

Advance of Women Workers

By Kiyoko Fujii

It was not until May 8, the last day of the 120th Ordinary session, that the Diet finally passed a bill on child-care leave—a bill that provides for a parent with a child under one year old to apply for and receive child-care leave. Although there are still problems to be worked out, this law provides the basic framework for parents to take leave to look after their children until they become one year old, thus maintaining their professional careers.

It takes its place alongside another piece of progressive Japanese legislation, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which was passed six years ago amid such skepticism but which has been accepted with surprisingly little trouble. There is clearly a change taking place in Japanese attitudes toward women in the work force.

Society has come to think it natural for women to work, and few look askance at the concept any more. As a result, the labor climate as it affects women is also changing.

Great strides

It is estimated that there were 18.34 million female employees in the work force as of 1990. This is nearly 40% of the total. If one includes women working on their own farms or in family shops or helping out in the family business (unpaid), half of Japanese women aged 15 or older are working women.

Yet the real growth has been in female employees working outside of the home, and the number of these women has jumped from 40% of all women workers in 1960 to over 70% in 1990.

Women have indeed made great strides. In 1955, the year popularly accepted as marking the end of Japan's postwar doldrums, there were only about 5 million female employees. Yet with the rapid economic growth of the 1960s, their number had more than doubled by 1970. Despite the slower growth imposed by the two oil crises of the 1970s, female em-

ployees numbered over 15 million by 1984 as they became increasingly important in the service sector.

This has happened not only because of growth in the demand for women at work but also because of changes on the supply side. Women now live longer, have fewer children, have more home appliances to simplify the housework, and are better educated than ever before. Thus they have the ability, the ambition and the time to make their way in the world of business.

Educationally, more and more women are going to college or university. In 1990, 35.2% of all boys went on to college or university. The comparable figure for girls was 37.4% (including junior colleges). This was the second year in a row that the percentage for women was higher than that for men.

The college or university admission figures are not as auspicious when they are broken down by four-year college or university and junior college: 15% of women going on to four-year colleges or universities and 22% to junior colleges. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that increasing numbers of women admitted to four-year colleges or universities are going into law, economics and other social sciences and into engineering, agriculture and other natural sciences.

Also encouraging is the fact that 81% of

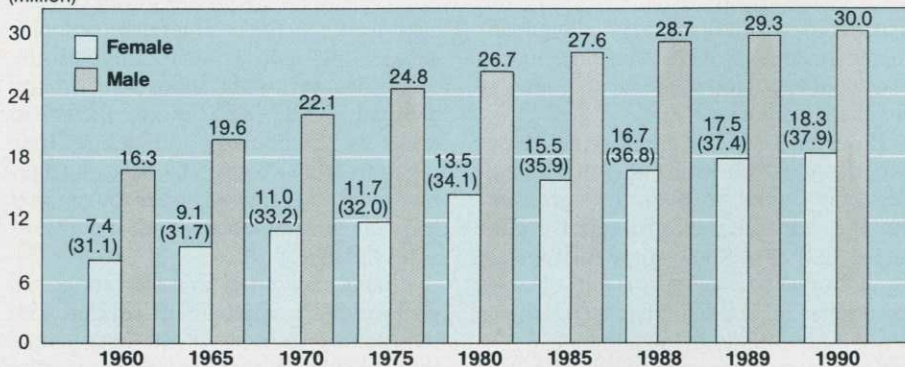
all women college or university graduates found jobs immediately on graduation in 1990. This figure has been increasing steadily over the last decade or so and has finally caught up with the figure for male college or university graduates.

Not only have more women entered the work force, they are staying longer as well. It used to be that women in the workplace were assumed to be marking time until they got married and had children. These were young, short-term employees. However, now the norm is one of middle-aged married women. Today, 60% of all female employees are 35 or older, and 70% are or have been married. About a quarter of them have over 10 years' service. Not only are more women continuing to work even after they get married and have children, there are more women coming back to work after their children are old enough.

The number of female employees topped the number of full-time homemakers for the first time in 1984. This was much remarked on at the time. Yet today, one out of every three married women works outside the home.

