

Photo: Antoine Schneck

# Super Potential Power: New Leaders of a New Japan?



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## New Law in France for Better Representation of Women in Top Corporate Positions

Even in a country like France, where equality between men and women seems to already be a reality in business, politicians need to impose a quota of women in top positions. A new law was passed in January 2010 to increase the share of women who sit on the boards of leading companies, where they are currently under-represented. The quota aims to have women account for 40% of boardroom seats in the next six years (instead of the current 8%). While there are of course pros and cons involved, implementing quota systems seems to sometimes be the only way to make things change.

A recent scientific study in France even proved that women are better bosses than men! According to the study, top-tier companies where women make up more than 35% of the management force have seen a 23.54% increase in their benefice against the 14.61% gain seen in companies where female managers comprise less than 35% of the management force. So if there is scientific evidence, it will be even easier to implement the new law. And it will also be efficient for the French economy!

## Still Very Few Women in Managerial Positions in Japan

In Japan, although the Equal Employment Opportunity Law has been in place since 1986, there seems to have been little progress among Japanese companies. Women who want to succeed, who love their jobs, and who enjoy working have to work like men – meaning that they have to work very long hours. This means that

they ultimately have no choice but to essentially become like men. Because it is impossible to combine both work life and motherhood, they often must quit their jobs when their first child is born.

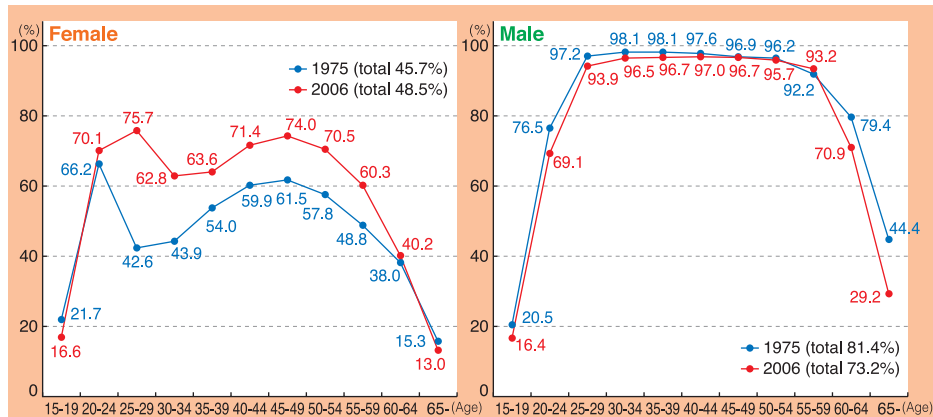
When you think about the high success rates of female students as well as their extraordinary abilities (such as the ability to learn foreign languages or to adapt to different situations), it is a pity to think that a lot of these women will stop working after getting married, or after the birth of their first child. When coming out of the best universities and after having found challenging jobs, why should they have to stop?

The female participation rate in the labor market in Japan is still only 55%, lower than in most developed countries. The M-shaped curve is a phenomenon that specifically applies to Japan. *Chart 1* shows the women's labor force participation rate by age. The M curve shows that women aged 25-45 stop working to raise their children, and go back to work in their 40s, but often in the form of part-time work, which does not correspond to their educational levels. This explains also why there are so few women in managerial positions (*Chart 2*). In France, more than 80% of women work, and nearly half of the managers are women.

Men and women alike are supposed to earn their living and work in order to fulfil their roles in society. A person can be a doctor, a lawyer, a professor, a police officer, or an artist...but work is simply a part of life. It is just as important – if not more so – as any other part of life.

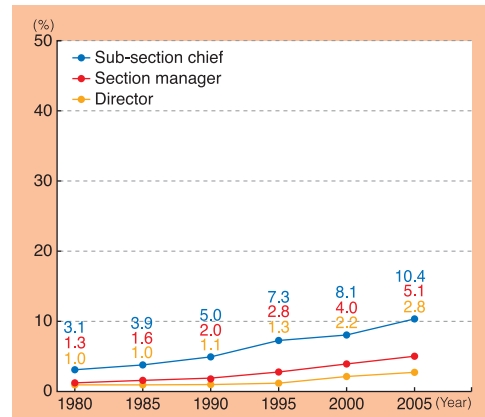
When you look at *Chart 2*, even if there has been an evolution in the women's workforce since 2000, the number of female managers in Japan is still very low. The key point to remember is that as long as managerial positions are monopolized by men, there will be no change – no change in the way of working, and no change in the way of thinking (of seeing life in a more balanced way, between private time, work

CHART 1 Labor force participation rate by sex/age group (M-shaped curve)



Source: "Labor Force Survey," Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications

CHART 2 Female managerial-level staff in Japan



Note: Companies with more than 100 employees  
Source: "Basic Survey on Wage Structure," Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare

and family life). It might be stereotypical to say, but men and women think differently, and thus view the world in different ways.

