

Japan's sexist labour market ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

"My mother died," said the female boss of a Japanese software company, seemingly from out of nowhere, during an interview. "I'm sorry," I said. What else can one say?

"No, no," she rushed to explain, sensing that I hadn't followed her point.

I was interviewing Fujiyo Ishiguro, the founder of Netyear, an online-marketing software firm. We were discussing Japan's software sector, her company and her decision to go to America for business school. How did her mother fit in?

"It is hard to raise a child in Japan without one's parents," she said. "The infrastructure for child care is not well developed." The grandparents tend to support the mothers during child-rearing, but Ms Ishiguro's father had also passed away years earlier, she explained.

Then I understood her point-and almost fell out of my chair. I sat there stunned. Ms Ishiguro registered my reaction. For a moment, we both simply sat staring at one another.

"You mean to tell me...you felt it was easier to leave Japan...with a two-year-old son...to do an MBA at Stanford...because you couldn't access child care in Japan?!", I mustered, blinking in disbelief.

We continued to stare for another second, till she broke the silence.

"I am risk averse. It is much easier to go to the US than stay in Japan as a working mother," she confirmed.

I returned to taking notes, as my pulse began to come back.

The story ends well for Ms Ishiguro-if not so well for Japan as a whole. After completing her MBA, she started a consulting firm in California in part because she could control her time more easily there and raise her son. She eventually returned to Japan and started Netyear, which helps companies manage their online marketing operations. Salesforce.com, a large Silicon Valley cloud-computing vendor, took a stake in the firm last year, which is seen in Japan as an important validation of its high quality. (This comes as Japan starts belatedly to overcome its bias for hardware over software, which we've written about in July.)

But there is a sinister side to the story, back in Japan. The lack of child care was at one point an intentional policy choice-made by the nearly all-male political, bureaucratic and business elite-based on the belief that keeping women at home would support traditional values, improve family life and spur women to produce more children, such as to reverse the declining birth rate.

Of course, evidence from places like Sweden, France and even South Korea shows the reverse: better child-care facilities encourage women to have more children, not fewer. Japan's policy couldn't have been worse. Since the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has been in government it has tried to establish better provisions for child care, but has been stymied by the dinosaurs in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) who authored the policy of yore. They just block everything the government tries, hoping to discredit it and win power in the next election.

Ms Ishiguro has always been a pioneer in Japan. While she was a salaryman (so to speak) working in the Nagoya office of Brother, an office-equipment maker, she founded and captained the company's women's rugby team. Now she is one of the few female Japanese bosses of a publicly traded company. Another notable female business leader was Tomoko Namba, the founder and chairman of DeNA-who recently stepped down as chief executive.

As for Ms Ishiguro's son? He graduates from Stanford's computer science department next year. "I tried to raise him to be a geek. And Silicon Valley is for geeks. And now he's a geek in geek school," she says, beaming with pride. Though he is Japanese and was raised partly in Japan, she doubts that he'll end up making his career in his native land, like his mum did. There's more opportunity for an ambitious programmer in Silicon Valley, she sighs.

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