

Special Interviews for 50 Leading Companies for Women in APEC



Women's empowerment is recognized not only as a key element of "Abenomics" but also of APEC's growth strategy. In the March/April 2015 issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, an article titled "50 Leading Companies for Women in APEC" written by the APEC office of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry highlighted a project to select about 50 exemplary companies and organizations from APEC economies to share their efforts in increasing opportunities for women as stakeholders in APEC economies. The project aims to raise awareness of women's economic contributions to business activities today and promote greater opportunities for women to take on more leadership roles and to be further involved in economic activities.

Among those 50 companies, we have selected five, three Indonesian and two Japanese, for our July/August 2015 issue. We were privileged to speak with five female executives and entrepreneurs, and these conversations are summarized either in interview articles or in their responses to our questions by e-mail. These give a good idea of their activities, experiences and ideas as business leaders. Through our conversations with them, we have learned that while in Indonesia women need better social infrastructure, such as in education and health care, and often need to escape from domestic violence or poverty, which itself could cause a lack of such infrastructure, women in Japan are better equipped with such but do not necessarily enjoy enough flexibility in their working hours.

We hope the following five introductory articles will prompt ideas about how to involve more women in economic and business activities in Japan and Indonesia.

An Interview with Yuka Mitsuata, Founder, and Ikuko Gotsubo, Mo-House

1 Working Mothers in Nursing Clothes Company Mo-House Propose New Working Style

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Working women know well how they feel about their environment and what they want to achieve. Mo-House Company meets women's needs as breastfeeding mothers by providing them with functional nursing clothes and also meets their needs to bring their babies with them to their workplace and work while taking care of them. In a double sense, they promote working women's interests by their products and their working style, and thus Mo-House is considered a pioneer in encouraging women into the labor force. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* held an interview with Yuka Mitsuata, the founder of Mo-House, and one of her staff, Ikuko Gotsubo, an advisor on nursing clothes.

Founding of Mo-House

JS: Could you please tell us how Mo-House was founded?

Gotsubo: Yes. When our founder, Ms. Mitsuata was on a train one

day with her second child, she had to breastfeed the child, who was hungry and crying badly for her mother's milk. There were very few clothes designed for such nursing needs at that time and she felt it was a bit embarrassing to feed her baby in a train. However, she dared to do so. But she wondered then why women have to endure

such embarrassment when they need to feed their babies in public. This was when she started thinking about founding a business to make it easy for women to go anywhere to work while continuing to care for their babies. Thus Mo-House was started. In the beginning, Ms. Mitsuhashi began selling nursing clothes that she made by herself at home. Our business eventually expanded to the two shops now in Aoyama and Tsukuba.



Yuka Mitsuhashi (R), Founder of Mo-House, and staffer Ikuko Gotsubo, nursing her son Kensei

JS: Ms. Mitsuhashi, did you design your first nursing clothes by yourself?

Mitsuhashi: Yes, I did, and I felt very happy. With these clothes I felt completely different about nursing my children. I felt liberated and thought I could go anywhere and do anything with my daughter. I wanted to transfer this freedom and confidence to other women and decided to start Mo-House.

Unique Working Style

JS: Afterwards you started a “system to go to work with your babies”. What was the response to it?

Mitsuhashi: When I started Mo-House, my second daughter was only several months old and still needed to be breastfed. Therefore, I went to my work with her and most women who helped me then brought their babies to the company too. Bringing our babies to our working place was just common and nobody among us doubted its relevance. Several years later, our working style attracted some journalists’ attention. I thought then that this working style was exactly what I had been looking for in my life. Having thought that my working life would be over after I gave birth, I began looking for various ways to continue working after having babies. There are various alternatives such as working at home or working just for a short time, but going to work with your babies is one that could enhance women’s working potential. So I would like to spread this message.

JS: You have a special expression referring to mothers who work for a short time: “working on a small scale”. However, as a private business you have to earn profits. How would you be able to achieve both “working on a small scale” and earning profits?

Mitsuhashi: Though it is certainly true that we cannot continue our

business unless we earn more than we spend, we have never thought about earning much profit. Our staff work very hard, even though their working time is not so long, and because they are competent we enjoy enough efficiency. Inefficiency could occur in the case of too many people working, but this has not been a problem for us.

JS: How many staff come to your office with their babies? Do you all live close to your office?

Mitsuhashi: We have about 45 people working in our two shops altogether. I highly recommend people living nearby to come to our offices, but there are some who come from rather far places.

JS: That means your work place is comfortable for your staff?

Mitsuhashi: This means, I believe, that there are many mothers who would like to stay with their babies and do their work at the same time.

JS: At this moment, are there only a very few companies where working mothers can work with their babies, other than Mo-House?

