

# Changing Japanese Employment Patterns and Women's Participation:

## Anticipating the Implications of Employment Trends



by Colleen M. Fox

A democratic society is one in which all citizens can participate politically, socially, and economically to the best of their abilities and desires. Though this democratic society does not exist in reality, it is an ideal goal which many democratic nations pursue. One of the common impediments to this goal is gender inequality. A woman may legally have the same rights as a man, but she is often unable to fully enjoy those rights because of social and economic barriers. Gender equality is one area in which Japan lags behind in comparison to other highly industrialized nations. Though the presence of women in the workforce has increased dramatically in the Post-World War II era, many barriers continue to exist which deny women full equal access. It may at times seem a case of de facto discrimination, but such an analysis is superficial, as it disregards gendered stereotypes and expectations that support a gender stratified work structure. Inequality continues to exist, despite attempted reform, for several reasons. A very important factor is socialization of men and women which reinforces the belief that a woman should focus her energies on the home once she is married. There are more opportunities for women to join the public world, but the public world is not very accommodating to women.

The traditional sexual division of labor with male supremacy in many areas of home and public life remains, perhaps to a greater degree than in other industrialized democracies. Japan thus presents the paradox of a relatively equal democratic society (in material terms) with some persistently unequal components (in cultural terms); of a pluralist society and democratic polity without a salient public ideology legitimizing and spurring greater equality and pluralism.

A common employment pattern for a Japanese woman is to leave a job once she is married or has children, and for a woman to begin or return to work after her kids get older: a quit-and-return pattern. When presented with several choices of female work patterns, a majority of the respondents (male and female) to a 1987 survey chose the quit-and-return pattern as the most acceptable for women. The following diagram, known as the M Curve, shows the pattern of women's employment described above. The M curve shows the predominance of the quit-and-return work pattern for Japanese women. Women have a high tendency to work in their early twenties, drop off in mid-late twenties (around the time of marriage), falling to a low by their early thirties (child-bearing and raising years), and returning to higher levels in their late forties (when children need less care).

Source: Sumiko Iwao. *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality*. 1993. The Free Press: New York, p. 163. Originally from Bureau of Statistics, Management and Coordination Agency. Labor Force Survey.

The above employment pattern enables employers to hire women in their early twenties (at the first peak) at lower pay and lower status, while hiring women in their late forties (at the second peak) as an expendable part-time work force. The basis for gender-based discriminatory hiring practices is that younger women are more likely to leave when they get married or have children, while older women have already missed career opportunities while at home raising children.

The predominance and implicit acceptance of gender discrimination in hiring practices naturalizes the M curve employment pattern. Employment patterns are not inherent in a society, as they commonly change to fit the changing needs and technologies of a society. Whereas it was once unacceptable for (middle and upper-class) women to be employed outside the home, it is currently acceptable and common for women to participate in wage earning activities (along with continuing responsibilities in the private sphere), in the future it is possible that both women and men might have more options in both the public and private sphere. Thus, trends in employment are just that: trends. Being that there is nothing natural or inherent within these patterns, there is no justification for gender-based discriminatory hiring practices. It is, in fact, employment practices and needs, as well as the general structure of the work force, that has helped create and sustain gender roles.

The pattern of women's employment has evolved out of various historical changes. The post-war Japanese work structure is based on paternalistic notions of employer-employee relationships in which long-term employment incurs mutual responsibilities between manager and worker. This pattern of long-term employment has its roots in the 1930s.

A continuous flow of books, pamphlets, and official statements encouraged managers to design wages to meet the livelihood or life-cycle needs of workers: wages should rise with age, the best single proxy for need; income should meet minimum livelihood needs and should therefore be stable, ideally distributed in the form of a monthly salary; incentive pay, subject to fluctuation and rate-cutting, should be reduced or eliminated; family allowances should be provided. In theory, such wage reform would encourage long-term employment as well. If this combination of regulation and exhortation spread from the seniority wage system to much of Japanese industry, seniority wages and permanent employment can be explained in part as products of Japan's war experience.

In the post-war period the growth and success of the long-term labor force (based on seniority and automatic incremental wage increases) was dependent on a youthful workforce and high economic growth. The 1970s culminated in several factors which changed the face of labor: the labor market had turned from one of surplus to one of shortage; the average age of long-term workers had increased; and the 1973 oil shock brought economic recession. Companies dealt with the recession by 1) early or forced retirement of older (expensive) workers, 2) the lay-off of large numbers of part-time workers (predominantly women), and 3) the 'suggestion' that female workers leave their jobs earlier than they might in 'normal circumstances' (normal circumstances being the time of marriage or the birth of a child). The sacrifice of women workers was illustrated by a decrease in women's employment over the next few years. In the 1974-75 period, it is estimated that 700,000 - 800,000 women left the labor force. Thus demonstrating the success of the 'discouraged worker' policy.

