

Working Women in Japan: Past & Now

20 Years of Equal Employment Opportunity Law

By IINO Natsuko

It was in 1986 that the Equal Employment Opportunities Law for Men and Women was implemented to prohibit sexual discrimination against women in the workplace. Twenty years have passed since then and the law was revised this year with the aim of further eliminating discriminatory behavior against working women. I would like to look back on the last two decades and reflect on the changes that have taken place during this period and the improvements that still need to be made.

Rising Number of Working Women

I graduated from university and started job hunting in 1983, a few years before the equal employment law went into effect. At that time, there were few companies that would employ women, and I remember finding it difficult to be allowed to take employment exams. Compared to those days, there are few companies now that make visible sex discrimination such as declaring that they will not employ women. There are certainly more workplaces open to women and the number of working women has increased, with some gain-

ning to work as taxi drivers and as salespeople, taking on jobs traditionally monopolized by men.

Chart 1 shows changes in the number of women employed by companies. In the year the equal employment law was implemented, the number was about 14 million, but has now exceeded 20 million. The ratio of women among all employees exceeds 40%. However, these figures are a combination of both full- and part-time workers. When we look at the numbers of full-timers and part-timers, we see that during the last 20 years, there has been little change in the number of female full-time employees. The number of part-timers and dispatch workers has increased, and exceeds that of full-time workers. Meanwhile, many men continue working as full-time employees. While it is said that women have made advances in Japanese society, the reality is that a great gap still exists in the employment situation between men and women.

Persisting Gender Wage Gap

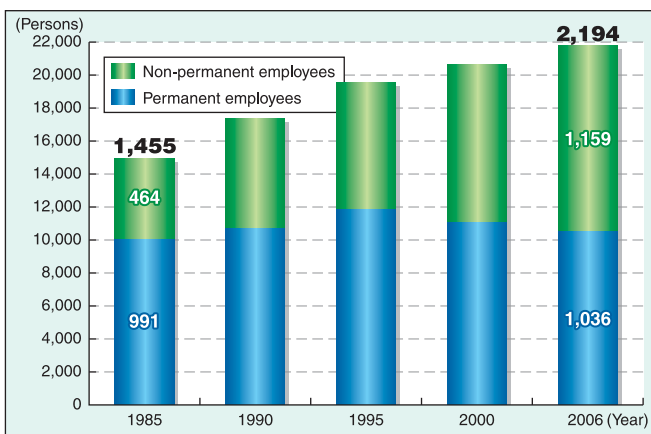
The difference in the wages of female employees, including part-timers, and of male employees is actually growing as a

result of the difference in forms of employment. In 1986, a woman's salary was 51.8% of a man's pay, but has now dipped below the 50% line to 49.6%. This is because more women are working as non-full-time workers.

In contrast, the wage gap between male and female full-time employees is shrinking. But the number of women who are in *sogo-shoku* (career track) positions and able to perform key jobs is small. Women make up only about 5% of all *sogo-shoku* positions. One reason for this is that many companies require employees in *sogo-shoku* positions to accept job transfers involving changes of abode for work at regional offices. The number of women in managerial positions is gradually rising, but is still low. A mere 3.7% are working as *bucho* (department managers). (Chart 2)

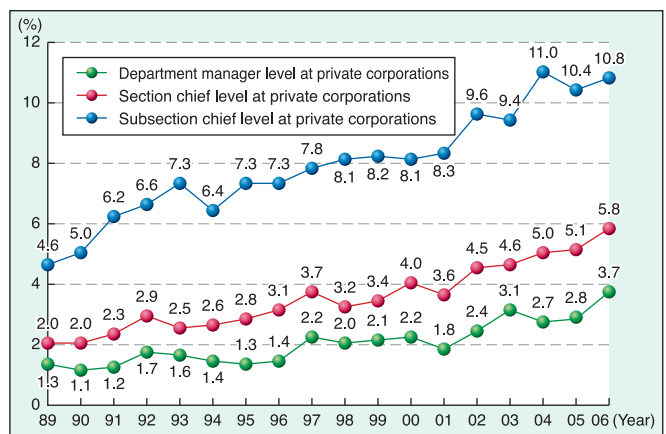
Looking at such data, we see that while there is no doubt that the equal employment law has led to bigger employment opportunities for women, only a handful of women have been able to utilize these opportunities. The reason is that the responsibilities of child-rearing and housework lie heavily on a woman's shoulders. It is impossible for women to keep up with the pace of hard

Chart 1 Number of women employees (officers excluded)



Source: Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs & Communications

Chart 2 Ratios of women managerial staff by position



Source: "White Paper on Gender Equality 2007," Cabinet Office

work which men are adhering to at the expense of their families. Under such circumstances, 70% of women quit their jobs after giving birth, and once they have left the workplace, it is difficult for them to find a job again, and many have no other choice but to take on insecure and temporary part-time jobs.

