TOKYO – "What a cold person you are to leave your mother alone," a corporate personnel director tells a young woman from the countryside trying to find a job in the city. "Why don't you go back to your home town and find a job there?"

"Take off your jackets," another manager instructs a group of young women. When some comply, he continues: "Those who took off jackets, please go home. You do not have any common sense at all.

The incidents are among dozens collected by a group of recent college graduates trying to combat sexual harassment and discrimination in Japan, where women endure indignities almost unimaginable in their scale and blatant nature.

The phenomenon strongly reinforces the image of Japanese men and corporations as overbearingly sexist, and of Japanese women as silent, submissive sufferers. It perhaps makes more believable charges that alleged sexual discrimination and harassment in Mitsubishi Motor Co.'s US divisions stemmed from practices common in Japan.

"What color is your underwear?"

"If you want to get this job, will you be my mistress?"

"Are you a virgin?"

Not only are these questions still commonly asked in job interviews here, the asking of them actually seems to have intensified as deflation of the once-burgeoning Japanese economy has cut severely into the supply of new jobs.

An official of the Ministry of Labor, who insisted on anonymity, acknowledged that questions about women's sexual inclinations, lifestyles, family plans and even underwear are asked at job interviews. "This is not against the law, though it is against the spirit of the equal opportunity act," he said.

He said the ministry tries "to give guidance to companies so that they can understand what sexual harassment is, or what discrimination is, from concrete examples. It seems some companies have a profound understanding and some don't have any idea."

Young women say they feel forced to put up with bad treatment, and not complain too loudly, lest their already declining chances for employment vanish altogether.

"Before the bubble burst, corporations were hiring more women and handicapped people so they could show a human face, so they could call themselves gentle corporations," said Keiko Sugiyama, 20, a junior at Hokkaido College of Education and active member of the group Female Students for Jobs.

"After the bubble burst, they quit," Sugiyama said. "Now all female college students face severe problems. They fear they will not get jobs no matter how able they are."
Women trying to establish their independence, often by moving from rural to urban areas, are at a particular disadvantage, said Noriyasu Inaishi, a male board member of Female Students for Jobs, which is trying to fight discrimination by raising women's awareness and by pressuring government officials.

"Companies consider them less stable than those living with their parents," he said, while "it doesn't really matter where male students live. Corporate interviewers tend to appreciate them having girlfriends and lots of social activities, as proof that they are straight and socially capable."

Statistics prepared by Recruit Corp., Japan's largest personnel agency, indicate that while the number of young women seeking careers after completing college is rising sharply, the number being hired is decreasing even more rapidly.

March is graduation month in Japan, and Recruit's figures show 104,000 women sought jobs after receiving their degrees this year. That was an increase of 37 percent over the last five years. But over the same five years the number of jobs available to new women graduates has plunged nearly 60 percent. Openings for new male graduates have declined by significantly less.

While women are enjoying some success as entrepreneurs here -- particularly in businesses in which most of the customers are women -- it is still rarer than in any other developed country to find women in management positions of major corporations.

Socializing after office hours, long recognized as an essential exercise for doing business between and among Japanese, is essentially an all-male party. Almost all menial work in offices is done by women.

Equal rights for women were written into the Japanese constitution by Americans during the US Occupation after World War II. Discrimination based on race, creed, sex, social status or family origin was banned.

But the constitutional provision failed to eliminate discrimination against women in practice, just as the 14th and 15th amendments to the US Constitution failed to eliminate discrimination against blacks in the post-Civil War period, and for some of the same reasons.

"Very few things have been elaborated in law based on the constitution," said Beate Gordon, who as a young member of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff drafted the women's-rights sections of the document. "That is what I thought would happen" when more specific passages that she wrote were eliminated.

Now 72, Gordon travels frequently to Japan, where she speaks on women's rights and social issues in the fluent Japanese she learned as a grade-schooler in the pre-war years.

"I tell women they have to fight, they have to be more active politically, they have to be more legalistic," she said. "They have to go to the supreme court" to bring home to corporate employers, government officials and women generally the meaning of sexual equality.

"However, this is not a legalistic society," Gordon pointed out. "It is only in the last couple of years that women's issues are being brought to court."

Gordon and many other women, young and old, point out that World War II was a watershed for women's rights in America as well as Japan, but that Japanese women were much further from equality than their American counterparts.

There is widespread recognition that discriminatory attitudes run deep and strong in this culture, which requires women to speak in super-polite forms -- speech not required of men -- when addressing anyone outside their closest family and friends.

The two Japanese characters that, together, make up the word used by a man to refer to his wife mean, separately, "inside" and "house." The characters for husband mean "main person" or "master."

And the old folk saying dan sohn, jyo hee -- man is respected, woman is humiliated -- is used widely as an explanation of the social facts of life, such as the high tolerance for sexism and discrimination in the workplace.

When a delegation from Female Students for Jobs first went to the Ministry of Labor last year to ask that these issues be taken more seriously, "they completely denied there was such a thing as discrimination against women," Sugiyama said. When a second meeting was set up, this time with the labor minister, "he actually implied in his response that women are less capable than men.

"Japan doesn't really have a firm legal system to protect women from discrimination," she said, "and society does nothing to protect
the human rights of women.

Terue Hara of the League of Japanese Women Voters said that generally women succeed in Japanese companies “only when they work exactly like men. Marriage and having children are big handicaps in this sort of environment. There is no punishment for discrimination.”

Recent surveys have found that fewer than 1 percent of central government managers are women. Japan trails all other major countries in numbers of women in legislative posts.

Many supporters of women's rights believe Japan's monarchy, touted by traditionalists here as the world's oldest continuous dynasty, is a key reason for their lack of progress.

While there were women rulers far back in Japanese history, women were barred from ruling beginning in the late 19th century. That prohibition continued after the postwar constitution relegated the emperor to a ceremonial role.

"People don't follow what the emperor says literally," said Yasuko Yamaguchi, leader of the Women's Democratic Club, but symbolically "the emperor has been the center, the core. This is still reinforcing the idea that the natural head of the family is a man."

Attitudes change very slowly here, she said, noting that after devoting her life to women's rights "I can't even say that I have achieved a sharing of work in my own home. I say it should be different, but my husband is 73 years old. People don't change much at that age.

"But women have to keep saying it," she said softly. "We have to keep raising our voices until society changes.

Memo:
Mugi Hanao of the Globe's Tokyo bureau contributed to this report.

Copyright (c) 1996 Globe Newspaper Company

Record Number: 004600D70352979891DC0