Until the late 1960s, the predominantly male permanent work force was complemented by a predominantly male temporary work force which picked up the slack in boom periods. With the power of bargaining resulting from the shortage of labor, male temporary labor began to decline. The decline in male temporary labor was complemented by an increase in female part-time work. As of 1987, approximately 5 percent of the employed male work force was non-regular (temporary, daily, and part-time), while in the employed female labor force; 19.3 percent of all female workers and 41 percent of married workers fit this categorization, with an even higher rate for middle-aged married women. Part-time workers generally do the same work as their full-time counterparts, sometimes at similar numbers of hours, without the benefits, while earning an average of 30 percent less.

The trade-off for the lack of security in a part-time position is the flexibility it allows. This flexibility is the draw for female workers. Married, middle-aged women are particularly drawn to part-time work, as it allows them to fulfill their domestic role while employed outside the home. The obligations between employer and long-term employees, as well as the higher wages of permanent employees, are eliminated through the use of part-time workers. The nature of part-time work gives Japanese industries a safety 'cushion'. Part-time workers are the last to be hired and the first to be laid off or fired. It is this type of

'expendable' workforce that allows Japanese industry to get through bad times while retaining its regular workers.

The 1985 Anti-Sex Discrimination Law banned discrimination against women in hiring, promotion, and job allocation, but did not specify measures against companies that do not abide by this law. There have also been other legal measures taken to equalize opportunities for women in the work force such as the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), created to stop discrimination in the workplace, and the Child-Care Leave Law, calling for up to one year of parental leave for newborn baby care. These laws are generally not enforced and do not apply to all workers. Yet, since the creation of the 1986 law, there have been some changes for women in the labor force. Sumiko Iwao questions the motives behind corporate change.

One deep-rooted problem is that companies appear to be making changes not because their management believes discrimination on the basis of sex is wrong, but in order to preserve a good corporate image in the eyes of women and the general public. One suspects that the changes made are less a matter of conscience than a result of efforts among the leading corporations to keep pace with one another (*yokonarabi*) in their employment practices in order to maintain their reputations with the public. In Japan, fear of the perils of falling behind the times can affect corporate behavior as significantly as can any law. Since companies do not utilize the law out of agreement with the principle of equality of the sexes, they might quickly ignore its guidelines if business should take a downturn.

One of the changes affecting women in employment practices is the choice between two different employment tracks: integrated and general. The general track follows the traditional pattern of female employment in which women have much less demanding work and less obligation to the company, along with fewer opportunities for promotion or transfer. The integrated track offers opportunities (promotions and transfers) and responsibilities (accepting promotions and transfers, as well as putting in overtime) equivalent to those offered men. Some of the larger Japanese companies allow female recruits a choice of the two tracks, others limit the offer of integrated employment to women who have majored in certain subjects, while other companies only hire women on one of the tracks. Certain companies have also begun to offer a third alternative of an integrated track without obligating the employee to accept transfer to another branch. Sometimes women are able to switch from the general to the integrated track after some time with a company.

One of the biggest impediments keeping women from pursuing careers (as opposed to jobs) outside of the home is the structure of the Japanese workplace. An important consideration is the expectation of the employee to accept a transfer to a different branch. This expectation makes it very difficult for both partners in a marriage to pursue careers. It is also necessary to consider the long hours and total dedication usually required. A 1987 survey by the Ministry of Labor showed that the average employee spent 2,111 hours annually at their job. The factors leading to these long hours include the low rate of absenteeism, less vacation days actually taken, unpaid overtime, and company after hours. Few women view this with envy. Because a woman's status is not dependent on a successful career, as is a man's, she is able to fulfill cultural expectations which value a woman's role as mother and wife. Thus, gendered expectations of both men and women, work to supply the economic sector with workers able to fulfill various needs within the workforce.

One of the impediments of working mothers is the lack of child care, as the bane of working parents is often finding someone to look after a child for over eight hours. Not only is the woman still expected to be the primary, if not unitary, caregiver to children, but she is also expected to take care of her husband and their home. A wife's work should not interfere with caring for her family and home or she may face criticism from her husband and the community. It is rare for husbands to aid in domestic tasks, even if the wife is also working. A 1989 Ministry of Labor survey stated that 60% of female managers are unmarried and 36% of married women are childless.

In order for women to have any real choice and opportunity in the Japanese workplace there must be a change in the fundamental structure of the workplace. This change will be brought about not simply by a women's movement, but through the demand for change by Japanese workers in general. Many workers have become increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of life in Japan. The 1990 white paper on labor showed a sharp decrease in young workers who wish to stay at their jobs along with greater dissatisfaction in wages, working hours, employment, security, chances to utilize one's talents, opportunities for promotion, and the quality of one's interpersonal relations.

Increasing numbers of Japanese no longer seek lifetime employment and more individuals are likely to change jobs in midcareer. Recruit Co. publishes several magazines which advertise to these disaffected individuals. Temporary workers and women, as well as those with specialized skills seeking new positions, are targeted. These new attitudes were confirmed by a television survey which found that 54% of male college students and 62% of female students approved of pursuing a temporary position after graduation. Another survey, conducted by the Ministry of Labor in 1985-86, found that companies were beginning to recognize and reflect these changing values. Companies defined two types of workers, those who conform to traditional corporate structure and those who do not.

