

# WOMEN'S ISSUES

## Changing roles in a changing society



**Career woman**  
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)

### Towards a Gender-equal Society

In December 1996, the Japanese government prepared the Plan for Gender Equality 2000, and this led to the passing of the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society in 1999. The five basic principles covered in this law are: respect for the human rights of women and men, consideration to social systems or practices, joint participation in planning and deciding policies, compatibility of activities in family life and other activities, and international cooperation.

Based on the provisions of the 1999 law, the Basic Plan for Gender Equality was approved by the Cabinet in December 2000. This plan includes the following 11 priority objectives: expand women's participation in

policy decision-making processes, review social systems and practices and reform awareness from a gender-equal perspective, secure equal opportunities and treatment in the field of employment, establish gender equality in rural areas, support the efforts of women and men to harmonize work with their family and community life, develop conditions that allow the elderly to live with peace of mind, eliminate all forms of violence against women, support life-long health for women, respect women's human rights in the media, enrich education and learning which promote gender equality and facilitate diversity of choice, and contribute to the "equality, development, and peace" of the global community.

As a result of the central government reorganization implemented in January 2001, the Cabinet Office was created, and the

Council for Gender Equality and the Gender Equality Bureau were placed within the Cabinet Office. As one of the four major policy councils in the Cabinet Office, the Council for Gender Equality examines and discusses basic policies and other important matters on gender equality, monitors progress in achieving gender equality, and surveys the impact of government policy on gender equality processes. As of 2009, council members include the chief cabinet secretary, 12 cabinet ministers, and 12 individuals knowledgeable about gender issues. The Gender Equality Bureau serves as the secretariat of the Council for Gender Equality. It is mandated with the formulation and overall coordination of plans for matters related to promoting the formation of a gender-equal society, as well as promoting the Basic Plan for Gender Equality and formulating and implementing plans for matters not falling under the jurisdiction of any particular ministry.

Every year more voices can be heard calling for women's participation in government and politics. Thus, the government has adopted a policy of increasing the number of female members on government councils and commissions.

## Women's Working Conditions

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women, which came into effect in April 1986, was revised in June 1997 in order to speed up measures to counteract male-female discrimination. The revised provisions implemented in 1999 prohibit gender-based discrimination in job recruitment, employment, allocation of specific posts, and job advancement; they also make employers responsible for the prevention of sexual harassment. These revisions point mainly in the direction of placing much clearer responsibility for cases of gender-based discrimination on employers.

Along with the revision of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women, the Labor Standards Law was revised in such a way as to remove special restrictions on work done by women during

holidays, late at night, and during other non-regular working hours. This revision underscored the idea that giving women special treatment was a sort of gender-based discrimination. Although labor conditions for men and women have thus been equalized, there are in fact numerous claims that women for the most part are still responsible for doing the housework and raising the children. The disappearance of regulations that give women special protection might therefore increase, rather than alleviate, the social burdens women bear.

In 2008, 41.9% of all persons employed in all branches of industry in Japan were women. In 1975, the corresponding percentage had been 32.0%, after which time more and more women found employment, particularly in service and food industries, wholesale and retail outlets, and electrical equipment manufacturing.

More than a decade of economic stagnation in Japan has led companies to cut back on their hiring of new university graduates, creating a very difficult environment for young women, as well as young men, looking for jobs. Despite this, the employment rate of university graduates was higher for women than men, with 66.4% of men and 74.6% of women finding work in 2008.

However, the positive picture implied by this small gap is complicated by the fact that more female graduates take part-time jobs, and the fact that while many enterprises hold nonrestricted company-introduction meetings and carry out other recruitment activities in which female university students take part, they may not, in actual practice, offer suitable or equal employment opportunities for women. The reality reveals that most women sense an invisible barrier, yet to be breached. It is hoped that the 1997 revision of the Equal Opportunity Law for Men and Women will continue to have a positive influence on this situation.

Since the mid-1990s, the percentage of male and female irregular or part-time workers among all working income-earners has grown considerably, from around 20.0% in 1996 to about 30.7% in 2006. Deregulation has accelerated this trend by greatly increasing the range of job categories in



which companies can use temporary “dispatched” workers in place of regular employees.

Since 1980 the percentage of households in which both the husband and wife are employed has been gradually increasing. Except for the years 1995 and 1996, since 1992 the number of such two-income households has exceeded the number in which only the man is employed, and the gap between the two categories has been widening in recent years.

## An Aging Society

The increase in the average age of marriage for both men and women and the increase in the number of people who are remaining single are major factors behind birthrate declines. Working women’s reluctance to have children, due to the inadequacy of public systems that would help make holding a job and raising children compatible, is also a contributing factor. A Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare study found that while more than 70% of the mothers surveyed had been working one year prior to the birth of their first child, six months after the birth more than 70% were not working. In addition to a lack of desirable jobs, another barrier to mothers who would like to work outside the home is that men still participate relatively little when it comes to helping with housework and childcare. This can be partly attributed to deeply rooted attitudes that housework and childcare are “women’s work,” but another part of the problem is that more and more men—especially in the group of ages 25-40 most likely to have small children—are working longer and longer hours of overtime.

The government considers the problem of a declining birthrate to require urgent attention, and in 1991 it passed the Child Care Law, which stipulated that employers cannot refuse requests from either men or women to take time off from regular work schedules in order to care for children less than one year of age.

Subsequently revised a number of times, the law now permits persons satisfying certain

criteria to take childcare leave up until the child is one and a half years old. There are also provisions allowing parents of a child younger than elementary-school age to take up to five days off work a year to care for the child when he/she is sick or injured.

In addition to the falling birthrate, the other factor behind the aging of society is the rise in average life expectancy. At 85.99 years for women and 79.19 years for men (as of 2007), Japan has the longest life expectancies in the world. Women make up just under 60% of the population aged 65 and up and more than 70% of the population aged 85 and up. To help care for the growing population of elderly, a long-term care insurance system was implemented in 2000.

When care for elderly relatives is provided in the home, the major burden is generally borne by a woman, whether she works or not. Addressing the needs of working people in this situation, family care leave provisions were added to the Child Care Law in 1995, and it was renamed the Child and Family Care Leave Law. This revision, which went into full effect in 1999, enables workers to leave their regular jobs for specified amounts of time in response to a need to give special care to a spouse, a parent, a preschool child, or a spouse’s parent.

## An Age of Fewer Marriages

In Japan, the percentage of women who continue their formal education after high school is very high. In 2008, 54.3% of women graduating from high school entered universities or junior colleges, as compared with 51.4% of men. A growing number of women want to work on an equal basis with men following graduation from an institution of higher learning. As a consequence, the concept of marriage as a woman’s life objective is becoming less prevalent than in the past. According to a study by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, unmarried men and women consistently believe that marriage would result in the restriction of their actions, lifestyle, and relationships with friends, and

that it would also add the psychological burdens involved in having to support a family. Consequently, an increasing number of people are opting to marry late or remain single throughout life.

In 1980, the percentage of those who remained unmarried between the ages of 25 and 29 was 55.1% for men and 24.0% for women. By 2005, these percentages had surged to 72.6% for men and 59.9% for women. A National Institute of Population and Social Security Research report estimated that among females who are less than 16 years old today, one in seven will remain unmarried throughout life.

In 2008, the average age at first marriage was 28.5 years for women and 30.2 years for men. Another indication of the changes in tradition taking place in Japan is a rising divorce rate. The divorce rate per 1,000 population rose from 1.22 in 1980 to 1.99 in 2008.