

# Female voices must be heard

Women in the Japanese workforce, and politics, face a constant struggle to balance career and motherhood

**Y**uka Ogata, a 42-year-old lawmaker of the Kumamoto Municipal Assembly, was met with consternation by male colleagues last month for bringing her 7-month-old son into the chamber. Officials refused to let her attend with her child, citing a rule that forbids visitors from entering the floor of the assembly when it is in session.



**Cai Hong**

In an interview with the *Mainichi Shimbun*, Ogata said she brought her son in the hope of visualizing “the poignant voices of women struggling to balance between work and child-rearing”.

Even though we continually raise our voices about the limits of what can be handled personally, Ogata said, nothing changes no matter how much we fight. “So I thought the only way they would listen was to bring my son to my assembly seat. I wanted to give those struggling voices a face,” she added.

The male-dominated legislature in Japan is not friendly to women lawmakers. Sexist hecklings have occurred on the floor of Japan’s parliament and local assemblies.

In 2014, Ayaka Shiomura, a legislator of the Tokyo Metropolitan

Assembly, was heckled by five male assemblymen with comments like “You should get married” and “Can’t you even bear a child?” when she gave a speech urging increased public support for pregnant Japanese women.

A female lawmaker of the Osaka municipal assembly was called “a salary thief” after she gave birth.

Women occupy less than 13 percent of Japan’s local assembly seats, and the ratio of women in parliament’s lower chamber is around 10 percent. The low percentage of female lawmakers is a key reason Japan was placed 114th among 144 nations in the World Economic Forum’s gender equality rankings this year. The country’s ranking was one of the worst among industrialized nations.

Japanese women are working in bigger numbers these days — an estimated 68 percent of those aged 15 to 64 are employed. And Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pledged to boost women’s economic opportunities in order to revive the slumping economy. But changing the cultural norms about working moms is a far more difficult challenge.

Japanese law guarantees that fathers can take paid paternity leave to take care of their newborns. Abe has publicly encouraged men to take a more active role in raising children. But only roughly 3 percent of men in the country avail

themselves of that right, according to Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

Women in the Japanese general workforce face a constant struggle to balance motherhood and a career after having children. A nationwide shortage of public child-care facilities and outdated opinions on women in male-dominated work environments contribute to 70 percent of Japanese women leaving the workforce for a decade or more after their first child.

A survey by Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications showed that women spent three hours and 28 minutes a day on housework including child care in 2016, whereas men spent only 44 minutes. Even among the two-paycheck families in Japan, wives shoulder much more domestic duties than husbands.

In comparison, the survey showed that in the United States, women did housework for three hours and 49 minutes while men did two hours and 21 minutes.

The Abe administration has announced that Japan will spend roughly 800 billion yen (\$7 billion) to expand the country’s free pre-school program. The expansion will render all 3- to 5-year-olds eligible for assistance, regardless of their parents’ income, making preschools free for an additional 2 million children.

Currently, 2.5 million children

in that age group attend either nursery school or kindergarten in Japan. Care for children up to age 2 will be free for households that make less than 2.6 million yen a year and are exempt from municipal residency tax.

For child care, a deeper problem lies in a shortage of nurseries, leaving more than 20,000 children on waiting lists.

Abe has asked Japanese companies to contribute around 300 billion yen for the free child-care program. Sadayuki Sakakibara, chairman of the Japan Business Federation, the country’s most powerful business lobby, has agreed to share the responsibility.

But money is not the only answer to Japanese women’s problems. Political empowerment of women is believed to be the key.

Tali Mendelberg and Christopher Karpowitz, political scientists in the US, conducted an experiment that saw male and female participants separated into groups. Strikingly, they discovered that at least in some circumstances, when women are the majority in the group, men speak more about caregiving issues.

In groups with one man and four women, 62 percent of men raised the topic of children, compared with just 19 percent of men in groups of four men and one woman.

These findings underline the point that when women’s voices are not heard, the issues women care

about are not considered relevant or essential. They are considered separate women’s issues instead of issues for everyone, said Anne-Marie Slaughter, president and CEO of the US think tank New America, in her popular book, *Unfinished Business*. From 2009 to 2011, under the Barack Obama administration, Slaughter served as director of policy planning for the US State Department, the first woman to hold that position.

When women’s voices are heard, as Mendelberg and Karpowitz put it, they are doing “more than naming a problem; they are including marginalized or disadvantaged groups in the conception of ‘us’”.

In other words, women actually represent a broader spectrum of citizens than men do. Just as important, when women have greater standing, men share the floor more equally, adopt the language of care for children more often, endorse more generous safety net support for the poor, are less likely to interrupt women in hostile ways, and provide more positive forms of support and encouragement to female speakers, the two scholars said.

Slaughter rightly said that for women to advance will mean breaking free from stereotypes and assumptions, not only for women but also for men.

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# US fears drive protectionist moves

Trump administration aware China will soon overtake the United States to emerge as the largest global economy

By LAURENCE BRAHM

**T**he most consistent thing about US President Donald Trump is his inconsistency. With consistency, he has reneged on most campaign promises, with a few flagrant exceptions, such as withdrawing from the Paris climate change agreement, building up trade barriers, forcing American companies to divest internationally, and effectively seeking to isolate the United States from globalization.

Not a good record for a country that has for years claimed to be the beacon of globalization, free trade and investment.

Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, President Xi Jinping emphasized that no one will

emerge as a winner in a trade war.

However, the Trump-led US administration fired the opening shots of a trade war on Nov 30 by opposing China’s bid for recognition as a “market economy” in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The move reflects Trump-era protectionism via the manipulation of a global multilateral trading mechanism.

Under WTO principles, there are no specific requirements for a member country to get the market economy status, a concept that harks back to the Cold War principles espoused by the US to isolate and sanction socialist economies.

Cold War rhetoric has become popular in Washington again, without anybody acknowledging that most of those socialist economies enjoy high growth as market economies today. Of course, they

developed in their own way, based on their own actual conditions and without following imported theories.

China led this process of gradual transition from planned to market economy, and joined the WTO in 2001. According to WTO rules, China should have been automatically recognized as a market economy on Dec 11, 2016 — that is, 15 years after joining the world body.

A market economy is an economy that operates by voluntary exchange in a free market and is not planned by a central authority, and where decisions on investment, production and distribution are made based on supply and demand, which in turn determines the prices of goods and services.

Addressing the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi, who is also general secre-

tary of the CPC Central Committee, unequivocally said that it is important to improve the property rights system and ensure the market-based allocation of factors of production.

Western media attention is often focused on China’s State-owned enterprises, but the fact is that they function within the framework of a market economy. Besides, Western media rarely acknowledge that private companies are estimated to account for 75 percent of China’s \$11 trillion economy.

By not acknowledging China as a market economy, the US will be able to adopt protectionist measures against Chinese imports, including high tariffs, taxes and investigations into China’s production and marketing methods, comparing them with those followed by Japan and the Republic of Korea in order to

accuse China of dumping and deny it the market economy status.

*The Economist* recently said China will catch up with the US as the largest global economy soon. Is Washington afraid of Beijing’s Made in China 2025 marketing strategy, because it has realized that in less than a decade China will lead in many industries, particularly technology?

China is already the leading investor in artificial intelligence, renewable energy technologies, and quantum research. In 2020, China will launch 5G, moving a step closer to being a global technology leader. Could this be the underlying reason for the Trump administration to not grant China market economy status?

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