

Interview with Kuniko Inoguchi,
Member of the House of Councillors

Rising Up on the Wings of Superwomen

A View on Abe's Policies on Women with Kuniko Inoguchi, Member of the House of Councillors

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Women are Japan's hidden treasure. So their active participation in the labor force lies at the core of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's growth strategy. The reasons are multiple: human resources necessary to a shrinking state can be boosted by new and highly-educated talent; purchasing power can be increased; and innovation through greater diversity can be created. Yet digging up this treasure is a herculean task in a harmonious culture where women are used to adapting to traditional gender roles, and full-time employees are confined to a work-life imbalance that barely allows for family time. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* talked to Kuniko Inoguchi, former minister of state for gender equality and social affairs, to learn more about her views on “womenomics” and discover whether Abe has found the key to injecting female power into the ailing economy.

Johansson: In a 2012 survey by the World Economic Forum, Japan was ranked as low as 101st in gender equality out of 135 countries. What do you think is the biggest reason for Japan's high gender inequality?

Inoguchi: Japan was probably not very skillful in changing priorities after the Cold War. We didn't reallocate part of our security budget for social policies, as Germany did, for example. Even in today's politics, major shifts or radical course changes don't occur. Only a highly visionary, strong and stable political leadership can overcome this. But unfortunately, the last time we had such leadership was the five-year tenure of Mr. Junichiro Koizumi, during which I was appointed as the first minister for gender equality. But there are many other reasons, such as the difficulty in breaking free from the Asian paternalistic leadership style, or the lack of radical social movements similar to those in the West. There hasn't been any sweeping, radical feminism in Japan.

Johansson: Indeed, typical gender roles with men as main breadwinners and women as housewives persist in Japan. Also, women who speak out and express their opinions are widely disapproved of in Japanese culture. If such traditional gender roles don't change first of all, isn't there a risk that Prime



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Minister Abe's goal of increasing the rate of women in leadership positions to 30% by 2020 will fail?

Inoguchi: This particular number you just mentioned was in my second basic plan, when I became gender equality minister in 2005. I insisted that we needed a numerical target and managed to push it through against opposition from the private sector and bureaucrats. But it's now 2013, and the women haven't done their homework. After eight years only few of them have made their way up. So Mr. Abe wants to push gender equality forward by highlighting this particular target from 2005.

Johansson: So if you calculated 15 years back then, this means that Prime Minister Abe will need another 15 years until 2028 to achieve this policy goal?

Inoguchi: But we have already made some progress. And with the prime minister himself reminding people of this target, he is demonstrating the strong leadership that is needed to spark change. He is acting as an advocate. Also, I think another of his attainable goals is having at least one female board member at major corporations. So Mr. Abe is giving an indication of this and at the same time reminding us of the target the government set about 10 years ago.

Female Role Models as Key Driver for Change

Johansson: What kind of policies do you think are necessary to achieve a higher percentage of females in the labor force in Japan?

Inoguchi: As in most countries, Japan has a seniority system where the labor force is employed permanently. You can't just quit your job. And this is why we have to find measures that prevent women from having to quit their jobs when they have children. My special committee during the Koizumi era aimed at increasing the number of nurseries and childcare centers in order to reduce the waiting list to zero. After so many years, the "Zero Waiting for Daycare Program", as it was called, should have been completed, but it is still ongoing. Prime Minister Abe therefore plans to increase the capacity of childcare facilities by 200,000 next year, and then gradually extend it further to 400,000 by 2017. Meeting this high target instantly will probably be difficult. But the timeline is good; with the planned consumption tax increase from 5% to 8%, we have a relatively reliable budget source to finance such an expansion of facilities.

Johansson: What other policies do you suggest in order to increase the number of women in leadership positions, such as Diet members, board members, and the like?

Inoguchi: No single policy is a solution to everything. Not to retreat from the labor force when you get married and have a child is one point. Another is to fight intolerance towards diversity. Japanese people are used to a homogenous corporate culture, where people come from a very similar background; college graduates without any foreign experience are such an example. During the last few years we have seen a change. People with foreign experience are now sought after for higher positions. But any person with a different background can still encounter difficulties in Japan, not only women. That's a major bottleneck. If you don't want diversity, you are certainly not willing to accept women in closed boardrooms.

Johansson: How do you create tolerance towards diversity?

Inoguchi: Well, policywise it is quite difficult. But if the glass ceiling breaks in one country, it will inevitably leave cracks in all countries in today's global world. A leading female politician, like Hillary Clinton for example, will have an impact on people becoming more tolerant and accepting of a new phenomenon.

Johansson: But even though there have been female prime ministers, such as Margaret Thatcher, this hasn't really had an impact on Japan.



Inoguchi: It takes time. But Margaret Thatcher herself had a big impact on many women's faith. Maybe not so much in Japan, but people in many countries have come to accept female politicians after seeing Margaret Thatcher serving so resiliently for such a long time. A breakthrough inspires many other women of all ages; things are beginning to look feasible.