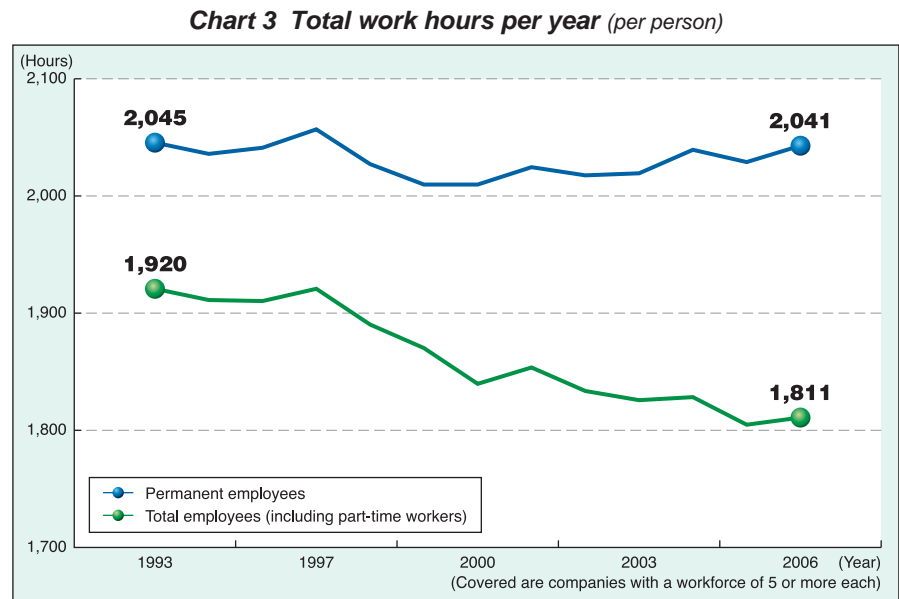
The equal employment law has certainly ended blatant discrimination against women, it is true, but gender-based discrimination still remains in different forms. The big challenge for us now is to come up with ways to stamp out such discrimination.

My Experience

Let me talk about my own experience. I have continued to work full-time while looking after my two children. There have been times when I was on the verge of giving up my job, but I have managed to hang on so far thanks to the understanding of the people I work with and the support of the people in my neighborhood. The biggest driving force, though, was that I was able to feel my work deserved passionate self-devotion.

I was employed by NHK as its first female reporter. The essential work of a reporter is to gather information for news reports and feature programs. When there is a crime or an accident, reporters have to rush to the scene and gather information just like the police. When there is a disaster, reporters must sometimes stay in the same place for many weeks to cover it. When I started working, my boss seemed to be initially worried about sending a woman to the scene, but as time went on, it was taken for granted. Whenever something happened, I was alerted night and day for information gathering. At that time, I was glad to be doing a job that aims to uncover truth, and I did not find the hard work stressful at all.

Things became less simple when I had my first child. The nursery in those days closed at 6 p.m. and the only solution seemed to be to employ a babysitter if I had to work through the evening. However, it was costly to have a babysitter stay until late at night. So I put up a notice at a school training nursery staff in my neighborhood, and had its students take turns to stay overnight at my



Source : Ministry of Health, Labor & Welfare

home to look after my child. I coped with the situation in this way and managed to continue working, but I was concerned that I was spending too little time with my child. Deep down in my heart, I kept asking myself whether it was right for me to continue like this.

And so when I had my second child, I took a year of childcare leave, and requested less demanding work that would allow me to put priority on childcare until my child turned 3. Thankfully the company accepted my request, and I was able to work on making TV programs at a less strenuous pace. On the very third birthday of my child, I went back to the kind of strenuous work I used to do before.

Having children has been enormously beneficial for my work. By giving birth, I was able to see the sorry state of obstetric medical care and by raising my children, I came to notice the insufficiencies in the country's child-rearing support and pediatric care. And when my children started going to school, I became painfully aware of the various problems surrounding school education. The various questions that were raised while leading my life prompted me to do research and this in turn was useful in making TV programs. The reason I decided to enter the media industry in the first place was because I felt that Japanese journalism often failed to see things from the perspective of the ordi-

nary citizen, and I wanted to rectify the situation. The experience of child-rearing helped me achieve my goal.

