

Labor Conditions for Women in Contemporary Japan: Where Do the Problems Lie?

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Women's labour in Japan is given significantly lower status than men's. The gender gap in earnings is large: 2003 figures show female earnings amounting to 64.9% of their male counterparts'. In managerial positions in the same year, women made up 9.4% of assistant managers, 4.6% of managers, and 3.1% of general managers, with the number of women holding senior management positions still extremely low. By whichever statistics, women's labour in Japan falls far below the standards of other developed nations. What brought about these particular conditions? Wherein lies the potential for reform?

Historical Background: Women and the Japanese Employment System

The Japanese employment system with its characteristics of lifetime employment, seniority-based wages and company-based labour unions, was one of the most important elements in establishing the nation as a major economic power. Men regular employees, as the core of a large company's internal labour market, are the sole beneficiaries of this system. As such they are guaranteed certain favors; long-term employment, relatively high wages and hospitable in-company welfare facilities and services in turn ensure workers' high motivation and loyalty. While during the 1960s, when this system was established, the nation was in the midst of high economic growth, it was also experiencing a shortage of young workers. The women labour forces especially married women workers, were enthusiastically courted. At this time also, and as a direct result of high economic growth, appeared the new 'affluent society,' which strongly compelled women to become full-time housewives at all costs. From the latter half of the 1970s, the phenomenon of part-time women workers in middle age began to gain real prominence. Thus that premise of the Japanese employment system, lifetime employment, establishes it as a men's realm. Women are positioned outside, obliged to give up their jobs for marriage and childbirth and then to re-enter the work force as part-time workers in middle age. The combination of male breadwinner and full-time housewife came to be seen as the most stable household system: it was now common sense that if a married woman was to work, it would be only in a part-time capacity and only after the children were grown.

This positioning of women's labour was strengthened by the ruling LDP party's choice to work politically through government policy toward the establishment of the Japanese-style welfare society from the latter half of the 1970s. This "Welfare Society" was a denial of the "Welfare State" system, dependent on the exercise of welfare power within the family unit. Naturally the housewife's role was assumed to be pivotal to the family's welfare strength, and a full-time housewife or one with a part-time job was taken as a prerequisite. Based in this way of thinking, a series of policies preferential to married women staying at home were introduced during the first half of the 1980s. A rise in legal spousal inheritance (1980), establishment of a pension for full-time housewives (1985), special income tax reductions for spouses (1986) and other measures strengthened the status of housewife, and in this way a structure was created for substantive recognition of the value of the 'wife's work.'

Women's Labour in the 1980s

In pursuit of the welfare society system as renouncement of the welfare state, family life became reliant on the system of corporate welfare with familism at its base. However, by the 1980s this truly stable family system which was the premise of the welfare society model was already showing strain. The spread of juvenile delinquency and housewife syndrome (unhappiness in the position of full-time housewife expressing itself in emotional distress and alcoholism) and the rising divorce rate suggested family problems, certainly. The reality of the Japanese family was not entirely

the one of health and stability for which the above-mentioned government policies were laid out as foundation. Rather, continuing on course toward the Japanese welfare society would entail resolving such familial difficulties, for which all the energy, the attention, of the housewife would be required to focus on the internal workings of the home. This, it might seem, was the reason for all the special preferential legislation were prepared in her support.

However, as goals of women's societal and economic independence may run counter to the chosen course of the welfare society, it in turn has proven an impediment to the establishment of economic and societal independence for women via occupational self-reliance. A woman holds entitlement to societal welfare based first and foremost in her status as wife, with no back-up system of occupational independence. The 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOA) as well, which called for equal treatment of women and men in recruitment, hiring, job placement and promotion, in each of employment's stages, went no further in its provisions for implementation than to urge diligence in doing so, and the mediation commission it outlined for dispute resolution was a contrivance with almost no real function whatsoever. Owing to this legislation, it can be said that non-tolerance for blatant sexual discrimination was societally recognized. And yet, although part-time and rank-and-file positions continued to be filled only by women, this situation was interpreted as not contradictory to the Equal Opportunity Law. Consequently, from before the EEOA to after, many companies introduced separate personnel management systems for women to follow major and minor career paths, according to their projected stages of progression in their corporate careers. Insufficient in realizing the concept of gender equality, the EEOA was a frail and ineffective piece of legislation.

