

# 日本の雇用，社会システムにおける性差別及び人権について

## Gender Issues in the Labor, Social System and Human Rights in Japan

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### ABSTRACT

現在，日本は生活水準向上のため，高度な知識，スキルを必要とする知識基盤，実力主義社会である。一方，日本では少子高齢化が急速に進み，雇用不足の撤回，高齢者介護福祉が必須とされる。しかし，男性中心の雇用，社会システムにおいて，女性差別は深刻な問題である。1985年の雇用機会均等法施行以来，政府は雇用，社会システムにおける男女平等に全力を尽くしているが，教育の機会均等にもかかわらず，日本の雇用，社会システムは依然として，男女不平等である。本稿は，まず雇用，社会システムにおける女性差別問題を明確にする。次に，政府がどのように女性差別問題に取り組んでいるかを探索する。さらに，心理学的，社会学的立場から，日本女性の社会進出への可能性を探索する。本稿は特殊文化を持つ日本社会における女性差別問題を論理的に提起し，女性の社会進出を社会の公生及び人権レベルで捉えることにおいて，有意義であろう。

Today Japan is a knowledge-based and performance-based society where demonstrating advanced knowledge, information, and skills are critical to success. Meanwhile, Japan is facing a sharp declining of the birthrate as well as societal aging, a combination which causes a labor shortage. In spite of the equal opportunity for education for all in Japan, the labor and social system stressing Japanese traditional gender roles certainly reveals gender inequality. Consequently, labor shortage and gender inequality in the labor and

social system is a critical issue. The question is how to change a distorted gender perspective and take action for equity and human rights. Since the Equal Opportunity Law was enacted in 1985, the Japanese government has been striving to attain gender equality in the labor and social system. This paper will 1) clarify the gender issues in the labor and social system; 2) examine the government measures to attain gender equality in Japan; and 3) examine gender equality for equity and human rights from a psycho-sociological perspective. Advanced knowledge, information, and skills are needed to enhance equity in the labor and social system. Furthermore, there is a need for empowering the relationship between men and women that may help them to build a gender-equal society. Without a change of men's consciousness about gender equality, there is no solution. This approach could benefit educators to find ways to attain gender equality and to empower the relationship between men and women in the labor and social system, which could result in attaining human rights in Japan.

## 1. Problem Statement

Today Japan is a knowledge-based and performance-based society where demonstrating advanced knowledge, information, and skills are critical to success. In spite of the equal opportunity for education for all in Japan, the labor system stressing Japanese traditional gender roles certainly results in gender inequality.

Since the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was enacted in 1985, the Japanese government has been striving to attain gender equality in the labor market. "In 2013 Japan's female workers constituted more than 40 percent of the total paid workers" (Sugimoto, 2014, p. 170). However, Sugimoto also points out that "Japanese capitalism has sought to recruit women, chiefly as supplementary labor, at low wages, and under unstable employment conditions" (p. 172). The current labor system stressing traditional gender roles certainly reveals gender inequality.

Meanwhile, Japan is facing a sharp declining of the birthrate and societal aging. Currently one out of four Japanese is over 65 years old, and the birthrate, which was 1.03 in 2013, has been continuously declining (Sugimoto, 2014). According to the OECD (2017), "the total population is projected to decline by almost 25% between 2015 and 2050, falling below 100 million" (p. 8). Furthermore, the OECD's data shows that "the ratio between the elderly population (age 65

and over) and the working population (15-64 years of age) will fall from 2.3 to 1.4. The elderly dependency ratio was 44% in 2015, and it will continuously increase to 73% in 2050" (p. 8). This invokes serious issues of labor and elder care shortage. Compounding Japan's economic downfall, even Japanese youth holding college degrees tend to have a problem finding stable jobs. As a result, many of them cannot even fully support themselves. Add to this the fact that many Japanese middle-aged working women have responsibility for elder care at home. Their moral obligations are deeply rooted in the 'ie' ideology and the concept of Confucianism in which distinctive gender roles are clearly defined. Consequently, Japanese women tend to have four burdens: labor, housework, child and elder care.

