

Women at Work

By Namiko Nishimura

According to the latest ILO statistics, there were 600 million women in the work force in 1980. This was one-third of the total world labor force of 1.8 billion. The percentage of women 15 or older in the labor force is the highest in the Soviet Union at 60%, followed by the East European countries at 57%. The lowest percentages are 4% in northern Africa and 24% in Latin America. The number of women workers throughout the world climbed during the three decades between 1950 and 1980, bringing the ratio of women workers to the total labor force significantly higher in 1980 than in 1950.

The majority of women workers are in the developing countries and two-thirds of them are employed in agriculture. In the Western industrialized countries, approximately two-thirds of women workers are in the service sector, one-fourth in manufacturing and one-tenth in agriculture. In the planned economy countries, one-fifth of women workers are in agriculture, the remainder in industry and services.

Between 1970 and 1980, there was a

drop in agricultural workers in every region as labor shifted to the service sector. This shift was particularly pronounced in the planned economy countries. The number of women workers in manufacturing doubled over this same decade in the developing countries, hung steadily at a high level in the planned economy countries and remained fairly stable in the Western industrialized countries.

Japan is no exception to this general trend to more women workers. Particularly in 1984, the number of working women 15 years of age and older exceeded the number of full-time housewives by more than 20,000. Clearly, a growing number of Japanese women are choosing to work outside the home.

Over the past decade, there has been a definite and steady increase, in concert with the general rise in women workers, in the number of married women entering the labor market. The absence of similarly high increases in the number of unmarried, divorced and widowed women workers indicates that, in Japan at least, married women have been the

prime agent in the general increase in the number of women workers.

When changes in the labor force are broken down in terms of male and female workers, Japan's total labor force of workers 15 and over increased from 45.11 million in 1960 to 59.29 million in 1984, albeit with a downward dip in the wake of the first oil crisis. Within this, the number of male workers increased from 26.73 million to 35.8 million and the number of women workers from 18.38 million to 23.47 million. Economic ups and downs appear to have little lasting effect on the number of women workers in Japan. In contrast to the gradual decline in the percentage of male workers within the total labor force (84.8% to 78.8%), the percentage of women workers has gradually risen from 45.7% to 48.9%.

The pattern of increase in the number of women workers in Japan is similar to that in the Western industrialized countries. Much of this trend is the result of changing industrial structures, the first stage of which is characterized by a decline in the number of workers in the primary sector, followed by a second stage of expansion in the secondary and manufacturing sectors and finally by a significant increase in the number of workers in the burgeoning service sector.

On a worldwide basis, the East European countries rank highest in the percentage of female workers in the total work force, followed by the Western industrialized nations and Japan. Next come the newly industrializing countries, and the Third World countries are at the very bottom.

Staying longer in the work force

Comparison of the age structures of the Japanese and American female labor forces also sheds light on social patterns.

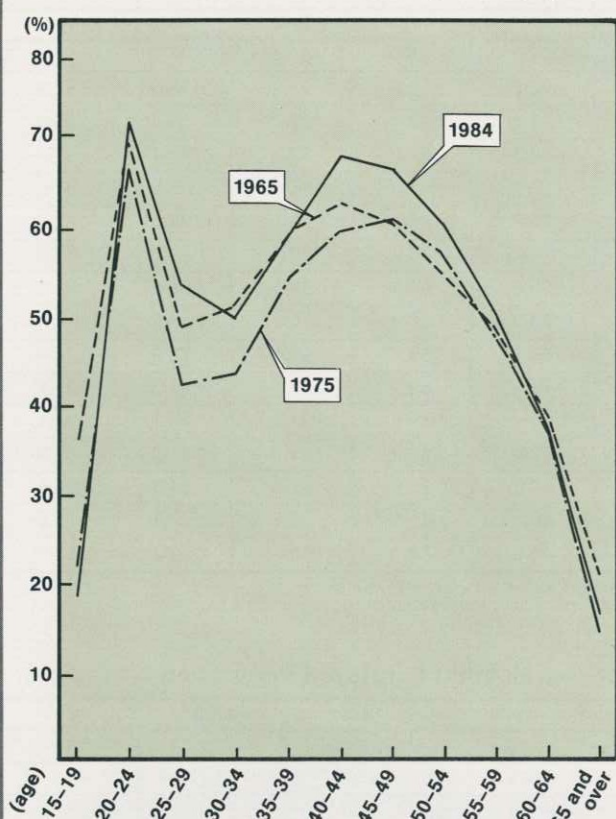
Japanese women tend to work for a



More Japanese women are working as specialists and technicians.