Even so, as the women work force continues to grow and years of employment lengthen, the numbers of women who continue to work after marriage and childbirth have risen as well. As Figure 1 shows, women's employment cycle has not escaped the famous M-shape altogether, but the M itself is experiencing some major changes. Especially from middle age on, married women's tendency to take outside employment is increasing: as Figure 2 shows, in 1989 households of male regular employees, the numbers of middle-aged wives employed outside the home surpassed for the first time that of full-time housewives. Despite not only women's trend toward employment outside the home but also long-term employment during the 1980s, treatment of women in the labour market is decidedly behind the times. The system of separate career tracks saw the majority of women stuck in rank-and-file positions with limited access to raises in pay level and seniority. Moreover, even with personnel systems geared toward managing men and women employees together, women continued to receive low assessments and stagnate in low-level positions. Even workers' unions did not offer response in earnest to this discriminatory attitude toward women's labour, and the 1990s saw women long-term employees bringing cases to trial one after the next.

__1990s Policy Changes and Women's Labour

By the 1990s, the basis of policy in a foundation of familism urging women to be full-time housewives and devote themselves fully to the welfare of their households was clearly in need of a change, and the direction shifted to policy change. The greatest contributing factor was the severeness of the declining birth rate. The average number of children one woman will bear in her lifetime in 1989 was at 1.57 a post-war low: this was reported in the 1990 media as the '1.57 Shock.' From a rapid succession of response measures emerged the 1991 law on childcare leave and nursing. This law facilitates the creation of conditions in which it is possible for a woman to continue working after giving birth as a necessary step in combating the declining birth rate. Certainly, it can be seen as a major change from measures heretofore that took women's retirement for marriage and childbirth as a given. It recognizes dissatisfaction with the lack of future job security as a cause of the decline in childbearing and brings women's labour to the forefront. This childcare leave legislation can be used by both parents, although at present the rate of women respondents is extremely high, suggesting that as an equalizer of gendered childcare responsibility it has not been eminently successful. However, the numbers of women from ages 25 to 29 who give childbirth and childcare as reasons for retirement from the workforce have fallen from 16.3% in 1992 to 9.3% in 2002, a statistical development worthy of notice.

A second major development was the pursuit of a gender equality policy based in a whole new

take on the wisdom surrounding gendered division of labour. Every year sees a decline in the percentage of Japanese people who believe that a woman must protect the home while the man works outside. Now, with only 12.8% of women taking such a stance, the effective change in trends of thought is remarkable. Since the 1.57 Shock of 1989 came a recognition of the heaviness of the housewife's burden of responsibility for housework, childrearing and care for the elderly which strengthened the societal trend toward equality between men and women. This was the environment in which the 1999 Basic Law for Gender Equal Society was created. Calling for the establishment of equality between men and women in family, politics, education and labour, that is, in the various settings of life in society, this law represents in large part the building of a new societal foundation, a change from previous conceptions of women's labour. Even at the level of local government, the creation of regulations to promote cooperative participation continues.

The third development was a critical response to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. Nationally, harsh assessment began to be heard from women's groups and researchers along with lawyers and the Management and Coordination Agency of the central government. Further, the ILO opinion on Japan's observance of equal pay for work of equal value measures (1992_4) and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's pointed criticism of the Japanese government (1994) created the movement for revision of the EEOL. Such criticisms were regarding the continuation of inequality in women's and men's income levels and other labour conditions despite the legislation. Other than these movements, there were the legal battles still raging with regards to sexual discrimination in wages, promotion and advancement policies, but the focusing of public attention on the issues proved a primary motivating force. Finally, in 1997, the EEOL was amended. Discrimination regulations for recruitment, hiring, job placement, promotion, retirement and dismissal were taken one step further than the provisions for voluntary discouragement and such practices were officially 'forbidden.' Also, with first-time inclusion of issues like sexual harassment and support of positive action, the legislation as a whole proved much stronger and more effective.