Then, what ought to be done to respond to Japan's societal aging and labor shortage associated with gender inequality in the labor and social system? What measures has the Japanese government implemented to respond to gender inequality? What do well-being, equity, and human rights for Japanese women in their self-actualization and betterment of the Japanese society entail?

## 2. Purpose of the Paper

This paper will 1) clarify the gender issues in the labor and social system; 2) examine the government

measures to attain gender equality in Japan; and 3) examine equity and human rights from a psychosociological perspective. This approach could benefit educators to find ways to attain gender equality and to empower the relationship between men and women in the labor and social system, which could result in attaining equity and human rights in Japan.

### 3. Clarification of Gender Issues in the Labor and Social System

#### 3.1 Definition of *Gender*

The term *gender* began to emerge in the mid-1960s, distinguished from *sex*, which refers to biological differences at birth. Gender refers to social and cultural differences between men and women. It is a theoretical concept which translates into the knowledge of recognizing the social and cultural differences between men and women as created by the social norms and conventions. In the 1980s, researchers recognized that this gender perspective might be associated with prejudices and discriminations as a result of determining the differences between men and women in distorted distinctive roles in the labor and social system. Thus, one should have keen consciousness that gender is the outcome of norms and conventions created by society.

#### 3.2 Gender Inequality in the Labor System

Sugimoto (2014) describes the fact that 60% of the women between ages of 15 and 64 years are employed. Those women in the 45 to 54 years-old group have the highest participation rate. This fact can be interpreted to mean that Japanese women definitely contribute to Japan's economy as a critical labor force. However, the main gender issues are the type of work available to women, lower wages, sexual harassment, and length of service in comparison with those of Japanese men.

##### 3.2.1 Type of Work

Since the Equal Opportunity Law came into effect

in 1985, there has been a growing trend towards hiring women to do real work, resulting in changes in women's lifestyles. In addition, due to the labor shortage, "Society as a wholesome to display a receptive attitude toward working women" (Mainichi Daily News, 1990, p. 5).

Yet there is currently a two-track system mainly adopted by large companies and government: the *sogo shoku* (career-track/management work) and the *ippan shoku* (general work). The ratio of the *sogo shoku* employees between men and women was 77.8% for men and 22.2% for women (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2014). This statistic proves that in fact a number of women who chose to take the *sogo shoku* tend to leave their posts due to child-rearing, elder care at home, or job transfer along with required relocation. Bishop (2000) mentions that "Unsurprisingly, the low rate of retention of women on the *sogo shoku* has become a topic of concern in recent years" (p. 105). It is true that after leaving the *sogo shoku* track, many women can manage their time for duties both at work and in the home. As a result, a large number of women tend to choose supplemental work in small or medium-sized companies because of flexibility, while companies use women's employment in insecure, irregular jobs to achieve their own corporate benefits.

##### 3.2.2 Wages

The statistic shows that even though 68% of women are employed, the majority are only doing part-time contract work due to their wish for flexibility. This trend impacts working women's wages. Because women tend to staff supplementary positions, it is assumed that women have lesser mental and physical powers. The result is lower wages than those of men. From the employers' perspective, women who take the *ippan shoku* positions generally lack commitment and time to devote to a career. Consequently, working women lack opportunities for on-the-job training, which would result in less higher skills than men.

### 3.2.3 Sexual Harassment

These social norms and conventions result in less wages and less job opportunities for women. That also gives negative impacts on women resulting in sexual harassment both psychologically and/or physically in the workplace. This distinctive power relationship is based on a gender-based division of labor, which certainly negatively impacts women's business performance.

