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JAPANESE COMPANIES FINALLY BEGIN TAKING STEPS TO ENSURE ACTIVE ROLES FOR WOMEN

Kimie Iwata

- Japanese companies lag far behind global standards in ensuring active roles for women
- Women have for the most part achieved a balance between work and childcare, and the key issue going forward is career advancement
- It is essential that long working hours be reduced and numerical targets be set.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The Abe administration has positioned active roles for women at the core of its growth strategy, after vigorous discussions about an increased presence for women from the human rights' perspective of gender equality and from expectations that greater female participation will help curb the decline in Japan's labor force. Company managers, too, are beginning to assert that active roles for women will revitalize companies and lead to overall economic growth.

Let us begin with a look at current circumstances in Japan. The differences in the employment situations of Japanese women and their counterparts overseas are astounding. For one thing, 60% of women in Japan quit working after giving birth to their first child, while very few women in other countries completely give up work to raise their children. For another thing, the percentage of managerial positions occupied by women (10%) and the percentage of company directors who are women (1%) put Japan in the bottom class worldwide. Japan thus lags far behind its global competition in offering more opportunities to women.

Promoting active roles for women will entail addressing administrative issues (establishing daycare centers, clubs for after school activities for children, and other facilities) as well as household issues (such as men who do not commit themselves to housework or childcare), but in this paper I would like to discuss a few issues that companies should strive to resolve.

Women must be able both to continue working while raising their children and to advance their careers if they are to take on more responsible positions in companies. Until just recently, Japanese companies considered it a matter of course for women to quit their jobs once they had children, but major corporations are now introducing support measures that enable working mothers to keep their jobs even as they raise their children. To make it possible for women not just to continue working but also to advance their careers, three issues must be addressed.

(1) Changing the direction of support for working mothers

Support for working mothers heretofore has consisted primarily of exempting women from work through childcare leave and shorter working hours. This approach, however, leaves women without

significant work responsibilities and thus unable to advance their careers. Companies should regard work waivers as a bare minimum, opting instead to change course toward greater flexibility in work styles. Permitting flex time and at-home work, for instance, would enable women to perform their jobs while raising their children. Some companies that have been competing for female employees with longer childcare leave and extended periods of shorter working hours have realized their mistake and begun altering their approach.


(2) Reducing long working hours

The conventional wisdom among Japanese companies that sees overtime as an integral part of work must be changed to allow working mothers to advance their careers and men to engage in raising children. The prevailing view has favored a work style sustainable by men only because they enjoyed the support of a wife and full-time homemaker, a work style that suits neither women nor working couples. The key to reducing overtime is finding ways of working that offer high productivity per unit of time. This is a difficult issue, but there are companies that have begun taking steps to reduce overtime to almost zero.

(3) Establishing numerical targets and action plans

Eliminating real gender disparities solely by guaranteeing equal opportunities will take a frighteningly long time. I believe that numerical targets would be effective for shrinking these disparities more quickly. Rather than quotas, I would recommend a goal-and-timetable approach in which companies would set targets suited to their own circumstances and then undertake action plans (empowering women by assigning them more responsible and challenging work or positions) to achieve these targets. Major corporations and certain other companies last year began announcing numerical targets on their own initiative.

As we have seen, Japanese companies are beginning to change. This change has been mostly limited to major corporations in the Tokyo metropolitan

area, however, and has not been readily apparent among companies outside this area or among small and medium-sized enterprises. A bill mandating that companies establish their own numerical targets, something I have encouraged for many years, was submitted to the extraordinary Diet session that started in autumn 2014 but, with the Diet subsequently dissolved to clear the way for a general election, the bill was not passed. I look forward to passage of this bill in the Diet's 2015 ordinary session to change the mindsets of business managers at companies outside Tokyo and at smaller firms. 

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