Working mothers in Japan battle social pressure

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When a working mother told her mother-in-law that her 2-year-old daughter had just learned to change her own clothes, she was hoping the mother-in-law would share in her pride.

But the mother felt hurt when the grandmother responded, "Oh, poor thing. She must have been obliged to change clothes alone at nursery school."

The grandmother, a housewife, strongly believed that children should be raised by their mothers full-time and that day-care centers do not take good care of children.

The episode is not surprising, according to Aki Fukoin, who represents a group of some 150 working mothers in the Tokyo area.

"Working mothers tend to blame themselves for not being able to spend a lot of time with their children. It pains them greatly to hear such negative remarks from other people," she said.

Fourteen years have passed since the number of married working women surpassed that of housewives in Japan, but working mothers say they still feel burdened by society's general view that their children somehow lack for love and attention.

When Fukoin's group held an annual orientation for would-be working mothers last March, a woman in her early 30s burst into tears while talking about her husband, who had suddenly changed his mind about her staying in the workforce.

"The husband started saying, 'It would not be good for the child,' at the time she was about to return to work as her extended maternity leave would end in April," Fukoin said.

"The woman was sobbing, didn't know what to do, because she herself was wavering over the decision. And in the meantime, weeping started among the others, who had all had similar feelings of guilt," she said.

Women in Japan must have "strong determination" if they want to continue working after having a child, said Kiyoko Kumazaki, a senior executive in charge of female workers' issues of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo), the nation's largest labor group at eight million strong.

A government report on the present status of Japanese women released last March said most continue working after marriage, but not after becoming mothers.

"Various surveys show Japanese women usually quit working after having children and get jobs again after the children have grown up," said Ayako Matsubara, deputy chief of the Women's Welfare Division in the Labor Ministry.

The division is in charge of supporting workers, both women and men, in keeping harmony between their jobs and family affairs.
"But we are not sure if that is truly what they want or they are forced into choosing such a lifestyle," said Matsubara, a 32-year-old working mother with 4-year-old and 1-year-old daughters.

She said, however, it is not a government policy to encourage women not to quit jobs when they have children.

"Individuals should be the ones who decide when and how they want to work, and our job is to create a social environment where any type of working style is feasible," Matsubara said. "We want to eliminate situations in which women cannot work although they want to work."

As part of such efforts, the ministry plans to submit a bill to the next Diet session starting in January to strengthen the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which was introduced to foster women's careers but has been criticized as toothless.

The law only says employers "must make efforts" not to discriminate against women in job advertisements, employment, placement and promotion.

On Dec. 17, the Women's and Young Workers Problems Council, an advisory panel to the labor minister, proposed that the law clearly bar companies from discriminating against women and the labor minister make public the names of companies ignoring the requirement as a punitive measure.

The proposal was welcomed by many women workers, but they voiced anxiety about another crucial proposal made by the council that a provision in the Labor Standard Law restricting female employees from working overtime or late at night be abolished.

"It is appropriate to lift such restrictions to allow a greater variety of jobs to be open to women," a report submitted by the council said.

Many employers hailed the proposal, as they have long sought such a lifting, although labor unions have argued a lifting would only force women to work longer hours for lower wages than their male colleagues. In 1994, women got an average 62% of salaries paid to men, according to Labor Ministry statistics.

Rengo's Kumazaki, who is one of the 20 members on the ministry council, said Rengo will start campaigning for making new restrictions, common to men and women, on their working hours.

Fukoin does not support lifting the existing restrictions, which is said to have been approved by council members representing workers in exchange for an approval by members representing employers to strengthen the equal employment law.

"Japan is already a society that overworks," Fukoin said. She said she envies some European countries where workers can leave their offices at a fixed time, allowing them to enjoy both their job and time with families. :::

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