

Women's group aims to narrow wage gap

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Inspired by the basic principle of equal pay for equal work, a group of working women in Osaka is gearing up to pressure the government to narrow the gap in wages between male and female employees.

The Working Women's Network, a civic group formed by female workers in Osaka in 1995, is putting together a report on sexual discrimination in the workplace to be distributed in November to members of the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

CEDAW, comprising 23 experts on women's issues from around the world, monitors the implementation of measures to eliminate discrimination against women in countries that ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Japan signed in 1985.

Working conditions for women have improved since the Equal Employment Opportunity Law took effect in 1986.

The equal employment law bans sexual discrimination in the workplace, but the group says the government should

take additional steps to prevent indirect discrimination.

"We will point out that Japan needs to create a law to guarantee equal pay for equal jobs and establish a system to evaluate employees without gender bias," said Shizuko Koedo, chairwoman of the group, which has 800 members nationwide.

According to the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, full-

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time female workers in 2007 earned on average 66.9 percent of what men earned.

This gap can be attributed to the relative scarcity of women in managerial positions. Women also tend to have shorter careers with companies, often leaving when they marry or have children.

But Koedo said the wage gap is also being caused by a discriminatory dual-track career system that usually places men on the fast track to the executive suite and women on

the path to low-paying clerical positions.

The system has been criticized by experts as an indirect form of discrimination against women.

If there is a law that clearly stipulates the equal pay for equal work concept and employers evaluate workers more fairly, indirect discrimination through the dual-track system could be prevented, Koedo said.

To that end, the WWN plans to submit the report and lobby CEDAW members in Geneva in November, when they hold a working group meeting.

CEDAW requires member countries to report on working conditions for women every four years and to issue recommendations for improvements.

The sixth and latest report compiled by Japan and submitted to CEDAW in April 2008 will be reviewed in New York in July 2009.

In the report, the government claims that the equal pay for equal work rule has been implemented according to Article 4 of the Labor Standard Law, which bans sexually discriminatory wages. However, it admits there remains a wage gap between men and women and encourages employers to take action to narrow the gap.