**WOMEN STILL SHACKLED TO THE HOME**

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Dateline: TOKYO

Topics: discrimination women culture sex discrimination

**Article Text:**

Japan is far from the most progressive nation when it comes to women's status, but a new government report shows that the old obstacles to gender equality may even be more deeply rooted in society than earlier thought.

The Japanese government's new white paper on the status of women, which was released July 17, says women continue to be thought of as belonging only to the home and are not found often enough in senior positions in the private sector and government. "Despite a growing awareness among the public for equal access, the strong perception in Japan is that in working households, the woman alone should do the housework, a major obstacle in achieving gender equality," said Natsuko Horii, assistant director at the Office of Gender Equality in the Prime Minister's Office. Government surveys show that this perception has been strengthening over the last five years, with 85.6 percent of respondents agreeing with it in 1992 and the proportion climbing to 86.4 percent in 1997. Stereotyped gender roles and gender-based discrimination in the home, workplace and community are the main impediments to women becoming more involved in policy and decision-making processes, the report quoted respondents as saying. The white paper, which outlines Japan's Plan for Gender Equality by 2000, reviews progress as against the platform for action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and Tokyo's Vision of Gender Equality report. The document uses the latest human development index (HDI) drawn up by the United Nations Development Programme and reports that Japan has actually slipped from 3rd in 1996 to seventh place on the HDI scale among 175 countries. Japan has also ranked 12th on the Gender-Related Development Index in recent years, due largely to indicators like life expectancy, education and health. But it ranks much lower, in 34th place and below countries from Malaysia to Zimbabwe, when it comes to the Gender Empowerment Measure, which considers factors like income share, senior positions in parliament and in the professional sector. The white paper has more depressing statistics. It says female employees in the central government occupying managerial or higher positions stood at a measly 1 percent. The average ratio of female local assembly members was just 4.6 percent. As for members of the Diet or Parliament, before Sunday's election for the House of Councilors, there were 60 female parliamentarians, a record high in Japanese politics. But the proportion of women lawmakers was only 8 percent. The report said structures and operations designed in favor of men was cited as the most pressing reason for why women have not become involved enough in policy and decision-making. Almost 50 percent of women of local assemblies and women managers who answered the government survey cited heavy burdens in housework, child-rearing as well as taking care of the elderly, which is still considered a female responsibility, as among their personal difficulties. The government report says men spend only 20 minutes on housework a day, even when their wives worked. Japan signed the Equal Employment Opportunity Act 10 years ago, but the government was forced to come up with an amended aversion which will come into effect in April 1999. The new law bars discrimination by companies in the hiring and promotion of women, and includes a prohibition on using sex-specified job advertisements. It is seen as a step forward from the current law, which does not spell out penalties for discrimination. But women activists who have long fought for equal job opportunities say the new law does not address the roots of gender inequality in the workplace -- which lie elsewhere. The odds are stacked against Japanese women even before enter the labor force, they argue. There are 21.47 million or 40 percent of all women who are employed in Japanese companies. But the Labor Ministry reports that only 2 percent occupy positions such as section chiefs, and only 1.2 percent of department chiefs are women. Likewise, women who work full-time are paid only 63 percent of the wages earned by their male counterparts. More than 80 percent of working women and in their twenties or early thirties, which helps explain why there are so few women in senior positions. "The reason why so few married women work is because Japanese companies, which are based on a seniority wage and promotion system, discourage women from entering career positions that require long working hours and total devotion to the company," said Nobuko Ishida, an activist. "Working mothers find it difficult to follow these demands," she explained. Besides, women's groups say, gender equality is not achieved simply by having women working as hard as men do, which is what they see the new employment law to be all about. "The Japanese government must develop a system that will force companies to allow employees, both men and women, to work less and have a better quality of life, like spending more time with their children," says Ishida. A bitterly contested aspect of the new law is the Labor Standards Law, which applies to both men and women the same standard for overtime work. The recommended ceiling will be 360 hours a year. But companies that force their employees to work more than that -- an increasingly common phenomenon amid the recession -- will not be penalized under the law. This worries women activists, who fear the added burden on female employees under the new law.

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Record Number: 010840D7217B23821EE4A