And the more access women have to top positions, the more it will benefit Japanese society as a whole. The same applies to the political world; there are still too few women both in government and in parliament.

## Why Do Women Find It So Difficult?

### 1. Men & women: traditional roles

In Japanese society, there are still classic, traditional gender roles. Although men have made some progress, many still don't participate much in everyday home life or in the education of their children. For most of them, their role is to provide financially for their family, usually by working in a big company. The woman is expected to take care of the house, oversee the children's education and manage the family's finances. The word *shufu* (housewife) is still very common and has no negative connotation to it, whereas in France the word is simply not used anymore. Most women are referred to as "women who work" (as more than 80% work), and the few who do not work fall into the "do not work" category.

### 2. Working conditions & long working hours

Many women in Japan are also not keen on pursuing a lifestyle filled with the typical rules and obligations that come with working in a Japanese company. The long working hours or the unique pressure that businesspeople in Japan are under are two classic examples. All of this, combined with the lack of holidays and the many *tsukiai* after-work obligations, makes for an unpleasant work life that many women are eager to avoid.

### 3. Not enough support for mothers & their children

Family allowances are still very low, and are set in accordance to a particular household's income bracket (although the Hatoyama government has promised to change this). There are not enough nurseries, combined with the fact that school starts later for kids in Japan, at age 6. In France, all children go to school from age 3. And they are in school from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., which means that most mothers can stop working for two or three years and then return to their former positions, in a very natural way.

## But There Are Some Success Stories

Miho, a mother of three, has worked for 18 years for the Japanese company Pia. For each child, she took about one year of maternal leave and then went back to her job as editor. When she returned to work, she coordinated her work/life balance with the help of a nursery, a babysitter and her husband. She has never thought of a life without work, but she admits this is because she loves her job. She decided to quit Pia in 2008 and work as a freelancer. She leaves her youngest child in the care of a "*hoiku* mama" most of the week. Miho says she loves her life, but admits that sometimes it was very hard to cope.

Masako is another example. Masako started her own company 30 years ago. She decided to create a company where she herself would like to work. And she decided to employ only women and create an environment where flexibility would be the leitmotiv. She aimed for a company where her staff could enjoy their hobbies, take care of their children, and could comfortably not come into work on days when they were not feeling well. At the beginning, 10 women worked in this unique atmosphere. Then, the company changed its speciality and started to employ more men. Now, the company has grown substan-



tially, and as expected (!?) most of the managers are men.

According to Masako, these are the points that prevent women from work.

- Women tend to be good at doing exactly what they are asked to do, in a near perfect way. But they do not usually want to take responsibility, as this involves also having to take risks.
- Inability to leave the company at around 5 p.m.
- Women don't have any real role models, so they end up working like men, with the same defaults. They lack self-confidence, and they are afraid to fail. (This inevitably happens at work regardless of time or gender.) This can be solved by increasing the number of women in managerial positions.
- The Japanese tax system discourages married women from working because of the tax exemption for those who earn less than 1.3 million yen per year.

On a much larger scale, there is also an interesting example of Shiseido, the cosmetics giant. Shiseido has onsite childcare facilities and a real strategy for female employees. The goal is of course to help women continue to work while raising their children. But the company also has a more long-term economic goal in mind. In the long term, it is more cost-effective to train women and then promote them to leadership positions. It would be a waste not to do so. Another point to keep in mind is the decreasing workforce in Japan due to the population decline. This means that the female workforce is seen as an important, underutilized, asset which needs developing.

## New Challenge for Japanese Society: Better Balance in Life for Men & Women Alike

Promoting the work/life balance ultimately means promoting the quality of life. Many think it is high time to reform society as a whole. It is an important challenge for Japan; the economic crisis perhaps has come at just the right time to allow people to renew their priorities in life. They can take this opportunity to discover a new view on life based more on freedom, time for oneself and for loved ones, and hedonism, and less on material possessions.

The most important thing for any woman in the world is to have a choice – the choice to be able to live her own life according to her own priorities. There are as many lifestyles as there are women. A woman should be able to live in an environment where she feels free to choose her own life. **JS**

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