



Working families: Naoki Atsumi (second from right), an expert on work-life balance issues at Toray Corporate Business Research Inc., shares episodes of his parenting experience during a Tokyo symposium organized last week by the ACCJ-Soft Landing Task Force. The symposium, titled "The Next Stage: Families that Work!," also featured moderator Akiko Nakajo of Waseda University Graduate School (left) and University of Nevada, Las Vegas researcher Mary Beth Horiai. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTOS

Secret to work-life balance vital for Japan

By TOMOKO OTAKE

Staff writer

While the phrase "work-life balance" has gained some currency in Japan recently, there is still a long way to go before people here can find the right mix between careers and personal life, due in part to cultural stereotypes about gender roles, participants at an international symposium in Tokyo said last week.

The conference, titled "The Next Stage: Families that Work!" was organized by the Soft Landing Task Force of the American Chamber of Commerce Japan's Corporate Social Responsibility



Committee.



Susan H. Roos

The event, which featured a speech by Susan H. Roos, the wife of U.S. Ambassador John V. Roos, was hosted by The Japan Times and its parent company, Nifco Inc.

In her keynote speech, Roos, who came to Japan with her husband a year ago, highlighted some cultural differences in support for working mothers in the U.S. and Japan, citing a number of statistics and her own experience juggling career and parenting.

"In my own life, I was inspired by the women's movement," Roos, a mother of two who has worked as a lawyer for 28 years, said as her husband looked on. "I didn't want to make the choice about having a career and having a family. I wanted to have it all. After all, men didn't have to make that choice."

In particular, Roos, who specializes in employment and labor law, said that while the U.S. "does not have a perfect system," it has an "elaborate system of federal and state laws that support women, prohibit discrimination and promote fair pay."

In addition, some U.S. companies have instituted programs that help working mothers balance work and life, as seen in reports by magazines and women's groups that track and rank companies according to the way they treat females in the workplace, she said.

The Bank of America "estimates that 80 percent of its employees, both men and women, used some sort of flexible work schedules last year," she said. "The Bank of America also offers a four- to 16-week sabbatical program of pay and benefits, and for high-performing women, they may take a career break of up to five years and re-enter the workplace at the bank where they left off."

While the lack of role models is a problem both in the U.S. and Japan, it is essential for Japan to change cultural stereotypes that dictate what women and men should do, she said. In this regard, in the U.S., numerous movies and TV shows — ranging from "Mr. Mom," "Full House" and "The Cosby Show" — have helped raise the profile of men who play active roles in families, Roos said.

In the second part of the conference, two Japanese authorities on promoting active participation of men in family life — an area where Japan lags behind many other developed countries — took center stage.

Tetsuya Ando, founder of Fathering Japan, a Tokyo-based nonprofit group that provides parenting and homemaking workshops for men, said the key is to send out the message to the nation's dads that parenting is not only fun but also helpful in improving their business skills.

"Parenting is a 'Project X' with a time limit," Ando said, citing the popular TV show that features successful business projects completed by dedicated, mostly male, corporate warriors.

He said parenting can help men build a network of friends in their communities, helping to enrich their retirement, while meeting the tough daily demands of babies can enhance their communications and time-management skills.

Naoki Atsumi, director of the diversity and work-life balance research department at Toray Corporate Business Research, a think tank affiliated with the Tokyo-based textile and chemical firm Toray Industries Inc., shared some of his parenting failures.

A father of two preschoolers with a working wife, Atsumi said he struggled to fit into the mostly female parenting community when he took child care leave four years ago. Isolated and without help, he said he almost had "paternity blues."

"I don't like the term 'ikuji kyugo' (literally, taking time off for parenting)," he said. "Many of my male friends wrongly think it's just a long vacation, that it's time for relaxation. They told me, 'I'm jealous. You can read so many books. You can go to so many different places.' They have no idea! I couldn't go anywhere outside a 200-meter radius from my home. It was so hard I wished I was working."

But such hardships, Atsumi went on, are an important experience for those who are in the majority in the workplace.

"The experiences you have as a minority — the misery that comes with it and the (rare) kindness you receive — help you later on when you get back into the majority," he said. "You can be more considerate to members of the minority. It's a very important quality you can acquire" by being a man who actively participates in parenting.

The half-day event also featured a concert by singer Helen Morrison and a communications skills workshop presented by the Ongakuza Musical/R Co.

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