

JAPANESE WOMEN FACE DISCRIMINATION

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Two Japanese government officials sit in a very expensive restaurant in downtown Tokyo discussing Japanese customs with a foreign woman. They insist that women have real power in Japanese society: their wives have free reign in the home — they have absolute freedom to raise the children and spend their husbands' pay cheques as they wish.

Throughout the meal, two Japanese waitresses, in traditional costume, move silently in and out bringing the ornate boxes of sushi, bowls of soup, cups of hot sake. Between courses, the women kneel on the tatami, one between the two Japanese men, the other beside the foreign woman. They lean close and watch the faces of the guests, in case they should make any gesture in want of something. The guests, politely, ignore them.

the women's movement, but also how deeply entrenched sexist attitudes can be, and how far we still have to go.

"I know that Japan has been a man's world for 3,000 years but it is very hard to be a woman here. It is hard for women to get good jobs. Sometimes post-secondary education for women is a disadvantage for them. This country is okay for women if their goal is to get married but otherwise if you want to think about your career it's very difficult."

Misako Nishio is a freelance interpreter. She works for a private agency which is often commissioned by the Japanese government to provide guides for foreign guests and journalists.

"I prefer to work freelance because it is very stressful for girls in the workplace. You are paid the same and you can do the same work as the men but at 3 pm you have to make tea and after work you have to do the dishes. I don't mind making



Graphic/Arthur

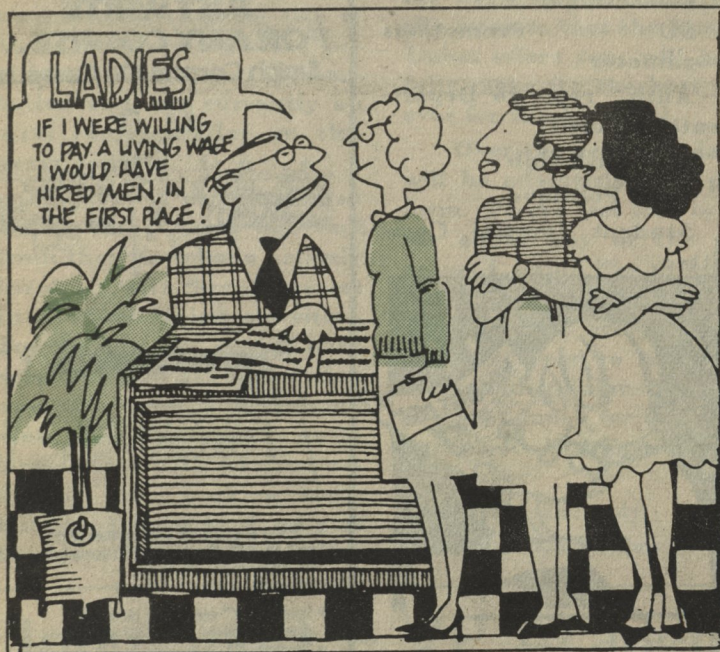
poor. In 1984, the average annual salary of Japanese women was 51.8 per cent of that of male workers, while their North American counterparts make around 68 per cent of men's salaries. Women are usually employed in smaller companies which pay less, and men's salaries are supplemented with allowances (for which women are not eligible) for dependents and housing.

A survey conducted by the Ministry of Labour in 1984 showed that most companies set different requirements for men and women when recruiting new employees. And though the passage of the Equal Opportunity Law made this kind of discrimination illegal, the law has been poorly enforced, especially in small companies.

The Labour Standards Law was also revised at that time and discriminatory provisions which had been designed originally to protect women workers, were removed. Until recently, women were forbidden from working more than two hours of overtime per day and were restricted to a maximum of six hours overtime weekly. Late night work, between the hours of 10 pm and 5 am, was also prohibited for women before the law was revised.

Larger companies respect the anti-discrimination law on the surface, but systemic discrimination still plagues Japanese business and industry.

Hisayo Hagiwara works in the public relations department of Nissan Motor



While Canadian women blithely claim that the age of equality has arrived and feminism is passe, Japanese women live an anomaly. They operate in a society more advanced than any in the western world in every aspect but one: women's rights.

A first-hand look at the status of women in Japan is a slap in the face to a North American woman. One is forced to recognize not only where we would be without

tea because I like to be nice but I don't like that it is just because you are a girl that you must do that."

Women in the workforce outnumber those at home by over 200,000 (0.4 per cent), and that number is growing rapidly. The Equal Opportunity Law passed in 1985 forbids discrimination against women in the workplace, but societal mores continue to promote discrimination on the basis of sex.

Even as a freelancer, Nishio cites examples of blatant sexual harassment that go unchecked because of a lack of awareness about sexism in Japanese society. But the virtual non-existence of formal harassment grievance procedures is only part of the problem.

The subject of sexism and harassment of women in the workplace elicits nervous laughter even from government employees.

Akiko Yamakawa, a guidance officer for the Ministry of Labour says that theoretically, a female worker could take legal action if she is harassed or discriminated against on the job.

"Legally, she could do it (sue), but Japanese women are more likely to leave the job. They don't put up a fight. We are not a litigious society and according to Japanese social behaviour you are better advised to retire — leaving for that reason is quite legitimate," says Yamakawa.

She added that she believes workplace harassment — pressure for sexual favours, sexist comments, etc. — is uncommon in Japan.

"At any rate, any male worker with common sense would know that kind of behaviour would constitute a misdemeanor. He would be fired, or he would not be promoted. Employers do not want to lose young female workers — they are hard to get."

Yamakawa said she hears very little about severe sexual harassment, but she says many women object to being expected to serve their male co-workers.

"Serving tea and other little tasks like that are usually expected of women. Some say if they want (to work) it's not such a sacrifice to go along with it."

"Serving tea and other little tasks like that are usually expected of women. Some say it is hurting the dignity of the women but others say if they want (to work) it's not such a sacrifice to go along with it."

And though numbers of women in the Japanese workforce are ever increasing, wages and working conditions are still relatively

Company Ltd. She is 29 years old, and the eldest woman in her department. She says 80 per cent of her female co-workers are single and not interested in pursuing their careers after marriage.

"They call me a feminist here because when we start a project I begin by asking why. The other workers are very submissive, just