

symposium on female executives

Expanding roles for working women

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The situation on gender issues may not be exactly the same in Germany and Japan, but the two countries have similar agendas; men and women must change their mentality to increase the number of female leaders, eight experts on gender issues from the two countries concluded.

The four Japanese and four Germans — a group of government officials, researchers and corporate executives — participated in the symposium “Promoting active roles of female leaders — situations and challenges in Japan and Germany,” organized by the Keizai Koho Center in Tokyo on May 20.

Current situation in Germany

The first speaker was Ute Klammer, the vice rector for Diversity Management at the University of Duisburg-Essen and chairwoman of the German government's Expert Commission on Gender Equality.

Klammer cited a government report on gender equality published in 2011, which showed female labor market participation exceeded 60 percent at that time and now stands at 66 percent.

But the number does not reflect reality as many such women have low-paying, part-time jobs, she said, adding that they are not covered by social insurance.

German women's working hours are also shorter than those in other European countries, she said.

“In no other country, except for the Netherlands, do part-time workers have hours as short as those working in Germany,” Klammer said.

Women currently occupy 28 percent of all managerial positions in Germany, which Klammer said is not enough because many of them are in jobs typically dominated by females, such as principals of kindergartens.

In Germany's top 200 companies, only 3 percent of management and executive board members are women, she said.

Managers in German companies are often expected to be on call all the time and rush into work whenever they are needed, even at night or on weekends. This makes people think men are better suited as managers, she said.



Symposium participants answer questions during a panel discussion in Tokyo on May 20. YOSHIKI MIURA

Japan's situation

Kumiko Bando, the deputy education minister, delivered a presentation on the current situation and challenges facing women in Japan.

She began by saying she has been working on gender equality since she was transferred to the Cabinet Office in 2006 and female leadership has become one of the biggest issues of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration.

She also said Japan and Germany are both facing the problem of aging societies, increasing the urgency to make use of women in the workforce.

Bando showed a graph indicating the percentage of women in managerial positions in developed countries, which showed Japan at 11.1 percent, while Europe and the U.S. are typically around 30 or 40 percent. Women held 29.9 percent of managerial positions in Germany.

One noteworthy point is that the ratio of highly educated women active in the labor market is lower than other countries, suggesting Japan is wasting women's talent more than other countries.

“Japanese females are highly competent, but society doesn't take advantage of it,” she said.

Keidanren's measures

The third speaker was Junko Nakagawa,

senior managing director, head of Internal Audit at Nomura Holdings Inc. and the women's advancement committee chairwoman of the Japan Business Federation, or Keidanren.

She showed a graph showing that the female labor participation ratio roughly correlates with global birthrates, stressing that a work-life balance is achievable.

However, the reality is that women often have little hope for promotion because they feel it is difficult to do well at both work and home. There are also few female role models and jobs often leave little room for promotion, she said.

“Companies that want to hire people with science and technology majors do not pass on female applicants, but they end up hiring more men because women choose not to major in those disciplines,” she said.

She also touched on the lack of female management in Japanese corporations. In order to improve this, companies' senior management must make a commitment and make employees aware of the importance of gender diversity in managerial positions, she said.

Keidanren posts on its website examples of the voluntary measures by companies to promote female employees to managerial positions. The federation

also holds events and other activities to provide opportunities for female executives to exchange information and network with other female executives.

German government involvement

Elke Holst, research director of gender studies at the German Institute for Economic Research, Berlin, said government intervention is probably needed to increase the number of female executives.

She cited Norway, which introduced a gender quota, requiring nearly 500 firms, including 175 listed on the Oslo bourse, to raise the proportion of women on their boards to 40 percent. Other countries, including France, Belgium, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, followed suit, she said.

The German government agreed to pass a law that will require German companies to allot 30 percent of their newly elected supervisory board seats to women from 2016 onward. Large German companies' two-tiered boards are comprised of a supervisory board and an executive board.

Currently, women account for only 4 percent of executive board members and almost zero CEOs in the top 200 companies in Germany. The percentage on supervisory boards is 15 percent.

Even this situation is “better than before,” Holst said.

She also addressed the number of female managers in engineering — as well as women working toward engineering degrees — has been on the rise.

However, “the fundamental problem is to make it possible for women to have both a career and a family,” she said.

Examining ANA's measures

Hiroko Kawamoto, a member of the board of directors, executive vice president and director for Promotion of Diversity, Operation Division, Inflight Services Center of All Nippon Airways Co., was the fifth speaker and she introduced measures taken by ANA.

Half of ANA employees are cabin attendants, which Kawamoto was, and most are women. When Kawamoto entered ANA more than 30 years ago, the retirement age for cabin attendants was 37 and it is now 60, she said.

