant of Fuji Bōseki at age seventeen to support herself, rather than submit to her father's plan for her arranged marriage. Both women, as well as Kumagai Kikuko and the Okinawan M.U. (I use her initials as she was reluctant to be quoted), later compared their families' resources favorably with those of the poor girls from places such as the Tōhoku. They pitied those girls who relished the dormitory food they disdained. Interestingly, their comments about their poorer colleagues indicate their belief that many girls lacked the autonomy—the freedom to choose to work—that they felt they themselves enjoyed. The frequency with which these women declared their relative economic superiority suggests that this sentiment may have been fairly common even among the poorer girls, and that a sense of autonomy may have been more widespread than even contemporaries thought. Of course, it may also reflect fading memories or nostalgia for the distant past.

Although farm girls frequently chose to work in the mills, they did not always make their decisions on the basis of accurate information. A

40. Katsura Susumu, “Bōseki rōdō jijō,” Shakai seisaku jihō 28, no. 12 (1922): 57. He notes that commuting women had an attendance rate of 83 percent, as compared with 90 percent for commuting men and 97 percent for dorm girls. Takai Toshio, Watashi no “jokō aishi,” 26–27, notes a particularly cruel case of coercion by one nasty supervisor whose proximity made her excessively attentive to her workers. The supervisor constantly berated Takai for “laziness.” Not permitted even to sit during work, Takai tired quickly. One day, her hand slipped and her finger was cut to the bone. In the process of being injured, she broke her thread, causing the supervisor to say Takai deserved her injury because she was so stupid as to break her thread.

41. Yamanouchi, Jiden, 11–12.


number of female factory workers recalled their dismay at discovering the public's negative perceptions of them. These perceptions had both class and gender components. Class bias appears in an example reported by one retired worker of the public criticism of workers as "pigs." Workers' sexuality was also a major issue. For example, during the 1920s both proponents and opponents of the abolition of night work for women couched their arguments in terms of women workers' morality. Proponents claimed that night work made women potential victims of foremen and male workers lurking in the dimly lit corners. Opponents made the women themselves the agents of their undoing by claiming that workers with too much free time would engage in warui asobi (bad play). The public's fear of women's sexuality, however, was not echoed among the workers themselves, who must have been unaware of these negative attitudes before entering the factory. Otherwise it would have been difficult for them to choose textile work.

Young farm girls were equally unaware of labor conditions before signing their contracts. This is natural, given that few of their elder sisters or cousins returned to the countryside to tell tales of hard work and low pay, and as a result the ability of recruiters to disseminate information about the mills was quite extensive. By the 1920s, large companies generally preferred to rely on recruiters to bring in new workers, although smaller firms often hired women and girls directly at the plant. Recruiters signing up workers in the countryside could negotiate with both the girls' families and the girls themselves—thereby adding at least some element of coercion to their contracts. They could also secure the support of guarantors: after all, girls arriving alone at the factory gate were unlikely to be backed by guarantors or other institutions of societal control. Indeed, many large firms had policies prohibiting the hiring of workers without guarantors. Takai Toshio found, for example, that although she was often successful in gaining employment with smaller firms by promising managers she would work diligently, she was repeatedly turned back at the gate of Tokyo Muslin because she lacked a guarantor. Even if she had maintained close ties with her relations in the country, of course, none would have been able to guarantee Takai's

44. Shin Nihon Fujin no Kai, Haha no rekishi, 100.
45. Takai, Watashi no Joko aishi," 46.
46. Elite attitudes in the West also scorned women's employment. Hall's study of activist textile workers in the American South in the 1920s notes that "respectable" folk viewed them as bawdy and sexually threatening; see "Disorderly Women," 374–75.
loyal, long-term service, as she had a history of frequent job changes. Eventually she secured the guarantee of the old man who guarded the gate and was able to begin work at Tokyo Muslin. 48

Takai's experience in seeking employment was typical in the cotton textile industry. A 1927 survey of 21,852 female workers showed that company-designated recruiters brought in 62.8 percent of all new recruits, while only 8.3 percent were hired at the company, and 5.6 percent were introduced by family members. 49 My sample of interviewees shows a similar pattern. All had some contact with a special recruiting agent, at least for their initial employment; subsequently they often obtained jobs themselves by applying at the factory gate. Kumagai Kikuko was first informed by relatives about Tōyō Muslin, but then dealt with a recruiter. Umezu Hagiko approached a recruiter herself when she wished to flee an unwanted marriage prospect. Hanashiro Uta also approached a recruiter in Okinawa. 50 Yamanouchi Mina's aunt, who turned to her brother—Mina's father—for assistance after her divorce, decided to work in textiles to support herself. Afraid of failing because of her poor literacy, she asked her young niece Mina to accompany her and help her in her chosen job. Though interested in further schooling, Mina agreed to go, and the two approached a local recruiter. Mina secured her parents' approval after one week, and the recruiter then proceeded to make arrangements for the trip to Tokyo. 51

