

## **COUNTRY REPORT – JAPAN**

### **IMPACT OF FINANCIAL CRISIS ON WOMEN WORKERS IN JAPAN**

#### **Lay-off targets irregular workers**

The deterioration of the world economy after October 2008 has severely affected Japan whose economic growth has relied greatly on the export of automobiles and electric products to the United States and European countries. Those first laid-off were irregular workers who had been used as a cheap employment adjustment. Toyota, Sony and other large manufacturers have announced mass dismissal of temporary and contract workers, which has also affected subcontracting manufacturers. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare recently revealed that around 192,000 irregular workers and 12,500 regular workers have lost or will lose their jobs by June 2009. Out of 192,000 irregular workers to lose jobs, 65.3% or 125,339 workers are temporary (dispatched) workers and 20.4% or 39,195 workers are temporary contract workers. However, this survey covers only large manufacturers that have already decided to cut more than a hundred jobs. The full-scale impacts of the recession are still unknown, particularly because many women workers are in sales and service jobs at smaller-scale companies. The Action Center for Working Women, a national network of women's labor unions, has received more than twice the amount of complaints including lay-offs or involuntary contract termination, between January 1st and May 31st, as compared to the same period last year.

#### **Violation of reproductive rights**

A particularly serious issue for women workers is the increasing number of lay-offs or disadvantageous treatment against those who claimed for maternity leave or childcare leave. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare reports that labor offices have received 1107 complaints from workers by the end of February 2009, which is 1.3 times compared to last year. Women's unions also received such complaints that workers were forced to become part-timers or contract workers once they claimed for maternity leave or childcare leave, or that workers on childcare leave were told that there would be no jobs for them anymore. Although such discriminatory treatments for pregnancy, childbirth and childcare are prohibited by law, it has been difficult for irregular workers to exercise their rights due to their unstable job status. Now under the depression it is becoming increasingly difficult for women workers including those with regular jobs to enjoy reproductive rights.

### **Gender-skewed concerns over temporary work**

Dismissed temporary and contract workers often lose not only their jobs but also their apartment rooms provided by employers, and end up as homeless or quasi-homeless in 24-hour internet cafes. Furthermore, those workers are excluded from the national employment insurance scheme. The misery of those homeless stricken workers received national attention when the Anti-Poverty Campaign and several labor unions set up a camp to support homeless workers in a district of Tokyo. Such activities for homeless workers successfully made the deteriorating employment and poverty problem visible to the public. However, impacts on women temporary workers are barely visible in the media and hardly discussed in the mainstream labor movements, despite the fact that 70% of temporary workers are women. It is true that only a few women registered to stay in the camp: more sensitive and careful measures would be needed for women. However, we also think that the deep-rooted gender bias still prevents the media, policy makers and union activists from addressing fundamental problems of irregular employment.

Dispatching companies have targeted women since the Temporary Work Law was first enacted in 1985, the same year the Equal Opportunity Law was enacted. At that time only 26 work categories were specified in which employment of temporary workers was allowed. Temporary work was depicted as a freer working style suitable for women, and many women in fact found the temporary work an attractive option, because it provided relatively high hourly wage compared to low-paid part-time jobs available for women with family responsibilities. Although the Equal Opportunity Law prohibited gender-based discrimination, equal treatment was ensured only for women who could be as competitive as men and bear long-hours, moreover binding work that was hardly compatible with family responsibilities. However, when employment of temporary workers was allowed for most industries as of the 1999 amendment, employers have increasingly replaced regular workers with temporary workers as a measure to cut labor costs. Hourly wages of temporary workers were also suppressed. It was only when a large number of young male workers were employed as temporary workers as of the 2004 amendment which allowed employment of temporary workers in the manufacturing industry, that unstable low-paid and insecure working conditions of temporary workers became a social issue. And yet, problems facing women workers are often regarded as less serious or negligible since women are supposedly the secondary earner in the family. In spite of this view, an increasing number of women have been supporting themselves and families.

**Conclusion: Deepening poverty among women**

While the recent financial crisis is affecting Japanese women workers just as much as male workers, economic insecurity of women in one of the wealthiest nations in the world is hardly new. It is the product of institutions set up in the 1980s to promote certain gender roles, including the pension and tax systems that encourage women to be economically dependent on husbands and the informalization of workers originally targeting women. As the economy declines, the social security has deteriorated due to the neo-liberal policies, furthermore informal safety nets provided through family and the community have also been weakened, poverty among women has deepened. Currently 74% of people under the poverty line are women, and their economic hardship often relates to gender-based violence and affects children. Yet the idea that women should be supported by men who are the primary breadwinners held by policy makers and mainstream labor activists, still makes women's poverty invisible and unaddressed. Additionally, employment opportunities are particularly limited for certain groups of women such as migrant women, women with disabilities and lesbian and transgender women. Recently some women's groups have set up a Women's Anti-Poverty Network to provide support for women in poverty and to advocate for women's economic security. We would like to take this opportunity to strengthen our activities through networking with women's groups in East Asia.

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