Geisha On Fire

Beimeng Fu

CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

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Masae Satouchi is not an average Japanese woman. The transplanted New Yorker works as a modern Geisha performer, fire performer, burlesque dancer, belly dancer, color therapy teacher, dream workshop mentor, model, hair stylist, and makeup artist. On top of that, she’s a new mother to a nine-month-old baby. That might be too much to handle at once. When she lived in Shiga Prefecture, a country town an hour away from Kyoto, her ex-boyfriends were uncomfortable with her eccentricity. She liked to wear colorful clothes, they didn’t. They even found her embarrassing to walk with her. She decided to leave.

“I was too colorful to live in Japan.” She left behind a then fiance, telling him that she would be away for “two to three years” – and it has been nine.

Japan is, of course, a modern, industrialized nation. Its society, however, is famously conservative and does not allow for much unique self-expression. In Japanese journalist Kentaro Aragaki’s words, “people who leave the country are treated like traitors.” Moreover, Japan's standing lifelong employment law encourages people to specialize in one single profession. That can limit people's choices and curb their creativity.

The situation is particularly difficult for Japanese women. Japan ranks 105 out of 136 in global gender gap index. Most women their quit jobs after having their first child. To recruit more women into workforce is a critical part of Shinzo Abe's policies to boost the economy. However, two years in, the initiative only achieved minor success. Controversially, people tend to say that's because of the traditional mindset to keep women home. Some say there isn't enough public will to change gender norms for there to be real change.

When Satouchi was living in Japan, she suffered from the outdated mindset too. Nobody supported her dream of becoming a dancer. Her parents, a bank clerk and a businessman, said that she would need to support herself, and dancing wouldn’t be the profession to realize the goal. Her former boss at a salon didn’t allow her to use her own time modeling, although she worked almost 16 hours a day from morning meeting at 8 a.m., to 12 a.m. after work “nomunication”– a term that combines the Japanese word, “nomu,” meaning “drink,” with the English word “communication.” If there was one thing her former hair salon boss left her that was positive, that was to encourage her to “visualize dreams.” And her dream, was to come to New York. She won a hair-cutting competition and the prize was a trip to New York.

The first night she came, she couldn’t see any light down there from the window
on the airplane. Pitch black. She oddly ran into a large-scale blackout in the city, and the plane had to hover in the air for hours to get in line and land. Finally she got in a taxi, but first time in a strange city, in the black, she couldn’t help but shivering, hoping that the driver wouldn’t bring her somewhere and assault her. Thankfully, nothing happened. The next day, the city restored power, and she unfolded her brightest dress, gave it a try on the streets. “It’s such a beautiful dress!” a woman in the elevator greeted her. Really? People here actually like my style? She asked herself, surprisingly. She was like a fish returning to the water. From then on, after a couple of more trips, she finally moved to her dreamland.

"It seems Japan’s biggest problem is the lack of role models presenting diverse lifestyles and work styles that are free of fixed gender roles and different from the traditional “men at work, women at home” family model," wrote Japan Times' reporter Tomoko Otake.

Satouchi sometimes feels guilty that she plays around with so many gigs, unlike other fellow citizens who focus on just one thing. But work is always work. “I realize that I can do one thing, two things, three things, I can do whatever I like and support my family.”

Coming to New York allowed her to break out of the strict social codes and stereotypes that constrain women. She spared no time learning, and determined to spread the dream on – she has been holding a “dream-come” seminar in New York, San Francisco, as well as Japan for people who want to learn how to dream. “Think of 100 dreams and write them down,” she would require in the beginning of the session. I don’t have that many dreams? – “You don’t know that, you don’t know if you have 100 dreams. Try.”

Now that she goes back to Japan, more people look at her in a different way, treat her as an artist, including her father. Once she was performing a fire show in a Kyoto hotel, she for the first time invited her father. When the performance was done, he didn’t say a lot, but only, “don’t tell your mother.”