

# Forget equality, Japan needs female workers for survival's sake [JP] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

In an era when women in developed countries are advancing in every field from politics to business to the professions, Japan stands out. Japanese women remain second-class citizens in the workplace, underrepresented, under-used and undervalued.

Just 0.8 per cent of Japanese chief executive officers are women, compared with 10 per cent in Britain. Less than 10 per cent of managers are women, compared with 43 per cent in the United States. Japan's female employment rate is 25 percentage points below the male rate, the highest gap for any major industrialized country except for Spain and Italy (and they are catching up while Japan's female rate stays flat).

To legislator Kuniko Inoguchi, that seems not just unfair but absurdly wasteful. With its working population forecast to shrink by nearly 10 million by 2030, Japan desperately needs productive workers if it is to maintain its high standard of living. Just as badly, it needs a shot of new energy and ideas.

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Ms. Inoguchi is one of a growing number of Japanese who argue that raising the status of women is much more than a matter of justice and equity. It is a matter of national survival.

Japan faces a big crunch over the next 20 years as a growing public debt and an aging population converge, threatening to cripple the world's second biggest economy.

Other countries, like Canada, keep lively by importing labour through high levels of immigration. Proudly homogeneous Japan has almost no immigration by Western standards. The obvious alternative is to make better use of existing, Japanese labour by tapping the vast pool of women who are excluded from paid work. One study, by Kevin Daly of Goldman Sachs, estimates that Japan could boost its economic output by 16 per cent if it closed the gap between male and female employment levels.

Ms. Inoguchi argues that along with filling empty seats in Japanese offices, bringing more women into the work force would spur the innovation and creativity the country needs to revive its economy, which lost steam after a market collapse during the late 1980s and has never fully recovered.

Call it practical feminism. A Japan that fills its offices with ranks of salarymen in dark suits, she says, cannot prosper in a global economy that runs on innovation. "If you don't care about catching up to the competition then you can afford to have a uniform work force," she said. Japan cannot. "If you want to stay ahead you need to have new ideas. If you recruit people with exactly the same ideas as yours it's no good."

Ms. Inoguchi is a rarity in Japan: a successful, high-profile woman who also managed to raise two daughters. For years a top representative of her country in international disarmament talks, she entered politics in 2005 and became minister for gender and population issues in the government of reforming prime minister Junichiro Koizumi. Now an ordinary MP again, but still a determined advocate for women, she holds court in an office in the National Diet so crammed with papers, books and bouquets of flowers that it is hard to move.

She says that because there is so little organized child care in Japan, many women have to quit their jobs to raise children. Public spending on child care amounts to just 0.3 per cent of gross domestic product, far below the 0.7 per cent average for industrialized countries. That helps explain the unusual M shape in Japan's female participation rate in the labour force. The rate drops sharply during women's prime child-bearing years.

By providing on-site child care, she argues, companies would find themselves with a whole new group of motivated, loyal employees. "Women, once cared for in terms of their role as care givers, will be very much committed to that company," she says.

Perhaps paradoxically, they might also do the nation a favour by having more children. In the past it was assumed that it would help the

fertility rate if women stopped working to have children. In fact, the evidence shows that in developed countries where female employment rates are higher, birth rates are too. That is because countries like Japan confront women with the choice of either having children or working. Countries that make it easier to do both see more babies being born.

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**Region:** Asia <sup>[2]</sup>

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