



Hugvísindasvið

Women in the modern Japanese economy

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Bragi Ólafsson

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Abstract

This dissertation discusses the situation of women in the Japanese economy. It asks the question how women stand in the modern economy of Japan in terms of gender equality and whether women face any sort of discrimination in the job market. It is divided into two chapters. The first chapter examines women's dual role in the economy; their direct and indirect participation in it. Direct labour participation is examined from several angles, mainly by age and by occupation.

While the first chapter explores women in the economy more on the macro level, the second chapter delves deeper and discusses discrimination and differences between the genders in Japanese workplaces. The difference in wages between the sexes is examined as well as the situation of female part-time workers and clerical workers, which make up a large portion of Japanese employees. Female managers and their situation make a very interesting example of the problems faced by women in the Japanese economy, despite only constituting a small percentage of working women in Japan, therefore this is also discussed. Finally, changes made through legislations will be accounted for.

Through the information presented in the main issue, the conclusion reveals that Japanese women have indeed faced great discrimination in the economy over the decades and still do, although things are slowly changing for the better. It ends with the recommendation that Japanese businesses change their perspectives and open themselves up more towards women to fare better both domestically and internationally.

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Introduction

Japan is a modern industrial country, with the third largest economy in the world. Having taken in influences from Western countries following the Meiji restoration in 1868 and consequentially begun its industrialisation process, Japan started seeing economic growth early on in its life as an industrial country. It wasn't until after the second world war however that Japan experienced the extremely fast economic growth which the country became known for during those years, often dubbed the „miracle economy“, and which lasted until the economic crash in the end of the 1980s.

This dissertation aims to examine the role and status of women in the modern Japanese economy, both their role in the high-growth years as well as their part in building up the economy after the crash. Hence the status of the economy itself is crucially relevant, obviously, but Japanese culture and its developments as well as Japanese society in general and women's standing therein is also important.

Women's status in Japanese society has changed greatly throughout the centuries. In prehistoric times, Japan is believed to have been a matriarchal society with women rulers but with the introduction of Confucianism and Buddhism from China and Korea in the 6th century, society gradually began to change towards a patriarchal one.¹ By the Heian period (CE 794-1185), women had already lost much of their influence in society but were still revered in many ways. To name an example, the supreme god of Japanese mythology is the sun goddess Amaterasu, the ancestor to all Japanese and from whom the Imperial family supposedly descends directly. However, as the centuries progressed, women's status declined further, arguably reaching the bottom with the Civil Code of 1898 when women were not even legally recognised persons, but were classified in the same category as the „deformed and mentally incompetent.“²

In the first half of the 20th century women's standing in the economy developed little, but how has it developed in the economy of the postwar era of the 20th century and how does it stand today? Do women face discrimination? What hurdles, if any, still stand in women's way in the job market? These questions are what this essay aims to answer.

¹ Renshaw (1999:61)

² Waswo (1996:149)

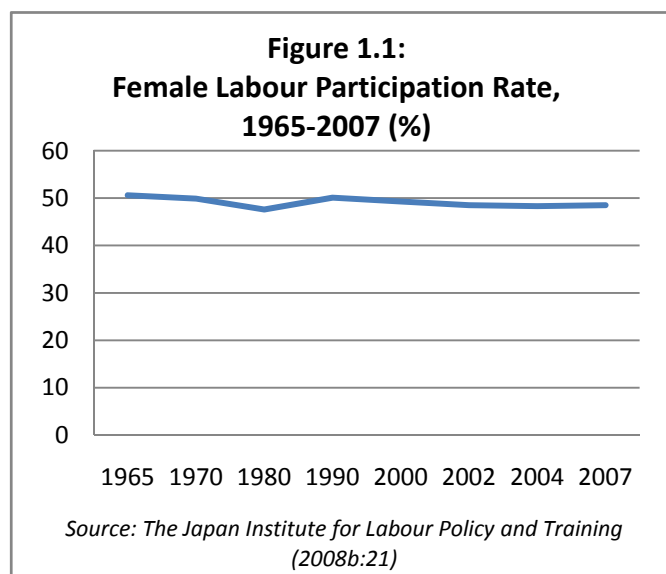
Participation in the Economy

To understand women's situation in the Japanese economy it is important to first examine their current participation in it and how it has developed. As such, this chapter will discuss both women's direct and indirect participation and hence what is known as women's dual-role in the economy.

Direct labour participation

Despite being frequently overlooked, women have always been important contributors to the Japanese economy. Their part in the industrialisation of Japan, specifically in agriculture and manufacturing, played a key role in Japan's economic growth until the second world war. Although the female work force had mostly shifted its focus away from those traditional occupations and onto new ones by the late 20th century, women's contribution to the modern economy has been no less significant. As is to be expected however, women's participation in the economy has always been heavily influenced by the social norms and values at the time as well as the country's state and thus it is important to keep those in mind to fully understand the changes and trends that evolved throughout the 20th century.³

Women's participation in the Japanese economy is twofold; researchers of the subject note both direct participation as well as indirect, but for now we will focus on women's direct participation. In 2006 over 27 million Japanese women worked in paid employment, comprising over 41 percent of the total labour force and 48.5 percent of the female population over the age of 15.⁴ The development of women's labour participation has been fairly stable in the postwar period, as can be seen in figure 1.1, although it did decrease by around 8 percent between 1955 and 1980. This decrease came about because the rate at which women were leaving the agricultural sector was greater than the rate at



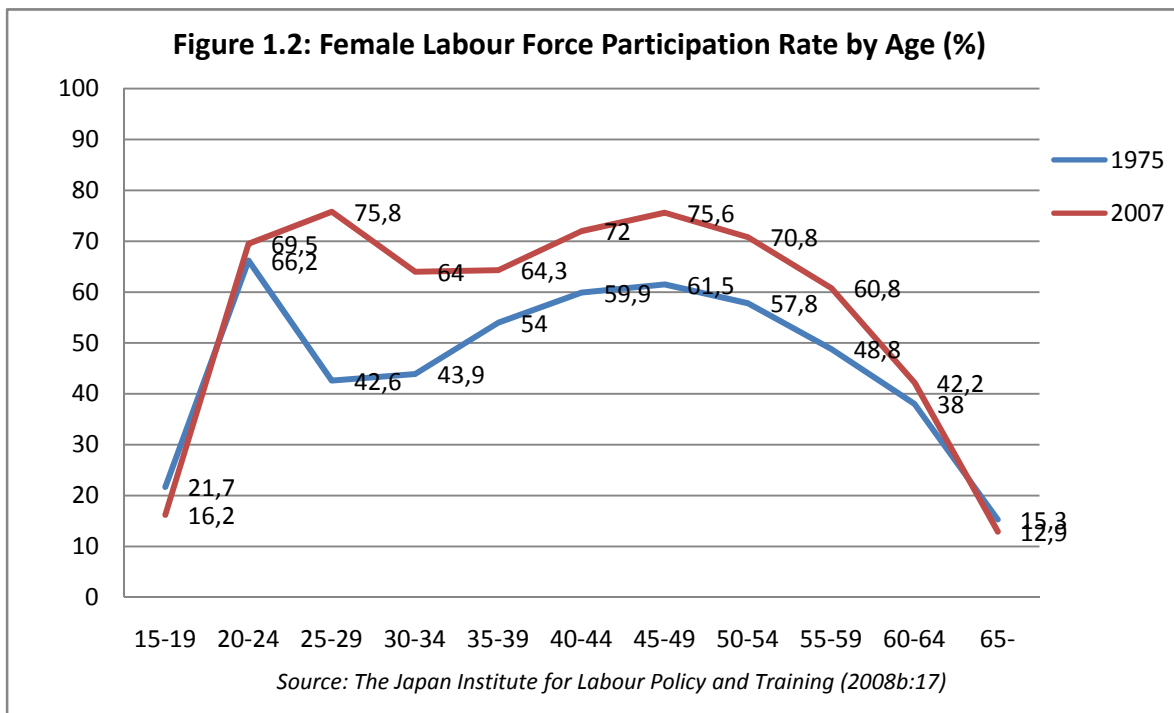
³ Upham (1987:124)

