

Facing Change

Some Issues for Japan & Women in Japanese Workplace

By Annie CHANG



Annie Chang

Women in Japanese Workplace

Japan is facing continuing changes in its society and workplaces in the 21st century that began in the 20th century. I have been living and working in Japan for 27 years, already seeing many changes. But clearly more are to come, and more must come for Japan to successfully navigate forward in

the currently very difficult and competitive world economy. I will focus significantly here on my experience as a non-Japanese entrepreneur in Japan, and the issues I also faced as a professional woman in Japan. There has been progress, but it is clear progress must continue for Japan to best use its human resources to maximize the productivity of Japanese and non-Japanese workers in the Japanese economy.

The most significant change for women in Japanese business is that more women are indeed climbing the Japanese corporate ladder, and some women are succeeding in becoming senior executives in Japanese companies, although the number is still very small compared to other Asian countries and the rest of the world. I can still remember when I was working at an old-fashioned Japanese IT company. Although I was promoted to sales manager, I still had to serve tea for my male Japanese colleagues. While this sort of treatment of women colleagues in the Japanese workplace is very uncommon now, clearly more than these changes need to be made to maximize women's abilities to contribute to Japanese business.

Non-Japanese women in professional or senior executive positions are common now in Japan, although they almost invariably work for non-Japanese companies. My situation was unique, however. As an Asian Chinese woman, I faced the challenge of looking the same as a Japanese woman, so my superiors in the organizations I worked for expected me to behave like a Japanese woman was expected to behave. It was clear that there were different behavior expectations for women who were clearly not Japanese. My success was a result, I believe, of my making it clear I was not Japanese, despite my appearance, so I was allowed to be more open, more aggressive, more equally participatory in my work than I believe would have been approved for a Japanese woman. But, of course, Japan's women are a much greater resource for the Japanese economy than the small number of non-Japanese women working in Japan. As Japan utilizes its labor pool of educated and

skilled workers as best as it can in a competitive world, it is important that Japanese women gain the same advantages that non-Japanese women are granted so they may succeed and their training and skills are properly utilized.

Phenomenon of Declining Population

Tokyo is considered one of the top cities for gourmet restaurants. I often find myself served in restaurants by foreigners, often Chinese students in Japan, who give me an opportunity to use my mother tongue. Increasingly, foreigners are participating in the Japanese workplace, not only students but often foreign workers who are clearly needed by the Japanese economy. Recently, I saw in my neighborhood a traditional Japanese vegetable shop (*yaoya*) with a foreigner working there. Clearly in some areas there is a severe labor shortage.

Even Taiwan has opened up the labor market for nannies and domestic helpers for many years now. A strong case can be made that Japan needs to change its immigration policy to let foreign nannies, domestic helpers and nurses come to Japan. It is clear that Japanese women would be aided by this change as they could more easily participate in the workforce if domestic help were available. Foreign female business executives can bring in their nannies and sponsor them legally to stay in Japan as domestic help. Many of my Japanese girlfriends want to hire foreign domestic help, but the system will not allow this. Thus, a foreign woman will have an advantage over Japanese women in Japan! Unfortunately, most foreigners do not realize they will lose this privilege if they become permanent residents in Japan. Does it make sense to discriminate against permanent residents and native Japanese?

Imagine the advantages if the Japanese government allowed Filipino domestic help to come to Japan and trained them to speak Japanese. Domestic help can look after the household, children, and even aging parents as well. I have found my single working Japanese girlfriends often do not want to get married because it is too hard to raise children and work at the same time. Some of them do not want to marry the first son to avoid looking after his parents in later life. The advantages of expanding the Japanese labor force to allow domestic help seem clear, and the costs of not doing this also seem clear. Recently a Japanese company invented a robot to do domestic work and be a caretaker for elderly people. I think it is easy to understand, however, that as a mother of two children I wouldn't want a robot to look after my kids!

More Babies

An acknowledged issue in Japan is the need to increase the population growth. A declining population is known to create a declining economy and a declining country. One of my secretaries commuted two hours by train to come to work. She did not have children, but she did have an elderly sick mother so she could only work three days in a week. She wanted to have a child, but it was challenging.