In Okinawa, M.U. also negotiated with a recruiter, but her story had an unusual twist. Her father, a recruiter in addition to his regular oc-

48. Takai, Watashi no "Jokō aishi," 43-44. Takai was not alone in desiring job mobility: many women escaped from their prisonlike dormitories, although police officials cooperated with company managers in capturing them. See Saxonhouse, "Country Girls," 97–125; and Nakamura, Rōdōsha, 164. Others used clever tricks such as claiming, falsely, to be married. Marriage changed a woman's legal household, which invalidated previous contracts. See Nakamura, Rōdōsha, 103–4. Frequent changes of employment in active search for higher wages is documented by Honig for Shanghai workers in Sisters and Strangers, 178.

49. Izumi, Transformation and Development of Technology, 30. Small numbers were also hired through employment exchanges and worker supply or protection unions. Whereas the former supplied only token numbers of workers to industry, the latter were slightly more important. These unions (jokō kyōkyū kumiai and jokō hogo kumiai) were associations of (male) local notables who mediated their daughters' and neighbors' labor exchange by arranging placements and looking after their welfare. See Janet Hunter, "Recruitment in the Japanese Silk-Reeling and Cotton-Spinning Industries, 1870s–1930s," in Proceedings of the British Association for Japanese Studies, vol. 9, ed. J. Chapman and D. Steeds (Sheffield, 1984), 73–75; Sawaki Kin'ichi, "Jokō kishukusha kanri ni kansuru gutai hosaku," Jokō kenkyū 4, no. 1 (1928): 128–29.


51. Yamanouchi, Jiden, 12.
occupation, was accustomed to collecting groups of young girls and sending them to Fuji Bôseki in Kawasaki. Like most other recruiters, he painted a rosy picture of employment and offered prepayments and new clothing to attract new workers. M.U.'s young friends were the beneficiaries of these payments and clothes, and M.U. wished to receive them as well. But her father demurred, not wanting to send his own daughter off to the job he tried to urge other girls to accept. M.U. eventually prevailed, taking her mother with her, later to be followed by her father. This story appears to be unusual in the Japanese context, though fairly representative of the European situation. Further research should tell whether it is indeed an example of the daughter's growing role in affecting economic decision making in the family.

Although most workers operated through recruiting agents, all recruiters were not alike; thus potential workers' abilities to make employment decisions were affected in different ways. Recruiters fell into several categories: those hired by the mill as salaried employees; placement and recruiting agents under special contract to a mill; recruiters paid a commission for each girl hired; and mill workers sent out to bring in new recruits. Mill workers were most likely to present an accurate view of conditions in the factory, while recruiters working on commission were least likely. Many recruiters were otherwise employed, using their positions as recruiters to earn supplementary income. The pay was quite good: a recruiter could make several yen per girl hired, and many signed up groups of ten to twenty twice a year. On average, the company spent around thirty yen to attract each worker; costs included prepayments and loans, train and ship fares, an allowance, clothing expenses, and the recruiter's fees. Thus, recruiters could significantly affect the relationship between workers and their employers.

CONDITIONS IN THE MILLS

Workers' responses to conditions in the mills, like their decisions to seek employment there, reflected a growing sense of personal autonomy and decreasing attachment to their rural origins. A few days after her parents and guarantor signed her contract, a new worker joined a group of other girls to travel with their recruiter to the mill. Upon arrival, the

52. M.U. interview.
55. Kumagai interview.
recruiter left, and the girls moved into the dormitory.\textsuperscript{56} The first three-month period was often considered a training period and, compared to later work, was something of a honeymoon: work hours were shorter and night work rare. Forced savings and repayment of debts did not begin until the probationary period ended.\textsuperscript{57}