As a result, there is greater diversity in the jobs available to women. More and more women are finding jobs outside of the full-time employee route, including part-time work, contract work, temporary work, and being sent out on special as-

The Increase of Female Employees
(million)



Note: Figures in parentheses denote percentages of female employees against total employees.
Source: "Labor Force Survey," Management and Coordination Agency

signments. In fact, it is estimated that about 30% of female employees are not monthly salaried employees.

While there are many reasons for this variety of forms—including the need to reconcile home and work, changes in the concept of work and the enterprise's own needs—more needs to be done to provide better employment conditions and economic stability for these people.

Equal employment opportunities

In 1985, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was passed after great debate. This law, which went into effect in 1986 to eliminate gender-based discrimination in the workplace, has had an impact, but how much of an impact?

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law stipulates that there shall be no discrimination at any stage of the employment process—from the initial advertising for applicants to their employment, assignment, promotion, training and education, fringe benefits and retirement. As such, it is intended to ensure that people are accorded the same treatment for the same abilities. At the same time, it also provides employment assistance so that women can reconcile work and home.

This law would not have been passed had it not been for the strong surge of women into the workplace, the widespread demands for sexual equality, and even the context of the United Nations' International Women's Year and the subsequent U.N. Decade for Women. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the U.N. in 1979 was a major driving force to get the bill passed.

Although there are some calls for reviewing the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, the law's principles and practices have been accepted far more readily than was first thought possible.

The majority of Japanese enterprises have reevaluated their treatment of women as a result of the law. There are more want ads that do not stipulate whether a man or a woman is wanted.

And major progress has been made in eliminating gender-based discrimination in training, fringe benefits, retirement and other areas covered by the law.

However, assignments and promotions are still a sore spot. Enterprises have a long history of favoring men, and they have been slow to change in some areas. Nonetheless, there are more women in middle-management positions today, and the number of women in positions of responsibility is growing. In 1990, 8.1% of all female employees were in management positions.

With the passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, some enterprises have introduced an employment management system for new employees to select a managerial career path or general career path. While this is sometimes criticized as leading to a division in the female work force as some opt for low-paid jobs and others for high-paid jobs, the system itself is applied to both men and women, and will open up more non-discriminatory career opportunities for both men and women if it is applied equitably. It is considered to be progress, looking back on the situation in the past when women were apt to be employed as assistants or in supplementary jobs.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law has also contributed to a transformation of social attitudes. In 1989, the Prime Minister's Office conducted a public opinion survey on women and jobs. It found that 80% of women and 70% of men thought that women should continue to work or should come back to work even if they take time off to care for their children. This means that both men and women think it natural for women to work.

As might be expected, the improvement in the working environment for women workers is what has been so much requested. In the same public opinion survey, 61% of all respondents said that child-care makes it difficult for women to work long-term and 45% cited the need to care for aging or infirm family members as another complication. It is clear that taking care of children and the elderly imposes a heavy burden on working women.



A leading securities company has opened a branch office staffed entirely by women. The increasing presence of women in the workplace has softened harsh attitudes toward work, thus benefiting men.

Thus the first change that is needed is to get men more involved in the household and in taking care of the children. According to a 1986 survey by the Management and Coordination Agency, in families where both husband and wife worked (at least 35 hours a week), women spent three and a half hours per weekday on child-care and housework, and men a mere eight minutes.

Yet there is hope for the younger generation. The same survey showed 30% saying that, in two-income families, whoever was free should take care of the household chores, and 14.6% saying that both husband and wife should share equally. Male attitudes are changing, and this is aptly illustrated by the fact that the Child-care Leave Law makes no distinction between father and mother.

The next urgent need is for greater social institutions and services to help families take care of their children and of their old and infirm. Among the possibilities here are leave for taking care of children or other family members with medical problems, better child-care and nursery facilities, flextime, reemployment schemes for people who have had to take protracted leave, shorter working hours during times of need, and other possibilities that would apply to both men and women.

At the same time, both men and women need a shorter workweek so that they can lead fuller and more enjoyable lives. When the Labor Standards Law was amended in 1988, it stipulated that an effort be made to reduce the statutory workweek to 40 hours, with an interim figure of 44 hours set as of April 1991. Also in 1988, the five-year economic plan approved by the Cabinet declared that every effort should be made to reduce the work year to 1,800 hours (2,052 at present) by the time the five years ends in

fiscal 1992. Both labor and management have made the reduction of working hours a priority. Many people have thus argued that the increasing presence of women in the workplace has had a beneficial impact for men in softening the harsh, spartan attitudes toward work and the corporate warrior.