ANA has implemented various measures to help women manage a career and a family, in order to retain employees after they marry or have children.

It offers a variety of schedules to suit the needs of working mothers such as shorter work days or fewer work days. The company also partially subsidizes child care costs.

Additionally, ANA's top management has decided that promoting women, including increasing the number of female board members, is one of the company's midterm strategies.

It has also introduced other measures such as a mentor system in which female role models mentor younger female workers.

Taisei Corp.'s situation

The sixth speaker was Tetsuya Shioiri, the manager of the Human Resources Training & Vibrant Workplace Promotion Section in the Personnel Department of the Business Administration Division of Taisei Corp. construction company.

The construction industry is typically seen as male-dominated, making it rare for a construction company to take drastic measures to promote female workers.

However, the industry may need to rely on female workers more than other industries as it is suffering a severe shortage of workers. The number of construction industry workers dropped to 5.03 million in 2012 from 6.85 million in 1997. Meanwhile, demand for construction work is expected to grow ahead of the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 and construction related to the magnetically levitated train.

Taisei Corp. began increasing the use of female workers in 2007, and since then, 20 percent of new hires have been women. Currently, the company has more women in managerial positions such as site supervisors, roles that had been dominated by men, he said.

“Recently, more and more women want to work overseas and we are ready to support them fully and already have some abroad,” he said. He did point out however, that overseas projects are mostly for infrastructure building in developing countries and women are generally not interested in such assignments.

Taisei holds seminars for female employees and their husbands because “a husband's support and understanding is very important,” Shioiri said.

German companies

Elke Benning-Rohnke, managing partner of management consulting company Benning & Company GmbH, spoke about the situation from a consultant's perspective.

She held various marketing and sales positions at Procter & Gamble and Kraft Europe, later becoming a board member at Wella AG, before founding Benning & Company.



Clockwise from top left, symposium participants from Germany and Japan: Ute Klammer, Kumiko Bando, Elke Holst, Tetsuya Shioiri, Markus Dressel, Elke Benning-Rohnke, Hiroko Kawamoto and Junko Nakagawa YOSHIKI MIURA

“I'm a career woman, but it doesn't mean I'm a good businessperson. It's just that I started my career at an American company,” she said. “In no other country can women with the ability to contribute shine as much as in the U.S.”

In Germany, then-Prime Minister Gerhard Schroder made gender diversity a priority in 2001. After 13 years, Benning-Rohnke is not very happy with the outcome.

“Half of university degree holders are women, but only 6 percent of C-level executives (CEO, COO, CFO, etc.) are women. It's nonsense,” she said.

Henkel Japan's case

The eighth speaker was Markus Dressel, HR director of Henkel Japan Ltd. Henkel AG is a Dusseldorf-based maker of consumer goods such as detergent, hair color and adhesives.

“Gender diversity is necessary for us because men cannot succeed in the business of developing and selling hair color without women,” Dressel said. “Our business is diverse.”

Globally, about 32 percent of Henkel managers are women, but only 9 percent in Japan are women, he said.

He said that the ratio of women leaving Henkel Japan is high because, according to an exit survey, women feel society expects them to take care of their families.

“I was very surprised to learn that,” he said. “It's my job to change that.”

Pros & cons on quotas

Following the presentations, a Q&A session was moderated by Keiichiro Sawa of the Mainichi Shimbun newspaper. He asked Klammer what a company can do to change the mentality that long working hours is necessary.

Klammer said the notion that managers have to be reachable at all times is dated. She noted that Volkswagen

Group made its email servers unable to forward emails to individual employees' accounts at night and weekends. Although employees were initially critical of the policy, they now accept it, she said.

Sawa then asked Nakagawa to elaborate on the statistics that the female workplace participation ratio has a roughly positive correlation with the birthrate in the world.

Nakagawa said the correlation is actually very rough, but it is clear that the female labor participation ratio does not have a negative correlation with the birthrate, and thus working women do not (statistically) decrease the number of babies.

The eight were then asked whether they supported or opposed setting quotas, noting Norway's successful implementation of one. Klammer, Holst and Benning-Rohnke were for it, while the other five opposed it.

“People tend to appoint those sharing similar traits and characteristics. Therefore, homogeneous management teams tend to remain homogeneous,” Benning-Rohnke said.

Nakagawa, meanwhile, said quotas are unnecessary because the senior management of small- and mid-size companies already have a high percentage of female executives and large companies know they need to increase female executives.

“Personnel strategies must be part of overall business strategies,” she said.

Countering that, Holst said: “Nakagawa's remarks are a fine ideal but, as an economist, I think it's impossible. If you want to achieve something within a certain time, you need pressure.”

Bando agreed pressure is needed, but the type of pressure should not only legislative, but also from society, she said. “There are many directions the pressure can come from,” she added.

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