

Reducing the Feminization of Poverty with the Rights-based Approach

Country Paper of Japan
for the 1st Meeting of the ASEAN+3 Committee on Women

1. Introduction

The country paper from Japan is based on a report, “Actual situation of men and women facing financial difficulties in the context of new trends in the economy and society,” that is being prepared by the Specialist Committee on Monitoring and Gender Impact Assessment and Evaluation under the Council for Gender Equality. The Council for Gender Equality was established in 2001 to serve as a part of the national machinery for advancement of gender equality. The Council is chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary and consists of 12 cabinet ministers and 12 experts from the private sector.

The important roles of the Specialist Committee on Monitoring and Gender Impact Assessment and Evaluation toward gender mainstreaming are to monitor implementation of the government measures to address gender equality issues and to study influence which these measures will have on men and women separately. Since June 2008, the Committee has been deliberating financial difficulties currently faced by men and women in Japan. The Committee is now compiling actual situation of financial difficulties faced by men and women and its background, implementation status of the government measures, and future issues to be addressed.

2. Actual Situation of Financial Difficulties Faced by Women

The graph 1 shows the relative poverty rate of men and women in Japan. The relative poverty rate is defined as the share of the population in households with incomes below 50 percent of the median. The graph shows the higher poverty rates in women. Due to the disadvantages accumulated from their younger days, the disparity in poverty between men and women widens as they age.

The graph 2 divides men and women into more detailed categories that show which groups are in more difficult situations. Of aged single women in the 65 years old and older age bracket and mothers in mother-child families in the 20-to-64 age bracket, more than 50% live in poverty. Those in these two categories have a significantly higher risk of becoming poor. Another major issue of concern in recent years is the high poverty rate among children. As shown in this graph, the poverty rate among children in mother-child families is particularly high, indicating that the poverty is transmitted to the next generation mainly in mother-child families.

3. Background Information of Women with Financial Difficulties

One of the reasons why the number of women in poverty is significantly larger than that for men in Japan may lie in people's perception of gender roles. People in any country have stereotypical views of gender roles, but the level of stereotyping is particularly high among Japanese people. The graph 3 is about the stereotypical perception of gender roles in Japan, the United States and Sweden. In Japan, 50.7% of men agree with the idea that "men work outside and women stay at home taking care of the family," and 39.8% of women do. In Sweden, however, merely 8.9% of men and 3.9% of women agree with that idea.

This kind of stereotypical perception hampers women from actively playing a role in the economy and society. The graph 4 shows the data of the 3 countries which are the components of Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). Women in Japan are highly educated, and the ratio of female specialists, who are usually evaluated on their expertise, is comparable to that in Sweden. On the other hand, the ratio of women in managerial positions in government agencies and private businesses and the ratio of female Diet members are only about 10%. The wage disparity between men and women is large. The low wages for women lead them to poverty.

The graph 5 shows the labor force participation rates of men and women in Japan. A comparison of the labor force participation of women with that of men shows two major characteristics. One of them is that it is difficult for women to continue working while having children. They have to stop working at the time of childbirth and child-rearing. For this reason, as shown in the graph by age, the rate of Japanese female participation in

the labor force follows an M-shaped curve, as has always been the case.

The other characteristic is that more women work as part-time workers or in temporary employment. Women who want to go back to labor market after taking years off for child-rearing, particularly those in their 30s, are mostly employed as non-regular workers, indicating that they cannot participate in decision-making and other important activities. At present, wages for non-regular workers are low and their employment is unstable. They are not eligible for social security benefits and unemployment insurance. If women in these situations lose their husbands because of divorce or other reasons, they will be pushed into poverty, even with a job. As there is no safety net available to help these families, being unemployed immediately leads them into poverty.

In recent years, financial difficulties tend to be combined with other difficulties. Violence against women creates particular difficulties for women, including physical and psychological trauma caused by violence, isolation after fleeing from the violence and starting a life in a new place, financial difficulties, and children's education.

Women in Japan, as in other countries, have been in difficult situations but this has tended to be overlooked in the past. Recently, as financial difficulties triggered by the economic crisis have been spreading throughout the nation, their problems have surfaced. In the past, many women were dependent on men, which made it difficult to reveal these problems. The situation is changing. As the number of unmarried or divorced women is increasing and the population is aging, the number of women who must make a living on their own is also increasing. It has also become difficult for men to support their family because many of them can only find non-regular jobs. There is also an increase in female immigrants to Japan and they receive neither sufficient wages nor social security benefits to cover their living expenses.