⁴ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008a:70)

which women were entering other occupational sectors, such as the service and clerical sectors, and also because of the amount of women in informal jobs in homes and family enterprises. It wasn't until the late 1970s that the rate of women entering new occupations caught up.⁵ On the other hand, the male labour participation rate in the postwar period has seen a steady decline from 81.7 percent to 73.1 percent, which in turn means that the percentage of women in the workforce total has been on the rise.⁶

Japan's current female rate is comparable to other countries around the world, with Japan ranking between the higher rates of North America and especially Scandinavia and the lower rates of Western Europe. These statistics do not however reveal the true differences between Japan and the rest of the world regarding women in the economy, nor indeed the difference between men and women in the economy.

A more interesting aspect of female labour participation in Japan is the way it is spread amongst age groups. Since World War II, many generalisations of working women have been born. The most prominent of these is related to the exit and reentry of women to the economy. Throughout the decades the female participation rate, when divided by age, has maintained the shape of an „M“. This „M-shape“ stems from the common practice of women entering the paid workforce in strong numbers upon graduation, then leaving after a few years of service upon marriage or childbirth, and finally reentering the workforce, for example when their children have finished primary



⁵ Brinton (1993:27)

⁶ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008b:20-21)

school.

As figure 1.2 shows the decrease between ages 20-24 and 25-29 was very significant in the early decades after the war, and hence it is perhaps not strange that the generalisation of women leaving the workforce to have children came to be.

Corresponding to this drop are the results from surveys by the United Nations in 1987 on marriages and childbirths by age of bride and mother respectively, which showed the most common age for new brides and mothers to be between 20 and 30.⁷

This trend of women reentering the workforce later in life when domestic responsibilities, mainly childrearing, become less demanding is unique to the postwar period and onwards. Many factors contributed to this change along with declining domestic responsibilities, such as rising divorce rates as well as education rates and the growth of the service industry. One especially important factor is noted by Frank K. Upham, who has written several works on postwar Japan, namely the significantly increased life expectancy. As Upham notes, Japanese women prior to World War II only had „7.6 years to live, on average, after completion of their child-care responsibilities; now the average is 43.8 years.“⁸

The increased participation of older age groups doesn't negate the stereotype of women leaving the economy for domestic responsibilities though, and because of the intensity with which this idea has been engraved into the Japanese mindset, it is understandable why it still persists. Male executives have for decades referred to the „M-shaped curve“ as a central reason why women were near completely excluded from job training, long-term careers and especially management careers. The assumption that women leave the workforce upon marriage has not been restricted to men, however, as studies conducted in the 1980s showed a consistency between the viewpoints of men and women.⁹ This viewpoint, supported by the postwar government and employer organisations, was left to foster practically unchallenged despite the fact that, as figure 1.2 shows, even during the 1970s the participation rate for women aged 25-34 never went below 40 percent. When you consider that the participation rate before the drop was 66 percent, the actual decrease constitutes about 35 percent of that rate. While that is a substantial drop, that still leaves 65 percent of the former workforce that keeps working.

⁷ Brinton (1993:30-31)

⁸ Upham (1987:125)

⁹ Brinton (1993:169-170)

It can therefore be argued that it is an unfair presumption that all or most women leave the workforce after only a few years of service. Of course, this does not take into account the separation of labour into different industries or job types. What is definitely unfair is that this assumption has carried on through the decades despite gradual changes, the result of which is today's labour participation curve that is drastically different from those of the early decades after the war. To begin with, the curve has moved northeastward, women of all ages have entered the labour force in greater numbers and they are staying there for longer. The major contrast comes in the age group of 25-29 which was initially the age where labour participation fell, but now represents a sizable increase. Another notable difference is that the curve has flattened greatly over the years, as more and more women are deciding to continue working, balancing work with domestic responsibilities. Also contributing to these differences is the recent increase in women putting off marriage until later, and those deciding not to marry at all. Higher education also plays a big part, as women of higher education are more likely to continue working through marriage, childbirth and childrearing.¹⁰

Looking at the recent data it is hard to argue as people did in the early postwar era that women tend to leave the workforce at marriage. The lowpoint of the curve, at ages 30-39, still sees 64 percent labour participation rate and the percentage of women who leave the workforce is only 15 percent. Some researchers of the subject take this even further. In her study of Japanese women managers, Jean R. Renshaw argues that today the M-shape is merely a myth, citing the changes to the curve and also arguing that „when nonworking women desiring work are added to the Japanese chart, the participation rate at the highest point, ages twenty to twenty-five is 86.9, and at the lowest ages thirty to thirty-five, is 81.8. That is, at the lowest point 81.8 percent of women are either in the labor force or would like to be, and the M-shape disappears.“¹¹ She goes on to attack another widely held belief, one that builds on the generalisation discussed earlier, namely that because Japanese women only work until marriage, most working women must be single. Renshaw refutes this also, claiming that in 1995, „more than half of Japan's working women were married, with an additional 9.1 percent widowed or divorced, and more than half of women with children under age twelve were working.“¹²

¹⁰ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2006:18)

¹¹ Renshaw (1999:30-31)

¹² Renshaw (1999:32)

In the mid-postwar era men's and women's length of service differed substantially. The majority of men worked continuously throughout their working lives whereas the opposite could be said of women. Today, with the developments of female labour participation, women are catching up but still lag somewhat behind, with men's length of service averaging at 13.5 years and women's at only 8.8 years.¹³ The most important determinant of women's length of service in the 20th century, according to Mary C. Brinton, was whether a woman started out as an employee in the private sector or in the government. Women starting out in government positions were more likely to keep working, mainly due to less discrimination and more flexibility in that field.¹⁴ The private sector has traditionally been less forgiving. An opinion poll from 1987 found that women aged 30-40 were most likely to feel that it was difficult for Japanese women to work outside the home and balance their responsibilities, mainly due to limited workplaces open to them. The greatest incentive for them to work was for financial reasons, which still applies to both men and women today.¹⁵