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Fig. 1 Women in the Labor Force by Age (Japan)



Source: Rodoryoku Chosa (Labor Market Survey), Management and Coordination Agency

relatively long period until they get married, after which they confine themselves to the home. This pattern has been the primary obstacle to career development among women in Japan. At the same time, this tends to substantiate the argument, as put forth by in a recent EC report, that Japan's rapid economic growth has been sustained by cheap women's labor and long working hours.

The graph of Japanese female labor by age undulates in an irregular M. The middle point, representing the age group which tends to drop out of the labor force for reasons of marriage, childbirth and child rearing, has moved up, indicating an increase in the percentage of women of childbearing age in the labor force (Fig. 1). As in the United States, more and more women are remaining in the labor force and opting for careers. Many of these women are working in part-time positions, however, unlike their counterparts in the U.S. who are generally shifting to more prestigious full-time jobs.

In this connection, it is worth noting that 1984 statistics compiled by the Ministry of Education show that 40% of all boys and 33% of all girls go on to higher education after completing high school. Comparable figures for women in other countries are 51% in the United States,

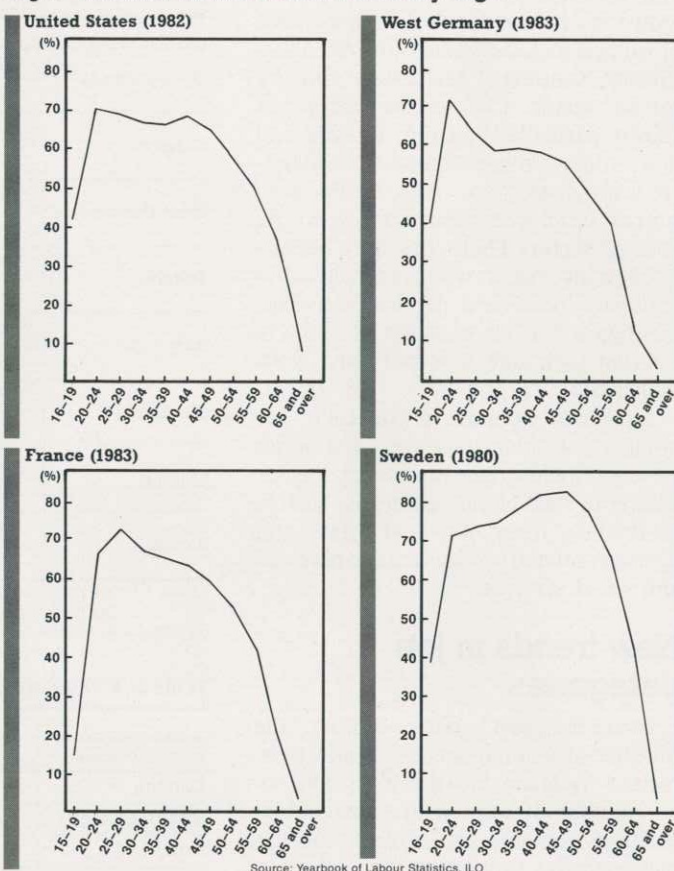
31% in France, 24% in West Germany and 19% in Britain. Japan ranks second only to the United States among the Western industrialized nations in the educational level attained by its women.

The gradual leveling out of the M configuration is due to several factors: the higher educational level of women, heightened awareness among women, the lessening burden of household work, the increase in child care facilities and services, the failure of average household incomes to keep up with the rising cost of living and the need for supplementary income to pay off mortgages and other major expenses. In addition, the expanding service sector and growing demand for part-time workers have combined to make more jobs available to women. This is true elsewhere as well, with female employment expanding with the service sector's growth in the United States, France, West Germany and Sweden.

Steady increase in numbers

In 1960 there were only 5.31 million female employees in Japan, but by 1976 this number had grown to 10.04 million and by 1984 to 15.18 million—nearly tripling even as the number of male em-

Fig. 2 Women in the Labor Force by Age



Source: Yearbook of Labour Statistics, ILO

ployees increased only 2.2-fold over the same 25-year period. The increase in women employees was especially pronounced during Japan's years of rapid economic growth, but even though this growth has stabilized, there continues to be a steady increase.

