

Hiroko Ihara Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

OSAKA--For half a century, Emiko Takenaka, 80, has led the charge to improve the working environment of Japanese women through lectures and publications.

Although her ultimate goal of achieving equality of the sexes by departing from conventional gender role models is still a work in progress, her insightful theories have helped female labor union leaders win better pay, institutionalize childcare leave and achieve equal opportunity.

Although she retired from teaching in 2002 and is now a professor emeritus of Osaka City University, the soft spoken but energetic Takenaka is still in demand as a theoretician.

Takenaka also served as director of the Osaka Prefectural Center for Youth and Gender Equality, better known as Dawn Center, from 2001 to 2007.

To sum up her career, she recently published the book "Fifty years of women's labor issues: How theories and movements have worked in tandem."

The first half of the book is a chronology of her work that describes how her theories have informed debates on women's labor issues among union leaders, government officials and labor experts from the 1960s until today.

"I didn't want my theories to be limited to academia, but to work in reality," Takenaka said. "Japanese women activists are doing more and have become more convincing. It makes me proud. If they can't solve a problem in Japan, they take it to the international community [including U.N.-affiliated meetings] and bring that feedback home."

The latter half of the book includes essays written by members of Kansai Onna no Rodo Mondai Kenkyu-kai, a group of female activists in the Kansai region with whom Takenaka had worked since the early 1970s.

Tomoko Goka, a former labor union leader who has worked with Takenaka since 1966 and wrote a chronology of their activities in the book, said that Takenaka had advised many people about labor problems.

"From speaking at gatherings, she's learned from participants what to do next," Goka said. "We in Osaka took the initiative nationwide to fight for better pay based on her theories and expanded our activities nationwide. An activist who won a labor-related lawsuit told me she drew on Ms. Takenaka's theories in presenting her argument in court."

Takenaka said her work stems from her own experience.

Graduating from a girls' high school after World War II, Takenaka decided to study economics. "I learned that Japan had been driven to go to war for economic reasons, so I decided to learn economics, although almost no women studied it at the time," she said.

In 1955, she married a Korean political activist who came to Japan seeking asylum during the Korean War.

"As my husband had no regular income, I had no choice but to become the breadwinner," she said. "After our son was born, I needed to spend more time caring for my family and had much less time to study. I noticed many women had similar problems. I also wanted to rectify wage discrimination [between women and men]."

On average, women were paid 67.8 percent of what men made in 2008, according to Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry statistics. But the ratio was only 43 percent just after World War II, Takenaka said.

The wage disparity had already been pointed out in Europe after World War I. During that war, many women worked on behalf of men who were sent to battle, and more people became conscious of the problem.

In the 1960s and '70s, Takenaka primarily focused on the issue of unequal pay.

"Labor unions ignored the issue initially as it was thought that female workers were generally unreliable and deserved less pay. But they couldn't commit to working as many hours as men because they had to look after children and had chores at home," she said. "I stressed that housework and labor should get equal consideration. I always have emphasized this point."

With the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986, Takenaka began to stress the importance of protecting women along with calls for equality.

"Some people reacted negatively to my ideas at first," she said. "Women need protection as they care for their families. They can't work the same as men--such as long overtime hours--even though they're given equal chances and want to work equally. I stressed that we should seek equal results by changing gender roles."

In 1995 unpaid work, such as care of children and the elderly people, became the focus at the U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing.

"At the conference, it was said that women tend to do much more unpaid work. It was epoch-making," she said.

From the early 1990s to 2000, equal pay for equally work was also sought. The goal, however, remains unfulfilled, Takenaka said.

In 1999, the International Labor Organization proposed "decent work" as its primary goal. Takenaka thinks the idea indicates how to advance welfare worldwide in the 21st century.

"The goal is to obtain work with dignity," she said. "It suggests that the labor-oriented society of the 20th century should be shifted to a care-oriented society in the 21st century. In going to work in the 20th century, we cut into the time we could spend providing care. Although care is essential for human life, it's an obstacle in a labor-oriented society. Unlike labor, its efficiency can't be evaluated.

"Governments are responsible for changing the 20th century social framework in which men were positioned as the paid breadwinners and women as unpaid caregivers to a new flexible work system in which both men and women have time to care for their families."

Each nation can develop its own system. For people who want to provide care themselves, the Dutch model may work, she said.

In the model, people have the right to allocate part of their labor time to providing care. With their employment guaranteed, they temporarily shift to working shorter hours, and afterward, they return to their regular schedule.

"Without caregivers at home, children are neglected and the elderly are regarded as a nuisance and treated badly," she said. "Building and following international standards for work and care is a positive element of globalization."

Labor regulations have been relaxed since the mid-1990s amid globalization to increase flexible but irregular employment of breadwinners.

"At such a time, the equal treatment of regular and irregular workers should be considered, but Japan fails to do so," she said. "Employers in Japan have guaranteed the employment of breadwinners, and that has worked so far. Unfortunately, Japan therefore rigidly maintains the divided gender role system or the breadwinner model regarding tax and social insurance, although more women are going into the labor market, including many out of financial necessity.

"Many irregular workers are paid much less and their employment is unstable, and many women are irregular workers. They're paid little and will end up living in poverty in old age."

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