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Milestones in the advancement of women since International Women's Year

— PREFACE —

The post-war Constitution of Japan clearly stipulates respect for the individual and equality under the law. Since the promulgation of the Constitution, Japan has consistently pressed forward with active efforts towards gender equality, including the enactment of various legislation. In this way the legal status of women in Japan has been radically improved.

Taking a look at the situation for women in Japan today is both informative and revealing. The average life expectancy for Japanese females in 2005 was 85.5 years, a considerably greater lifespan than the male average of 78.5 years. In global terms, Japanese women have boasted the world's longest life expectancy of any country in the world since 1985.

In educational terms, 97.9 percent of Japanese women advance to high school or the equivalent, a figure that since 1969 has been higher for women than for men. In 2005, the percentage of women advancing to universities and junior colleges was 49.8 percent, very nearly as high as the 51.3 percent of men who did so. In the same year, women made up 41.4 percent of the workforce.

However, women remain under-represented in Japan's policy decision-making processes and the percentage of women in the labor force drops for women in their early 30s, which is the primary marriage and child-raising period. This would suggest that opportunities for women to fulfill their potential and fully contribute to society remain insufficient.

At the same time, in order to respond to the rapid changes that Japan is facing in societal and economic aspects, including the declining birthrate, the aging of the population, and the maturation of the domestic economy, it is now of urgent importance that a gender-equal society in which men and women respect each other's rights and share responsibilities equitably is achieved. Such a society would provide every person the opportunity to make the most of their individual abilities and emphasize their individual characteristics regardless of gender.

These realities make the realization of a gender-equal society a top-priority for the continued development and sustained growth of Japan through the 21st century. The government is engaged in the task of formulating and implementing policies related to promotion of a gender-equal society.

What is a Gender-equal Society?

Article 2 of the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society stipulates that a gender-equal society is “a society in which both women and men shall be given equal opportunities to participate voluntarily in activities in all fields as equal partners, and be able to enjoy political, economic, social and cultural benefits equally as well as to share responsibilities.” (Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society, enacted in 1999)