The percentage of women among total employees increased from 29.9% in 1960 to 35.6% in 1984 (Table 2). This increase is obviously due in part to the growth in labor demand stimulated by the years of rapid economic growth, but additional factors include the emergence of industries that employ large numbers of women, the creation of new jobs for women and the increase in the number of women workers in all industries. In percentage terms, the increase of more than five million in women employees was due 59% to industry growth, 23% to the growing ratio of women workers within all industries and 13% to industrial restructuring. The traditional employment sectors for women (wholesaling, retailing and services) have grown quickly and there has been comparable growth in the number of women they employ, as well as a significant increase in part-time employment.

Similar trends are evident in the United States, Britain, West Germany

and Sweden. In those countries, the industries known for their employment of women include wholesaling, retailing, finance, insurance, real estate and the service sector. The service sector has shown particularly strong growth and now employs more women than manufacturing does. As of 1984, 67.4% of all women employees were working in the tertiary sector. There has also been a marked increase in women employed in regional, social and personal services; this figure reaches as much as 57.6% in Sweden (although it is still only 39.9% in Japan).

American women, in particular, are notable for their presence in a wider variety of fields, their numbers being far greater in such private enterprise sectors as finance, insurance, real estate and business-related services than in personal and social services.

New trends in job categories

Over the past quarter-century, the number of women specialists and technicians in Japan has doubled. The total number of women in management positions remains small, but it too has increased five times over the past quarter-century. In fact, the growing number of women in lower management positions has proved a major stimulus to the greater participation of women in all labor sectors. Skilled female labor is increasingly important in manufacturing and women workers play a central role in product quality management. However, the extreme dedication to their work shown by women in maintenance jobs may be peculiarly Japanese.

Over the past decade, the number of women specialists and administrators has increased by 4.9%, that in sales by 4.0%, that in clerical positions by 3.2% and in skilled production by 1.9% per annum. In Sweden, the greatest number of women workers are specialists and technicians, followed by security guards, then service and clerical workers. Eighty percent of all women workers in Sweden are employed in one of these three categories. In the United States and West Germany, as in Japan, most women are in clerical positions, with lesser numbers in security, services, and specialist and technical fields (Fig. 3).

Where Japan differs from the United States and West Germany is in the large numbers of women it has in transportation and communications, and working as skilled factory workers and manual laborers. The increase in women in these

Table 1 Employment as Percentage of Total Labor Force

| | | 1965 | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 | 1983 |
|---------------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|
| United States | Male | 84.6 | 88.0 | 88.4 | 88.6 | 88.3 |
| | Female | 89.8 | 92.7 | 93.3 | 93.3 | 92.9 |
| Canada | Male | 85.4 | 87.1 | 89.1 | 89.3 | 88.4 |
| | Female | 90.3 | 91.1 | 92.1 | 91.4 | 91.4 |
| West Germany | Male | 83.9 | 95.6 | 86.4 | 87.5 | 87.0 |
| | Female | 75.0 | 78.8 | 82.7 | 86.5 | 86.9 |
| Britain | Male | 91.7 | 90.2 | 89.4 | 89.1 | 87.4 |
| | Female | 95.8 | 95.8 | 96.0 | 96.2 | 94.6 |
| Italy | Male | 63.9 | 67.4 | 70.8 | 70.9 | — |
| | Female | 59.1 | 64.7 | 69.9 | 72.9 | — |
| Sweden | Male | — | 86.9 | 89.4 | 89.5 | 89.5 |
| | Female | — | 92.4 | 94.3 | 95.1 | 95.1 |
| Finland | Male | 72.8 | 77.8 | 83.3 | 81.3 | 81.4 |
| | Female | 66.0 | 74.6 | 82.7 | 84.6 | 86.4 |
| Japan | Male | 68.8 | 71.5 | 75.8 | 77.1 | 78.5 |
| | Female | 48.6 | 54.7 | 59.8 | 63.2 | 65.7 |

Notes: 1. The Canadian figures for 1965 are actually the 1966 figures.

