

Women expect to keep working, excel

Last of three parts
By KANAKO TAKAHARA
Staff writer

At 2 a.m., Kazumi Murata flicks on the lights of her living room cluttered with stuffed animals, video game gadgets and her kids' half-

LABOR DYNAMICS

done homework from the night before.

If she has leftover work, the room, which doubles as her office, is quiet in the early morning hours and offers her the best time to catch up.

"I usually get up at 5 a.m., but if I can't finish my work, I get up early before the kids wake up," said Murata, a 36-year-old computer engineer who works at home on a con-

tract basis.

The mother of a 7-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter is one of an increasing number of working mothers in Japan trying to juggle careers and housework, including the needs of two little kids.

But she is also one of the many women who decide to leave their jobs after having a child. Although many women are as educated as men, about 70 percent quit their jobs when having children, knowing most companies won't tolerate employees whose working hours can be compromised by children.

Many critics, however, are voicing concerns that the world's second-largest economy will not be competitive in the future if it effectively continues to suppress this segment of the workforce along with all its experience and knowledge.

According to an estimate by Japan Research Institute, the nation will have a shortage of about 3.9 million workers in 2015 as the population continues to shrink, and will need 880,000 more working women than there were in 2005 to keep growth at around 2 percent.

Some companies are finally becoming aware of the need to hire women.

Japan Personal Computer Co., a small programming company in Yokohama, welcomes working mothers. Of its 11 employees, eight, including Murata, are mothers.

Computer programmers tend to job-hop, but the company soon discovered that working mothers are much less likely to quit.

JPC President Hiroharu Matsui said working mothers are also less demanding when it comes to work condi-

tions, including salary, because few companies are friendly to mothers with small children.

"It is a waste not to hire women," said Matsui. "Women are a treasure (as a labor force), and I want to create a working environment where they can work" until retirement.

JPC is still a rarity in this male-dominated society, which traditionally expects women to stay at home, raise children and take care of household chores.

Women's participation in the workforce is often represented by the "M curve," which shows employment status by age.

According to a 2005 survey by the internal affairs ministry, 74.9 percent of women are engaged in either full- or part-time employment be-



KAZUMI MURATA works at her home in Yokohama as her son and daughter play in the living room. YOSHIKI MIURA PHOTO

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Working women beginning to crack glass ceiling but obstacles remain

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tween the ages of 25 and 29. But this figure drops to 62.7 percent between 30 and 34, when many are believed to have children.

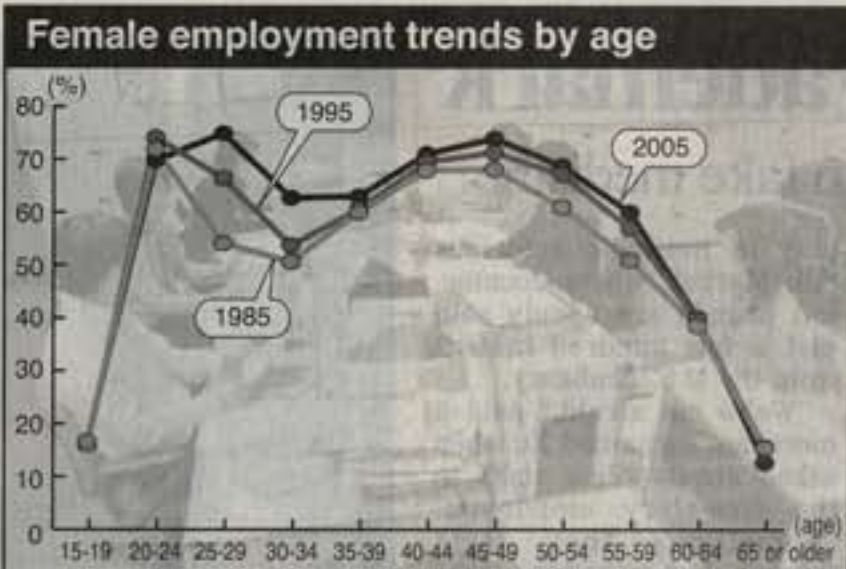
This recovers to 71 percent between the ages 40 and 44, reflecting their re-entry into the workforce once their children have come of age. But the survey also showed that 52.5 percent of all women in 2005 were nonregular employees — part-timers, contract workers or temporary workers.

Women have an especially tough time getting full-time jobs once they've left the career track, no matter what the reason, experts say.

As a result, companies opt to hire cheaper, unstable part-time or temporary workers who give them a sort of "adjustment workforce."

Kuniko Inoguchi, former state minister on gender equality and social affairs, said managers tend to be prejudiced against working mothers.

"There is an image that the work of working mothers will become sloppy," Inoguchi said. "Thus, pressure grows on them to quit."



SOURCE: Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry

That is why Inoguchi pushed the government to increase spending on child-rearing support, she said.

The government is proposing a budget of ¥1.71 trillion for such support, up from ¥1.52 trillion in fiscal 2006. The money will be used to boost nursery school use by 45,000 children and raise the monthly allowance for women on maternity leave to 50 percent of salary instead of 40 percent.

The government also passed a law that obliges companies with more than 300

employees to draft an action plan with numerical goals for child-rearing support. The law took effect in April 2005.

Firms that achieve the goals will get official government certification allowing them to display a special logo for recruitment or advertising purposes to show it accommodates working mothers.

Now Inoguchi and other politicians are trying to revise the law so smaller companies can get the certification, too.

They are also pushing for a revision that would require companies to disclose their

support plans and the progress made in achieving them.

Cosmetics maker Shiseido Co. and publisher Benesse Corp. have won praise from women for introducing support measures for working mothers. Both have built in-house nurseries and adopted policies that allow mothers to work shorter hours.

Such efforts have spread to other companies, including beverage maker Kagome Co., where only 20 percent of its employees are women.

In September, Kagome set up a task force of 14 women to design a better working environment for females. The team is expected to compile a report early this year.

Kagome spokeswoman Tomoko Sone said the company is trying to reduce the number of women who quit. Nearly 40 percent of its women quit after five years.

"We felt the need to secure experienced and knowledgeable personnel to survive the global competition amid a declining population," Sone said.

Twenty years have passed since the equal employment opportunity law took effect in

1986, and women are slowly filtering into the ranks of management. The number is still surprisingly low when Japan is compared with other industrialized nations.

According to the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry, 10.1 percent of Japan's managers were women in 2005, compared with just 5.3 percent in 1975. That's much lower than the 42.1 percent in the United States, 35.2 percent in Germany and 31.8 percent in Sweden.

The government has vowed steps to ensure women constitute 30 percent of managers by 2020.

In the meantime, there are signs Japanese women are beginning to make their mark on the corporate world. In a recent survey by the nonprofit organization Shareholders Ombudsman, six of 304 listed companies responding had women on their boards of directors.

And in March, Nikkei Home Publishing will start Nikkei EW, a new magazine for female executives and venture company presidents that will feature business and lifestyle articles.

Although the company did not disclose how many copies it hopes to sell, editor in chief Hiroko Nomura said it is clear female executives are on the rise at last.

"It took 20 years to come this far," Nomura said. "Women who started working 20 years ago have reached the age where they would be in managerial positions, and their presence has become bigger in Japanese society."

To raise the number of female managers, Nomura stressed that companies will have to implement evaluation systems that treat men and women equally when handing out promotions.

She also said that women will need to change their mind-sets if they're looking to advance.

"When they enter a company, most women don't think they will be promoted to a managerial position one day, whereas men do," Nomura said. "After they are asked to take up a managerial position, they panic."

"The difference in awareness makes a difference (in performance) after five or 10 years," she said.