

Possibilities for Enhancing Work-Life Balance in Japan

Report presented by the International Committee of the Japanese Association of University Women (JAUW) at the Seminar on Work-Life Balance held at the National Women's Education Center (NWECC), October 17~18, 2009

The Japanese Association of University Women has been investigating the subject of how to achieve a society based on “work-life balance,” in which both women and men can participate more equally in paid work and in the domestic sphere. In November 2008 JAUW held a symposium on this theme co-sponsored by the Japanese Government's Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office. In October 2009, we held a 2-day national seminar on the same topic, once again co-sponsored by the Gender Equality Bureau, featuring a panel discussion and presentations by 6 regional branches and 5 committees and attended by members of JAUW from across the country and open to the general public as well. The following is a brief report on the International Committee's Seminar presentation.

In 2008, the Committee conducted a questionnaire among IFUW National Affiliates inquiring about policies regarding provisions of childcare and elderly care leave, employment options such as flexible work hours and work-sharing, and promotion of progressive attitudes regarding gender roles, particularly among children and youth. This year we looked, first of all, at three European countries where both the rate of men taking childcare leave and the percentage of women in employment has increased as a result of various measures.

In the United Kingdom, the Blair government's Work Life Balance Campaign implemented from 2000, introduced flexible work patterns such as Compressed Hours (providing option to work different number of hours each day so long as the total hours for the week are met) and Term-time Work (allowing employees to work only during school terms).

In Germany, the Parental Allowance (2007) guaranteed a certain percentage of income for parents on childcare leave for up to 14 months, but with the provision that in the case of two-parent families, the length of time one of the parents can receive this allowance is limited to 12 months. This

gave a strong incentive for fathers to take leave for at least 2 months, and by 2008, men comprised 20% of those taking parental leave.

The Netherlands has been at the forefront in promoting diversified work styles, guaranteeing equal labor conditions as well as welfare benefits for part-time and full-time workers (Prohibition of Discrimination on Work Hours Law 1996), making it possible for dispatched workers to negotiate with the employer to become a full-time employee after a certain length of time (Flexicurity Law 1999) and allowing workers to switch from full to part-time work and vice versa and to determine the number of hours they wish to work per week (Work Hour Adjustment Law 2000). These and other measures have resulted in the percentage of men taking parental leave reaching 21% in 2006. The comparable figure among Japanese men was a mere 1.23% in 2008 (over 90% among women).

Promoting work-life balance based on the principle of gender equality requires not only changes in employment and other policies but also in attitudes regarding gender roles. The second aspect of our research focused on gender bias and stereotyping in textbooks. Studies indicate that in textbooks throughout the world, females are greatly underrepresented, and moreover, gender-stereotyped portrayals of female and male attitudes and traits as well as occupational and domestic roles persist (Blumberg 2007). Yet such biases and stereotypes are difficult to detect unless we make a very conscious effort to look for and analyze them carefully.

In our study we looked specifically at illustrations and pictures contained in elementary school textbooks from New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Argentina, published between 1985 and 2006, and found depictions of boys and girls and women and men that transcended gender stereotypes—e.g., girls playing soccer, boys and men doing chores like washing dishes and cooking, girls and boys together jumping rope or using a hammer and saw to build something, men performing household chores and bathing and changing babies' diapers, women physicians and women operating heavy machinery.

Measures on the part of governments in the various countries we examined to create new employment options as well as improved childcare support and to counteract traditional gender roles and eliminate gender

stereotyping through education, offer valuable models for Japan. While we have seen some advances in attempts to eradicate gender-stereotyping in Japanese textbooks particularly since the enactment of the Basic Law for Gender-equal Society in 1999, we should take note that CEDAW, in its concluding observation of Japan's most report to the Committee (CEDAW 2009), called upon the Japanese government "to further enhance its efforts and to take proactive and sustained measures to eliminate stereotypical attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men," and "to enhance the education and in-service training of the teaching and counseling staff of all educational establishments and at all levels with regard to gender equality issues and to speedily complete a revision of educational textbooks to eliminate gender stereotyping."

Traditional attitudes regarding gender roles, which are still quite prevalent in Japan, are a major hindrance to the progress of gender equality and achievement of work-life balance for both women and men. To overcome this obstacle, we must seriously heed the above recommendations by CEDAW.

References

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