
Position And Role Of Women In The Tokugawa Shogunate Period

The shogunate and daimyos viewed the economy in simple agriculturist terms. They saw the economic system where the peasants' role was to produce basic foods. Peasants were to give a good portion of their products in tax to support the ruling classes. Artisans used their skills to craft necessary non-food items. Finally, goods that could not be acquired through any other means could be purchased from merchants. Merchants were denied the necessary evil of the economic system. However, the Tokugawa period saw rapid growth in the economy. It occurred first in the agricultural sector. However, merchant-driven trade and market activity also contributed to the growth. This was due to the concentration of population in cities. Many Tokugawa authorities stick to their old notions of the agriculture-based economy. The samurai class who were dependent on the daimyos were not allowed to engage in profitable trading or farming and had disadvantages. The ruling class could not take advantage of the economic growth. On the other hand, the substantial benefits went to merchants and even to market-savvy peasants. Therefore, we see an inversion of the status hierarchy based on the four-class system due to economic growth. As a result, a wealthy, educated, and powerful commoner population was created. Meanwhile, samurai, especially those of low rank, steadily became economically weaker.

"Merchants and Society in Tokugawa Japan" by Charles D. Sheldon, show the rise of mercantilism in late Tokugawa. It is discussed that merchants, although placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, managed to gain advantage from the economic growth as compared to the Samurai class. The author gives us the reasons behind the transformation of the commoner culture as well. For example, "Samurai were prohibited legally from engaging in trade and this gave the merchants a monopoly which they proceeded, naturally enough and with skill, to exploit"

From the end of the seventeenth century, the bakufu, as well as most of the daimyos, faced financial difficulties. This happened because most of the samurai class were underemployed in terms of official duties, along with that they were used to a high standard of life which they considered appropriate to their rank and status. An example of this could be Katsu Kokichi's story. Katsu Kokichi is also known as Musui was a samurai of the Tokugawa period. The story provides the perspective of Japanese society and its economy. Katsu had many dependents and the stipend from the shogunate would not be enough to feed his family. He did various other jobs to take care of his family. The stipend that the retired samurais got was only forty-one koku which surely was not enough compared to the expense's samurai class had. These unemployed samurais were called kubushin. If they wanted a job, they were investigated based on domestic situations, finances literary, and military talents. Many of the kobushins would avoid the appointments to avoid the other costs.

The economic growth affected different classes differently, clearly, merchants benefitted from the increase in trade, markets, and urbanization. One question to answer is why did the Samurai suffer? First, samurai had fixed stipends, disbursed rice. These stipends were given based on an individual's rank and office and did not increase at a pace equal to the rise in prices. Second, with the growth of the market and monetization of the economy, samurai had to

trade their rice stipend for cash. We see in the reading of *Merchants and Society* by Sheldon, he says, "the only sector of the economy which continued to flourish was the mercantile and banking sector and the merchants whose monopoly it was, though monopoly of city commerce was increasingly challenged by provincial merchants." Samurais were in dilemma because of the market price of rice and the greed of merchant money changers. Finally, samurai were forbidden by law from engaging in farming and commerce. All these factors were in the way of the samurais to benefit from the economic growth. As this happened samurai began to borrow money for the future to meet their present needs. This benefited the merchants on a large spectrum. This became even worse as they also had to maintain their appearances according to the protocol. In Musui's story, katsu wanted to get jobs and had to maintain his elite status, to do so he made sure to buy expensive clothing.

Tokugawa authorities were aware of the problem samurais were facing. They kept defining the samurai's job as moral administrators. Common people could not fulfill those roles. Scholars such as Ogyu Sorai had proposed reforms to get the samurais out of these problems however, the authorities thinking about proper order could not change the reality. Ogyu Sorai proposed to let the samurai return to the land so they could farm. In the end the commoners, specifically the merchants benefited from the economic growth than the elites like Samurai.

I will describe the second gap between the perception of women's role in Tokugawa Japan and the reality. There are several contradictory perspectives of women in modern Japan. Female labor was ignored in the understanding of women. The picture of "Ukiyoe" (the picture of the floating world) gives us an idea of the role of women in society beyond that of the Confucian ideal of ideal Japanese women. How were the women of the Tokugawa period? Through the readings of "Great Learning for women" we see a reflection of Japanese women in the Tokugawa period, however, a question that can be raised is, is this an accurate reflection of women in Japan? Are there rules because no one is following them? In *Onna Daigaku*, a description of women is limited to righteous wives, who are to be, not silly, disease-free, filial, docile, obedient, isolated, fertile, not jealous, and frugal. However, we see a different picture in Yokota Fuyuhiko's "Imagining Working women in early modern Japan" which is more focused on labor. The author tells us how husbands and wives worked together. Although disvalued women's work was almost everywhere. As shown in *Onna daigaku* the relationship between sex and status did not exist in Japan. The work was emphasized the elite class neglecting the women of other classes. As the economic growth was happening women were also prominent in this growth. Women worked in textiles, in pleasure quarters. The women in pleasure quarters were in high demand. We also know from the readings of "women of the mito domain" that women's jobs were not only limited to household but also, they were engaged in martial arts.

Women in Tokugawa, especially in rural surroundings lived in a more equal environment because their work was important in the survival of rural families. Although men remained the head of the house, women influenced the decisions as well. Through the picture of the floating world and literature by women, one can justify that Modern Japan was not nadired status for women. Women were even allowed to deny marriage if they were willing to remain with their parents to take care of them, although it could disturb the structure of the society. Moreover, we learn from the readings of, "Women of the Mito Domain" that the samurai children received intensive education and women were not disadvantaged with this. It was the women of the samurai class and the common class who organized an educational system consisting of newly established schools and private academics. The Japanese concept of "Bento" as discussed in class is of the lunchbox, which was graded by the teachers stressing the fact that women

should influence their children in the study and do so, this bento needs to be healthy for the kids. Men were not to evaluate a woman based on her appearance but also the grade of education. This led to a high level of education for the women of the Tokugawa period. Women in cities were able to receive higher education compared to the rural areas. Overall, these gaps in Economic growth and Women's role existed. We can understand these and their significance through documents on Japan's Tokugawa period.

edubirdie.com