Employers also have a great variety of reasons to employ women although they did not seem to realise it until late in the 20th century. Throughout the century, although men were nearly always the primary breadwinners of their households, it was their wives that managed the household budget and ultimately decided on purchases, spending and even the husband's allowance. Gradually businesses have started to realise this, and subsequently focus their marketing strategies to appeal to women, hiring women as designers and consultants to help this process. Financial institutions have also begun to see women's potential, who have typically also managed the household's savings and investments.¹⁶

Beyond these rather positive reasons lie others, perhaps less pleasant ones. Because many salaried men have little time for socializing with people outside the company, some companies admit to hire „attractive, bright, marriageable women who hopefully will become wives of the salaried men with whom they work and then retire.“¹⁷

The Japanese workplace has traditionally been defined by male culture. Despite accounting for 41 percent of the workforce and being on average as educated as men, women are hence underrepresented in the economy no matter what industry you look at,

¹³ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008a:123)

¹⁴ Brinton (1993:187)

¹⁵ Brinton (1993:182)

¹⁶ Renshaw (1999:27)

¹⁷ Renshaw (1999:30)

especially when it comes to management. Another reason is because married women's paid work has always been seen as secondary to their roles as wives and mothers. These make up the primary reasons for discriminating attitudes in Japanese companies, taking the form of limited career paths for women and mandatory retirement upon marriage or childbirth.¹⁸ Oddly enough, this is true despite the Japanese economy's dependence on female labour. Women are and have mostly been employed as part-time workers, where they've served as cheaper, expendable labour. Trends are changing, slowly, but with the fall in birthrate and subsequent decline in population growth, Japan is looking at a diminishing working population. It is therefore not unlikely that the Japanese economy will respond by becoming more open to women and foreign workers.

Indirect labour participation

Dependent as the Japanese economy is on the labour of women, the Japanese society needs women for other work as well, namely the unpaid domestic work. For most of the 20th century, Japanese values have had a great emphasis on a clear division of labour. The M-shaped curve, and the ideas and myths around it support these values of women working full-time as wives and mothers. Economic growth and productivity is however another highly regarded value and as such women have come to be seen as having a twofold responsibility in the economy.¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, Japanese women participate in the economy both directly and indirectly, and have done so throughout the 20th century. Women's indirect participation comes in the form of their unpaid domestic labour and through it, the nurture of the higher valued labour of husbands and sons. Brinton argues that women are essentially „investors“ in Japan's human capital system as they are typically the ones responsible for nearly all household responsibilities. Women therefore „play an important part in Japan's human capital development system by investing heavily in the human capital of the males to whom they are attached.“²⁰

The extent of this unpaid work has for long been underestimated, but as a study conducted in 1991 by the Japanese Economic Planning Agency shows, the value of this work is actually quite significant. The results estimated the value to be between 66.7 and 98.8 trillion yen, equaling 14.6 to 21.6 percent of Japan's gross domestic product.

¹⁸ Broadbent (2003:7)

¹⁹ Renshaw (1999:33)

²⁰ Brinton (1993:12)

The same report found that women were responsible for 85 percent of this work.²¹ It is therefore not unusual that most Japanese women feel that men are favoured in the home as well as in the workplace. In spite of this, women in the 1980s seemed to agree with the ideas of gender roles, as another study demonstrated. In this study, the majority of women answered that they felt women's role was to care for the family and household while men's role was to work outside as the primary breadwinner.²² Supporting these views throughout the postwar era were the government and employer organisations, emphasising the importance of women's supporting roles in both the household and the workplace rather than equality.²³ Women are pressured to conform to the stereotypes of gendered division of labour as they „coincide with [employers] needs for intense devotion to the job by male employees and for large numbers of part-time female employees.“²⁴

These domestic responsibilities have serious drawbacks for women in the labour force. Having to manage a household leaves limited time for other things, and balancing household responsibilities with full-time work is difficult. Brinton observes that during the 20th century, „the seniority and training systems of large Japanese companies were fundamentally incompatible with women's lives.“²⁵ Women entering the job market after having left to raise children have little chance of getting training or entering a career-track, as they're likely already in their forties. Because of this, reentering the job market means starting from the bottom all over again, at wages that are likely lower than that of young, new entrants to the job market.

Women's indirect participation therefore does limit their potential to gain power and influence in the economy, but it does leave them a form of domestic power. As was mentioned earlier, in their managing the household, women typically control the household budget and as such have major decision power in the home. Takie Lebra also notes that women are theoretically able to manipulate their husbands „by making their services indispensable.“²⁶ It does however seem like a rather bleak exchange for women.

²¹ Renshaw (1999:29)

²² Upham (1987:145)

²³ Upham (1993:332)

²⁴ Upham (1987:144)

²⁵ Brinton (1993:129)

²⁶ Ogasawara (1998:159)

Participation by occupation and industry

In the times of early industrialization, nearly all women workers were concentrated in the agricultural sector and production, particularly in the textile industry. This held mostly true for the first half of the century, although with slight changes. Three quarters into the century women had shifted so significantly from primary industry (agriculture, forestry, fishing) towards tertiary industry (transport, sales, finance, service, etc.), the participation in these sectors had essentially reversed, although women were and are still strong in numbers in primary industry compared to other countries.²⁷ The office was traditionally seen as men's domain and was therefore exclusive for men until the war effort called part of the male population for the army, thus creating the need for replacements. With that women finally entered the office, but although it was certainly a step forward, it would be grossly inaccurate to say that any sort of real equality had been achieved. These *office ladies* as they are called, represented one visage of institutionalised gender discrimination in Japan, which still persists today.

Another area that clearly shows a form of difference between the sexes is that of managerial positions and long-term employment in general. Brinton claims that because less than 10 percent of married women were paid employees even by 1950, women were essentially not present when life-time employment policies were taking form in Japanese companies in the prewar period.²⁸

If we look at the postwar period in more detail, and the distribution of the female labour force into different industries, a few changes become clear. From 1965 to 2007 the rate of women workers in paid employment rose from 49 percent to 86 percent, while the rate of family workers and self-employed workers fell from 37 percent to 7.3 percent and 14.5 percent to 5.8 percent respectively. These developments are comparable to that of males, but the amount of men in family work has always been much less than that of women while the opposite is true for self-employment.²⁹