Johansson: So you would suggest setting up role models to encourage more diverse thinking in companies?

Inoguchi: Yes, because in companies you have to be appointed to higher positions. You cannot simply rise. It's different from being a politician who is elected by the people. In firms the senior management selects you. That's why we need to find ways to persuade the senior officers and change their attitude towards women. One is through policies. Prime Minister Abe is determined to make the female labor force the core of economic growth. Top leaders can mainstream an idea, and in general corporate managers want to go with the mainstream.

Johansson: And here we come to an interesting and critical point: how do you make this mainstream happen? As you said, it's necessary to change the attitude of senior officers who are not thinking in terms of new gender roles. Their minds have from early childhood been fixed on the traditional gender roles of men and women.

Inoguchi: Even the most conservative and non-tolerant men in top leadership positions have wives, daughters, or girls as grandchildren. Close encounters with the upcoming and aspirational generations should change the top leaders' thinking in a fundamental way — even

though they might not straightforwardly acknowledge this.

Johansson: You mean it comes from the bottom?

Inoguchi: It comes from the bottom, from very close by.

Johansson: Young women have to prove themselves, and it remains difficult to have an active influence on senior management thinking?

Inoguchi: That remains difficult.

Johansson: Because no policy exists to bring about this change.

Inoguchi: True, you can't force anybody to hire more women for higher positions, because this is a free capitalist market economy. It's not an area in which to enact a law. In politics you have the possibility of implementing, for example, a quota system, but not for corporations. That is an extremely difficult task.

Ways to Better Reintegration of Leave-Taking Mothers

Johansson: Regarding maternity leave, Prime Minister Abe proposed changing the leave period from 18 months to up to three years. The media criticized the proposal, saying that such a long period would make it more difficult to reintegrate women at work. What is your opinion?

Inoguchi: In my view, this statement of the prime minister was blown out of proportion. It was unnecessary that it became the driving topic in the gender equality debate. Some mothers may find it

useful to have the option of a three-year leave; and they are not forced to take it. In fact, this system already exists. Top bureaucrats in Kasumigaseki are all entitled to three-year maternity leave, but only 10% make use of this right. In general, I think many women feel after 18 months leave that having a more stimulating life — with not only mums and kids around — would be nice. Childcare services are then a good choice.

Johansson: But three years seems long, especially considering that this period when women are raising a child is critical for their labor participation, as you mentioned before.

Inoguchi: Yes, that is true. Prime Minister Abe has expressed the need to launch learning programs that give mothers assistance in re-entering the workforce after childcare leave. You can feel at a loss when returning to work. I have had this experience too. All of a sudden, copy machines became a mystery. Being out of this very competitive market for just one year is a challenge. The government is therefore initiating the development of telework systems. These will ensure that leave takers can keep in touch with their jobs via email-systems. So, there are some creative ideas underway for the two most important needs of the leave taker, which are to secure a childcare place and to smoothly continue their career path.

Johansson: Wouldn't this mean an additional burden for the companies? Managers would not only have to shoulder the costs for maternity leave but also the costs for retraining programs, resulting in even higher barriers to employing women.

Inoguchi: Yes, many managers say so, but they lack experience. In many cases it's a preconception. Generally speaking, it will be less expensive than hiring new staff and training them from the very beginning.

Johansson: Even after three years?

Inoguchi: Well, three years might be too long. But if the employer grants a three-year leave, then this person must be very valuable to him.

Johansson: Why not have fathers share the childcare leave more with mothers? Why is the focus here on mothers?

Inoguchi: We want to focus more on fathers. The reason why fathers are not taking it is because payment during childcare leave is only 50% of the monthly salary. And as they usually earn more in income, it's always the lower-earning mothers who stop working. If there was no gender pay gap, it wouldn't matter who took the childcare leave.



That's the real problem.

Johansson: Isn't closing this gender pay gap, then, the starting point rather than a three-year leave?

Inoguchi: Yes, this could be the starting point. In fact, among the OECD countries, Japan ranks second-highest in income inequality, after South Korea. But as South Korea is improving fast, in reality I think Japan is worst.

Innovation of Daycare Facility System

Johansson: Let's have a closer look at daycare facilities. Are there any other means than daycare facilities that could provide childcare services?

Inoguchi: We have developed a very flexible and diversified system of daycare facilities, something that falls into my working area. Mr. Abe's government is in the middle of doing the final organizational details, so it can be launched next year. Major changes are a new kindergarten system and welfare-oriented daycare services. But then there can be mergers, too. A part of the daycare center services could be incorporated in the kindergarten education system or vice versa. Simple mergers with both elements - education and nursery welfare services - could arise as well.

Johansson: What about other means, individually or on the company side?

