

4 Policy on Equal Employment Opportunity between Men and Women

More than 20 years have now passed since the enactment of the Act on Securing, etc. of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment (hereinafter referred to as the “Equal Opportunity Act”) in 1985, and the intervening period has seen major advances in the development of related legislation. In 2006, the act was revised to expand the scope of prohibition of sexual discrimination (to prohibit, for example, certain forms of indirect discrimination), prohibit prejudicial treatment on the grounds of pregnancy or childbirth, etc., and require the introduction of measures to prevent sexual discrimination, and so forth.

The proportion of women in the total labor force population has risen from 39.7% in 1985 to 42.8% in 2012, and women’s share of managerial positions (section manager level or above) has also risen from 1.4% in 1985 to 7.9% in 2012.

On the other hand, many women still leave their jobs for reasons of childbirth, child rearing, and so on, making it difficult for them to build sustainable professional careers. Moreover, a working style premised partly upon long working hours is seen mainly among male core workers, and a similar working style would be difficult for many women to achieve. In view of these facts, steps are being taken to secure substantial equality of opportunities. One way of doing so is to ensure the rigorous enforcement of the Equal Opportunity Act, which provides for the prohibition of discriminatory treatment at all stages of employment management, among other issues. Another is to keep promoting positive action (i.e. autonomous and positive efforts by companies aiming to eliminate the disparity inevitably arising between male and female workers), as well as measures to support a balance between work and home in the child rearing and childcare phases.

In the “Japan Revitalization Strategy – JAPAN is BACK” decided by the Cabinet in June 2013, fully utilizing the “power of women” is placed at the core of the growth strategy. The strategy sets the target of

boosting the employment rate of women aged 25-44 to 73% by 2020, and efforts to improve the employment rate of women, and particularly to eliminate the “M-shaped curve” (a curve expressing the labor force rate of women by age group), are being tackled as priority tasks.

In order to ensure compliance with the Equal Opportunity Act, the equal employment offices in the prefectural labor bureaus established in each prefecture as local agencies of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare engage in the following activities:

1. Active dissemination of information about the Equal Opportunity Act and provision of consultation services regarding discriminatory treatment due to sex in recruitment/hiring, assignments, promotions/demotions, education and training, uniform welfare packages, changes in job category and form of employment, encouragement to retire, mandatory retirement, dismissal, renewal of labor contracts, unfair treatment on the grounds of marriage, pregnancy or childbirth, and sexual harassment in the workplace.
2. Advice, guidance, and recommendations by the heads of prefectural labor bureaus and mediation by the Equal Opportunity Mediation Commission to promote the swift resolution of disputes between workers and employers regarding equal treatment, etc.
3. Proactive guidance based on the Equal Opportunity Act to ensure equal treatment of the sexes and monitoring of the actual state of employment management by enterprises.

With a view to securing substantial equality of treatment, meanwhile, “Guidelines for Supporting Efforts by Labor and Management Aimed at Reducing the Gender Pay Gap” and “Supporting Tools for Increase of Visibility of the Gender Gap” have been

produced and distributed. As well as encouraging companies to “notice” the need to ascertain the facts of gender disparity and make efforts internally, these support autonomous initiatives by labor and management.

Besides this, positive steps are being taken to give necessary advice and provide information, while promoting further efforts enabling companies to engage in concrete initiatives for positive action. Specific examples are direct lobbying to companies to promote efforts, promoting information disclosure on the status of activity by women using the “Positive Action Information Portal Site”, awarding companies

that promote equality and balance, paying additional balance support grants to companies tackling positive action, and forming “Women’s Activity Promotion Councils” in collaboration with business groups and others.

Finally, manuals on the introduction of a system of mentors (employees who advise and support female employees) and training of role models (personalities who have a wealth of job experience and serve as examples to others) have been produced and distributed, and support is being given to create an environment in which female workers can remain in employment.