Conditions varied from factory to factory, but most big mills shared certain characteristics. Large buildings filled with long machines (and without chairs) formed the economic center of the factory complex. Dormitory buildings with rows of rooms, each accommodating ten to twenty girls per alternating shift, constituted its residential center. Many interviewees recall that dorm rooms had just one mat for two persons.\textsuperscript{58} Alternating shifts (usually 6:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M.) shared bedding, a practice that spread not only annoying pests like lice, but also serious diseases such as tuberculosis.\textsuperscript{59} (By comparison, early New England boarding houses held eight or ten girls in one room, with two girls to a bed.) A dining hall and a large but dirty bath adjoined the dormitories. Meals were usually served four times a day, at 6:00 A.M., 12:00 noon, 6:00 P.M., and midnight, to permit workers on both shifts to eat. All the women interviewed recalled factory food as generally tasteless and lacking in nutrition.

Girls' salaries were extremely low. Many firms promised around sixty sen per day in wages, but not all offered that amount; in many cases, eighteen or twenty sen was more common.\textsuperscript{60} (This was about one-tenth the wage of a contemporary New England worker.) To repay her pre-payment, a worker under contract often agreed to monthly deductions of about one yen from her already low income.

Worst of all were the conditions of labor itself. A twelve-hour day, alternating every week between the day and the night shifts, was exhausting. Lack of chairs prevented the workers from resting even dur-

\textsuperscript{56} This differs from the most common patterns in Shanghai as described by Honig, \textit{Sisters and Strangers}. In Japan, the salient relationship was between employer and employee, whereas in Shanghai the recruiter often continued his parasitic relationship with the recruit.

\textsuperscript{57} Yamanouchi, \textit{jiden}, 13.

\textsuperscript{58} Nakamura, \textit{Rōdōsha}, 160; Yamanouchi, \textit{jiden}, 25, notes that Tokyo Muslin supplied just fifteen mats for twenty-three people.


\textsuperscript{60} Hosoi, \textit{Jōkō aishi}, 132–33. Hosoi also cites (71–72) an advertisement for employment at Tokyo Muslin, which promised workers spectacular benefits including a starting salary of sixty sen per day, thirty yen per month after three months, and fifty to sixty yen per month after six months. The ad further asserted that workers could expect to save one hundred to two hundred yen per year, and would enjoy cheap but nutritious and delicious meals in the dormitories.
ing their fifteen-minute morning and afternoon breaks. Girls were expected to operate large machines for hours. Although in many factories machines could be turned off individually while workers took necessary toilet breaks, stopping work was strongly discouraged.

Holidays were infrequent, four days off per month being typical in the 1920s. On rest days, girls rose late, wrote letters, washed, and, if free of debt to the factory, went to movies or other entertainments nearby. Restriction of physical mobility for workers with outstanding loans was a major source of tension for factory workers.

Despite this gloomy picture of mill life, there were some positive aspects. Workers tried to make the best of their grim situation, either through enjoyable friendships or through labor activism to improve their conditions. Dormitory life provided girls with camaraderie, which was reinforced in some companies by the practice of seating room groups together at meals. Distasteful though the dirty bath may have been, girls also forged friendships while bathing. These kinds of friendships could be useful later when activist leaders planned strikes and other job actions.

One form of activism involved simply transferring to another employer. Most women who left a firm sought alternate employment in shops, offices, domestic service, and, most commonly, other factories. Almost half of the women who resigned (or escaped) from a cotton textile mill were reemployed by another factory, especially one making textiles.

Another response of women workers to unhealthy and oppressive labor conditions was labor activism in the traditional sense of the word—that is, engagement in strikes and other forms of organizing. Japanese mill workers, like American workers in the mid-nineteenth century, were depicted as selfless daughters of the soil with no abiding interest in labor activism. But neither group fits its stereotype. In Japan's case, mill workers staged labor struggles to shorten the workday, to raise wages, to end the confinement of workers whose contractual prepayments had not yet been repaid, and to improve food and lodging in the dormitories. A significant number of workers surely believed their fu-

64. Dublin, Farm to Factory, 10. American mill workers were more accepting of mill conditions in the early years of industrialization, but as pay and hours began to deteriorate with technological advances that accelerated the pace of work, they increasingly engaged in strikes. Wages for New England workers may be found in Robert G. Layer, Earnings of Cotton Mill Operatives, 1825–1914 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), 17–42.
tured to be as workers rather than as daughters returning to the farm; after all, organized strike activity would have been seen as superfluous by workers who expected their time in the mills to be a limited ordeal before they returned to their real role as farm women.