### 3.2.4 Length of Service

In order to further analyze the disadvantages of working women, it is critical to examine women's life cycle and their well-being. The reason for working women's short length of service relates to the time of their marriage, childbearing, and child and elderly care. In addition, housing and education is very expensive, while the day care system is not sufficient. Consequently, working women tend to choose to be part-time workers and part-time housewives. They are not required to pay income tax; they are classified as a dependent as long as their income does not exceed 1.30 million yen. There is an increase in the number of part-time housewives after childrearing. They tend to work as long as regular full-time workers, but they are hired on a fixed-term basis and get paid hourly rates without fringe benefits. This trend shows women's disadvantages due to the current seniority system.

In the 1960s, the age-based female labor-participation rate was the well-known M-shaped curve. In fact, 75% of women who left work to have children return to the labor market.

However, the M-shaped curb has been shifted to the U-shaped curve in the 2000s. The U-shaped curve shows that "in Japan the label of part-timer covers not only those employees with limited working hours, but also those who work as long as regular full-time workers but who are hired on a fixed-term basis and paid hourly rates without fringe benefits" (Sugimoto, 2014, p. 172). Again, this trend reveals women's

disadvantages due to economic production and distribution.

### 3.3 Gender Issues in the Social System

Gender and a gender perspective are the outcomes of deeply rooted social norms and conventions in Japan. This negative trend is also seen in the social system such as the *koseki* and patriarchal system with which women are stratified under legal and social control. The *koseki* is the registration system instituted by the Japanese government. Registration is legally required and operates for an entire household. Registration includes the records of each individual's gender, birthplace, and date of birth, parent's names, position among siblings, marriage, and divorce. These are kept in detail in each household *koseki* and are filed in the local municipal office. In the patriarchal system, the husband is almost always given the title of the head of a household. The wife's role is to take care of their children and do housework.

### 3.4 The Relationship between the Labor and the Social System in Gender Inequality

Gender inequality in the labor system strongly relates to that of the social system. Sugimoto (2014) analyzes that women have two compromise roles: "The first was the so-called Victorian compromise, which assigned men production roles and women to the reproductive function. The second compromise differs in that it generates a new gender-based division of labor, which makes many women part-time wives and part-time workers" (p. 172). This explains how working women suffer from both capitalism and patriarchal orders.

In response to Japan's societal aging and labor shortage, Prime Minister Abe in his *Abenomics* declared that "using all available talent in the labor market and achieving gender equality are key to overcoming labor shortage" (OECD, 2017). This implies promoting inclusive growth for an aging society. One could recognize that the government

perspective is right. The OECD (2017) describes the trend of Japan's societal aging as comparatively high level of well-being, high skill levels, low unemployment, and the highest life expectancy at birth among the OECD countries. This trend becomes a positive outcome if gender equality is attained in the labor and social system to overcome the labor shortage.

As the population is continuously declining in Japan, the problem of labor shortage cannot be avoided. There is also a need for an affordable, professional elder care system. Furthermore, gender equality must be attained by utilizing more talented women in the workforce.

#### **4. Government Measures on Attaining Gender Equality**

It is critical to examine how the government measures enable attainment of this goal associated with equity and human rights. Postwar, the Japanese government under General MacArthur's control adopted women's voting rights. Thus, the political rights between men and women who are 20 and above were attained in 1945. This marked the attainment of gender equality regarding political rights in Japan. Since 2016, both men and women who are 18 and above have rights to vote. This reveals that the human rights in Japan reached the global standard from a legal point of view.

In 1975, the United Nations declared the Year of the International Women, by being committed to enhancing women's status for the following 10 years. During the past several decades, various actions have been taken at the global level. For example, the Treaty of Abolition of Discrimination against Women was ratified by the Japanese government in 1985. Furthermore, the Declaration on Abolition of Violence toward Women was adopted in 1993.