Mitsuhashi: Yes, I guess so. There seem to be many mothers who cannot get their babies into any daycare facility but still want to work even if it means bringing their babies to their workplace. Meanwhile, though, many of our staff working for Mo-House can meet their two needs simultaneously: staying with their babies all the time and contributing to society by working for a company.

JS: Have you ever been asked by any other company about introducing your system of bringing babies to your workplace?

Mitsuhashi: Yes, and I have heard that some companies actually introduced it, though they are still very few. Those companies that introduced it have never made it public and there are a few examples where male employees work as well. They are mostly not large-scale companies.

JS: What kind of advice would you give first to companies interested in introducing this system?

Mitsuhata: I believe that observing our workplace would be much more useful than mere advice. We offer a tour of our office and shops. We show them that they would not need anything in particular except their supervisors' good understanding of the situation of working mothers and their working environment that would make it easy for everybody working there to accept working women with their babies.

Fashion Show for Our Nursing Clothes

JS: We have heard that you organize a fashion show for your nursing clothes. Could you tell us about this?

Gotsubo: We have two shows, one in Tsukuba, the other in Aoyama. In the Aoyama shop, our customers/volunteers wearing our nursing clothes sit with their babies among the audience. During the show, we tell the audience that these mothers are feeding their babies confidentially through the show. In our latest show in November 2014, we showed them a wedding dress that has a function to enable brides to breastfeed their babies at a wedding party.

Mitsuhata: In this show, we can prove that feeding a baby does not cause any embarrassment in our society and should be considered very natural.



Ms. Gotsubo can breastfeed her son quickly and frequently by moving her sling upward a little.

Raising Children & Contributing to Society

JS: Have you been thinking about how to work and raise children simultaneously for a long time?

Mitsuhata: Yes. I have been thinking that women of my generation are obliged to achieve both equally. I joined PARCO, a leading retail company, where working women's positive contribution to the company was distinguished, in the year when the Equal Employment Opportunity Law between men and women was implemented in 1986. I realised at that time that we would have to continue to develop the path for women in society, building upon the hard work of our seniors at the company.

However, I did not then have a model for enabling work outside the house and raising children simultaneously, since most of our seniors then were not married and had no children. In my young days, whenever I missed the last train at midnight due to working late at the office, I thought that I could not continue to work until midnight after getting married. But at the same time I was thinking even then that we have to find a solution. After my marriage, I tried many ways of working, such as working at home or doing a part-time job, and in the end I arrived at what we are doing here in Mo-House.

Since I was brought up in a commercial district of small shops and restaurants, I had never seen a woman doing housewife work exclusively until the end of my elementary school days. In my neighborhood, all the mothers were working. But having been brought up in such an environment, I would think that after becoming an adult it would be difficult for women to work and raise children simultaneously. This means, I believe, that the role model culture among men and women in Japan, namely men to be working for a company and women to be at home and taking care of their babies, is deeply rooted in our society. I thought this deeply rooted culture should be fundamentally changed so that women in Japan could work more freely outside their homes. So I believe we should actively promote the "Work-Life Balance" adopted by Mo-House.

JS: There may be many mothers who would find it difficult to exchange information on raising children with other mothers, if they were staying alone at home. In Mo-House, working mothers can get together and exchange such information easily, can't they?

Gotsubo: Yes. More precisely, we have working mothers with two children as well as those with only one child. Those with a second child have a different perspective on raising children from those with just one child, and can give good advice accordingly. This is very valuable. I appreciate such advice not only for my colleagues but also for customers coming to our shop. There is thus lots of know-how on raising children exchanged among working mothers here in Mo-House.

Achieving “Work-Life Balance”

JS: When going to their workplace with a baby, some women may feel uncomfortable in a train packed with the commuters. Perhaps their husbands are also opposed to it. What did your husband think about your going to your workplace with your baby?

Gotsubo: In my case, when I told my husband that I wanted to work for Mo-House for the first time, he opposed it on the basis of certain risks, such as going on a crowded commuter train. Because of his objections, I could not insist upon applying for a job at Mo-House and then the deadline for job applications passed. However, when another occasion arose, I pleaded for his agreement and finally got it. He still worried about the risks as he did before, but in the end he said to me, “If you really want to work outside home with our baby, you can try as much as you can. It would be much better than staying at home and being frustrated.”

Yes, certainly I find it difficult to get a space for us on a packed commuter train when going to our shop. I do not use a stroller, as I think it bothers other passengers, but I can use a device for holding a baby and sit on a seat by myself. Thanks to our clothes, I can breastfeed my baby on the train, and so it does not bother other passengers by crying for milk.

JS: You do not feel any nervousness in feeding your baby on the train?

