



## **"A culture in which women play a more active role" (Summary)**

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### **Stress levels of working women are above the boiling point**

I am 37 years old. I don't have many female friends of my age who are full-time housewives, and there are even fewer in the younger generation. Women in their 20s, 30s and 40s seem to have different views on their careers.

For people who are younger than I am, constant economic growth, the bubble economy and an adequate pension are nothing more than mythology. They only know a world where a flat year-on-year economic performance is considered rather good, prices go down, and continuing to work after marriage is not a matter of choice but a natural course. Working women are uniformly suffering in juggling jobs, childcare and housework simultaneously, and they complain about their husbands' unwillingness to cooperate and the inadequacy of social infrastructures.

So-called traditional family values are strongly rooted in our parents' generation in our families and in our superiors' generation in the workplace. A working woman who puts her career before having a child or outsources her housework faces disapproving frowns from her parents and in-laws. When she comes home, she sees her children cling to her and worries that she is inadequate compared to full-time mothers.

Under such circumstances, stress among young women is mounting like magma. Is this phenomenon unique to Japan?

### **The situation in the US depicted by Facebook's COO**

There are many powerful women in American politics and business. I had assumed that the stereotyped gender roles of "working father" and stay-at-home mother" had long ago been conquered until I read this book.

"The image of a happy couple still includes a husband who is more professionally successful than the wife." ("Lean In", Sheryl Sandberg, Knopf Doubleday)

While the huge success of Sandberg herself is evidence that there is considerable

difference between Japan and the US, the model of “a husband who is more professionally successful than the wife” is amazingly similar to what we see in Japan.

“About 65 percent of married-couple families with children in the United States have two parents in the workforce, with almost all relying on both incomes to support their household... Employed mothers and fathers both struggle with multiple responsibilities, but mothers also have to endure the rude questions and accusatory looks that remind us that we’re shortchanging both our jobs *and* our children. As if we needed reminding. Like me, most of the women I know do a great job worrying that we don’t measure up. We compare our efforts at work to those of our colleagues, usually men, who typically have far fewer responsibilities at home. Then we compare our efforts at home to those of mothers who dedicate themselves solely to their families.”

### **Why do men work and women stay at home?**

There are many people who feel uncomfortable with the idea that women should be on an equal footing with men. In fact, they represent the majority of Japanese society. Anthropologist Jared Diamond in his “*Why Is Sex Fun?—The Evolution of Human Sexuality*” (Basic Books) presents a thought-provoking chapter titled “What are men good for?”

Although he refrains from asserting outright that men are not good for anything, he points out that even among couples who love each other and who both work, women spend twice as much time on work, childcare and housework than their partner. He closes the chapter by stating that not only anthropologists but also society is still arguing about “What are men good for?” and this study is ongoing.

### **Japan will ultimately utilize its female workforce**

In the long term, I am optimistic that Japan will resolve this problem, perhaps more effectively than does the United States. While Japanese society tends to resist idealism, history shows that it can change dramatically when it is confronted with no other choice.

With its lowering birth rate and aging society, Japan is at the global front line of depopulation. Rapid decrease in its working population can no longer be adequately filled by foreign workers. Our society will spontaneously shift toward making the most of its female workforce. The rest is a matter of the speed of social change.

### **What is interfering with women’s career promotions?**

One major factor is Japan's long and unproductive work hours. As long as this problem exists, few can pursue a career and children at the same time. Sandburg’s “Lean In” also shows this is not a problem unique to Japan.

“Still, the traditional practice of judging employees by face time rather than results unfortunately persists. Because of this, many employees focus on hours clocked in the office rather than on achieving their goals as efficiently as possible. ...Admitting that I went home at five thirty turned out to be kind of a big deal...how incredibly hard it would be for someone in a less-senior position to ask for or admit to this schedule. We have a long way to go before flextime is accepted in most workplaces...”

### **What is behind the overrated long work hours?**

I think the fundamental problem is that a lot of Japanese companies are still reluctant to attempt to measure performance.

The pros and cons of white-collar exemption were actively debated a while ago. At the same time, it is significant that labor shortages and the decline of Japan's old-fashioned major corporations have occurred simultaneously. To secure qualified human resources and improve productivity in this age of depopulation, it is necessary to give consideration to diverse individual situations and take supportive measures such as shorter work hours and teleworking. There are many women who grieve at the lack of job opportunities when they want to return to the workforce after spending several years raising their children. Companies which can flexibly accommodate such a workforce will be the winners in the years to come.

### **Ways to a solution**

Continued competition for human resources may solve the problem naturally. On the political front, I hope that Abenomics will continue to prevent the Japanese economy from deteriorating further and exacerbating the labor shortage. At the same time, the private sector should devise some means of determining smart human resource utilization in order to improve productivity. I think these measures will initiate a smooth shift toward a society where female workers play more active roles. Numerical targets such as “assigning 30% of management positions to women” remain superficial and cause more harm than benefit.

## Author Profile

Norihiro Oe

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Born in Nara in 1977. Editor of *Wedge* since 2006. Specializes in the fields of energy and health care. Launched *WEDGEInfinity* in 2009 and editor-in-chief since 2011. *Wedge's* target readers are intellectual executives at the front lines of business, politics and public administration. His policy from the inception of the magazine has been to dig deeply into timely themes to satisfy the readers' curiosity, delving into the essence of matters. To offer essential constructive proposals without being swayed by public sentiment is needed especially now, when companies and the nation are suffering institutional fatigue and approaching a major turning point. All *Wedge* editors are in their thirties or younger. The author is determined to make the magazine a responsible source of information for the nation's future, representing a generation striving to survive this period of low birth rates and longevity which our nation is the first to face.



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