Noriko Maeda, 35, lost her job as a flight attendant at one of Japan's leading airlines five years ago. Today, she teaches conversational English part-time to children in the neighborhood.

"I was the victim of a program to cut company costs which severely affected full-time women flight attendants. So, here I am, bored, poor and frustrated," said the housewife, who holds a degree in English literature.

Taniguchi is part of a growing number of women who have either accepted pay cuts, or simply watched their jobs disappear as Japanese companies embarked on massive economic restructuring programs to stay afloat in the recession.

Restructuring means personnel cuts -- and women workers complain that this trend is hitting them the worst.

Labor lawyer Keiko Hashimoto says women who had joined the labor force in droves over the decades are now extremely vulnerable to discrimination as a result of bad economic times.

"Companies utilized female workers in the 1980s because they just needed more hands in the booming economy and are now quick to shut the doors as soon as they discovered they must cut costs," she explained.

For instance, Japan's much-applauded "Big Bang" reforms, while earning it praises for efficiency, have seen a major exodus of women workers from the financial industry.

More and more securities companies are downgrading female clerks to cut costs. Nikko Securities, a major company hit by the floundering stock market, reported last year it will be sending 1,500 female clerks to work as temporary staff for an affiliated staff service company.

Seventy percent of Japan's part-timers are female, according to the labor ministry. Temporary staff are paid by the hour and do not expect promotions or other benefits that regular male employees are entitled to in the same company.

Keiko Tani says the Tokyo Women's Union, which has swelled to 250 members after the initial six when it was set up in 1995, is kept on its toes negotiating for a growing number of women whose part-time pay has been reduced due to company restructuring.

Salary for part-time jobs, which paid 13.8 U.S. cents per hour, have been reduced to 12.3 cents for clerical work. Pay for waitresses or shop assistants, is down from $8 to $6.50 hourly.

Labor analysts explain that women workers have never been treated equally in Japan's male-dominated society -- and this has been exposed again by women bearing most of the recession's employment pains.

Tani explains that a major barrier to equality is Japan's weak legislation directed at the "invisible" barriers that hinder equal pay and opportunities for women in the workplace.

Dismal statistics have proved time and again that social tradition and discrimination have indeed discouraged women from playing a greater role in society.

In July, the Prime Minister's Office released survey results showing that employed women at the same time remain in charge of household chores. This is contrast to men who answered that marriage leaves their schedules unchanged -- a situation that does not encourage women to pursue time-consuming careers.

A hotline operated by lawyers in February 1998 to advise working women also found sexual harassment in the workplace one of their top concerns, followed by lay-offs without sufficient notice.

Though Japan became a signatory to the U.N. Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1996, women account for only 8 percent of legislators in the Diet or Parliament, and comprise 0.2 percent of corporate directors, ranking last among industrialized nations.

Although women account for half of the nation's workforce, their take-home pay reaches only 62 percent of their male counterparts and a good number of women hold part-time jobs.

According to the Economic Planning Agency, Japan ranked 19th -- one rung below Mexico -- in terms of easiness for women to work.

"Against such a backdrop, it is no wonder that women are first affected in the current economic crunch," says Tani. "The situation can only change..."
if the government enacts stricter laws that will force companies to pay men and women equally whatever job they are forced to do at this particular time."

Revisions in employment laws to be implemented from April 1st are geared toward equal treatment in employment, but have only increased anxiety about corporate restructuring.

There are no penalties for companies that discriminate against women.

While the laws ban sexual discrimination in advertising for job placements, women say the new law does not address the reality that men, who lose their jobs, will win over women who face the "handicap" of having to look after their families.

But people like Junko Kawano, in charge of "Tarabayo," one of Japan's leading job opportunity magazines, believes the job picture is changing.

"As deregulation picks up and new equality laws are established, Japan's job market has undergone a revolution," explains Kawano, whose magazine readership comprised mostly single young men but will now cater to men as well.

"What Japanese employees must realize now is that the old system of depending on the company for security in exchange for company loyalty, is disappearing," Kawano said, adding that jobs will depend on people's skills.

This change is an opportunity that could work for women, Kawano explains. "By becoming specialized, women can compete with men in Japan's competitive new job market. What we need from now on is better official support to improve the situation when it comes to the household sector that continues to pin down aspiring women," she said.

In this area, Japan's new laws try to help by calling for equality in the home and asking men to share domestic chores -- but how far laws can go ahead of tradition remains to be seen.

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Record Number: 010840DBB9BCBC1E110EA