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Japan: culture change required

By Lindsay Whipp

In 1986, as the world watched Japan's soaring economy in awe, the government introduced an employment law that addressed equal opportunities on the basis of gender for the first time.

This encouraged Machiko Osawa, a professor at Japan Women's University and a specialist in labour economics, to return from the US with her American husband in the hope that she would see women gaining more career opportunities in her homeland.

A quarter of a century on, the economic tide has turned, but women in high-ranking positions are still few and far between.

Indeed, government figures show that just 6.2 per cent of women working in the private sector have positions as section managers or higher. And, despite women accounting for half of Japan's university graduates, within the central government they hold just 2.2 per cent of jobs at director level or above, according to cabinet office statistics.

"I did have hope," Prof Osawa says. "[But] not much has changed. It's because society as a whole is still organised on the basis of men being the main earners and women taking care of the families. It's not just the regulation but the ideology that discourages women."

The cabinet office has a long list of targets for improving equality. Key objectives include having women occupying at least 10 per cent of section management positions in the private sector and 5 per cent of manager-level positions in central government by 2015.

Other initiatives would see an increase in the provision of childcare facilities and a marked improvement in the work/life balance for both men and women.

The lack of equal opportunities within the system is not just hurting women. Full utilisation of Japan's educated female workforce could boost economic growth by 15 per cent, according to Goldman Sachs, the investment bank. This would aid a pension system facing decline as the population shrinks.

Long, inflexible hours are often expected with a full-time job, and being assessed as not up to the challenge of balancing work and family makes it very demotivating for those who want to rejoin the career ladder, critics say.

Off-Ramps and On-Ramps Japan, a recent study for the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York-based think-tank, showed that while 77 per cent of women want to return to

work, only 43 per cent actually do so, and 49 per cent of women quit because of stunted career prospects.

Suzanne Price, who runs a consultancy for coaching leaders, employee engagement and diversity training, argues that women are often overlooked because of narrowly defined leadership profiles and the lack of a sponsor putting them forward.

Women can also be their own worst enemy, as years of being overlooked eats away at their confidence, she says. “When polled, many Japanese women say they don’t want a senior position,” Ms Price adds.

Some Japanese women, particularly those with language skills, opt to work for multinationals instead of domestic companies.

One such woman in a middle management position says she doubts she would ever return to a Japanese company.

“Policies and certain rules can be put in place, and that’s a good start, but it depends on the people implementing them,” she says. “There would need to be buy-in at a middle management level that has to deal [with staff] on a day-to-day basis.”

Being employed at a multinational also gives her the flexibility to balance her job and childcare, working at home in the evening if necessary.

Childcare is a huge problem. In Tokyo, state-run nurseries are full, have long waiting lists and often inflexible collection times. Strict licencing regulations means there are a limited number of private establishments. Babysitting or private care is also not the norm in Japan.

Yoshimi Ogawa, 46, president and one of the founders of Index, a company that develops mobile phone content, says that a woman’s biological clock can cause problems, particularly given the lack of external childcare support, whereas men can generally father a child until they are quite old.

“Men are so free in this respect,” says Ms Ogawa, who is childless. “Having even five more years [to decide to have children or not] would probably be a relief for women. Women in their mid-30s worry. If there were more examples of women who had children in their 40s, then that would become another option.”

The two big issues for the government to tackle are the long, and not necessarily productive, working hours and the record low fertility rate, argues Prof Osawa.

But what will determine success is the reaction of corporations as well as government, and the belief that pushing for better access to higher positions is not futile.

As Prof Osawa says: “It is the whole system that needs to be changed.”