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Career Women in Japan Find a Blocked Path

Takako Ariishi said her father fired her from her family's company after she gave birth.
Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

By Martin Fackler

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TOKYO, Aug. 5 — Yukako Kurose joined the work force in 1986, a year after Japan passed its first equal opportunity law. Like other career-minded young women, she hoped the law would open doors. But her promising career at a department-store corporate office ended 15 years ago when she had a baby.

She was passed over for promotions after she started leaving work before 6:30 each evening to pick up her daughter from day care. Then, she was pushed into a dead-end clerical job. Finally, she quit.

"Japanese work customs make it almost impossible for women to have both a family and a career," said Ms. Kurose, 45, who now works for a polyester company.

Since the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was passed in 1985, women have become a common sight on factory floors, at construction sites and behind the wheels of taxis. But they have had much less success reaching positions of authority, which remain the preserve of gray-suited salarymen.

In 1985, women held just 6.6 percent of all management jobs in Japanese companies and government, according to the International Labor Organization, a United Nations agency. By 2005, that number had risen to only 10.1 percent, though Japan's 27 million working women made up nearly half of its work force. By contrast, women held 42.5 percent of managerial jobs in the United States in 2005, the organization said.

Experts on women's issues say outright prejudice is only part of Japan's problem. An even bigger barrier to the advancement of women is the nation's notoriously demanding corporate culture, particularly its expectation of morning-to-midnight work hours.

Government statistics show that many women drop out of management-track jobs when they reach their late 20s and early 30s and start having children. As Japan's birthrate rapidly declines and its population ages, there are growing concerns that Japan can ill afford to lose so much potential.

"If expected to work 15 hours a day, then most women will give up," said Kuniko Inoguchi, a former cabinet minister in charge of gender equality. "Japan is losing half of its brainpower as it faces a labor shortage."

Even with cases of blatant discrimination, lawsuits remain rare because of a cultural aversion to litigation. Another big problem has been that the equal opportunity law is essentially toothless. Despite two revisions, the law includes no real punishment for companies that continue to discriminate. The worst that the Labor Ministry can do is to threaten to publish the names of violators, and the ministry has never done that. As a result, Japan ranks as the most unequal of the world's rich countries, according to the United Nations Development Program's "gender empowerment measure," an index of female participation in a nation's economy and politics. The country placed 42nd among 75 nations surveyed in 2006 — just above Macedonia and far below other developed nations like the United States, ranked 12th, and top-ranked Norway.

"It's a pathetic situation," said Kumiko Morizane, deputy director of the equal employment division in Japan's Labor Ministry. "Even in Pakistan, where women cover their faces, they had a female prime minister."

But the painfully slow pace of change reflects ingrained social attitudes about gender roles.

Takako Ariishi, 36, experienced an extreme version of these roles when she grew up as the only child of the president of Daiya Seiki, a small manufacturer owned by her family that supplies gauges to Nissan.

Yukako Kurose said she was forced into a dead-end clerical job after she had a baby.
Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

At first, her disappointed father cut her hair like a boy's and forbade her to play with dolls. When she had her first son 10 years ago, he fired her from the company and anointed the infant grandson as his successor.

Still, Ms. Ariishi took over as president three years ago after her father died. She says she is the only woman in a group of some 160 heads of Nissan suppliers. The first time she attended the group's twice-annual meetings, she says she was asked to wait in a room with secretaries.

"I still have to prove all the time that a woman can be president," says Ms. Ariishi, a trained engineer who wears a blue unisex factory worker's uniform in her office.

She says she goes home every evening at 7 to put her son to bed, but then returns to work. The burden of such long hours pushes most career-track women to quit before they reach management-level jobs. Midori Ito, president of the Action Center for Working Women, a national group that gives legal support to working women, said more than half of career-minded women quit by their early 30s, while others choose to remain single.

One of those is Miiko Tsuda, 38. She said that because she worked until 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. every night at the office of a tutoring school operator, she has not had time to think about marriage.

And yet, Ms. Tsuda says she frequently feels discrimination. She says she earns 10 percent to 20 percent less than men her age. Younger male colleagues ask her and other women to push elevator buttons for them and serve tea. She also says just five women of the company's 300-some management employees are women, up from zero when she joined 17 years ago.

Still, women's rights advocates say that the realities of Japan's shrinking population are slowly forcing change. They say the need to find talented workers has pushed a small but growing number of companies to make more efforts to hire women as "sogo shoku," or

career-track employees, in line for management. Some analysts estimate that about a quarter of career-track hires in recent years have been women.

Some companies are taking small steps to nurture more female managers. Since quitting the department store in 2002, Ms. Kurose has headed the diversity development section at Teijin, a polyester maker based in Osaka. She organizes classes to train women for management, sets hiring targets and helps mothers returning from maternity leave find new positions in the company.

Progress is slow: Only some 50 of Teijin's approximately 2,000 managers are women, but even that is an almost threefold increase from when Ms. Kurose joined the company, she said.

Now, women's rights advocates are starting to argue that Japan must make more such efforts — not just for the corporate good, but for survival.

They point to studies showing that nations with greater workplace participation, like the United States, actually have higher fertility rates. Advocates say this is because working women in other countries start having children earlier in life, while many who leave the work force do not do so until their 30s.

"Birthrates here are declining because of a lack of equality for women," said Ms. Inoguchi, the former minister. "The population shortage is forcing a change in attitudes."