Labor activism was conditioned by the workers' own experiences. Male workers, most of whom were commuters and thus unaffected by dormitory conditions, often struck for such abstract rights as the freedom to unionize. Women workers, in contrast, struck mainly for improvements in working and living conditions.\textsuperscript{66} Workers at Fuji Böseki, for example, went out in 1927 for higher wages, overtime for night work, special sick rooms, twenty-four-hour on-call physicians, and, most important in some strikers' memories, better food.\textsuperscript{67} Some also struck in the late 1920s for reasons that were particularly gender-specific, including maternity leave and, in at least one case, "freedom of marriage."\textsuperscript{68}

Women workers' living arrangements also influenced how their strikes were organized. Planning could occur practically under the noses of the supervisors because workers ate, slept, and bathed together, and even if they socialized with one another after hours, they did not arouse suspicion. These experiences may help to account for the enthusiastic and militant involvement of large numbers of women workers in the massive textile strikes of the 1920s, despite their extremely low rates of union membership (only 3.7 percent of union members were women, and only 1 percent of women workers were unionized, compared to 16 percent of male workers).\textsuperscript{69} Close living quarters thus made union membership unnecessary for women to be active in staging successful strikes.

Activism often paid off.\textsuperscript{70} Fuji Böseki, for instance, decreased its workday to eleven hours after the workers struck in 1925.\textsuperscript{71} Most firms improved food and dormitory arrangements, and many offered pay raises, though these tended to be smaller than what was demanded.

In addition, social welfare advocates joined with working-class women and some government reformers to push for abolition of night work for women and children. After 1929, late-night (11:00 P.M. to 5:00 A.M.) work was prohibited for women, thereby shortening the hours of both


\textsuperscript{67} Watanabe Etsuji and Suzuki Yūko, \textit{Tatakai ni ikite} (Domesu Shuppan, 1980), 168–69.

\textsuperscript{68} Hasegawa, "Honpo ni okeru fujin rōdō undō no sūsei," 465.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 459–60.

\textsuperscript{70} It paid off for most workers, though militant leaders often risked their jobs; see Watanabe and Suzuki, \textit{Tatakai ni ikite}, 171.

\textsuperscript{71} Umezu interview, March 11, 1985.
TABLE 10.1. Frequency of Strikes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1924</th>
<th>1925</th>
<th>1926</th>
<th>1927</th>
<th>1928</th>
<th>1929</th>
<th>1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Participation Only</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Participation Only</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Participation</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>906</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


shifts and radically altering the pattern of shared bedding in dormitories.72

Although grim working conditions continued to characterize the cotton textile factories, the various reforms gained during the 1920s helped promote worker recruitment. Furthermore, rising expectations of a decent workplace strengthened workers’ commitments to their chosen jobs while intensifying their belief that activism could indeed produce positive results. Beginning in the late 1920s, then, strikes became more frequent (table 10.1). Increasingly independent young women were ready to accept the greater autonomy offered by the mills as reforms were implemented. Also, as rising levels of education in the 1920s made women workers more literate, new inspiration was found in the writings of such critics as the socialist feminist Yamakawa Kikue and playwright Henrik Ibsen.73 Women were also more physically vigorous because they left school later and were therefore older.74 By the end of the decade, gradual reforms in the workplace together with higher educational achievement had produced workers with attitudes and expectations at the time of recruitment that were markedly different from those of their predecessors in the textile industry.

Nevertheless, women remained outside the mainstream of union activity, as their low rates of union membership indicate. The structural


73. Umuzi interview; Takai, *Watashi no "Jokō aishi,“* 47.

74. E. Patricia Tsurumi, “Female Textile Workers and the Failure of Early Trade Unionism in Japan,” *History Workshop* 18 (Fall 1984): 3–28. Tsurumi questions the notion that education, which attempted to instill a respect for hierarchy and an acceptance of industrial paternalism, inhibited factory girls’ activism during the Meiji period because, she notes, so few textile workers were educated at that time (see pp. 10–12). If we accept Tsurumi’s assertion, we see a remarkable shift in the effects of education from the Meiji to the Taishō period, when education sparked activism. See also Allinson, *Japanese Urbanism*, 85, which notes that higher levels of education produced nondocile female workers, a condition deplored by their employer, Toyota.
characteristics of women's working and living conditions that aided communication may also have impeded formal organization by fostering a sense of vulnerability. Louise Tilly suggests that as European working women became less vulnerable, they became more militant. Married workers felt less threatened by the effects of job loss; indeed, as the percentage of the European work force that was married increased, so too did female militancy. Japanese employers attempted to curtail militancy by housing women workers in dormitories. While dorms facilitated transmission of information and ideology, which fueled militancy once a strike began, they were also a way of maintaining workers' vulnerability: a dismissed worker lost more than just a job.

