

Harnessing the Talent of Women: Gender Equality in a Graying Society

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Demographers, economists and organizations that track population trends all point to the fact that Japan is experiencing noteworthy demographic changes that will have a significant impact on Japan's economy—and profound implications for Japanese society.

The number of aged in Japan is on the rise even as the birth rate is declining. At the present time, Japan's birth rate is at an all time low of 1.29 percent, due in large part to long work hours, lack of sufficient child care and nursing care, and the high cost of living. At the same time, thanks to a healthy Japanese diet and relatively high standard of living, the average life expectancy for Japanese men is 75 and the average life expectancy for women is 85. In fact, Japanese women have had the world's longest life expectancy every year since 1985. According to a recent Washington Post report, 44.7 percent of Japan's population will be 60 years or older by 2040, compared with 23.9 percent in 2000. Not surprisingly, many of Japan's older men and women are infirm and require long-term medical care. They are also retired and drawing down their savings. With their declining household wealth, this growing elderly population can be expected to require increased government safety net expenditures for healthcare and social services.

Although other countries, including the United States, are experiencing similar demographic changes, the proportion of elderly in these nations is smaller. (For example, 26 percent of the U.S. population will be 60 or older in 2040 vs. 16.3 percent currently). That's why all eyes are on Japan—one of the first developed countries to experience these demographic changes to this extent—to observe how the country can minimize negative impacts on its domestic economy.

One solution is to harness the talent of Japanese women whose employment is often characterized by an M-curve: Women work full-time until marriage or childbirth, drop out of the workforce temporarily to raise their families, and then return to part-time work after their children are grown. According to Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 40 percent of Japan's workforce is female. These women make an important contribution to the Japanese economy, but find it difficult to stay in workforce due to the challenges of balancing the demands of the workplace and their family responsibilities. When the women are working, they typically outperform their male counterparts (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Women's Activities and Enterprise Operating Results, 2003). Some companies, such as Citigroup Corporation, which funded "Women in Politics and Public Service," a December 2004 program in Japan that focused on the role of women in Japan, have recognized the potential benefit of this untapped resource and instituted policies and practices including flexible hours and educational programs to help their female employees balance their work and family responsibilities.

The stereotype of the Japanese wife who has responsibility for housework, childcare and care for elderly parents is at the heart of the problem. In addition, government policies have not kept up with the growing number of families who decide for financial reasons that two incomes are necessary. Japan may no longer be able to afford to continue the M-curve phenomenon.

Admittedly, advancing gender equality as a strategy to respond to the challenges of demographic change requires a high level of commitment and action by many constituencies such as policy makers, employers, educators and Japanese men and women. During the December 2004 visit to Japan, which was sponsored by Citigroup, a delegation of seven U.S. women who serve in leadership posts as elected officials or public servants spent seven days examining with their counterparts a number of Japan's pressing social policy issues. Group members participated in frank discussions with city, prefectural and central government officials, NGO officers, and company employees about the history of women's suffrage in Japan, the status of working women in Japan, the economic implications of Japan's aging society and its low birthrate, and education reform.

The delegation observed the following:

- Women in Japan and the United States share similar histories in the advancement of suffrage and equal employment opportunities;
- Japanese women have made impressive strides in pursuit of elected office, and are increasingly participating in public service;
- Women in both Japan and the United States are challenged to balance family and work responsibilities;
- Japanese government, private companies and individuals need to implement policies and practices to promote gender equality.

The U.S. group learned that the Japanese government recognizes the importance of gender equality and has placed a high priority on achieving this goal. The government of Japan has promulgated a number of laws, including the 1999 Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society. In 2001 the government also established the Council for Gender Equality and Gender Equality Bureau within the Cabinet Office. All of these measures are a good start.

At the top of the Cabinet Office's list of priorities for the Basic Plan for Gender Equality is this objective: "Expand women's participation in policy decision-making processes." This will be important to bring to the policy arena diverse opinions, perspectives and experiences that will lead to new policies that support women and their families and bring about change in Japan's social system. During the December 2004 visit, the U.S. delegation learned about pioneers who laid the foundation for Japanese women to participate in politics and public service, such as Ichikawa Fusae, who served as Japan's first female Diet member. Ichikawa Fusae's legacy continues through the activities of the foundation she established, Fusen Kaikan. The foundation's purpose is to offer women political education and facilitate their participation in politics and policymaking. With the recent election of five female governors in Japan, as well as a number of women who are mayors and other locally elected officials, there is evidence that progress is being made. The number of women elected to national office is also increasing along with the number of female candidates.

In December 2000, the Cabinet outlined a long-term plan to implement policies that will promote a gender equal society by 2010. The Basic Plan for Gender Equality also includes concrete measures "to be implemented by the end of fiscal 2005." This is an ambitious undertaking that will require input and cooperation from men and women in all sectors of

Japanese society. From educators to elected officials, and community-based volunteers to company workers, the collective efforts of these constituencies will result in important changes for Japanese society and Japan's economy.