2. The Italian figures for 1980 are actually the 1979 figures.

Source: Labour Force Statistics, OECD, 1985

Table 2 Percentage of Women in Total Employed Population

| | 1965 | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 | 1983 |
|---------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| United States | 36.2 | 39.0 | 40.1 | 43.7 | 44.9 |
| Canada | 32.5 | 34.6 | 37.2 | 40.2 | 42.7 |
| West Germany | 34.5 | 34.7 | 37.0 | 37.9 | 38.7 |
| Britain | 35.6 | 37.7 | 40.4 | 42.1 | 43.5 |
| Italy | 27.2 | 27.5 | 29.1 | 32.2 | — |
| Sweden | — | 40.9 | 43.7 | 46.5 | 48.0 |
| Finland | 41.6 | 43.8 | 46.6 | 47.9 | 49.5 |
| Japan | 31.7 | 33.2 | 32.0 | 34.1 | 35.3 |

Notes: 1. The Canadian figure for 1965 is actually the 1966 figure.

2. The Italian figure for 1980 is actually the 1979 figure.

Source: Employment Outlook 1985, OECD

different fields suggests that in Japan the growing pool of female workers is being fairly evenly distributed among a wide variety of job types.

Supportive factors

Foremost among the various factors that have contributed to the increase in women in the Japanese labor force has been their rising educational level. Beginning in the 1960s, Japan embarked on a period of affluence which helped to create a growing middle class. It was around the same time that the percentage of women going on to higher education, both junior colleges and four-year colleges, began its rapid rise. Today, fully 34.9% of all women receive higher education. This has in turn stimulated their entry into the labor market.

Another factor has been the lengthening period of employment among women workers. In Japan's case, this has been influenced by the life-time employment system which discourages mid-career job

changes. At present female employment averages 6.5 years in all industries.

Higher educational levels, changing lifestyles and the wish to maintain an affluent income level have all contributed to keeping women on the job for a longer period of time. Already, 20% of all women workers in Japan have been employed for ten years or more and this trend can be expected to continue.

Aging has also played a role in increasing the female labor force. While the number of women workers between the ages of 20 and 24 has declined, the number aged 35 and over has increased to account for 56.7% of all women workers. This is the second peak in the M graph configuration showing the percentage of women in the labor force by age group. This pattern is created by a growing number of women who return to the labor market after dropping out for childbirth and child rearing. Over the past decade this older age group has replaced the younger (late teens and early twenties) age groups as the main force in the

female labor force. Unable to find employment with the larger corporations, Japanese women workers in their thirties and older tend to be concentrated in small businesses.

Finally, as the increase in older women workers suggests, there are more married women in the labor force today. The ratio of married to unmarried women has been reversed over the past ten years, with 68.5%—two out of every three—of women workers married.

As an additional note, female wages as a percentage of male wages in Japan have remained fairly steady at 61.4% in recent years.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law