Male unionist opposition also impeded women's participation in formal collective actions. As in other countries, male workers shored up their limited gains vis-à-vis their employers by distancing themselves from the needs of women workers: in short, their own job security and higher wages depended on subtle collusion with employers' oppression of women workers. Moreover, many men opposed the creation within unions of women's sections because, they said, these would focus women workers' attention on their "special interests" and divert it from the "real business" of the union. A combination of ignorance of women workers' needs, hostility toward women, and self-importance is evident in this conflation of male workers' interests with those of the larger group.

When women did strike, however, they were no less active than the better-organized men. The striking textile workers of Tōyō Muslin in 1930, who took their demonstrations to the streets and even stopped the trains in their area, could certainly not be characterized as passive workers. Such labor activism paralleled the less structured "activism" of young farm women who decided to leave for the mills.

CONCLUSION

Women workers were taking an increasingly active role in seeking and maintaining their employment in the cotton industry when Hosoi Wakizō wrote his influential book about them in 1925. As we have seen, Hosoi's approach had serious limitations. Although deplorable conditions did exist, his emphasis on oppression offers an incomplete picture of

78. Watanabe and Suzuki, Tatakai ni ikite, 179.
changing recruitment and employment patterns. In particular, his view
suffers from the tendency to treat the workers merely as the victims of
exploitation. Such an approach fails to account for changes in workers'
attitudes toward and relations with their families and their social envi­
ronment during the half-century (1877–1925) covered in Jokō aishi.
While Hosoi's depiction of factory girls may have been accurate for the
Meiji period, it fails to consider changes that must surely have affected
women workers later on, such as the evolution of industrial capitalism
and the development of male labor-management relations; the growth
of the regulatory power of the state; the expansion of education for all
segments of society, including rural girls; and the sense, even among
some rural girls, that they did not completely share their mothers' val­
ues, particularly after the social changes that transformed Japan in the
post-World War I (late Taishō) period.

The theory of female passivity is perhaps most evident in histories of
the Japanese labor movement in the late Taishō period, which fre­
quently attribute the rise of union activism to the increasing percentage
of men in the industrial work force. Until recently most analysts have
overlooked the origins of labor activism among female workers, though
interestingly, scholars on both sides of the Pacific have now begun to
modify the theory of Japanese women's passivity in the area of worker
organization and strike activities.79

Labor activists, of course, developed a worker consciousness during
their period of employment, with their experiences helping to mold
their identity. But even rural girls and women newly entering urban
employment made active choices about their work situation.

Two major developments during the 1920s affected women's atti­
tudes toward their employment, making them more favorably disposed
to work. First, within the workplace working conditions gradually im­
proved, particularly with the upgrading of dormitory, food, and recre­
tional services following major strikes and, after 1929, the enforcement
of the prohibition against child labor and the elimination of late-night
work for women. Second, outside the workplace higher levels of edu­
cation and the desire for learning instilled in female workers a greater
sense of self-confidence. The challenge to previous definitions of gen-

79. Some of these works use a predominantly feminist approach, others a more tradi­
tional Marxist labor-historical approach. They include ibid.; Watanabe Etsuji and Suzuki
Yuko, Undō ni kaketa onnatachi (Domesu Shuppan, 1980); the documents collection edited
by Akamatsu Ryōko, Nihon fujin mondai shiryō shūsei; Sharon Sievers, Flowers in Salt: The
Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan (Stanford: Stanford University Press,
1983); and E. Patricia Tsurumi, "Problem Consciousness and Modern Japanese History:
Female Textile Workers of Meiji and Taishō," Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars 18, no. 4
der by Taishō middle-class feminist workers and activists described by Rodd, Nagy, and Silverberg in this volume (chapters 8, 9, and 11), though not explicitly articulated by the women in my study, also undoubtedly helped to motivate changes in working-class women's attitudes. In sum, the 1920s was a period of significant change in the composition, conditions, and consciousness of the female work force in the cotton textile industry as older, better-educated, and more autonomous and activist workers from rural backgrounds sought to determine their own economic and social conditions while contributing to the industrial and demographic development of Japan.