Women changing Japan's male-dominated society

Author: Gregg Jones

Topics:
women's rights
sexual harassment
discrimination
sex discrimination
Japan

OSAKA, Japan - When lawyer Eri Shimao agreed to represent a 21-year-old woman in a sexual misconduct case against Osaka's governor last year, she expected to lose.

After all, said Shimao, her client was challenging a powerful man in a male-dominated society that has only started to acknowledge sexual harassment and gender discrimination.

But by the time the case ended last month, Shimao was celebrating the unlikely outcome: The young woman had won a record civil judgment, and the governor had resigned in disgrace and pleaded guilty to criminal charges of sexual harassment.

"Because of this case, other women who are victims of sexual harassment will be encouraged to stand up," Shimao said.

In fact, women across Japan are standing up like never before. They're challenging the privileged position of Japanese men in politics and business, and they're shaking the foundations of what experts say is one of the developed world's most sexist societies.

In just one measure of the growing muscle of Japanese women, female candidates won 1,081 seats in local elections last year - only about 10 percent of the nationwide total, but the highest number ever. Women captured a record 35 seats out of 480 at stake in parliamentary elections in June, up from the 23 seats previously held by women.

"Japan is changing, very slowly, but steadily," said Dr. Hiroko Mizushima, 32, one of the women just elected to parliament.

Still, Japanese women lag far behind U.S. women in their struggle for parity with men.

Japan ranks 140th in the world in terms of participation of women in politics. And on the economic front, Japanese women are paid 65 percent of what men earn, while fewer than 10 percent of Japan's corporate executives are women - compared with more than 44 percent in the United States, according to a study by the International Labor Organization.

On paper, Japanese women were given the same legal rights as men by the new, U.S.-drafted constitution after World War II. But even as Japan has built the world's second-largest economy, centuries of tradition have continued to relegate women to second-class status.

"When I was young, it was very hard for a woman to get a job," said Sumiko Shimura, 61, owner of an arts and crafts shop in Tokyo's Ginza shopping district. "If you did work in a company, men could touch you or put their arm around you, and if you said no, they would get angry. You might be walking down the street and men would say, 'You have nice breasts' or touch you. Now, things are changing a little."

Japanese women still face cultural pressure to set aside their careers to marry and raise a family. But in one indicator of changing attitudes, 50 percent of all women in their late 20s are single - up from 30 percent just 15 years ago.

Even Japanese housewives, frustrated by husbands who work long hours and then often spend their after-hours drinking and carousing with male co-workers, are fighting back. A record number are shattering the stigma of ending marriages, even with...
abusive husbands, sending Japan's divorce rate soaring by 55 percent over the last decade.

Some experts attribute the falling birthrate to the reluctance of women to get married and have children, because of the lowly lot of housewives in Japanese society.

Ironically, Japan's last decade of economic stagnation and rising unemployment has actually weakened the power of Japanese men - and spelled unprecedented opportunity and empowerment for Japanese women, experts say.

Japanese women are breaking out of their traditional corporate roles as submissive, tea-serving office ladies to become professionals, executives and entrepreneurs.

Still, Mizushima, a Tokyo psychiatrist before her election victory, says Japan is "the worst country in Asia for working women. Sexual harassment and gender discrimination are very, very common."

The problem, as many experts and women see it, is the lack of laws that force men - and the legal system - to treat women as equals.

Rape, for instance, is considered a less serious offense than other forms of physical assault in Japan.

In another example, police say they have been powerless to prevent stalking because of the absence of laws prohibiting it. In response to demands from women's groups, five of Japan's 47 prefectural governments have enacted anti-stalking laws in the last year.

Sexual harassment, stalking and domestic violence are viewed as such "new" problems in Japan that the words for these acts are borrowed from English. The Japanese word for sexual harassment is "sekushuarooh harasumentoh," or "seku-hara" for short.

Slowly, however, sexist acts and attitudes are becoming topics for discussion - and even parliamentary action. An amendment to the country's Equal Employment Opportunity Law last year bans sexual harassment in the workplace.

Government counseling centers received 9,500 requests for consultations about sexual harassment last year, a 35 percent increase over the previous year and 10 times the number six years ago, according to a Labor Ministry report.

Nonetheless, "many Japanese women still cannot publicly talk about the things that have happened to them," said Shimao, the Osaka lawyer. "In many cases in Japan, people assume the woman seduced the man. In many cases, the judges are men, the prosecutors are men and the lawyers are men."

As a result, only about 100 sexual harassment lawsuits have gone to court in Japan since the first such case was filed in 1989, Shimao said.

But last year, the issue of sexual misconduct seized the national spotlight when a 21-year-old university student accused the governor of Osaka, Japan's second-largest city, of groping her for 30 minutes in the back of a campaign van.

Gov. Knock Yokoyama, 67, a popular standup comic who also goes by the name of Isamu Yamada, called the allegations "blatant lies." But last December, the court found in favor of the victim and ordered Yokoyama to pay the woman 11 million yen - about $105,000 - in damages.

Yokoyama resigned when prosecutors filed criminal charges of indecent assault against him. In March, he pleaded guilty to criminal charges of sexual harassment.

Already, the Osaka case has emboldened a few Japanese women to come forward with sexual harassment allegations. In April, a 22-year-old woman hired as a "cherry blossom ambassador" for the city of Joetsu accused the town's mayor of groping her during city events and filed a $114,000 sexual harassment lawsuit.

But Japanese women remain averse to airing such allegations or taking their claims to court, Shimao said. And in the workplace, victims of sexual harassment or wage discrimination "are still afraid of retaliation," she said.

Yokoyama's resignation resulted in one other milestone for Japanese women: the election of Japan's first female governor, Fusao Ota, in February.
But like other women across Japan, Ota is finding that old ways die hard.

Earlier this year, Ota was told that she wouldn’t be allowed to set foot in the ring to award prizes at the Spring Grand Sumo Tournament - as every male governor had done for the previous 46 years. Sumo association officials said that allowing a woman inside the sacred ring would break centuries of cultural tradition.

Ota finally agreed to allow her male deputy to present prizes at this year’s tournament, but vowed to renew her fight next year.

"Of course, like any previous governor, she should be able to stand in the ring and present the awards," Shimao said. "Unfortunately, it's still a fact that Japanese society discriminates against women by using the excuse of culture or tradition."

(c) 2000, The Dallas Morning News.


Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

Copyright (c) 2000 Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service

Record Number: 094270E7FC17103DC1083