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JAPAN: Women Juggle Careers and Caregiving With Cell Phones

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TOKYO, Apr 17 (IPS) - Mobile phone technology is helping many Japanese career women cope with a traditional role they are unable to shake off -- that of providing care for the elderly.

Mariko Oshima, an expert on welfare policy, says her life changed dramatically after she bought her elderly mother-in-law a mobile phone, equipped with special functions.

"My mother-in-law's mobile phone plays a crucial role in my life because I can now work and also keep a check on her through the phone. It would not be an exaggeration to say the mobile phone has contributed to gender equality," says Oshima.

Oshima purchased a DoCoMo 'Raku Raku' phone for her 80-year-old mother-in-law, last June. The phone, specially geared for the elderly, has a sophisticated camera, e-mail functions and a special service that automatically downloads and relays information onto Oshima's own phone from her mother-in-law's daily schedule.

DoCoMo is Japan's principal mobile phone operator, the name being an abbreviation for 'Do Communications Over the Mobile'. It also means 'nowhere-anywhere' in the Japanese language.

"I can now also keep a close watch on my mother from long distances. Her caregiver sends me photographs through the cell phone on what my mother eats and where she visits. When my mother is alone, the cell phone helps me to monitor her movements. If I notice something strange I immediately call for help," said Oshima.

Although faced with a rapidly graying population, Japan is yet to devise a satisfactory strategy to care for the elderly, beyond expecting women to carry on with their traditional role of shouldering the burden.

Government policy on the aging society is that the family remains the primary provider of care for the elderly. Official papers say proudly that "the high rate of elderly people living with their children is a latent asset in the country's welfare budget".

Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s, when the increase in elderly population first became a social issue, some local governments began to honour housewives who cared for aged parents and even enact laws to reward devoted housewives.

It is common for working women to leave jobs and careers in order to care for elderly parents-in-law in a society that believes that it is the duty of the wife of the eldest son, to look after his parents.

But as Oshima's example suggests, the new generation of mobile phones is capable of playing a bridging role in Japan that remains both deeply tradition-bound and technology-crazy.

Mobile phone manufacturers are now falling over each other to introduce models with sophisticated technology such as built-in sensors that allow people to use their keitai for personal security, replace their wallets, buy travel tickets, and take care of other needs of the busy urban woman.

Already, Japanese career women have shown a keen interest in using cell phone features such as reminders and

alerts that help them 'multitask' through a typical day. Says Sophia Wu, a researcher at the information studies faculty at the prestigious national Tokyo University: "Cell phones are becoming indispensable for most Japanese. The cell phone is now considered a partner in their lives as more people become busy, live alone, and are on the move all the time."

Wu considers Oshima an apt illustration of how the mobile phone in Japan is more than a tool for entertainment or communication, unlike in many Asian countries. She points out how the cell phone has allowed women from the baby boomer generation in Japan, to juggle tradition with modern lifestyles.

"Japan's rapid industrialisation has left a void in society as traditional values have begun to take second place. Oshima's dependence on her cell phone shows how cleverly the Japanese have begun to bridge this gap with technology, a phenomenon I see expanding to Asia, as societies change," she explained.

Oshima says the keitai has become a bonus for Japanese homemakers who are forced take on the responsibility of looking after aging parents and have to give up careers.

"Women can now lead their own lives while looking after their parents," she says.

Cell phones have already proven their value in keeping track of children, many of whom have, in recent years, become victims of crime. Mobile phone operators now offer services on new handsets featuring technologies that automatically download information from hand sets carried by children.

This spring, DoCoMo launched a series of child-friendly '3G' mobile phones, with functions that include an alarm of about 100 decibels that children can activate with a push of a button, as well as a search service that works even after the handset has been turned off.

Parents, who sign up for the service, pay around 100 US dollars monthly. Yuichi Kogure, an expert on the mobile phone networking industry says the roots of the mind boggling array of services available on the keitai can be traced to the market being controlled by a few Japanese companies and telecommunication networks that focus on profits from various services.

"Mobile phone operators rely on profits through phone service charges which are high compared to most countries. To make users pay high bills, the phones are equipped with various functions that people start to use and become dependent on," he explained..

Indeed, Oshima's bills are around 150 dollars per month, a fee, she says is small compared to the convenience. "I can afford to pay the price. The cell phone bill is comparable to that for my monthly utilities. I cannot live without either," she explained. (FIN/2006)