

Japan's assemblywomen band together to push for maternity leave ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Assemblywomen are joining hands in municipalities across Japan to act a role models for women aiming to have both careers and children.

Amid the rise in double-income households, following both paths can often be difficult for female lawmakers absent a legal provision for childbirth or child care leave.

The issue surfaced following a survey conducted by Hiroko Nagano, a 45-year-old member of the Toshima Ward Assembly in Tokyo. Over the 72 years since women in Japan were granted the right to vote, only about 160 assemblywomen in the nation's 47 prefectures, 814 cities and wards and Tokyo's 13 towns and villages have become pregnant while in office, Nagano's survey showed.

Nagano reached out to as many assemblywomen as possible to create a network for sharing information. The network was established in December, bringing together some 60 female politicians.

Women accounted for about 10 percent of all assembly members across Japan in 2016, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Their ratio to the child-rearing generation is much lower, and many assemblies have no precedent for members giving birth.

Nagano was the first assembly member in Toshima Ward to give birth and has two children, born in 2008 and 2010. In both cases, she worked until her due date and returned to work a month after giving birth. Even so, she was criticized for "lack of self-awareness as a lawmaker," she recalled.

When she said she might not be able to attend an assembly session because her due date is near, a fellow member told her to "come even if you have to crawl in or use a wheelchair."

It is something she never forgot, even after 10 years.

When she returned to work four weeks after giving birth, she had to utilize several day care centers and a baby sitter to keep both her career and her family going.

Because there was no precedent in Toshima Ward, she had a hard time seeking advice from those in similar situations, prompting her to set up the network.

Although many people emphasize that women's viewpoints are indispensable in policy decisions, female assembly members "cannot work unless they become like men," Nagano said.

“There will be no increase in the number of women lawmakers until the state and political parties change the system in a responsible manner,” she added.

Earlier this year, the Toshima assembly unanimously passed a revised regulation that allows its members to be absent from assembly sessions due to childbirth and nursing care duty for elderly parents.

Moe Oshima, a member of the Owariasahi Municipal Assembly in Aichi Prefecture who is raising four children, once attended an assembly session just before her due date and was told by colleagues to take time off for the sake of herself and her baby. The advice made Oshima feel relieved, she said.

“The condition of pregnant women varies,” said Oshima, 41. “There should be standards so that those who need to rest can readily take days off.”

Kumamoto Municipal Assembly lawmaker Yuka Ogata caused a stir and received a warning from the assembly in November when she attempted to attend a session with her 7-month-old boy.

Ogata, 42, had attended the assembly until just before she gave birth but became sick afterward and stayed in bed. She was pressured for not living up to her mandate from the electorate because a prerequisite for voting is being present in the meeting hall.

Calling for a “flexible” system that would members to vote via written documents, Ogata said, “The question is not either work or child care, one at the expense of the other.”

Under the labor standards law, women are allowed to take maternity leave for six weeks before and eight weeks after giving birth. But this does not apply to lawmakers in the Diet and municipal assemblies who are elected by the public.

The Diet revised rules in both chambers to add childbirth to the list of reasons that can justify lawmaker absences from plenary meetings, but without any provision to cover child care leave. The National Association of Chairpersons of Prefectural Assemblies made a similar revision to the standard rules for member assemblies in 2002, followed by the national associations of city council leaders and of town and village assembly chiefs in 2015.

The new network of female assembly members with childbirth experience offers consultations for assemblywomen across the nation. It plans to conduct a survey on members to study measures to help lawmakers address problems immediately before and after giving birth, such as model cases for childbirth leave.

The network is also looking to get male lawmakers involved in its cause.

“Unless local assemblies, which are close to residents, face the issue of giving birth and child-rearing, lawmakers will continue to form a unique job category,” Nagano said. “We’ll seek a society where women can give birth without fuss whatever occupations they have.”

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