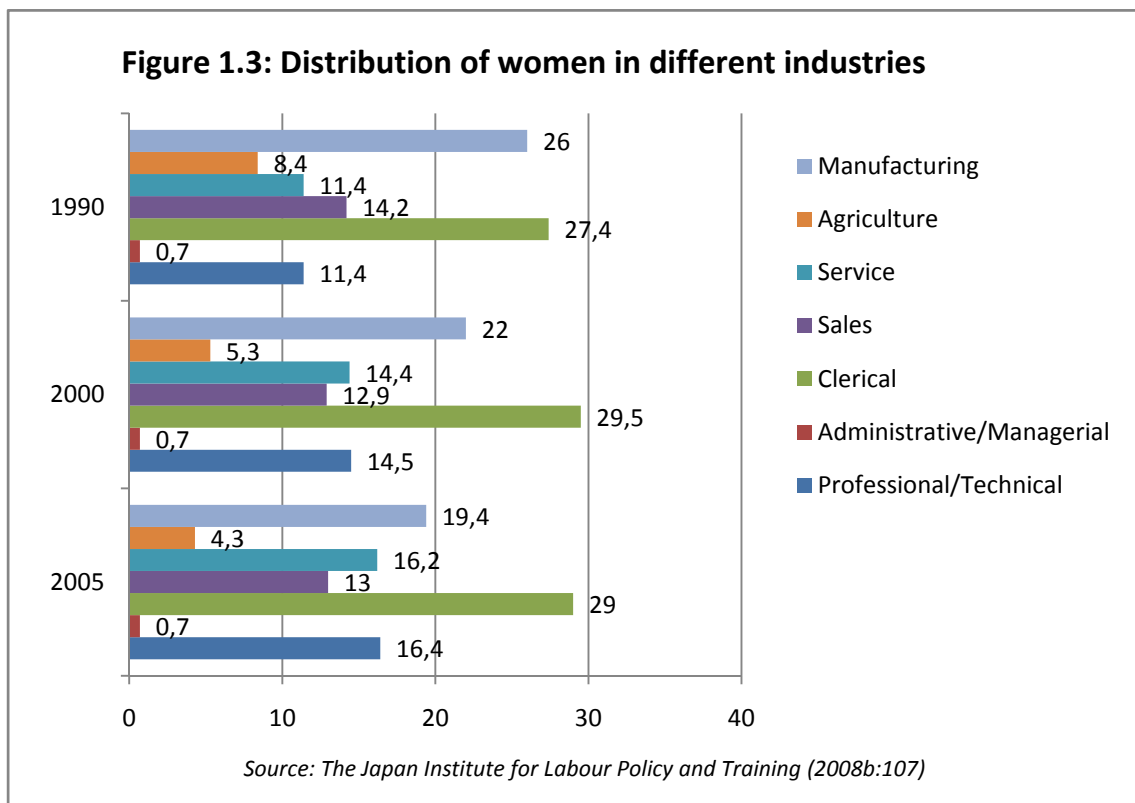
Delving deeper into the distribution of female labour into different occupational groups and how they compare with men shows some interesting developments as well. Between 1960 and 1990 women's share in the service industry remained around 50 percent, while their share in most other sectors besides agriculture rose. The most

²⁷ Brinton (1993:26)

²⁸ Brinton (1993:118)

²⁹ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008b:21)

significant rise was in clerical work, which rose from 36 percent to 55 percent, hinting at the importance of *office ladies* (female clerical workers) in the Japanese workforce. It is also worth noting that women's share of managerial positions nearly tripled around this time, although the numbers were very low, from 2.5 percent to 7.3 percent.³⁰ Today the percentage is around 10 percent, but that is mainly because the amount of male managers has decreased, while the number of female managers has remained near unchanged. The rates for other sectors have continued changing in the same ways as before, with increases in clerical work, professional and technical work and service but decreases in production, agriculture and sales.³¹ Looking at these numbers (which are from 2005) from a different angle shows directly how female labour is distributed into different occupations. Figure 1.3 shows this in detail. A unique aspect about Japan is that despite declining female participation in manufacturing, the rate of women in that sector is still quite high compared to other countries. As for the other sectors, most of them, as well as their developments, are somewhat comparable to other industrial countries, save for administration.



³⁰ Brinton (1993:35)

³¹ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008a:107)

In Mary Brinton's study on women's contribution to the postwar economy in the 1980s, women and men were, among other things, asked what type of employment they had experienced. The study revealed great differences between the sexes. Nearly all participants had at some point been full-time employees, but the number of women who had experienced part-time work vastly outnumbered that of men who had experienced the same. Women were also more likely to have experienced family enterprise work and piecework, while men were much more likely to have experienced self-employment and managerial positions. The gender differences for younger people were less pronounced than for middle-aged people, but enough to safely conclude that the differences started to show early in people's careers.³²

Overall, it is easy to see the general developments of women's distribution in the labour market. Women have shifted heavily from manufacturing and agricultural work into other sectors, primarily into clerical work. In 1995 around a third of all employed women was in clerical work, but only 15 percent of employed men.³³

³² Brinton (1993:173)

³³ Ogasawara (1998:19)

Gender-based Discrimination and Differences

In this chapter, Japanese companies' attitudes toward women will be looked into and any discriminating attitudes and practices will be accounted for. The wage gap between the sexes will be examined and the situation of female part-time workers, clerical workers (office ladies) and female managers will be explored in more detail. Finally, changes through legislations by the Japanese government will be discussed.

Discrimination in the workplace and job market

Even for people simply visiting Japan there are many things that hint at, with varying subtlety, discriminating attitudes towards women or at the very least contrasting attitudes for each gender. Frequently noted is for an example the use of uniforms, which women are more likely to be required to wear, and business cards, which men have traditionally been more likely to carry.³⁴ When such differing attitudes are evident on the very surface of the workplace, it should come as no surprise that gender discrimination in the Japanese economy runs much deeper. Many studies have been made by labour economists about women's unfavourable position in the economy. However, yet other studies have produced another viewpoint, that women have considerably more leverage in the Japanese economy and society than initially meets the eye, through indirect influence and power other than that discussed in studies based on statistical data.³⁵ Even assuming that is true, whether that actually compensates for the discrimination women face is another story.