4. Measures Initiated by the Government as Best Practices

The Japanese government has initiated some measures to address the problems mentioned above. In this paper, 3 measures will be introduced.

The First measure is for emergency support for mothers of single-parent families, who

are the most adversely affected by the current economic downturn. In 2008, the Japanese government contributed 100 billion yen (around 1 billion US Dollar) to the Fund for Child-rearing, the purpose of which is to improve child-rearing systems. More specifically, during the three years up to 2010, efforts will be focused particularly on improving childcare facilities that are needed to enable women to keep working. This year, 150 billion yen (around 1.5 billion US Dollar) was added to the Fund. This additional contribution will be used to provide mothers of single-parent families with more attentive support for employment. For example, an environment where it is easier for the mothers to work, support for job hunting and career counseling, social work skill training, and childcare services during job training will be provided.

The second measure involves longer-term efforts. The Japanese government is implementing various public relations activities and educational campaigns to change public awareness of gender roles. One of its individual-focused programs is the “Life Planning Support Program,” which aims to raise individuals’ awareness and help them choose between living options. The Program presents a wide variety of options for each life stage so that women can make a long-term plan for their independent life. Efforts include providing learning opportunities that meet local needs and lectures with on-site experience. The current objective of the Program is to empower women throughout their life cycle, but we consider it necessary to add efforts to raise awareness among men in the future.

The third measure aims to promote a concerted effort among support organizations in helping women with financial difficulties and their children. As mentioned earlier, financial difficulties tend to be combined with other difficulties in recent years. To help people with multiple difficulties become independent, different kinds of support should be combined. For instance, female victims of domestic violence who have fled from their spouses and wish to live with their children independently need assistance to help them recover from physical and psychological damage, to find a place to live, to maintain their daily life, to find a job, and to provide education to their children. We need a concerted effort among government agencies and support groups to address these issues. Young people not in education, employment or training, the so-called NEET, who cannot become financially independent, and children of families having difficulty in gaining access to social services, are facing potential difficulties in their lives. To help these children and young people receive education and become independent, the Act on

Promotion of Development and Support for Children and Youth People was established this year. The Act requires the establishment of local networks between those involved in education, welfare and employment. These networks should be expanded to include support groups in other areas as well.

5. Future Issues To Be Addressed

In spite of the measures being undertaken by the government, many issues to be addressed still remain. In this section, some of the major issues will be explained, divided into four groups.

The first group of issues involves empowering individuals to become independent. It is, of course, important to empower women and the elderly. It is also necessary to raise awareness of independence among young people and provide them with opportunities to accumulate experiences through education from an early age. In Japan, career education programs are being developed for inclusion in the school curriculum. It is needless to say that consideration should be given not to limit the range of options for women based on stereotypical views of gender roles.

Second, it is necessary to change work and employment environments that are not friendly to women. More efforts should be placed on achieving equal treatments between men and women. It is also important to resolve unreasonable disparities in employment between permanent and non-permanent employees more effectively. Taking positive actions is one of the most effective ways to achieve these goals. Long working hours make it more difficult to challenge the stereotypical views of gender roles and prevent women from continuing to work. It is important that more efforts should be focused on reducing long working hours and achieving a better work-life balance so that both men and women can continue working while rearing their children. In Japan, a family where men work outside and women stay at home has been regarded as the standard family for many years, based on which social security structures and taxation systems have been developed. These structures and systems have partially contributed to the current employment environment that is not friendly to women. Changing such systems into those exerting no adverse effects on women's employment has been a long-time concern.

Third, we need to provide services to support daily living for parents and children. Childcare facilities are being improved at a high speed to help women continue working while having and rearing children. More attentive support should also be provided for mothers in single-parent families. The government is also considering bearing educational expenses of children from early childhood to the completion of a high school education to provide educational opportunities to all children regardless of their family circumstances.

The fourth and last group of issues is how to provide support services. Problems that people are facing have become diversified. To address these diversified problems, we need cooperation that is flexible enough to meet individual circumstances. In addition, it is important to centralize the points of contact for consultation and support services in order to provide one-stop services to those who seek consultation about multiple issues, including domestic violence, concerns of mothers in single-parent families, and concerns about children, employment, and health. It is urgently needed to discuss what assistance the government can provide to promote cooperation in each field.