In response to these international women's movements, the Japanese government enacted the

Equal Opportunity Law in 1985. This provision enables women to stay in the workforce. Furthermore, the Child-Care Leave Law was put into effect in 1992. It requires all companies to allow female or male employees to take parental leave without pay up to one year to enable them to care for a newborn child. These two institutionalized provisions contributed to the enhancement of the status of Japanese women in the labor and social system. Yet, in 2012, 83% of female workers who have given birth took parental leave, while only 1.9% of males did. This fact shows that it takes a village to put these two provisions into practice.

However, one should recognize that in the early 2000s the Prime Minister's office finally initiated the formation of a new collaborative society by both men and women. The purpose of this attempt is to attain gender equality by empowering the relationship between men and women with enhancement of human consciousness.

#### **5. Equity and Human Rights in Japan**

Today's educational agenda is what ought to be done to raise human consciousness of gender equality and how to make a possible change to empower both men and women and their relationships. Brinton (1993) finds that:

the educational system, the workplace, and the family in Japan have shaped the opportunities open to female workers. Women move in and out of the workforce depending on their age and family duties, a great disadvantage in a system that emphasizes seniority and continuous work experience" (abstract).

Brinton's point is well taken: It is important for women to make a life choice: work or home or both in woman's life span. For women, marriage, child-rearing, and elder care are important factors in their

life cycle because of their responsibilities as wife, mother, and elder caretaker. A woman's choice is based on her family financial situation and her perspective on well-being and personal growth. These burdens—labor, housework, child and elder care—should not be only women's responsibilities.

From a sociological perspective, women, especially full-time housewives and part-time housewives, may have more opportunities to connect to home, schools, and community. This link might be a possible solution for women to take leadership roles by networking with community members and expanding their political influence. In fact, Sugimoto (2014) mentions that “some women in their late forties and fifties choose to work in community-based organizations as networkers and play major roles in reformist political groups at the community level. These women activists represent significant political voices in grassroots Japan” (p. 182). For career women, parental leave and daycare services would be a great help.

Furthermore, Song (2016) mentions that the expansion of workplace flexibility would assist working mothers in balancing work and life. It is interesting to note that South Korea is also facing a labor shortage due to societal aging and a sharp declining of the birthrate. Song suggests that it is critical to improve not only the quantity but the quality of women's employment. In order to improve the quality of women's employment, Song suggests that the government and company employers should improve equal employment and promotion opportunities for highly educated women as well as workplace flexibility in work hours and work schedule. Thus, it is understood that the balance between work and life is an important policy tool for increasing female participation in the labor system.

From a global perspective, Minoura (1997) emphasizes the importance of human choice consciousness as the labor force is becoming more global and there is a need for solving global problem collaboratively. Human choice consciousness is an

inner dimension as opposed to outer dimensions such as space, time, and problem solving for issues in global identity. It may refer to passion, proficiency, skills, attitudes, and feelings in relations to personal issues or problems, and it may help us understand each other. Thus one should develop a keen human choice consciousness toward self-actualization and betterment of society. Forming self-identity, commitment to one's community, and taking action would empower both women and men and their human relationship by linking home with community and beyond.

## 6. Summary

Today Japan is a knowledge-based and performance-based society. In addition, Japan is facing a sharp declining of the birthrate and societal aging. Consequently, a labor shortage and gender inequality in the labor and social system is a critical issue. In response to the UN declaration of the Year of International Women enacted in 1975, the Japanese government has been striving to attain gender equality in the labor and social system. Women must be empowered in order to attain gender equality. However, without a change of men's consciousness of gender equality, there is no solution. The question is how to change a distorted gender perspective due to capitalism and patriarchal orders and take action for equity. Human rights must be attained for everyone. In the early 2000s, the Japanese government made a policy to form a new collaborative society by both men and women. The purpose of this attempt is to attain gender equality and to empower the relationship between men and women by enhancing human choice consciousness. There is a need for advanced knowledge, information, and skills to enhance equal opportunity for education, workplace, home, and community. Furthermore, there is a need for empowering the relationship between men and women that may help them to build a gender equal society where men and women can work together and respect

each other.

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