Passage of the Child-care Leave Law

The Working Women Welfare Law enforced in 1972 was the first legal stipulation mandating employers to try to make provision regarding child care for women workers, including the institution of child-care leave. This provision was carried over into the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and strengthened with the addition of governmental advice, support, and even subsidies for such systems.

During the interim, the Law Concerning Child-care Leave for Female Teachers of Compulsory Education Schools, Nurses, and Nursery Teachers at Medical and Social Welfare Facilities was enacted in 1975 to give legal backing to their right to such child-care leave. In large part, this law was prompted by the difficulty of finding sufficient numbers of qualified people in these fields and a desire to make the fields as attractive as possible.

The Child-care Leave Law of 1991 stipulates that any parent, male or female, shall have the right to apply for and be granted leave to care for any child under the age of one. Recognizing the special problems that this might pose for workplaces that have only 30 or fewer employees, the law gives them a three-year grace period to provide for such leave. Since only about 20% of all Japanese workplaces currently provide child-care leave, the law is expected to have a considerable impact when it goes into force in April 1992.

The main provisions of the law are:

1. Child-care leave
 - a. Both male and female employees who request child-care leave shall be granted such leave lasting until the child's first birthday.
 - b. Employers shall not dismiss any

employee by reason of the employee's taking child-care leave.

- c. Employers shall endeavor to stipulate ahead of time the treatment during child-care leave, and wages, placement, etc. to which the parent will return after child-care leave.
- d. Employers shall endeavor to make it possible for employees to request child-care leave and to return to work smoothly after the child-care leave.
2. Reduction of working hours, etc.
Employers shall take measures such as the reduction of working hours at the employee's request for those who will not take child-care leave when their children are one under one year old.
3. Measures for employees taking care of infant children
Employers shall endeavor to take necessary measures, including child-care leave or the reduction of working hours, etc., for employees taking care of infant children.
4. Guidelines
The minister of labor shall issue public guidelines on the measures for employers to take and announce them officially. The minister of labor is empowered to give necessary advice or guidance, or make any necessary recommendations to employers based on the guidelines.
5. Government assistance
The government shall endeavor to render the necessary assistance to employers who will take measures such as facilitating their employees to return to their work smoothly.

Looking ahead

Although the opposition parties had difficulty in supporting the bill on the grounds that it did not provide income guarantees for employees on leave and did not provide any penalties for non-compliance, the Diet finally felt it more important to get the framework into place and passed the bill with the understanding that it would be reviewed in light of developments after a certain number of years.

While Japanese demographic trends

are moving with unprecedented speed toward an aging society, there has been a sharp increase in the number of women who are not getting married until the age of 30, and this has understandably been accompanied by a decline in the Japanese fertility rate. As of 1990, the statistics showed that each woman was likely, on average, to have only 1.53 children throughout her life. This has highlighted the importance of creating a social and working environment in which women can more easily bear and rear children.

On the other hand, the sustained economic expansion has resulted in sharp labor shortages in some sectors, and the participation of women and older people in the labor market has been strongly requested. At the same time, the shift toward a service-oriented economy with more extensive use of microelectronics will place greater emphasis on information and service-intensive industrial sectors, including information processing, medical and health care, welfare, education and other specialist fields. By the year 2000, it is expected that there will be a shortage of 3 million people in such professional and technical jobs and one million clerical staff.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that there are such high expectations of women in the workplace and that efforts are being made to improve working environments for women. Enterprises that make effective use of women workers and are positive in the promotion of women workers will thrive.

Major progress has been made since the International Women's Year in 1975, and the drive for sexual equality has led not only to greater equality in the workplace but also in the home. The campaign to allow husband and wife to both retain their childhood family name is but one example of this trend. It is thus hoped that Japan will see de facto equality in the 21st century—not only in its systems and institutions but also in the actual status of women.

Kiyoko Fujii is the deputy director of the International Labour Office, Tokyo Branch Office. She has served in various ministries dealing with women's affairs.