Training Important

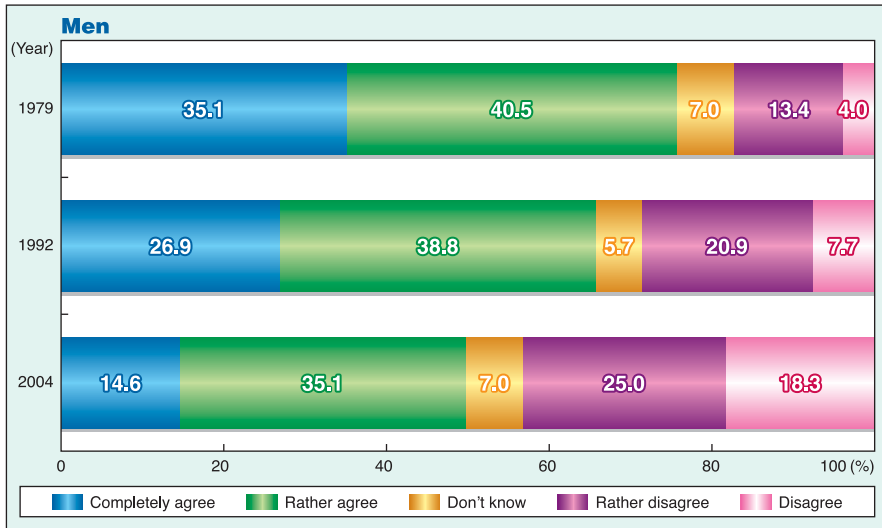
From my own experience, I feel that for women to continue working, there are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled. One requirement is the presence of meaningful work that you feel deserves self-devotion. I have talked to many women leaving the workplace and their common complaint is that while their male peers have been assigned important work, women have only been given supplementary tasks. I too have that kind of experience, but I was fortunate to have a good boss. Concerned that continuing to do such auxiliary work would not be good for my career in the long term, my boss appointed me as leader of a big project. If it had not been for that kind of thoughtfulness, I too might easily have quit my job. If companies want to make the most of its female employees, it is vital to give them exactly the same solid training as to men, and let them do responsible work.

Make Working Hours Shorter

The second requirement for women to continue working is to cut short the long working hours.

Chart 3 shows changes in a worker's

Chart 4 Views on the question, "The husband should be the breadwinner, the wife should stay at home"



Source : Compiled from "Public Opinion Poll on a Gender-equal Society," Cabinet Office

annual working hours. The overall time has been reduced to 1,811 hours, but this average figure includes the work time of part-time employees. When we look at the working hours of full-time employees, the figure is little changed at 2,041 hours. Clearly, long working hours have become the norm. Companies are letting go of full-time workers and replacing them with part-time workers who are paid lower wages. This trend is accelerating, and the full-timers who have remained with the company are finding that their work burden has become heavier than ever. As a result, there are increasing incidents of people committing suicide and dying from overwork.

In such an environment, a woman who has children has no choice but to quit her job. And when her husband is so overloaded with work, it becomes very difficult for a woman to work full-time. If we could put an end to this situation of full-time employees working such long hours, it would be possible for women to continue working even after giving birth.

Raise Awareness of Men

Another important requirement is to raise the awareness of men.

Chart 4 shows the results of a survey that asked people how they think of the idea of husbands earning a living and wives staying at home. While the per-

centage of men completely or rather agreeing to this idea has decreased from the past, nearly half of them still support the idea. Not a few women I know are unwillingly let go of their jobs because their husbands believed that once they have become mothers, they should take care of their children.

It is possible now for men in Japan to take childcare leave, but less than 1% actually do so. Perhaps they are cautious about requesting leave for fear their standing will suffer in the workplace. I doubt, though, that it is the only reason. I feel that at the bottom of their hearts lies the mindset that child-rearing is something for women to do. But if women are to work in the same way as men, it is only natural that men should also take the same responsibilities at home as women.

Better Treat Part-timers

It is also important to ensure that even if a worker can work for only short hours, he or she gets the proper remuneration for the work performed. There is currently a large discrepancy in the hourly wage between full- and part-time employees. The average hourly wage including bonuses for a female part-timer is ¥972, which is 59% of the ¥1,655 of a female full-time worker. In the case of men, the average part-time wage is ¥1,099 per hour, 43% of the ¥2,566 hourly wage of a male full-time worker.

Coupled with the larger gap in part-time pay among men than among women, the period of each part-time contract is short, and there is little employment security. Nearly half of all part-timers work on a six-month or one-year contract, and have to keep renewing them. Such workers may be dissatisfied with the way they are treated by their employers, but they are unable to express discontent because there is always the risk of their contracts not being renewed.

To improve such circumstances, the Part-time Work Law was revised this year. However, due to strong opposition from management, equal treatment made possible by the revision was limited to only a handful of part-timers who do the same work as full-timers. This reflects the fact that many Japanese companies regard part-time workers as nothing more than cheap labor. If treatment of part-timers were improved to the same level as those of other industrialized countries, Japanese women would find it easier to work. Besides, their morale would be boosted and productivity enhanced.

Work/Life Balance

In Japanese society, the disparity between men and women has been reduced so far by women trying to emulate the strenuous working style of men – a lifestyle that neglects the home. However, correcting the gender disparity in this manner has its limitations. I think it is high time that both men and women consider working styles that can be balanced with their private lives. In other words, we need to seriously consider ways to achieve a work/life balance. If more work/life balance measures are taken, it will be easier for women to work and it will also probably slow the rapid birthrate decline.

I would like to conclude by urging company management to implement measures from a long-term standpoint that will improve the working environment of employees. **J.S**

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