

## The International Corner

### Work and Family in Japan

by Sumiko Iwao

In Japan, women now account for 40% of the labor force, and, since 1997, the number of married households with two incomes has exceeded married households with just one income. Female labor force participation varies by age and can be plotted on an M-shaped curve. Women in their 30s are at the bottom of the curve (at the middle of the "M"), indicating that many women stop working at the time of childbirth and child-rearing.

A comparison of employment rates for women before and after the birth of their first child shows that almost 70% of women quit their jobs at the time of childbirth. Of the 30% or so who continue to work, the vast majority (72.3%) took advantage of child-care leave in 2007. The rate of male workers taking child-care leave is quite different. Although the Japanese government established a target of 10% for fathers taking child-care leave, the actual figure for 2007 came to a mere 1.56%, far short of the target. The current reality is that males in their 30s and 40s, the prime child-rearing years, are seen as indispensable at work. They get home the latest among all employed people, working 60 hours or more per week, and the prospects for their taking child-care leave are dim.

According to a government survey conducted in 2006, husbands in double-income households spend 30 minutes a day on housekeeping and child-care, while their working wives spend 4 hours and 15 minutes. Clearly, most of the housekeeping and child care are shouldered by working mothers, leaving little time for leisure activities. Many fathers also feel frustrated at not having sufficient time to spend with their children. The current situation is stressful for both working mothers and fathers. Insufficient time at home coupled with very high educational expenses have caused many couples to hesitate to have more children or even to have children at all.

As a result, Japan is today facing a serious problem of both low fertility and a rapidly growing elderly population. In order to ease the difficulty working women with children face, the Japanese government has been attempting to make workplaces more family friendly.

On the surface, the government's myriad new policies to support work-family balance, including child-care leave and elder-care leave laws, appear to be sufficient. Yet in reality, there are many problems remaining. There are serious discrepancies between government policies and what workers encounter in their workplaces. This is especially true during the current economic crisis where businesses have been forced to make drastic cuts in employee benefits in a bid to survive.

According to a report made public on March 16, 2009, by the Ministry of Health, Labor, & Welfare, there has been a dramatic increase in complaints and consultations by workers claiming discrimination in the workplace when they attempt to take child-care leave or when they announce a pregnancy. In 2008, the ministry reported 882 discrimination cases arising from workers attempting to take child-care leave. However, the figure for only the first 2 months of 2009 is already 1,107 cases. The ministry is reminding employers that laying off workers wishing to take child-care leave is a clear violation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Child-Care/Elder-Care Leave Law and that the ministry is empowered to demand compliance.

Despite the tough language from the ministry, it is easy to imagine how some mothers or fathers or parents-to-be might hesitate to ask for child-care or elder-care leave when they see others being laid off in a turbulent business environment. Japan is not a very litigious society, and the general workplace climate often affects individual workers.

One specific work-life balance issue the government hopes to immediately address is the acute shortage of good daycare facilities. Proposals are currently being debated that would provide emergency funding for more public centers. Currently, 2.16 million children are taken care of by either public daycare centers or registered daycare facilities subsidized by the government. Compared to private day-care facilities, public ones are usually less expensive and of better quality. Unfortunately, a total of 20,000 children are on the waiting list to be admitted. This huge number is partly due to the current recession. With their husbands' salaries reduced or their husbands' jobs eliminated all together, an increasing number of mothers with small children are hoping to join the labor force. This has led to the surge in the number of children who need to be cared for at public day-care facilities. In this era of large budget deficits, more voices are needed to protect children and families.

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