Inoguchi: Yes, those are enhanced too. There is a mechanism for financing small unit childcare facilities, similar to a mother taking care of a few children in the neighborhood. It's a private service linked to local childcare centers that supervise and guarantee a certain quality standard. Additionally, a new law will enable private companies to manage childcare facilities. Up to now, it has been difficult for them to enter these services since they needed permission from the municipal government — which they usually didn't receive. Private companies generally deliver high-quality services. So having them step in will bring dramatic improvement.

Johansson: On the other hand, involving private companies will lead to additional costs for the childcare services.

Inoguchi: Yes, but the parents pay an amount for public childcare services corresponding to their income level too. It's not a free service. Certainly, you can expect that private companies will charge a lot more. But together with Mr. Abe we are promoting a model right now which was implemented by the mayor of Yokohama, Fumiko Hayashi. Mrs. Hayashi evened out the costs for public and private facilities, so they remain about the same. She managed to do this by



having the municipal government subsidize private companies, non-profit organizations, and social welfare service corporations. In the big city of Yokohama, which had the longest of all waiting lists for nursery facilities, a female mayor succeeded in reducing the waiting list down to zero. She made a difference.

Johansson: Is Prime Minister Abe thinking about applying this model to the whole of Japan?

Inoguchi: Yes, exactly. One of the biggest complaints from parents is that, unlike public childcare services, the private ones wouldn't be able to provide an equally high standard while charging you three times the usual cost. This has led to huge dissatisfaction among parents. But by subsidizing the private companies, the local government can intervene, as in many cases they hire the private companies and thereby set the standards.

Work-Life Balance Model for Career Women

Johansson: In Japan, full-time jobs usually require long hours of overtime. How does Prime Minister Abe hope to establish a work-life balance for mothers aiming for a career?

Inoguchi: Good question. Well, women aiming for a career have to study and work very hard, starting from the early age of 15. You have to make up for it in advance to be able, some day, to take off 18 months for maternity leave or maybe for your sick mother. It's unfair, but as a woman you have to outperform the men. We are still in a transitional phase, and those who have made their way up have the responsibility to serve as role models.

Johansson: So, what you are saying is that Prime



Minister Abe right now does not have any policy for a work-life balance for career women?

Inoguchi: I think he is promoting a work-life balance. The work hours need to be reduced.

Johansson: Is that what he is saying?

Inoguchi: No, not directly yet. But working only assigned hours for both men and women is, in my view, something that ought to be coming. Otherwise you end up doing the tedious tasks in a tedious way. In my office, the light must go out at 6 p.m., thus everybody must be efficient. Mr. Abe is for innovation; that is growth through innovation and not growth through resources. You are driven to innovate when you are limited by the number of work hours, the number of employees, or by something that sets a boundary. Then you are forced to think of efficient ways to get it done. And women will set the standard here, as they have to go home and cook dinner.

Johansson: It's interesting that you say, "Women have to go home to cook dinner" - why not the men?

Inoguchi: If the office closes at 6 p.m. and the men see the women going home to cook dinner, they will automatically become influenced to start doing so too.

Johansson: This means you personally believe in work-life balance?

Inoguchi: Yes, zero extra work.

Johansson: What would a work-life balance model that encourages more women to work and at the same time be mothers look like? Women may feel they

have to choose between being a mother or a career woman.

Inoguchi: That is the reality for many women in this country. That is why the total fertility rate was dwindling. A model would look like this: you are well educated in foreign languages and mathematics, and have literacy skills, that's the foundation; during your pregnancy, you are able to take off as much time as you wish; and after your childcare leave, you have no problem finding childcare services. As the challenge of pregnancy differs from woman to woman, mothers should be entitled to take leave anytime they wish to.

Johansson: Wouldn't that affect the business of companies?

Inoguchi: Companies can benefit long-term by utilizing the knowledge of mothers for their business. Half of the consumers are going through the same challenge of childcare. By tapping into mothers' know-how, companies' products and services can be tailored better to the needs of the people. And mothers tend to develop multi-tasking skills and thereby become very efficient at work, too. But if you work in a top management position, you will work 24/7, male or female. That is common in many advanced economies. In traditional Japanese companies, the president starts the day late at 10 a.m., but this won't work in the future. Managers need to be super-bright, super-efficient, and also workaholics to establish a highly efficient company. At this point, career women can work 18 hours a day, because they have enjoyed their work-life balance before and their children are grown up.

Johansson: Have I understood you right that women have to multi-task, work so much harder, and be so much brighter than men in order to be a mother with a career?

Inoguchi: Yes, and that's unfair.

Johansson: And all the child rearing and housework would be the sole responsibility of women too?

Inoguchi: Now, what will happen, if things go right, is this: when career women face so many challenges, they will search for a tolerant and supportive partner. On the other hand, men will come to understand that they are only attractive when developing the qualities sought by the women. Once they have adapted, they will become part of the marriage market and eventually have a very happy family. Or alternatively, the couple get married first, but during the long years of marriage the man goes through a kind of evolution and adapts to what his beloved and multi-challenged wife needs. **JS**

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