In this manner, since the 1990s gender equality has come to be passed around as one government policy trend, but it had its inception in the public concern over women's labour situation brought about by the shock of the dropping birth rate. Also, along with the growing change in consciousness regarding sexual division of labour and the weakening of welfare power within the family unit, the government intended to take steps toward socialization of care for the elderly. Certainly along with the declining birth rate and the graying of Japan's population, which was highlighted as an issue with the adoption of a long-term care insurance system in 2000. In a fundamental conceptual shift, recognition of the need for care was based not in the situation of the family but in the actual physical condition of the elderly person in question. This was another step toward the rejection of the familism-based system. However, with services for care of the elderly still inadequate, the family's commitment remains pivotal and problematic. On the other hand, the long-term care insurance system promises to make many new jobs for women in the care work field.

__The Present Situation of Women's Work

As stated above, since the 1990s Japanese social policies have shifted direction from those strongly imprinted by familism and preferential treatment of housewives and can be seen to be developing, if slowly, into a new form. Also, with the 1995 collapse of the bubble economy, the Federation of Employees' Association (Nikkei-ren) announced a "New Era of Japanese-Style Management", in which corporations must attempt a sweeping reduction in the lifetime employment and coddling of workers which provided the stability in employment practice as well as to adopt principles for employment of short-term workers. This means the breakdown of the seniority-based pay and promotion system of Japanese employment practice and the introduction of a performance-based personnel management in its place. From the second half of the 1990s companies began one by one to adopt such guidelines. Some saw the spread of performance-based personnel management and the collapse of seniority-based personnel management would prove of merit to women workers. But the situation was not so simple. In reality, with the adjustments being made in company after company, more and more labour market deregulation policies such as the revision of the Labour Standard Law (1997), and the Employment Security Law (1999) brought about a rise in the numbers

of dispatched workers and the privatization of job referral services.

Women's connection with the workforce is becoming increasingly deeper: Figure 2 shows the rise in dual-income households from 1990, in which full-time housewife households have become the minority. Further, women's years of service continue to rise. Women workers evincing these kinds of trends have been significantly impacted by policy shifts away from those which prioritize familism and the full-time housewife and the deregulation of labour markets. They display a complex array of aspects. On the one hand, according to the positive action initiatives set up by various companies, the distribution of work responsibilities has been reexamined and measures put in place to improve workers' job and family balance. This has brought about a rise in the numbers of women in low level management positions. In 2003, 9.4% of assistant managers were women, a steady rise from 3.1% in 1980 and 5% in 1990. This represents the importance of the shift that began during the 1990s. A rise in assistant manager positions for women means more likelihood of advancement to higher positions, and a rise in the number of women in high management positions becomes imminently probable.

