

Gender Equality: What Benefits Would a Flextime System Bring to Japan?

Written by Miki Anno

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Japan lags behind other developed countries in gender equality in spite of the introduction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1985 (Estevéz-Abe, 2013). Unfortunately, a significant number of companies are less likely to hire or promote women and do not provide supportive working environments in which parents, both male and female, can have enough time to adequately care for their children. According to the Global Gender Gap Index, which ranks countries according to gender equality, in 2015 Japan ranked 106th out of 145 countries in economic participation and opportunity and 104th in political empowerment (Schwab et al., 2015, p 9). In addition, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW, 2010) indicated that for approximately 35% of female workers the main reason to leave the workforce after pregnancy or around the birth of a child was either the difficulty of balancing work and child, or dismissal or pressure from the employer to leave the workforce. Given the current situation, it is important for Japanese companies to provide much better working environments. The benefits of introducing a successful flextime system in Japanese society are often overlooked. By examining successful flextime systems in Nordic countries we can learn how to successfully implement them in Japan. Through this examination, the Japanese government could enact a law requiring companies to allow both men and women flextime because this new provision would bring benefits to everyone and even companies, regarding equal opportunities, child care, and productivity.

According to the Description of Labour Standards Law in Japan, Article 32 indicates that an employer cannot make an employee work for more than 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week, excluding rest periods (Osaka Labour Bureau [OLB], n.d.). In a flextime system, an employee can determine the start and end time for work if the total working hours for a certain period of a month or shorter meet the stipulation (OLB, n.d.). In addition, in order to adopt a flextime system, companies are required to prescribe in the rules of employment that employees are responsible for deciding their starting and ending time and to prescribe the range of workers who can utilise a flextime system, the length of flextime, and the fixed daily working hours in labour-management agreement (OLB, n.d.). Also, in June 2009, the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law was revised, which emphasised the importance of flexible work styles and short working hours (MHLW, 2010). This revision was significant to promote gender equality in Japanese society in which most men were apt to work overtime at companies.

However, the proportion of companies with a flextime system for parents who need to take care of their children is only 7.8 % (MHLW, 2010, p 14). Moreover, only 26.8 % of companies have exempted their employees from overtime work (MHLW, 2010, p 14). The figures imply that it is difficult for parents to balance work and child care because of working hours. Kobayashi and Usui (2014) indicate that approximately 60 % of female workers quit their jobs due to pregnancy or childbirth and only 27.1 % of mothers go back to the workforce when their first infant is 1 year old. Furthermore, one of the most common reasons why female workers leave the workforce after they become pregnant or give birth is that they find it almost impossible to take care of their children due to working hours (MHLW, 2010, p 15).

On the other hand, Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt (2009) indicate that Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden have childcare-related policies that are very strong both on generosity and on gender equality. In Finland, the Working Hours Act stipulates regular working hours are a maximum of 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Finland (MEEF), 2011). It also specifies that flexible working hours can be agreed on

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by an employee and employer and that the employee is allowed to determine the beginning and the end of the daily working hours within set limits (MEEF, 2011). When an employee and employer agree on flexible working hours, the employee can extend or reduce the regular daily working hours by a flexible period of maximum three hours (MEEF, 2011). Finnish childcare-related policies such as flextime have been successful. Ellingsæter and Leira (2006) state that countries that have the highest marks on United Nations' gender equality indexes are the Nordic countries. They also mention that the employment rates of mothers and fertility rates in the Nordic countries are the highest in Europe as the result of parenthood policies that enable both men and women to balance work and child care. According to Plantenga and Remery (2010, p 26), 53% of men and 47% of women have access to flexible working time schedules, such as flextime, in Finland. In fact, it is much more common for employed women to work full-time 35 hours or more per week in Finland (Fagan, 2004). Also, the fertility rate in Finland has remained stable at around 1.7 children per woman (Rønsen, 2004). The situation in Finland implies that the flexibility of working hours plays an important role in full-time employment rates and fertility rates.

Sweden is also a country which emphasises the importance of the flexibility of working hours. Hofferth and Deich (1994) state that Sweden has accomplished high female labour force participation and a high fertility rate. In Sweden, the Working Hours Act stipulates that a flextime system allows an employee to start work between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. and go home between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. after the fixed amount of working hours has been achieved (Anell & Haas, n.d.). Anell and Haas (n.d.) indicate that there are a number of companies with a flextime system in Sweden. As a matter of fact, 60.0% of men and 62.6% of women have access to flexible working time schedules in Sweden (Plantenga & Remery, 2010, p 26). Furthermore, because flexibility of time and place of work are considered important in Sweden, more than 50% of Swedish companies utilise computers so that employees can access company information or have flexible times for meetings (Atsumi, 2007). In Sweden, a number of companies provide better working environments. Thus, in 2013, the employment rate of the population was made up of 77% of women and 82% of men (Bernhardt, 2014). In addition, the fertility rate in Sweden is 1.9 per woman (Anell & Haas, n.d., p 6). This figure is relatively high, compared with other European countries.

