

Japanese women at a crossroads

Until the age of 16, my dream was to become a housewife.

My mother was one and so were my grandmothers. I also didn't have many friends whose mothers worked. It was the most obvious choice.

Now that I have become a mother myself, I realise it is much harder work than I'd expected. But as a teenager, supporting a hardworking husband by doing all the housework, and raising a child or two felt like a perfect fairy tale.

I wasn't alone in wanting to pursue what is known in Japan as "permanent employment", and many of my friends have become stay-at-home wives or mums.

We are in our early 30s, however, and I expected the younger generation to be different. So I was surprised to see the result of a recent survey - by Japanese advertising and public relations company Hakuhodo - which showed that more than one-third of single women in their 20s want to become a housewife.

'Nation of housewives'

Even more surprisingly, the number of married women in their 20s who think women should stay at home and focus on housework has risen from 35.7% in 2003 to 41.6% in 2013. That's according to the [National Survey on Family](#) by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

Two thirds of them think mothers shouldn't be back at work until the children are three years old, and about the same percentage of women give up their jobs after having their first child.

"Japan is a nation of housewives," says journalist and lecturer Touko Shirakawa who writes about women. "There are certainly more career women today than before but it's still not the norm."

The government wants to change this.

As part of its economic policy known as Abenomics, it is trying to make it easier for women to continue working after giving birth. For example, it is tackling the shortage of childcare facilities, albeit slowly.

Sagawa Express is a parcel delivery company, and has been hiring more women as its courier drivers. This traditionally male-dominated industry is known for long working hours, but the firm is allowing women to work part-time and take on flexible hours to make it easier for them to juggle work with family life.

"We have more deliveries to individual homes thanks to online shopping, which means our drivers don't have to carry parcels that are too heavy," Shozo Hayashi explains. "Our female customers also feel safer if the items are delivered by women, so it has been very popular."

But these part-time drivers earn less than 1 million Japanese yen (\$8274; £5498) a year, which means in the eyes of the taxman they remain dependents of their husband and don't pay tax on their incomes.

And while there are now more households with double incomes than single, the majority of wives work part-time.

Finding balance

What the government wants to encourage is women in full-time employment. But mothers who continue to pursue their careers are still few and far between.

"Women who don't want to quit their jobs tend not to, or at least delay the marriage until they meet Mr Perfect because there are so few jobs which you can juggle with housework," says Ms Shirakawa who also teaches at a girls-only university.

And in most Japanese families, the housework falls on women. The government's National Survey on Family revealed that almost half (46%) of husbands do less than 10% of housework even if their wives work full time.

If more women choose not to get married or have children to focus on their career, however, it affects Japan's demographic problem. The Japanese population has been shrinking annually for the last four years. Last year, the country welcomed just over one million newborns, and that is a record low.

So is it possible for Japan to achieve the ambitious target set by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to almost triple the proportion of female managers to 30% by 2020?

Satoko Ubukata is the general manager of the advertising department at chemicals business Toray Industries, and she says she hasn't faced much sexism as she climbed up the corporate ladder.

"I graduated from university in 1986 when the Equal Employment Opportunity Law had just passed, so there were 77 female new hires at Toray," she says. "Thirteen of them are still with the firm, nine of whom in management."

At Toray Industries, 4.2% of the management is female, which is the highest in the chemical industry.

"Comparing numbers might be handy, but I personally don't think setting a particular target is a good idea," adds Ms Ubukata.

"Women shouldn't have to receive special treatment to be promoted, but it seems like in Japan, you need the government to set the target in order for companies to act."

When Ms Ubukata joined Toray, pouring tea and cleaning ashtrays were the duties of female staff.

"We thought that was what we were meant to do so we didn't think much about it," she says, adding that the custom gradually ended in the late 1990s.

"I don't think the opposition came from the female staff, but the societal attitude started to change so it was natural for the company to stop, too."

Change in attitude?

Despite the government's efforts to get more women to rejoin the workforce, Ms Ubukata thinks Japan's problem is more fundamental.

"Regardless of your gender, it is difficult to get a full-time job after taking a long break, and it is more common for women to leave the corporate world for a few years to raise a child or look after the old," she says.

The government is tackling the issue by creating job centres that are specifically for women with a nursery. But when I visited one in Osaka, the societal attitude remains a hurdle.

"I feel that the employers definitely prefer candidates without kids," says Miyoko Takahashi who came in with her one-year-old daughter.

"I understand why because I as a mother cannot work long hours. If I was on the other side of the table, maybe I'd choose someone without kids, too," she adds.

I feel that I have done my part by giving birth and juggling motherhood with a full-time job as a reporter. But if I was working for a Japanese company and if I was married to a Japanese man, it would have been much harder.

"The government wants me to give birth, raise a child properly and work full time? Are they trying to kill me?" is a comment that Touko Shirakawa heard from some of her female students.

For Japan to fully utilise its female workforce, it will take more than just policy changes and it may take a generation or more to change the society's attitude.