It's often been noted that statistics alone fail to fully reveal the extent of discrimination in Japan, in particular those on the macro-level like labour statistics. They tend to be less effective at determining the reasons or motives behind the differing attitudes towards men and women, yet they are necessary to understand in what ways discrimination takes place. For an example, women's relatively small share in *sôgôshoku*, or career track, and especially in management, is in great part due to discriminating practices in the recruitment process and in promotion, as studies on the micro-level have shown. For decades after the second world war women were discriminated against without so much as a second thought, but through slow

³⁴ Brinton (1993:107)

³⁵ Ogasawara (1998:4)

developments late in the 20th century, it became theoretically possible for women to enter the workforce and stay on equal ground with men.³⁶

It is not easy, however. Women are still faced with their „traditional“ domestic responsibilities and find themselves needing to balance those with their work, a difficult feat if women were also expected to put in as much work in the workplace as men. This is the case for women on the career-track, but women are able to choose upon recruitment whether to enter said career-track or a clerical track, or *ippanshoku*. The career-track puts women on the same path as men, where they must be willing to work the same hours as men as well as to accept possibly being transferred to another part of the country. On the other hand, this track opens up possibilities of promotion to women, although Kaye Broadbent points out that women on the career track still find themselves lagging behind their male colleagues even after just a few years of service and claims that „their advancement is not based on seniority as it is for their same-age male colleagues.“³⁷ According to a survey from 1991, 66 percent of career-track women felt they were discriminated against in terms of wages and promotion and also expressed dissatisfaction at their companies‘ organisational culture.³⁸ This happens in spite of career-track women doing work equal or at least comparable to that of men. Alternatively, women can choose the clerical track, but that essentially eliminates all prospects of advancement. Consisting mainly of menial tasks such as typewriting and the ever-unpopular serving of tea, the clerical track is by far more flexible but also requires a certain lack of career ambition. At first, *office ladies* typically only worked for a few years before leaving the company for marriage or other work but their average length of service seems to have increased slightly over the years. Still, many women choose to enter the clerical path as they see it to be only temporary and because it is more flexible than the career-track.

A major factor in determining people’s occupational status is of course the state of the economy. For women it is especially so, as women have since they began entering paid employment served as a sort of economic buffer for Japanese companies. Throughout the 20th century and even today, women have been a cheaper and more easily dispensable labour, having been excluded from the development of life-time employment. Because of this they have always been more affected by fluctuations in the

³⁶ Upham (1987:127)

³⁷ Broadbent (2003:15)

³⁸ Broadbent (2003:16)

economy than men. During the years of high economic growth in the 80s, women were recruited in great numbers to meet the demand for skilled labour, while in the years following the economic crash the hiring rate for women fell drastically along with the economy, as companies began focusing their recruitments towards men over women.³⁹

For a long time companies were able to keep the flow of women in and out of their workforce somewhat stable with discriminatory policies, forcing women to leave the workforce upon marriage. This way, companies could control the size of their workforce to meet changing needs very efficiently. Even after this practice was made formally illegal with the passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1985, many employers continued asking potential female recruits whether they planned to retire upon marriage, some even insisting that they do as part of the contract. In a society where promotion, wages and other benefits are mainly dependent on length of service, these policies mean huge limitations for women in the economy. A further complication is that while employers support this pattern and even try to enforce it, many employers cite the main reason they do not treat women the same way as men concerning wages, training and promotion to be the fear women will only stay a limited time before leaving for domestic responsibilities.⁴⁰ Thus, a vicious circle of discrimination came to be entrenched in the postwar Japanese economy.

The discrimination women have faced in the economy comes in various other forms as well. In a survey made by the Ministry of Labour in 1985, 53 percent of employers reported that type of work performed differed between the sexes, 27 percent said they only transferred women within regions, while men could be transferred wherever in the country, and 17 percent had different requirements for men and women. What was most peculiar though, from a Western standpoint, is that nearly 18 percent of employers required that women commute from home, and were not permitted to live alone.⁴¹ The reason for this is that these companies believed women who lived on their own were more likely to have led less reputable lives, lacking any sort of supervision or guidance from parents or relatives. A slightly older survey (1981) revealed that whole 71 percent of companies treated women differently, and 45 percent admitted that they did not promote women to even the lowest managerial position. Perhaps more staggering is that between 70 and 80 percent of companies refused to hire female

³⁹ Renshaw (1999:101)

⁴⁰ Brinton (1993:146)

⁴¹ Brinton (1993:157)

university graduates, a stark contrast to the case of men, for whom a university degree was becoming increasingly necessary to land a good job.⁴²

The role of government in all of this has been contradicting, to say the least. While the Liberal Democratic Party strongly emphasised women's domestic role in society, suppressing developments in ideology, the government bureaucracy, especially the Ministry of Labour, has been a leader in developing women managers. The Women's and Children's Bureau, created within the Ministry of Labour by the occupation forces in 1946 has played a key role in strengthening the image of working women in the economy.⁴³

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, there are those who have observed advantages for women despite the intense discrimination, and indeed because of it. In her book on Japanese office ladies, Yuko Ogasawara claims that „men in Japanese organizations are, in a sense, far more dependent on women than women are on men.“⁴⁴ Because of the slim chances of her being promoted, a woman in the office can afford to worry little about a superior's opinions, while the same could hardly be said of men. Yet others claim that precisely because women were excluded from the type of work that men did, women had more time and more freedom to attend to hobbies and other activities more desirable than work.⁴⁵ While this may not make the situation any fairer, it certainly brings up an interesting point, how something as negative as discrimination can still produce some sort of advantages for those facing said discrimination.

The wage gap

In most countries in the world, even in the more modern and egalitarian ones such as Sweden, there is still a difference between the gross earnings of men and women. It should come as no surprise then that such a wage gap exists in Japan as well. The size of this wage gap and how it has developed, as well as the reasons behind it will be discussed in this chapter.

The wage gap has always existed in Japan. However, unlike most other industrial countries where the wage gap has always been steadily narrowing, in Japan it has taken a more non-linear path. Certainly it is narrower today than it was a century

⁴² Upham (1987:127)

⁴³ Renshaw (1999:111)

⁴⁴ Ogasawara (1998:160)

⁴⁵ Iwao (1993:7)

ago, but not by as much as in other countries. In 1882 for an example, women's average wage was about 59 percent of men. Over fifty years later, in 1938, the rate had actually decreased to 34 percent.⁴⁶ Of course, this is only the gross rate. If looked at from within each industry, different rates might show up, some narrowing the gap and others widening it. From the end of the second world war the rate rose to about 54 percent until 1980 when it again began a slow decline. Upham noted however that while the gross wage differentials were increasing in the late 1980s, if one were to look at wages at a deeper level, controlling for education, length of service, age, and employment status, the wage gap was actually narrowing gradually, „indicating increasing adherence to the norm of equal pay for equal work.“⁴⁷ If that is true, and controlled differentials are indeed narrowing, then what is causing the gross differential to increase?