A flextime system has been successful both in Finland and Sweden where both male and female employees are apt to work with some flexibility in the working hours, while a number of companies have not adopted a flextime system in Japan. Considering that many Japanese women mention that it is almost impossible to continue their work after pregnancy or around the birth of a child because of long working hours, it is significant for more and more companies to introduce a flextime system. A flextime system could contribute to women's empowerment while promoting equal opportunities, boosting productivity, and benefiting mothers, fathers, and their children.

The main benefit of a flextime system in Japan is that it could promote equal opportunities while improving the employment rate and fertility rate. The problem of gender influenced promotion would not exist if men and women had the same chance to take care of their children. A flextime system would enable both men and women to take care of their children and stay in their jobs. One of the factors of gender inequality in the workplace in Japan is that women are more likely to handle child care responsibilities, while men dedicate themselves to work. However, when both men and women take child care responsibilities to the same degree, companies are able to hire or promote their employees regardless of gender. In other words, a company which has a successful flextime system can hire or promote their employees in accordance to their capabilities without taking into account whether they will stay with the company for the long term. In Japanese society, it is necessary to promote women's empowerment not only because the population is shrinking but also because the Japanese government has been reluctant to accept immigrants (Brinton, 1993). By bringing more women into the workforce, the employment rate would dramatically improve. In addition, one of the reasons for Japanese low fertility rates is that the number of women who decide not to have children in order to continue their work has increased. Yet, if a company has flexible working arrangements, female workers will be able to stay in their jobs irrespective of whether they give birth or not. Therefore, the introduction of a flextime system is important in Japanese companies in order to lead to equal opportunities, higher employment rates, and higher fertility rates.

As well as promoting equal opportunities, a flextime system could benefit male workers in Japan. Flextime would make it possible for fathers to be more involved with their families. Male workers are more likely to work overtime in Japan, which implies that a number of men are less likely to balance work and family even though men could

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increase their happiness by being able to take care of their children. In fact, Avery and Zabel (2001) state that one of the advantages of flextime is that it enables work and family obligations to coordinate, resulting in better work satisfaction. With flexible schedules, men could have more family time, which would make it more likely for men to have much stronger relationships with their children.

Another advantage of a flextime system is that it could benefit companies in terms of productivity. Landy and Conte (2010) state flextime is related to higher productivity and lower absenteeism and most workers have satisfaction with flextime systems. Flextime makes workers responsible for completing work within their own work schedules, which means efficiency and the completion of work are emphasised in a flextime system (Avery & Zabel, 2001). Therefore, a flextime system would lead to performance that is more productive and efficient. Avery and Zabel (2001) state that flextime enables both mothers and fathers to control their working hours without getting a lower income. Also, the adoption of a flextime system can show trust in the employee (Avery & Zabel, 2001). As a matter of fact, employees who have access to flexible working schedules feel less stress than ones who do not (Avery & Zabel, 2001).

Furthermore, if men share housework and childcare, their children receive higher grades and lower rates of absenteeism in school. Rogers, Wiener, Marton, and Tannock (2009) suggest that when parents are involved with a wide range of activities to help their children learn, their learning becomes more effective. Children's academic achievements are enhanced by parental support, encouragement, and nurturing of children's education at home (Rogers. et al., 2009). Rogers, et al. (2009) also indicate that parental involvement is valuable in children's learning at home, especially when children are in primary school, because it is connected to high outcomes for children, such as motivation for learning and higher achievements. In addition, these outcomes in elementary school are linked to later academic outcomes in high school. According to Rogers, et al. (2009), the fathers' involvement in child-rearing has a significant influence on children's outcomes in addition to the mother's involvement. Thus, a flextime system even helps fathers to contribute to their children's academic achievements.

In conclusion, the Japanese government should enact a law that requires all companies to allow their employees flextime in order to benefit Japanese society in the ways previously mentioned. The population in Japan is shrinking partly because some female workers decide not to have children due to strict, long working hours. In Finland and Sweden, both the female labor force participation and fertility rates are higher as a result of successful flextime systems, which allow both men and women to balance work and family. Therefore, it is valuable for Japanese companies to adopt a flextime system.

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*Written by: Miki Anno
Written at: Kyoto University of Foreign Studies
Written for: Joe Cohen
Date written: January 2016*

About the author:

Miki Anno is an undergraduate student specialising in International Studies at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies.