

## **Gender Issues from the Perspective of Dutch Labor System**

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When discussing gender issues, I should mention a work-sharing system in the Netherlands. This system was introduced at the time of severe economic recession in the early 1980s during which the unemployment rate was as high as 12%. To overcome the problem, in 1982 the Wassenaar Agreement was concluded between the government, labor unions and employers' organizations. Following revision of the labor law in 1996 and establishment of the working hours adjustment law in 2000, the work-sharing system was fully launched in the country. The system's mainstay lies in 1) reduction of working hours and 2) introduction of part-time work.

Reduction of working hours is implemented in order to stabilize employment in economic recession. In a typical case, eight hours per worker is reduced to six. A government's permission is required to introduce this system, because workers actually have no choice between shorter working hours or unemployment.

The part-time working system in the Netherlands is well-prepared unlike in Japan. In the Netherlands, it is very common to work just four weekdays, or 32 hours. Most people spend the rest weekday enjoying their hobbies or interacting with their families. In addition, flex-time is common, enabling workers to decide on their own when to work. Moreover, both full-time and part-time workers are treated as permanent staff, which means that they are equally paid per hour, and obtain the same level of benefits, such as days-off and bonuses, depending on their working hours. The idea is that the same working conditions are given for the same work. However, if a temporary employment agency is involved, the hourly payment that the worker gains is lower by a few percentage points.

As for the two points mentioned above, both men and women enjoy equal rights. The reality is, however, in a typical case of a family with a child, the mother works part time two or three days a week, while the father works four days a week. As a result, the amount of household chores performed by women is slightly higher than that by men. This type of working style is seen at both private companies and government institutions, which is new to me.

The system is effective not only in stabilizing domestic employment, but also in increasing the time a family can spend together and in ensuring that household chores are shared equally between men and women.

My brother-in-law and his wife had a baby girl last year. Until then, they both had worked five days a week, but they now work only four days a week. They set each of their

days off on different weekdays, and use a child care center on the other three days. On the days the baby stays at the center, my sister-in-law takes the baby to the center in the morning, when my brother-in-law has already begun to work, using flex-time. In the evening, he picks her up. This way of working enables both fathers and mothers to be fully engaged in household chores and child-raising. Additionally, if both parents work and leave their children at a child care center, they may be eligible to receive a government child care allowance as part of the social security system according to their income.



It's 16:00. Using flex-time, my brother-in-law finishes work early four days a week. He's picking up his daughter at the child care center. Many fathers like him are actively engaged in child-raising, and the social environment supports such fathers.

When I take my son to and from school every day, I often see fathers do the same. In Japan, it is often assumed that mothers should handle the school-related needs. But in the Netherlands fathers share that responsibility equally with mothers. Moreover, for children whose parents cannot pick them up after school due to work, schools cooperate with child care centers. Specifically, a child care center picks up registered children at the school, and their parents pick them up at the center as soon as they finish work. In this way, well-established social security measures exist for the sake of children. Furthermore, almost all towns have large facilities or natural parks that people can use for a few euros a day, or sometimes free of charge. Children enjoy themselves surrounded by nature.

Thanks to this type of interaction between children and parents, and due to social support, the Netherlands boasts first place in the ranking of countries where children feel happy.