

Japan's Untapped Resource



Kumi Sato

A report by the World Economic Forum earlier this year on the corporate gender gap cast Japan in a far from favorable light.

Ranked 101st out of 134 countries, Japan's female employees were found to make up just 24 percent of the corporate workforce. In contrast, the United States finished top (52 percent), followed by Spain (48 percent) and Canada (46 percent). Not surprisingly, Japan also scored woefully in rates of women in middle, senior and executive management positions in companies.

Kumi Sato is president of Cosmo Public Relations in Tokyo and the founder of the WomenJapan website. *iNTOUCH's* Nick Jones sat down with the Club Member to glean her thoughts on the position of women in Japan's workforce. Excerpts:

iNTOUCH: How does Japan regard women in the workplace?

Sato: There is too much emphasis from the Japanese media and society that women should be good wives and mothers. Then there is this whole economic issue about there not being enough structure to support them. And, thirdly, the women themselves believe they can't have it all. Certainly, if you encourage women to continue to work and if they're able to find daycare centers, I think that more women will at least think about it. I think the drive is there, but it is up to each employer to realize that there isn't a cookie-cutter solution for each employee.

iNTOUCH: Does the culture discourage women from pursuing careers?

Sato: First, I don't think they have the support of their husbands. Also, I don't think Japanese as a whole have managed to create a good work-life balance. I don't know why, but many men in executive positions who have worked all their lives don't feel like they should be going home and pitching in with the housework. And so women end up becoming overwhelmed with the requirements of the job and their domestic requirements. Many of the women I know in their 40s have opted to continue with [their] careers and not to get married and have children because it's easier.

iNTOUCH: What will be the economic impact of not utilizing women in the workplace?

Sato: That is one of the reasons why Japan is still in the doldrums, because it's just a waste of a good resource. And, of course, multinational companies take a huge advantage of that fact and recruit many women for significant positions. But we need the whole nation to address this issue of making it easier for women to become a big contributor to the economic well-being of this society. But it's become a minor discussion for which the politicians feel no urgency.

iNTOUCH: Are we likely to see a change in attitude in the near future?

Sato: I would like to believe so, but I just don't think the current administration has enough oomph. The politicians are just focused on winning seats. The media is another problem here. The media love to portray women as "cutesy pie" and treat them as second-class nationals. Generally, I think Japanese men are less threatened by women who are young and pretty and all of that, [as opposed to] strong, educated and successful.

iNTOUCH: What are the main barriers to women pursuing careers and taking on managerial roles in Japan?

Sato: There is an underlying fear of Japanese people to be different. In many cases, successful women globally have had strong role models, whether it was a mother or an aunt, but the number of

role models in Japan just pales compared to other countries. The other issue is overcoming societal [expectations] to be a good wife or mother.

iNTOUCH: Is legislation required to help solve the problem?

Sato: I think laws are very important. So, for example, the law could make it really attractive for women to continue to work. I think financial incentives have to kick in.

iNTOUCH: What about affirmative action?

Sato: I think at some point you have to say, "Look, this trickle effect isn't working; we've got to make some drastic moves." I'm not saying it would be forever.

iNTOUCH: What is likely to happen?

Sato: I would like to think that a politician will be enlightened and say, "Now I see the link between women and the workforce. Maybe this could be one way to solve our domestic economic problems. Let's pass some laws."

iNTOUCH: Have you seen changes in the years you have been working?

Sato: Not as many as I would have hoped to have seen and not fast enough. At the end of the day, there need to be major laws passed to bring some equilibrium to this backwardness. □