

Despite economic need, women continue to be underrepresented

By HARUMI OZAWA
AFP-Jiji

In next month's general election, politicians — nearly all of them men — will make promises on what they will do to fix the economic morass, but very few of them will mention the role of women in the workforce.

The country's problems are well known: more older people are living longer as the workforce that supports them gets smaller, resulting in rising welfare costs and a shrinking tax base.

An influx of immigrants would boost the number of workers, but Japan has little appetite for migration on a European scale. Observers say the answer lies within — get more of the nation's women to work.

Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, said last month that women could rescue Japan's chronically underperforming economy if more of them had jobs.

A Goldman Sachs report in 2010 estimated the country's gross domestic product could jump by a staggering 15 percent if female participation in the workforce — currently at around 60 percent — was to match the 80 percent of men who are employed.

The report said seven out of 10 women leave the workforce after giving birth to their first child. And only 65 percent of women with a college-level education have jobs.

Across the board, female employees make only 60 percent of what men earn, according to labor ministry data, in part due to the larger number of women part-time workers.

Although staying at home is a positive choice for some women, commentators say it underscores a lack of opportunities for others.

Japan is ranked an embarrassing 101st out of 135 countries this year in the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report, down three places from last year. Its near neighbor, China, is in 69th place.

"The gender issue is really ignored in Japan," said Kaori Sasaki, president and CEO of a consulting firm named ewoman.

"Japan was strong for five, six decades after World War II because a certain

group of men occupied top positions in the fields of economy, media and politics. This boys' network shared the same values and made decisions unopposed."

But its failure to adapt to the challenges of the last 20 years means Japan has stood still. Government data show women account for a mere 1.2 percent of executives at 3,600 listed companies.

Sasaki said Japanese men need to realize that closing the gender gap is no longer a rights issue.

"This is a management and growth strategy," she said, adding scandal-hit companies including Olympus, which concealed more than ¥100 billion in losses, and Tokyo Electric Power Co., operator of the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, would have better dealt with their respective disasters had they espoused more gender diversity in their senior management.

"When you try to manage a crisis, create products or design services, diversity really counts," Sasaki said.

Saadia Zahidi, the World Economic Forum's head of promoting gender parity and female leaders in the corporate world, is in agreement.

"How is innovation going to happen if you have the same people in exactly the same situation as in the past? So where are the new ideas going to come from?" she asked during the launch of the Japan Gender Parity Task Force in Tokyo on Thursday.

Masahiro Yamada, a professor of family sociology at Chuo University, said that just to survive, the country needs women to become workers and realize the financial gain that this entails.

"Unless more women work and get their own income, they cannot start a family," Yamada said. "Without women joining the workforce, the government's tax revenue won't pick up (because the population will continue to shrink)."

A lack of child care facilities makes returning to work difficult for many women. Nursery places are at a premium and in any case are only usually available during the day.

For some women, the problem is the incompatibility of family life and Japan's notoriously long working hours, where after-work socializing with colleagues is almost compulsory.

Yet there are pockets of change, said Hodaka Yamaguchi, 38, whose Tokyo-based IT employer is more sympathetic than many to the needs of its female workforce. Yamaguchi gave birth to a girl in 2009 and came back to a promotion after a 15-month maternity leave. She said her productivity has not fallen even though she is now working six-hour days.

"In this company, working women are well-protected," Yamaguchi said.

Her company allows parents of either sex to take a total of up to six years parental leave — well beyond the 18 months of maternity leave allowed by law. Although anything above the statutory period is unpaid, the employee's job is guaranteed.

Sasaki of ewoman agreed that things are better than they were, but that problems still remain.

"Many young working women say they no longer feel the glass ceiling," she said. "But I tell them it's still there. It just moved up."

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