There are many reasons behind this, but first let us look at the developments from the 1980s until today. The ratio of women's to men's salaries kept decreasing until the economic crash around 1990 but then saw an increase of nearly 2 percent by 1995.⁴⁸ In 2007 the ratio had increased to 65.9 percent which, while a respectable increase, is still low compared to most Western industrial countries.⁴⁹ Even so, surveys made by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare determined the average monthly cash earnings in workplaces employing more than 30 people. The average for women was only 239.164 yen, 49.8 percent of the average for men.⁵⁰ Another interesting point to note is that the salaries for men and women at the beginning of their careers (new graduates) are near the point of parity. Controlling for education, young women earned between 94 to 97 percent of what men earned in 2007, and women coming from graduate school actually earned nearly a whole percentage more than men.⁵¹ Survey results have also found that foreign affiliated companies were more likely to be close to parity of wages for new graduates, but that as with Japanese companies, the wage gap widened with each year.⁵²

To understand the reasons for the large wage gap in Japan it is necessary to understand the nature of the wage system employed in Japan throughout the 20th century. While not exactly unique to Japan, the seniority wage system has been noted as

⁴⁶ Brinton (1993:120)

⁴⁷ Upham (1987:125)

⁴⁸ Renshaw (1999:29)

⁴⁹ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008a:181)

⁵⁰ Foreign Press Center Japan (2008:128)

⁵¹ Foreign Press Center Japan (2008:130)

⁵² The Japan Institute of Labour (2001:23-24)

a characteristic of the Japanese labour market. First appearing in the 1920s, this system helped managers to attract employees and to give them incentives to stay with the company throughout their working lives, the effect of which was that employees would become especially well experienced in the workings of their respective companies. In return, they were rewarded for their loyalties based on length of service, although evaluated performance or ability also had an effect.⁵³ This system is one reason behind the large wage gap between the sexes, long-term employment excluded women and hence seniority wage policies did not apply to them. Even today, although women are theoretically able to rise as far as men on the corporate ladder, most women work in small to medium sized companies where life-time employment is very rare, and a majority of women work part-time. Furthermore, large companies have higher wages on average; small or medium sized companies' wages average at around 75 to 80 percent of that of large ones.⁵⁴

Barbara Bergmann's crowding hypothesis explains the wage gap further. The hypothesis examines the effects of discrimination on the supply of labour and is best explained with two gender-equal occupations, one high paying and another lower-paying. When the sexes are in equal numbers in each occupation, the gross wage differential is none. If the higher paying occupation now discriminates against women, their labour supply curve shifts upwards due to the decreased employment, resulting in higher wages for the rest of their workforce as per the laws of supply and demand. On the other hand, the non-discriminating occupation gets an influx of new workers, shifting their supply curve downwards and decreasing wages.⁵⁵ This hypothesis, while vastly simplified in this example, is still effective at explaining how such a difference in wages can result from discrimination.

Perhaps the most important reason however is that a vast number of women workers are found in part-time work, meaning they get lower wages and hardly any of the fringe benefits given to men, widening the gap even further. Part-time workers, almost exclusively women, earned about 82 percent of full-time workers' hourly rate in 1976 and by 1994 the rate had dropped to a startling 49 percent.⁵⁶ This is made possible through rather dubiously sidestepping the Labour Standards Law from 1947, according

⁵³ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2006:44)

⁵⁴ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008b:49)

⁵⁵ Hori (2009:9)

⁵⁶ Broadbent (2003:68)

to which wages should be equal for the sexes, by defining the work as different even though in reality it is not.⁵⁷

Part-time workers

A prominent development in the status of labour in Japan during the later half of the 20th century was the gradual increase in part-time workers. The reason behind this increase is fairly simple from the employers' point of view; part-timers have been likened to a kind of gold mine who can be paid lower wages and require „none of the standard fringe benefits of „full-time“ employees – paid vacations, social security, housing loans, and family allowances.“⁵⁸ On the supply side, part-time work has been an increasingly common option for women returning to the labour market after child-rearing, as no particular skills or training is typically required but also because many companies have age limits for full-time employee recruits. A majority of part-time workers are female, and most are housewives working to add to the household budget.⁵⁹

Male part-time workers exist as well, but are usually classified differently by companies as *sono ta*. They are paid higher wages and receive benefits that regular part-timers do not receive, as they work, by definition, more than 35 hours per week. On the other hand, part-time workers, by definition, work less than 35 hours per week. These definitions do not conform to reality though. 62 percent of part-time workers in 1993 actually worked over 35 hours a week and due to the recession at the time, some of them even worked unpaid overtime.⁶⁰

In 2000 there were 8,5 million female part-time workers in Japan, constituting 42 percent of all female employees. The rate had risen 10 percent since 1987 but remains stable so far in the new century.⁶¹ Women's share in part-time work has been about 70 percent for the last decade but, surprisingly enough, this rate is comparable to the U.S. and actually even lower than in major European countries, the rates of which range from 77 percent to 81 percent.⁶² However, these share rates might be misleading, as they are for part-timers who actually worked less than 35 hours a week and, as was mentioned earlier, a large part of part-timers in Japan work more. The number of part-

⁵⁷ Lebra (1978:119)

⁵⁸ Condon (1985:203)

⁵⁹ Sugimoto (2003:155)

⁶⁰ Broadbent (2003:80)

⁶¹ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008b:35)

⁶² The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2008b:36)

time workers who work hours comparable to full-time work has been increasing since the mid-1980s, yet they are still classified as part-timers, likely so they can be used as cheap and easily disposable labour for fluctuations in the economy, to meet labour demands and save costs all at the same time.⁶³ As Broadbent notes however, the reasons for hiring part-time workers contradict the reasons many companies give for firing them in times of downturn. That female part-time workers are used as a sort of economic buffer does not explain why these companies dispose of them, their cheapest workforce, when downsizing.⁶⁴

Through a different type of employment status, companies have been able to hire women to meet demands for even skilled workers at a substantially lower cost and without all of the commitment that comes with hiring full-time workers, and without violating laws about equal pay for equal work found in the constitution as well as in legislations made during the postwar period. For this reason it is clear that equality is sorely lacking in the Japanese labour market. Stereotypes and presumptions, even outdated ones, still play a role in the decisions of employers who employ statistical discrimination against women. As such women are much more limited in the type of work they are able to do, in ways men have never had to worry about.

Women managers and office ladies

No field shows as striking differences between the genders as that of the administrative or managerial field. The idea that managerial work is men's work has been entrenched into the Japanese mindset since well before the beginning of industrialisation. So entrenched is the idea, that most people seem not to believe any female Japanese managers or executives exist at all. Many even take it further, mostly middle-aged men in managerial positions themselves, by flat out rejecting the existence of women managers. Renshaw came across three common forms of such denial in her study of women managers in Japan. First was the statement that there simply were none. Second, that if there indeed were any, they were not *real* managers but merely tokens or decorations (the awfully patronising label „flowers“ often being used). The third form was perhaps the most unusual one, stating that „the woman manager is not truly a woman, not able to get married or, more kindly, having chosen career over marriage and

⁶³ Broadbent (2003:8)

⁶⁴ Broadbent (2003:32)

family.”⁶⁵ These ideas are very damaging to the image of women managers because they undermine not only their existence but everything that they actually do as well.

According to a survey in 1986, 22.8 percent of companies had women in the lowest-level managerial job, subsection head (*kakarichô*). For higher ranks, however, the rate of companies employing women in them fell with each rank. 21.6 percent of companies had women in positions up to section head (*kachô*), but only 4.1 percent had women in the rank of division manager (*buchô*) and 1.2 percent had women above that. Interestingly enough, the same survey found that 79.9 percent of these same companies claimed they treated men and women equally.⁶⁶ Today the number of companies employing women in managerial positions has risen, the largest increase being in the *kakarichô* position.

