

The Nikkei Online Edition, October 4, 2024

“WOMEN’S INCREASING PRESENCE IN CORPORATE LEGAL AFFAIRS”

Women lawyers are becoming increasingly important in corporate legal affairs. Medium-sized law firms with a large number of women are increasing their presence, and large firms are also rushing to increase the ratio of women. There is also a growing trend among foreign clients to avoid male-only teams of lawyers. The gender gap in income has been nearly eliminated for in-house corporate lawyers. There are those who say, “The diversity of human resources enhances the quality of legal advice and judgment.”

Diversity is its strength

“The emphasis on diversity among attorneys has resulted in more diverse opinions, and as a result, better quality advice,” said Ayuko Nemoto, an attorney who founded Aquaxis Law Office (Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo) in 2023. The firm is headed by a woman, which is rare for a firm in Japan that handles corporate law affairs. The 14 attorneys in the group are split in number of male and female attorneys, and are diverse in age, specialty, and background. Emphasis is placed on creating a team that understands each other’s circumstances, such as childcare, and that feels comfortable enough to speak their mind freely and honestly. Multiple attorneys take on a single case and follow up with each other when a lawyer with childcare responsibilities is unable to respond to an urgent business trip. Ayuko Nemoto added, “Another clear advantage is that we are more likely to be chosen by foreign companies that make diversity a requirement in their choice of law firms.”

According to Innovation Platform for Business Legal (Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo), which provides advice on law firm management, stated that in the top 50 firms with the largest number of lawyers, at over half of these firms the percentage of women attorneys is on the rise. As of May 2024, Kensei Sogo Law Office (Kyoto, Japan) ranked first with a 37% female ratio. Attorney Seiji Makino, the representative of the firm, said, “When you look at things like working for many years at your firm, educational achievements, and social skills equally, you naturally get a higher percentage of women. At this firm, the lawyers have managed a way to have lawyers not work long hours and still be able to provide quick responses to their clients. For example, work assigned to young associates is checked in detail by the supervising attorney at a designated time, regardless of their progress. The firm has achieved a good balance between ease of work and quality of work, and in the 14 years since the firm was established in October 2010, there have been no associates who have left the firm.

Major firms also offer childcare leave programs

Large firms with more than 500 attorneys have a strong image of being male-dominated and hard-working, but recently they have been increasing the percentage of women in their firms. Mori Hamada & Matsumoto has had two women promoted to partner in the past three years who are involved in the management of the firm, but in 2024, six women were promoted at once. This is believed to be the result of a childcare leave system that guarantees one month's

full basic salary regardless of gender. Attorney Yoshi Shirakawa says, “It has reduced turnover due to work hours and other factors, making it easier to secure candidates for promotion.”

Pressure from clients

One of the reasons why major firms are focusing on increasing the ratio of women is due in part to the internationalization of their business operations. Attorney Yoshi Shirakawa noted, “We're getting more requests from foreign companies that are asking us to do things [on diversity] for them.” It has become routine for foreign clients to check the ratio of women in the firm as a whole and for each matter, and team compositions are increasingly being reviewed at the request of such clients.

“Easy to work with” in-house lawyers

The presence of women lawyers is even higher among in-house lawyers who work for companies and other organizations. According to the Japan In-House Lawyers Association (Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo), the percentage of women lawyers will stabilize at around 40% after 2012. A survey conducted in August by the association’s Diversity Study Group showed that the difference in annual income between men and women was relatively small and almost equal. In-house attorneys are considered to have a more flexible work schedule than law firms. This is because they have access to the workplace’s childcare support system and other programs, and they get the same amount of time off and work hours as other employees. Lawyers in law firms work as sole proprietors, and it is not unusual for their work to extend into the late hours of the night, with some cases requiring them to return on their days off.

Balancing family and work

Harumi Yamamoto, an attorney at Deloitte Tohmatsu Group said, “The advantage of not having to carry the workload of an individual, especially for women, is that it makes it easier for them to balance work and family.” Harumi Yamamoto herself was able to work in a managerial position before giving birth and was able to work at her discretion, which made it easier for her to balance the two.

There are an increasing number of cases of in-house attorneys moving into management and executive positions in companies, such as Kotoko Kawaguchi, who became a senior executive officer at KFC Holdings Japan in 2024. However, although the opportunities for women lawyers is increasing, overall, the gender gap is far from being eliminated. According to the Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA), women account for about 20% of the approximately 45,000 lawyers in Japan. A 2020 study by JFBA found that women lawyers earned about 2/3 as much as men. It is believed that pregnancy and childbirth have interrupted careers and limited work hours due to the burden of housework, childcare, and nursing care.

To begin with, fewer women than men aspire to become lawyers. The percentage of women who have taken or passed the bar exam is around 30%. Kyoko Ishida, professor of sociology of law at Waseda University Graduate School said, “Women, even if they do well in law school, tend not to be so concerned about obtaining a license that they have to waste their time to get

because of their parents' wishes or other reasons." Companies are eager to hire law school graduates, which is one reason why they aren't necessarily attached to the bar exam. Akira Nomura of the Corporate Legal Innovation Foundation notes, "With the globalization of legal matters and the increasing number of requests involving foreign capital, it has become difficult to run a business without women." He also emphasized, "The creation of a flexible work environment directly leads to the recruitment and retention of talented human resources, both male and female, which in turn leads to the competitiveness of law firms and corporations."
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Translated by Aquaxis Law Office