There is a growing tendency to seek job satisfaction instead of financial rewards alone. Wages, working hours, and the working environment are no longer the only focus of concern: People want to take pride in their work, and they want fair treatment. There has also been a greater emphasis on merit, as opposed to seniority, to accommodate these changing values. The challenge now lies in finding ways to shorten hours and to make these hours as pleasant as possible. Japanese society is recognizing this change in values.

There are some researchers who consider the more rigorous aspects of the work force positive attributes of the Japanese business world, as they play a great part in the past successes and growth of the Japanese economy. Yet the demands of the economy place burdens on individuals. Additionally, in order to maintain the system, gender roles must remain fairly rigid categories. Women are not the only ones who recognize the toll the existing work structure takes on employees. Men are able to recognize their own socio-economic role and how limited they also are by gendered roles and expectations. By marginalizing the problems of gender as women's special interest all parties suffer. By examining the choices women make, as well as the limits and possibilities behind those choices, the manner in which gendered notions of work restrict all individuals becomes apparent. As society demands a change in the work force, a more flexible work structure will rely less on the stratification of sex roles. A vast amount of energy is required to constantly reinforce constructed notions of gender. Once notions of gender begin to be questioned, hidden biases become more clearly discernible.

Japan's highly modernized society qualifies as a post-industrial society. The idea behind post-industrialism is that the advanced state of society would allow for greater leisure. Leisure time is something Japanese workers are sorely lacking. Sepp Linhart claims that Japan does not inherently lack the characteristics of a 'leisure society', but that society presents obstacles to this end. He also predicts that Japan is moving towards a greater emphasis on leisure, just as Western post-industrial societies have.

The position of the American male employee was once not too dissimilar from that of the Japanese male employee. In the not too distant American past, gender roles were sharply defined with a woman expected to take care of the home and family while the man supported the family. Hours were long and the company came first. Just as the Japanese work structure often leaves workers at the mercy of their job, American workers felt similar pressure from such an accepted standard.

A study on the 'rootlessness' of American society was conducted by Vance Packard in "A Nation of Strangers". 'Rootlessness' was the result of the somewhat arbitrary treatment of the American worker by an employer. A worker was often transferred upon promotion. The company expected high loyalty and usually one remained with the company throughout one's career. Obviously, this is similar to the current

Japanese case. Interestingly, Packard quotes various statistics taken in the 1960s which found the average British citizen moved about eight times in his life, an American fourteen times, and a Japanese five times. This exemplifies the similarities between the present Japanese system and the past American system.

In the 1960s and early 1970s more Americans began to question their own quality of life, changing the focus to one where greater importance was placed on the family and leisure. Herbert Marcuse was an important social critic of the time.

Contemporary society seems to be capable of containing social change/qualitative change which would establish different institutions, a new direction of the productive process, new modes of human existence. This containment of social change is perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society.

It is possible to apply the above to Japan today as it is cultural and social forces that retard the development of leisure in a post-industrial society. Those indoctrinated into the post-World War II industrial system view the current movement as selfishness and lacking in social responsibility, just as the ideals of the 'me generation' have often been classified.

The union of growing productivity and growing destruction; the brinkmanship of annihilation; the surrender of thought, hope, and fear to the decisions of the powers that be; the preservation of misery in the face of unprecedented wealth constitute the most impartial indictment-even if they are not *raison d'être* of this society but only its by-product: its sweeping rationality, which propels efficiency and growth, is itself irrational.

Though Marcuse's Marxist sentiments may not have taken firm hold, the general cry for greater individual freedom, choice, and leisure did. Many dissatisfied American workers identified with this sentiment. Many American women were working at this point, though their careers were usually secondary to their husbands higher paying and socially endorsed positions. It was often difficult for women to maintain a career for many of the same reasons facing Japanese women today. American workers began considering more than 'climbing the corporate ladder', choosing to weigh other quality of life factors more heavily. Also, with greater numbers of women in the workforce, a husband might have the support of a second income giving him greater choice and less dependency on his company. As a result of greater geographic stability, as well as more openings generated from the demand of greater leisure time, women were provided increased opportunity to pursue careers. This was a mutually reinforcing pattern. As more women pursued careers outside the home, acceptance of women in the public sphere increased. Thus, while the women's movement containment of social change is perhaps thplayed a large role in eliminating legal barriers and bringing gender issues into the public realm, the mass movement demanding greater leisure and independence was instrumental in more fully opening the work world to permanent female participants. Increased integration and role redefinition resulted in greater gender equality through opportunities and resocialization.

Japan is at the beginning of a similar movement. As the movement calling for greater equality for women in the Japanese workplace is relatively small, this structural change will be essential in gaining greater equality between men and women. The transformation of Japanese society to one which focuses more on the private realm will not only open up the public realm for women to a greater degree, but bring into question the assumptions surrounding gendered roles and expectations.

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