

Eradicating Social Stigmas in the Work Culture

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We cannot talk about female leaders with families without talking about social and public policy reform. Japan needs to improve its work hours, work environment as well as eradicate social stigmas applied in the work culture. Then, it will start progressing toward a gender balanced society.

Excessive overtime work hours limit the capacity of working females and males in Japan to properly maintain family responsibilities. The issue with overtime work should be addressed in general, regardless of gender. Because if we try to work toward balancing home/family responsibilities between men and women, then the counterpart–work responsibilities–need to reflect equality as well. Increasing opportunities for female leadership does not mean turning the focus to females only. Males need to work less overtime hours in order to be home and share family responsibilities. Only by viewing this issue holistically, can society work toward a solution.

Work environment is another big factor influencing the growth of female leaders in Japan. There needs to be a shift of focus from external image to internal quality. Meaning, instead of worrying about physically being at your desk looking busy or clocking in your hours early and out late, there should be an emphasis on the quality of work that is produced. Introducing flex time and telecommuting could afford workers both females and males more physical, mental and emotional flexibility. This allows the individuals to take more control and ownership of their work, leading to better results in the end.

Social stigmas applied in the work culture also need to be addressed. For example, people need to feel free to use their provided vacation days (of course, when appropriate). The stigma, because of which employees cannot use their vacation days for fear of looking as if they are not working as hard as others, perpetuates a negative cycle. Taking time off to refresh and relax is integral to maintaining one's emotional capacity toward their work. Constant and prolonged stress reduces productivity, and therefore eradicating this social stigma should start at the top. Managers need to encourage their employees to seek balance in their lives. As always, the best method to demonstrate encouragement is not to do it with words, but through actions. The leaders at the top must be brave enough to take the first steps toward change.