

Top shops treat staff like dogs

By GEOFF BOTTING

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When Shukan Post dispatches a reporter to snoop around the inside of several Ginza boutiques run by the top fashion labels, he feels like he may as well be inside an alien spaceship.

The reporter, whose magazine's readership is largely middle-aged, middle-class and male, is first astounded by the astronomical prices —



handbags selling for hundreds of thousands of yen a piece and business suits for a cool million. Then there's the serene, rarefied atmosphere at these establishments, a world away from a typical suburban shopping center.

A big factor of this sense of otherworldliness at these shops, operated directly by the likes of Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Cartier and Bvlgari, are the sales staff — mostly female and invariably beautiful and immaculately turned out in the high-end gear of their employers.

However, the feminine ideal seen so clearly on the surface belies a stark reality underneath. The working conditions of these women are downright draconian, Shukan Post discovers. Pay is barely above subsistence level, opportunities for advancement are limited, and much of the work requires hard, physical labor.

"I have to stand all day in heels, so my feet throb with pain," grumbles Akemi Noda, aged 28, who works full time for the retailer of a famous brand that

the magazine doesn't identify. "Half my day is spent dealing with customers. The rest of the time, I'm carrying in stock or doing inventory."

She adds that the frequent lifting of heavy boxes has given her a bad back. "I can't stick on a plaster to relieve the pain because of its smell. Some girls just collapse on the floor during their breaks," she says.

The irony is all too clear — businesses that cultivate an image of languid opulence are in fact cheapskates that work their staff to the bone.

As for wages, few sales staff members, including managers, earn incomes of more than ¥200,000 a month. Akemi's is a paltry ¥190,000.

"Even if I were promoted to manager, I'd only make a few thousand yen extra a month," she shrugs.

Akemi, with her full-time company employee status, is one of the lucky ones. The brand retailers rely heavily on contracted and temp workers. At one boutique, for instance, of a total female retailing staff of 40, a mere 15 are employed directly by the company full time. Another 15 are contracted as part-timers — with no benefits and little in the way of job security — while 10 have been dispatched from temp agencies.

"My gross annual income last year was exactly ¥2.4 million, with a monthly take-home amount of ¥170,000 a month," huffs Kyoko Suzuki, aged 23, a part-timer for another brand retailer. During the interview, the magazine notices that she's carrying a handbag made by her employer that sells for around ¥150,000 — nearly a month's salary for her.

The other thing about Kyoko that the magazine notices is that she's an outstanding specimen of a young woman. Not only does she have movie-star good looks, but her two years of study in Britain has given her an impressive English-speaking ability.

While in university, her first career choice was stewardess, second was boutique staff. Now, after a year on the job, she already thinks she should have

considered other options.

As she puts it, "My job may be high class, but my lifestyle is low class."

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