Japan's Other Workers: Exploring the Difficult Role of Women on the Job

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Japan's Other Workers

Exploring the difficult role of women on the job

The phrase is Ryosai Kenbo. It means "good mothers and smart wives."

Few would argue with those goals for women — if that were only a part of their lives. But in offices and factories throughout Japan, tradition and a rigid social structure have combined to make women second-class citizens on the job.

Nearly four in 10 Japanese workers are women, and women have contributed mightily to the nation's near-miraculous economic resurgence since World War II. But, as visiting scholar Takashi Maruta told listeners in an April 6 speech at UB Law School, women still are denied access to promotions, equal pay and career opportunities in Japan. Instead, they're expected to quit when they reach marrying age or get pregnant, "because their responsibilities at home should outweigh those at the company."

Change comes slowly in traditional societies like Japan, Maruta said in an interview. "The majority of females think being a housewife is the ideal social goal," he said. "That is cherished by many women still."

Maruta said that in a country where "saving face" is considered of paramount importance, an activist, American-style feminist movement cannot flourish.

"To work for a particular improve-

ment of one particular group or minority, it's very difficult," he said. "Japanese society is not so politically active (as the United States). No. 1, it's because of people's economic life. They're very busy working for their own business, they have no time and room for that kind of (activist) work. And No. 2, there's the fear that maybe you'd be labeled an activist."

Maruta, who has been studying Japan's decade-old Equal Employment Opportunity Law, said the two nations also differ in their view of the law as a tool of social change.

"In the United States, you use law to change social attitudes or social situations," he noted. "The law is the law because it has sanctions. If you violate it, you will get some sanction, some penalty."

"In Japan, this is only for criminals. (Matters of social policy) should not be criminalized; there should be a common purpose of a social goal."

As such, he said, the equal-employment law — which calls for fair treatment of women in such areas as hiring, promotion and pensions — carries no penalty for violations. It has the weight of suggestion, but no more.

Maruta, a professor of law at Konan University in Kobe, traced the history of the new statute, showing how it came on the heels of the 1947 Labor Standards Law. That postwar law contained a specific set of restrictions intended to protect women in the workplace, as they were deemed "weaker" than men. The law strictly limited overtime work and night labor, and prohibited women from working in hazardous jobs such as mining. There was even provision for "menstrual leave" for some women.

New legislation has effectively removed these limitations, as Japan's courts have held that equal treatment of the sexes made such rules unfair. As a result, Maruta argued, Japanese companies now are free to require longer hours and less flexibility of their female employees — in effect setting back the cause of women.

Maruta noted that many Japanese firms have created a two-tier employment system for women: sogo-shoku, designed for those who seek a promotion and don't mind working overtime or being transferred; and ippon-shoku, general work with no transfers, no overtime and no hope of promotion. Comparisons to the "Mommy Track" debate, so heated a few years ago in the United States, are inevitable.

"If a two-class system exists and no change is possible, that is argued to be discriminatory," Maruta said. "Companies can provide a 'bridge' between the two (to escape accusations of discrimination). But to go over the bridge is very difficult. Sometimes it is almost impossible to change."

A spirited question-and-answer session followed Maruta's speech; comments included hard questions about sexual harassment and inequity in Japan.