

Japan's Mothers Go Back to Work, but Find the Opportunities Lacking

TOKYO — When Hiromi Otsuzuki joined the Japanese software company Isana.net as human resources manager four years ago, she was the only part-time employee.

Working just 15 hours a week so that she could care for her stepson made Ms. Otsuzuki an outcast in a country that is notorious for the long hours office workers spend at their desks.

Her colleagues called her “part-no obasan,” or part-time auntie. Despite being a specialist, she was asked to organize bags for recycling.

“Within the company, nobody would accept me,” Ms. Otsuzuki, 48, said.

Things are better now. She is no longer the only part-time worker in the office, and she has been promoted.

Judging by the numbers, things are looking up for other mothers in the Japanese work force. According to a government survey released in July, nearly 71 percent of women with children were working, as of Japan's most recent fiscal year, which ended in March. That is the highest level on record, and a 14-percentage-point increase since 2004.

But the figures mask some major problems with the quality of work available to working mothers.

Under pressure at home to maintain their child-rearing responsibilities, many professionally minded mothers are opting for part-time work. In Japan, that means accepting meager benefits, little job security, few opportunities for advancement and pay that is often so low that women's rights advocates have described it as exploitation.

Adapted from *The New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2018