Women in Japan are facing tremendous difficulties when they want to have a child. Spending long commuting hours standing up in a jam-packed train is not a good start for having babies. A long waiting list for nursery enrollment is not encouraging either. If a commute is to be avoided and childcare is not available, one answer would be to work from home. Technology makes it very possible to be productive working from home. Japanese companies need to change their way of doing business and allow women to work from home or at least have very flexible hours so they may more easily raise children at the same time. If Japan is not going to open up for immigrant workers, the only way to sustain the world's second largest economy is to build up a better childcare system and restructure working rules for working mothers.

Aging Society

Japanese women are the longest living in the whole world, achieving an average span of 88 years. Japanese men are ranked second. Nearly 25% of the population is so-called elderly people. Progress is being made to care for this cohort of the population. I can see more elevators are built for subways and more Western-style toilets are installed. Some companies are extending the retirement age to better secure their workforce. Unfortunately, the healthcare system still has lot of room for improvement. My friend's husband owns a hospital in Saitama, north of Tokyo. She asked me if I can help her to hire foreign nurses. While I really wanted to help her, it is illegal. However, I have read news reports that recently the Japanese government agreed to allow 600 Indonesian care workers and 400 nurses to come to work in Japan. Without help, whether from abroad or from within Japan, Japanese women will have their time and hands full with responsibilities for aging parents.

Male-dominated World

I still remember when I started my own business and asked the bank for a business loan. One of the reasons I was refused was that I was a single woman. When I eventually started my business, I couldn't rent an office for the same reason. That was 20 years ago, and I realized how hard it was for Japanese women to start their own business! I used to go to some business functions and often was asked if am I the real president in the company or is there anyone else actually running the company. Japanese men simply could not accept that a woman was president of her own company! Japanese men still need to change their attitude towards women. I can see the situation has improved a lot and more Japanese women are starting up their own business. Japanese women are getting stronger and are willing to fight for their rights, but still all the rules are made by men. In an aging society with a declining population, it is important that the resources of educated, skilled and trained Japanese women are recognized and utilized more to benefit Japanese society.

Foreign Entrepreneurs

Japanese business is still controlled by large companies, and small businesses have to work hard to survive. During the IT boom, Japan opened up for foreigners to set up their own business more easily. Now there are many more successful foreign entrepreneurs doing business in Japan. During the extremely difficult time we are facing today, innovation from entrepreneurs, domestic and foreign, male *and* female, can all provide new job opportunities. But to enter the Japanese market is still difficult. Japan needs to ease the path forward for new companies, and enhance education to encourage young people to believe they can create new companies, not simply join existing companies, while at the same time bringing in more foreign ideas to create a more dynamic process of change. It is time to think outside traditional boxes.

Engaging with Neighboring Countries

I realized in these past couple of years that there are more foreigners visiting Japan, especially from neighboring countries. My Hong Kong and Taiwan friends will come here just for a long weekend to go shopping and enjoy Japanese restaurants and nightlife. They like to enjoy the beauty of Japan's four seasons, not something found in Southeast Asia. Hokkaido has become the prime destination for snow, winter sports and gourmet dining.

Recently there are more Chinese coming from the mainland to Japan for quality goods. They particularly want "Made in Japan" products. As consumer spending is now declining, Japan's service industry will suffer. Tourism, particularly from neighboring countries, can generate additional income for the service industry.

Final Thoughts

Japan has become my home and I have happily lived here for what is now most of my life. I have experienced many changes in Japan, and most of the changes are good. Change allows a society to grow, and is necessary for a society to grow successfully. Growth allows more participation, and more participation encourages more growth. As Japanese men and women both participate more fully in the Japanese economy, there is need for the support of Japanese women by domestic helpers and childcare workers. Opening Japan to more foreign workers will not create a burden for the country, but rather free its own population from burdensome duties and help women achieve their highest goals.

Japan provides a very safe and harmonious society for foreigners to live in. I have known many foreigners who have made Japan their permanent home. Now foreigners can buy a house or an apartment easily and they can now go to many places to which they were denied access like some *ryokan* (inns). If Japan is to benefit most fully from its more open arms, it needs to provide a society that gives the same opportunities to foreigners as they can find outside Japan, and the same opportunities to its own Japanese population as they might find abroad, for men and for women. To create growth, Japan needs to promote itself better to the rest of the world and continue to modernize and open its society to allow the world to participate in Japan in the same way as Japan needs to participate in the world. **JS**

Annie Chang is the CEO and founder of IT Consulting Japan Ltd. Besides recruiting IT experts for foreign companies in Asia, she also represents companies entering into the Japanese market and helps small Japanese companies tap overseas markets.