Although not proportional to women’s share in the labour force, it is certainly clear that women managers exist. Labour statistics show that nearly 1 percent of the female labour force is in managerial positions and while their numbers have remained rather constant, their share in managerial positions has risen over the years, mainly due to a decrease in the number of male managers.⁶⁷ They are mostly concentrated in the retail industry, likely a response to the realisation that young women are great consumers, but can be found in almost all industries.⁶⁸ However, while this is true for general management positions, it is a different story for top management and board members, the female members of which are merely in the few hundreds.⁶⁹

Their numbers may be small, but they are nonetheless impressive as it is a respectable feat for a woman to secure a managerial position in the Japanese economy. As has been mentioned there are several social barriers women must overcome to achieve such success in the workplace, and even when they have, it can be difficult to keep up. One difficulty noted by the first ever female *buchô* in a Japanese corporation was keeping up with *tsukiai*, socialising and discussing mainly work-related matters, which traditionally takes place outside the workplace, outside of formal working hours.⁷⁰ Another difficulty is that they still receive unfair treatment; their promotion is

⁶⁵ Renshaw (1999:150)

⁶⁶ Steinhoff & Tanaka (1988:110)

⁶⁷ Renshaw (1999:18)

⁶⁸ Renshaw (1999:106)

⁶⁹ Renshaw (1999:134)

⁷⁰ Brinton (1993:103)

rarely based on seniority like it often is with men, and they still receive only about 65 percent of the wages men receive.⁷¹

The third form of denial that Renshaw talks about is also unsubstantiated by reality. Although most female managers have not borne children, a great majority of them is nonetheless married.⁷² It is very surprising how these ideas can continue to exist seemingly unchallenged when there already is strong evidence contradicting them. That is not to say things are not changing; they are, and the existence of female managers is evidence of that, but they are doing so very slowly.

As the field of management is one that demonstrates the difficulties inherent in the career-track (*sôgôshoku*), the case of *office ladies* is a prime example of discrimination faced by women in the clerical track (*ippanshoku*). These are women who were sometimes referred to as „office flowers“, indicating that they were little more than assistants whose purpose was more decoration than any actual work. As views towards women have developed through the years, the phrase has seen a decline in use, but *office ladies* still face discrimination in their workplace.

The jobs of *office ladies* are usually seen as temporary ones. Typically, neither the employer nor indeed the *office lady* herself expects her to work in the company indefinitely. As a result, companies do not see a reason to invest in their training and with that, any prospects of promotion become highly unlikely. The status of *office lady* is therefore commonly regarded as a dead-end job that most would only do for a couple of years before leaving for something else. That they are frequently regarded as a waste of labour, being treated as clerical workers of the lowest level when their ability and education gives them potential for much more, should come as no surprise.

The discrimination against *office ladies* comes in many forms, but in particular there's a certain lack of independence, as they are not allowed to manage their own time at work.⁷³ Another thing that is missing in *office ladies'* work is individuality. *Office ladies* are not evaluated in the same way as male workers are; they are not recognised or rewarded when they do well and show great ability, nor are they penalised when they do poorly. The waste of their labour becomes even more obvious with this, when they are given absolutely no incentive to do well. Yuko Ogasawara observed that *office ladies*

⁷¹ Renshaw (1999:137)

⁷² Sugimoto (2003:157)

⁷³ Ogasawara (1998:34)

usually do not even receive credit for reports they work on, their names not appearing on them even if they did most of the work.⁷⁴ One result of this is that *office ladies* are often thought to be unproductive; that they do not do much work within the organisation, but in reality they just aren't given any of the credit.

Why then, do employers hire women as *office ladies*? To claim that they are hired as decorations to inspire men and raise their productivity while doing menial tasks such as serving tea and typewriting seems too meagre a reason. Many mention the fact that some employers hire them as potential marriage prospects for their male workers, as the employer wants them to spend their time working and not dating. If they find a mate at work, an *office lady*, they'll have a wife who is understanding and sympathetic to the amount of work her husband is responsible for.⁷⁵ Supporting this idea is a survey from 1995 of over 2000 couples, where nearly half of them claimed they first met at work.⁷⁶ Another reason, of course, is that they are cheap, temporary labour that doesn't complain too much, but any protests among *office ladies* are very rare.

A more puzzling question then comes to mind. Why do women seek this occupation in as great numbers as they do? We already established that the occupational sector with the most concentration of women is the clerical sector, with nearly a third of all female employees. Surprisingly enough, the answer lies in freedom. The work itself may not include responsibility, individuality or independence, but in a country that is by any standard socially strict, the work of an office lady does have some perks. Jane Condon explains the extent of this freedom:

On the job, she is free from responsibility and overtime work. After hours, she is free from family responsibilities (until she marries), free to spend her money on herself (for clothes, records, movies, and eating out), free from financial cares (she usually lives with her family), and free to travel (to Hawaii, Guam, America, and Europe) – all freedoms that will be sharply curtailed once she marries.⁷⁷

Because *office ladies* are excluded from the benefits that men receive, they have little incentive to work well and are even likely to care little for the opinions of men of higher rank. Indeed, because of the lack of potential credit or demerit, office ladies can not be controlled in the same way as male workers. In some situations they can even refuse to help a man they dislike and the man will often be held equally responsible for

⁷⁴ Ogasawara (1998:31)

⁷⁵ Cherry (1987:105)

⁷⁶ Ogasawara (1998:46)

⁷⁷ Condon (1985:211)

it. Ogasawara hence claims that *office ladies* do indeed maintain some form of power in the organisation, as male workers need to prove their ability as potential managers and therefore „it is to their disadvantage to call to the personnel department’s attention the fact that OLs won’t cooperate with them.“⁷⁸

What all this demonstrates is that both women on the career-track and women on the clerical-track are vastly undervalued and essentially a waste of potentially valuable labour. Career-track women are presented with great difficulty getting into management positions where their skills could be put to better use and clerical-track women are given no incentive to work well.

Changes through legislation

Change is an inevitable part of nature and so it is with human society as well. There have certainly been changes in women’s situation in the Japanese economy since the second world war both in terms of legislations as well as in the minds of Japanese people, but it is important to remember that those two forms of changes do not always develop hand in hand.