Gotsubo: Not at all. When you do it for the first time, you may feel a little tense. But when you are used to it, you can understand immediately the signs that your baby is getting hungry before he or she starts crying, and then feed your baby without being noticed by the other passengers nearby. You can do it very easily and safely.

Mitsuata: Mothers would be very happy with these nursing clothes and since they can feed their babies before they start crying, the babies would not cause any problem even in a crowded train. I think many more mothers should use such clothes.

Gotsubo: I strongly agree. This is for my interest rather than for the interest of my child. But in the end, this makes my child happier as well.

JS: Your husband finally agreed to let you work for Mo-House upon your second application. Was that because you looked so frustrated at home?

Gotsubo: In my case, I felt being obliged to work at home as a housewife after being a mother even harder than before. I always had to think about how I could be a good wife and support my husband. I was a bit nervous about the time allocation between nursing my child and taking care of my husband. I was under pressure to be



successful in both.

Then it became my dream to work for Mo-House. This was my first dream after becoming a mother, just like a young girl dreams about being a model or a flight attendant. I often visited a Mo-House shop with my child and was very encouraged by their working mothers with their children at the shop. Having finally understood what I was dreaming about, my husband agreed to my working for Mo-House. He must have thought I looked so happy visiting Mo-House as a client and talking with the working mothers there.

I thought at the beginning that it was really challenging to go to a Mo-House shop with my child on the train, but doing so gave me a great sense of satisfaction. Having seen how satisfied and happy I was going to Mo-House with our child, my husband thought it would be much better for me to work for Mo-House rather than staying at home being frustrated. In addition, working at Mo-house brought our finances into better shape.

To tell the truth, in my younger days I had always wanted to be a housewife without work outside the home and just staying at home with a child. However, thanks to the nursing clothes, I am happy now to be with my child in my workplace and above all I can get valuable advice on raising children from my senior colleagues, which would have been impossible if I were staying at home with my child. So everything is going well for me here in Mo-House.

JS: When you started your work here, how old was your child?

Gotsubo: I started working here when my child was seven months

Photo: Mo-House



Mo-House's nursing clothes enable mothers to breastfeed their babies without revealing their skin

old and now he is one year and four months old.

Expectations of Women

JS: What do you think will be necessary to make it possible for women to keep working no matter how old they may be?

Mitsuhashi: The most important thing for women to continue working is their own confidence in their competency to work for society and contribute to it all the time. If women become mothers and live always with their children at home excluded from society, they will cease to think about their own interests or ambitions, as their children would be the sole meaning in their life. So it will be crucial for women to maintain their relationships with other people somehow, either by continuing to work or study, or by doing volunteer work. These continued connections with society would give them a sense of happiness or satisfaction, as well as mental well-being, and would create a good environment for their babies, and above all this would help them in their future career path.

JS: The Japanese government and companies are now promoting women's participation in the workforce and in business, as well as in the

administrative decision-making process. We have a target of 30% for female managers in any organization, but unfortunately our current status is far from that target. What do you think will be necessary for us to make it happen?

Mitsuhashi: I believe that what matters is the readiness of women themselves to take managerial responsibility. Even in our company where all the working people are women and everybody is able to work with their kids in the office or shop, there are very few who would gladly become a manager or the equivalent when asked. Many are perfectionists and have a strong sense of responsibility and thus respond to me by saying it would be difficult for them to take such a responsibility as they could come to the office only twice a week.

When I offered the post of head of a shop to one of my staff, I told her that she would be more comfortable in this post as she could manage her working hours and methods on her own. To be frank, it was much easier for me to raise my children by being founder of a company. I wish they could change their ways and look at managing their work by following my example. But they can achieve sufficient responsibilities just by short working hours. So I think this perfectionist attitude among Japanese women still survives.

For example, old ladies in Japan would not use a cleaning robot, as they believe a robot cannot clean a room as well as they could do on their own. The same kind of perception is also applied to our nursing clothes. There are still many mothers in Japan who believe this would be bad for them, since it could make their life easier and spoil them. Hardship, or working hard by themselves, is always considered valuable to them. Unless they change this mindset and revive their original capacity to take advantage of others' help or service, we may not achieve the target you mentioned.

JS: How about men's perceptions of working women, such as male colleagues in a company or husbands? Is it an impediment for women to work more and contribute more to society?

Mitsuhashi: Men's perceptions in Japan, such as the role of women in their offices being to serve tea or coffee for guests or their bosses, seem to have changed, I guess. Though all men may not necessarily change their perceptions, many men now understand very well that this old role model needs to be changed. At this moment, in my personal view, Japanese women's attitudes are more responsible for the current low participation of women in the management of organizations.

JS

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