

IFE/Media & Technology Roundtable

Public Policy Dinner

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Womenomics Makes Headway

Kathy Kemper

Founder and CEO, Institute for Education

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Japan is getting serious about gender equality, and, despite doubters, recent signs point to progress.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made empowerment for women one of his top three reform “arrows” aimed at rekindling the economy two years ago and set about making policies to boost female participation in Japan’s workforce. His push for equality is a win-win idea, since Japan has a shrinking population and needs skilled people to fill jobs, including those in executive suites. Japanese women are among the best educated in the world.

Skeptics doubted that Abe’s “Womenomics” could overcome the traditional barriers society and businesses set for Japanese women who work outside of the home.

Two years later, however, the effort is showing signs of success.

Nearly 1 million women have joined the labor force.

As the Washington Post reported October 7, Japan, with more parental leave and other benefits, has just moved ahead of the United States in employment of women after years of lagging behind. The 2014 numbers show 64% of Japanese women ages 15-64 were in the workforce, compared with 63% of American women.

Japan’s economy, which has been underperforming for more than a decade, could be a major beneficiary. Goldman Sachs has reported that fuller participation by women could boost Japan’s total output by as much as 13%.

What’s more, Japan has expanded its support for women to include those in countries around the globe, with foreign aid for education and development. Tokyo in August hosted a second World Assembly for Women, a gathering from 40 nations, to discuss the empowerment of women. Addressing the

gathering, Abe said true reforms would come only as women have leadership roles in many fields and as men adopt new views.

Abe’s ambitious goals include having women in 30 percent of government management posts by the time Tokyo hosts the Olympics in 2020. His government is also pressuring companies with 301 or more employees to set goals for hiring and promoting women.

To that end the government has:

- Increased childcare leave benefits from 50% to 67% of prior wages. Because these payments are tax free, the actual benefit is now 80% of the parent’s working salary.
- Offered subsidies and tax incentives for companies deemed “women-friendly.”
- Encouraged greater flexibility for employees, including teleworking.
- Launched a campaign to eliminate the long waiting lists for child-care programs in the next two years.

One remaining challenge is that employees in Japan traditionally work exceptionally long hours, making it difficult for mothers with young children to stay in the workforce. As a result, women have typically left the workforce when they have children.

The Tokyo conference in August took that obstacle head on by urging a whole new approach for the workplace. The “to-do list” issued after the meeting starts with a call to readjust “Work-Life Management” and convince both men and women that “long working hours have many disadvantages for both societies and companies.”