Straight as Japan issued its surrender in 1945 the Occupation of the Allied Forces took command over the country. Initially, the Occupation’s aim was to minimise any potential future threat from Japan and to that end they began with establishing a democratic system of government. After a few years, with the rise of communism in neighbouring countries, the Occupation’s priorities shifted to quickly rebuilding the Japanese economy, according to capitalist ideology of course.⁷⁹ One major result of the Occupation was the new constitution issued in 1947. This new constitution had a huge effect on women’s status and rights in society, at least in terms of litigation, as Article 14 states that sex discrimination in any form is strictly prohibited. Supporting this is Article 24 with its freedom of marriage and family law, but detracting from it was the lagging developments of the Japanese mind set.⁸⁰ A lack of certainty and emphasis on eliminating gender discrimination also worked against equality, even in the Labour Standards Act which was the only law practically covering the subject of discrimination for a few decades after the war. Article 3 and 4 of the LSA discuss discrimination but both of them fail to do so with accuracy. Article 3 prohibits discrimination regarding

⁷⁸ Ogasawara (1998:136)

⁷⁹ Mason & Caiger (1997:359)

⁸⁰ Upham (1987:130)

wages, working hours and working conditions based on nationality, creed or social status but does not mention sex. Article 4 does, but only prohibits discriminating against women with respect to wages.⁸¹ Such loose handling of the subject has made it possible for employers to discriminate against women in the ways already discussed in prior chapters. The LSA also contains clauses giving certain privileges to women, such as the rather embarrassing menstrual leave, although reforms have since eliminated some of them.

The main development in legislation against discrimination in the postwar period was the passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1985. The EEOL's aim was to discourage discrimination but its effects are debatable. Its major flaw is undoubtedly its lack of sanctions, the law seems to merely be recommending certain behaviours meaning non-complying companies can not be taken to court and penalised. As a result „there are no penalties for employers discriminating in training, benefits, retirement or sacking, and it is necessary for a worker to gain employer agreement to participate in mediation.“⁸² Furthermore, the law makes no mention of part-time workers, a significant oversight considering the number of women in part-time work.

Due to these limitations, the original EEOL has been considered by many to have been somewhat of a failure and more a victory for management than for women; the law abolished some of the „privileges“ women had under the LSA and raised the maximum number of overtime work women in managerial and professional work (requiring specialised knowledge or skills), to name a few examples.⁸³ The law was strengthened somewhat in 1997 however, and even today amendments for strengthening anti-discrimination regulations are being discussed, one method of which is a ban against indirect discrimination.⁸⁴

Other laws, such as the Parental Leave Law and the Part-time Worker's Law have made some progress, but they suffer from the same flaw as the EEOL, namely that there are no penalties for non-compliance. Nonetheless, companies seem willing to comply with the Parental Leave Law, at least, although in 2001 only 10 percent of employees took leave, 99,8 percent of them women.⁸⁵ As for the Part-time Worker's

⁸¹ Ministry of Justice, Japan (2009)

⁸² Broadbent (2003:95)

⁸³ Upham (1987:152)

⁸⁴ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2006:107)

⁸⁵ Broadbent (2003:97)

Law, part-timers working longer than 35 hours a week were excluded from its benefits, making it highly ineffective at bettering part-time workers' conditions.⁸⁶

Another legal factor contributing to the form of women's work are tax incentives. A wife is able to earn up to 1 million yen annually without having to pay taxes. Add to this the facts that if her earnings stay under 1 million her husband can claim her as a dependent for a tax deduction of 300,000 yen and other benefits, that they still typically do most of the housework and that their wages are generally much lower than men's, and the strong incentives for women to enter part-time work become clear.⁸⁷

Legislations have definitely had some effect on the conditions of women workers in Japan, mandatory retirement at marriage or childbirth has been suppressed, but most of the legislation initially aimed to reduce discrimination against women have in one way or another failed to properly address certain issues for *all* women workers.

⁸⁶ Broadbent (2003:65)

⁸⁷ Renshaw (1999:34)

Conclusion

As was mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Japan is a modern industrial country. As such, it seems fitting to use Western industrial economies as comparisons when examining economic matters. These are countries with which Japan has many things in common economically and most of them, like Japan, follow capitalist ideology in their economies. So how does Japan stand regarding gender equality in the economy compared to other modern industrial countries like those of the west?

Based on the research that has been done on the subject over the decades, both in forms of statistical data as well as more deep and personal interview-based research, it is rather safe to say that Japan lags behind when it comes to gender equality, especially in the economy. On the surface it does not look too bad today; women's participation in the economy is comparable to that of other nations. However, you do not need to dig deep below the surface to come upon the stark differences between the sexes. Indeed, as soon as you divide the female working population by age they begin to show. It is true that the „M-shaped“ participation curve is substantially flatter these days than it was several decades ago, and so it is one of the areas where Japan has definitely improved over the years, but it still exists to some extent. It has however managed to become comparable to other industrial nations, especially when the amount of women desiring work are added to the mix.

When the female work force is divided by occupation more differences come clear, mainly women's strong numbers in clerical occupations and tiny numbers in managerial occupations. Here there have been some developments as well; women have steadily been moving from manufacturing and agricultural work to the service industry and professional/technical work. In other words, more and more women are choosing to take the career track in companies. Meanwhile, the amount of women in the clerical track, while large, has remained rather constant over the last twenty years.

These rates of women in paid employment only tell half of the story of women's contribution to the Japanese economy. The amount of unpaid work in household management is staggering, being valued between 68 and 100 trillion yen as previously mentioned. The fact that the great majority of this work is done by women is a great example of women's less visible yet hugely important role in the Japanese economy. Of course, other countries also have this kind of unpaid work, though Japan might possibly have it on a larger scale than others. Moreover, while women do the majority of this

work in countries all over the world, an old study from the 80s indicates that women's share in this unpaid work in Japan is rather higher than in other countries.⁸⁸

The reason for these differences between the sexes is that for a couple of centuries women in Japan have stood on a wholly unequal ground with men. In the first half of the 20th century women were not directly involved in the economy to the same extent they are today. As such, when various policies like permanent employment were being developed in organisations, women were unable to take part in the process. Women were therefore basically excluded from the better jobs in the economy from the beginning. On top of that, the idea of women's supportive role in society (household management and the nurture of men), became considered as tradition even if it strictly wasn't.

The result of this is that throughout most of the 20th century, women were discriminated against by employers and on many fronts. They didn't hire women nearly as readily, and in many cases even refused to hire women on grounds that sound absurd at best, such as if they lived alone or had graduated from university. Women were also often forced to retire upon marriage and, as they were not expected to stay for long within the organisation, they were rarely given training as men were. For the most part, women have been used as a cheaper, more easily disposable labour for companies which also acts as a sort of buffer against economic fluctuations. It is hardly any wonder there are so few of them in management positions.

Given all this, it is clear that Japanese women have met with intense discrimination over the 20th century. The situation has slowly been changing for the better but remnants of the old way of thinking still persist in Japanese companies. Various legislations have been made to aid women but most of them have met with disappointing results, mainly because they lacked sanctions but also because they often failed to properly address the problem. This is a matter that Japan needs to rectify with stronger laws and support to guarantee equality in the economy. As it stands, Japanese women are potentially valuable labour that is on average very well educated but still remains the country's most wasted national resource. More and more women are becoming tired of being used as cheap, temporary labour on top of having to manage a household and are entering careers, demanding their talents be used more effectively. It

⁸⁸ Brinton (1993:93)

would be in Japan's best interest to embrace this valuable resource to help Japan rebuild its economy and to be able to compete better in the international marketplace.

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