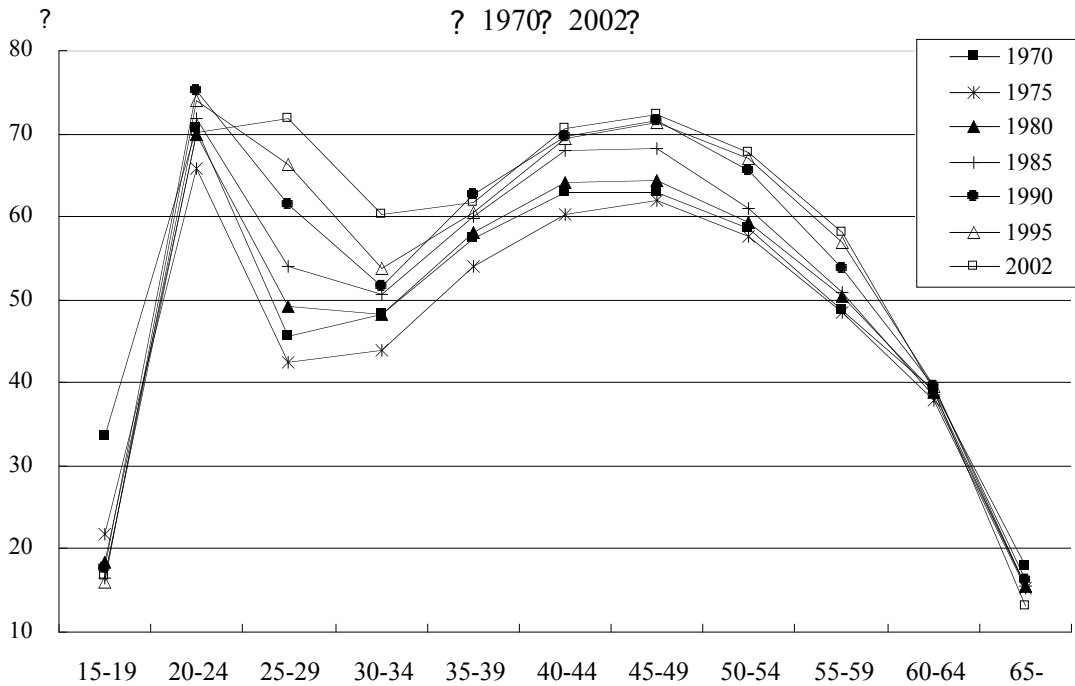
On the other hand, effects of deregulation of the labour markets can be seen in a destabilizing of employment situations for women workers. At 70%, women workers make up the overwhelming majority of non-regular positions, according to 2002 figures. As shown in Figure 3, women regular employees are declining while their non-regular counterparts are on the rise, in a trend that is remarkable throughout the 1990s. One prominent contributor to this pattern is the part-timer. Of new employees in 2002, male part-time workers made up 21.1% to women's 49.8%. Otherwise, the deregulation of the labour market has also seen a rise in the numbers of contract workers and dispatched workers, indeed a diversifying of forms of employment a whole. As shown in the case of the department stores which stopped hiring high school and junior college graduate-level employees on anything but a temporary contract basis, young women are most likely to be affected by the rise in non-regular employment.

We have looked at the beginning of the social movement for gender equality in the 1990s, but its advancement is still laboured. Positive action initiatives are presently in place in 26.3% of companies, and 14.8% are in the planning process. With the rejection of the Japanese employment system and subsequent changes in the circumstances of women's work, and the deregulation of labour markets the numbers of women non-regular workers have risen. However, according to a recent study, young women's hopes for the possibility of advancement have risen considerably, and with the help of positive action initiatives they can aim for senior management positions which will begin to open up. For those hired in part-time positions as well, ability is beginning to be recognized and rewarded through company policy, and shifts to positions of more responsibility and status are becoming possible. Within the performance-based trend, not only are systems of seniority repudiated but an atmosphere can be developed in which those with ability receive the same treatment regardless of gender. For the change in women's labour which continues through diversifying forms of employment, beyond even such diversification of employment forms is the fundamental right of fair treatment for all engaged in the same work. To recognize that such changes must in a broader sense improve workplace efficiency, encouraging all workers' motivation and loyalty, is essential. To that end, the value of each individual's work must be fairly assessed. The establishment of such an objective system of evaluation will be a necessity in the reformation of the Japanese-style system of management.

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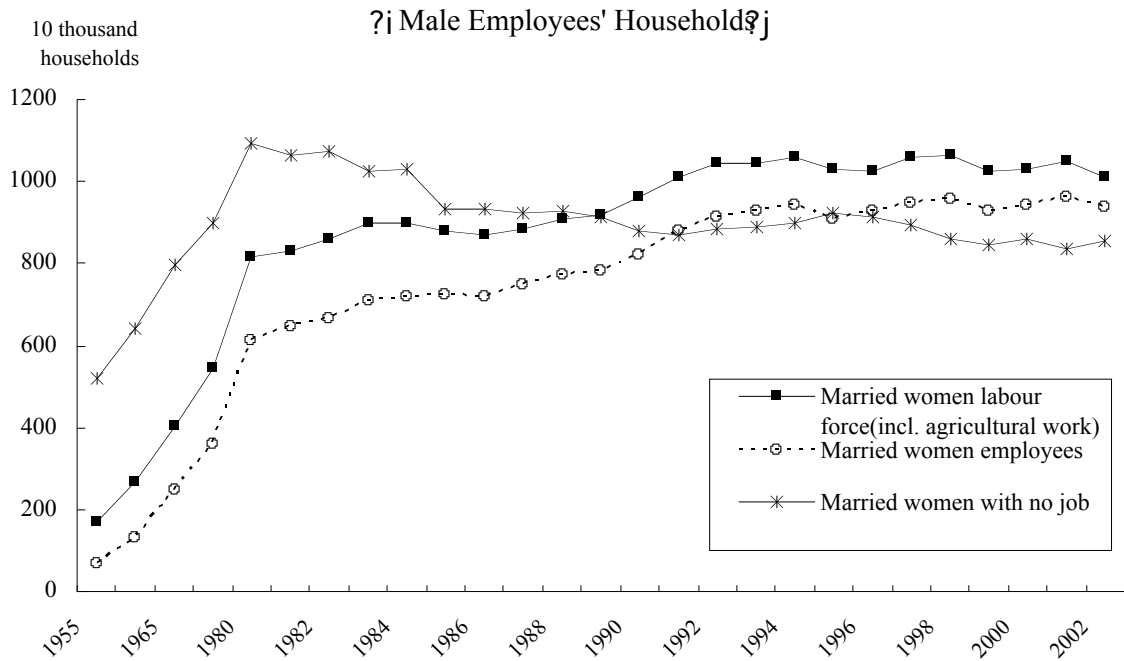
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Fig ?? Changes in Female Labour Force Population Ratio by Age