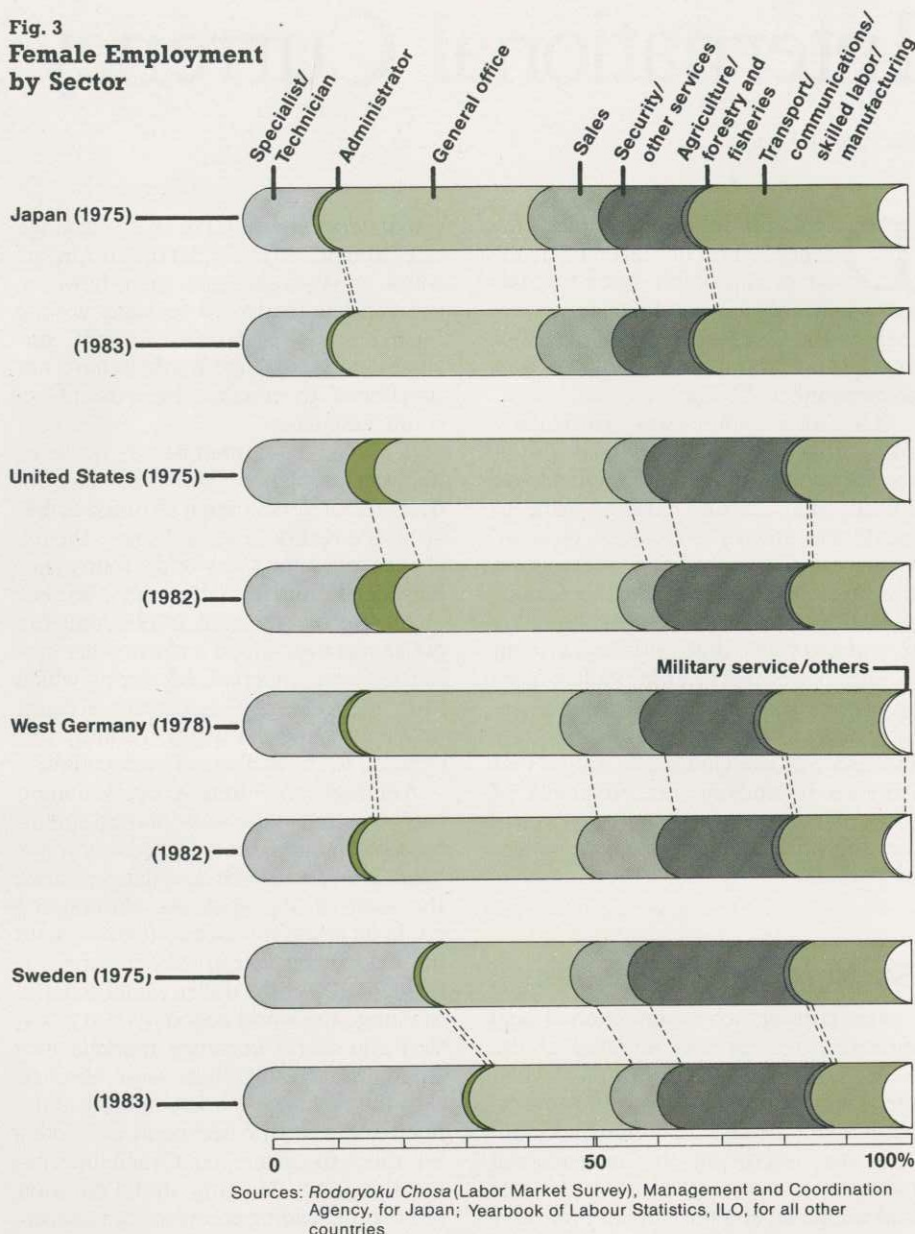
This year, labor and management are reviewing their relations and contracts in light of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law which went into effect on April 1. The United Nations' International Decade of Women triggered efforts all over the world to eradicate discrimination against women on all fronts, and many countries changed their laws or introduced new laws to prevent and eliminate discrimination. Japan had been much criticized for its slowness in following suit, but this new law puts Japan firmly in the ranks of the other nations.

Equal employment for men and women has been an issue of dispute between labor and management for the past seven years, but little has been done about the issue until now. The new law is intended to ensure equality of opportunity for both men and women, but in actual fact there is considerable difference in how men and women are put to use in the workplace. This is an issue the new law does not address. The divergence begins right from the time one is hired. Women employees are, for example, unlikely to receive the same degree of training as their male counterparts, and corporations are still under no legal obligation to provide equal on-the-job training or opportunities for advancement.

Reacting to criticism that the law is too weak to be truly effective, the Japanese government contends that the law is a good start and that it is now up to labor and management to work out the critical details to everyone's satisfaction.

Just to give a few examples of these critical details, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law removes restrictions on the number of working hours for women in management and certain specialist positions (previous laws restricted the

Fig. 3
Female Employment
by Sector



amount of overtime a woman could work), but labor unions argue that it is more important now to do something about the excessive overtime worked by men than it is to provide more overtime for women.

Another problem is that whereas similar laws in Western countries clearly stipulate employment obligations, the Japanese law only presents guidelines for advertising for employees and hiring, placement and promotion policies. There is likely to be strong argument over how quickly—if at all—the Japanese economy can make the required changes.

Yet for all its shortcomings, this law may become a major boon to Japanese female workers if it is applied effectively in the workplace. Japanese women are eager to work, and nearly 80% wish to develop careers that will last a lifetime.

Even if they are forced to drop out of the labor force temporarily for one reason or another, Japanese women plan to return to their jobs at the earliest opportunity. This desire to work is part of a self-awareness that is firmly rooted in the educational and economic foundations built up in Japan over the past 40 years. A majority of the Japanese consider themselves middle class, and men and women believe firmly in the potential for self-betterment through education and work.

The emerging power of women in Japanese society cannot be explained by the presence of a minority of women workers in prestigious jobs. There is a broad spectrum of women in intermediate positions, and it is they who will provide the momentum for future improvements in the position of women in the Japanese labor market.