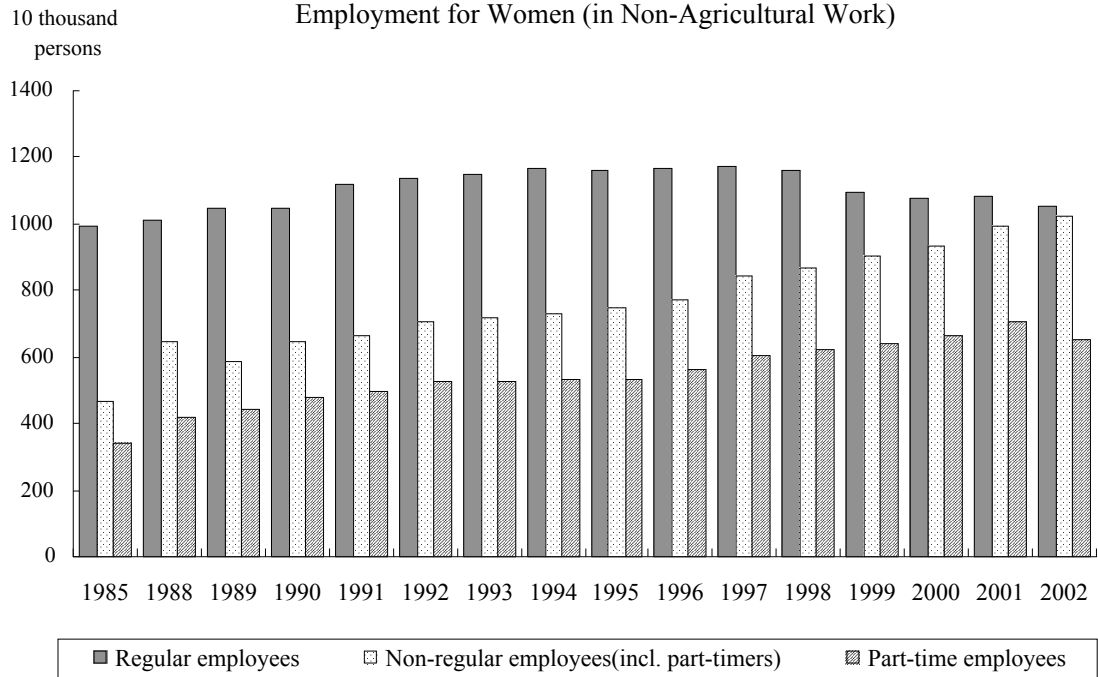
? Based on yearly figures from the Statistics Bureau, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications' Labour Force Survey Annual Report

Fig,Q ?@Changes in Dual Income Household Statistics



?j Based on figures from the National Census and the Statistics Bureau, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Report on the Special Survey of the Labour Force Survey

Fig. R 2. Developments in Employment Numbers for Different Forms of Employment for Women (in Non-Agricultural Work)



Based on yearly figures from the Statistics Bureau, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Report on the Special Survey of the Labour Force Survey