



Sunday » June
15 » 2008

Gender bias linked to Japan's GDP

Labour shortage anticipated. Japanese women choose to stay home, ambassador to Canada contends

LYNN MOORE

The Gazette

Saturday, June 14, 2008

A female cabinet minister rattled Japan's citizenry at the beginning of the year when she told parliament that Japan could no longer be considered a "first-class" economy.

Speaking these words just as Japan had begun to feel that its long economic slump was over, Hiroka Ota, the minister in charge of economic and fiscal policy, pointed out that the country's gross domestic product per capita had dropped in 2006 to 18th place among the top 30 industrialized nations. In 1993, Japan had ranked No. 2.

"Thinking about Japan's economic position in five to 10 years amid great changes in the world economy, I think it is imperative for us to implement reforms to boost growth," Ota told parliament in January.

Some analysts see the closing of the gender gap as one reform that would boost Japan's GDP and help offset an anticipated labour shortage.

Closing the gap between male and female employment would boost Japan's GDP by 16 per cent, according to a research report by Kevin Daly, a Goldman Sachs economist based in London. Reducing gender inequality could also play a key role in offsetting Japan's dual problems of an aging population and pension sustainability, he said.

But at least one senior statesman argues that Japan has nothing to learn from the West, especially about family matters and the role of women.

Japanese housewives enjoy an enviable lifestyle in which they are able to participate in "more humane contact" with their children and other family members, Tsuneo Nishida, Japan's ambassador to Canada, said in a recent interview.

"They are choosing the household life because they like it ... even though they are highly educated, even though they have options," Nishida said.

A key reason North American and European women work outside the home is because one income can not maintain the household, he contends. They have to work. In North America, this has contributed to social problems because working parents don't have enough time or energy for their children, he said.

Just as Canada is proud of its diversity, Japan is proud of "a totally unique culture" which includes a reverence for goddesses and harmony and high levels of physical security.

"Japan is still one of the safest countries in the world. Tokyo is safer than

Montreal," said Nishida, adding that if public security were translated into economic terms, it would boost Japan's GDP.

Like their counterpart worldwide, Japan's companies and government offices are under pressure to do more with less, a factor that has to be taken into consideration when hiring. That applies to embassy staff, he said.

In the Muslim world, he pointed out, women and men are not equal. "This is a reality that can not be changed by Japan."

But it must be taken into account when hiring for foreign postings where contact with the Muslim world is possible. As a consequence, if he could only hire two or three people for those postings, "I would prefer men."

While Nishida's son has followed in his father's footsteps, entering the diplomatic service, it's not something he is encouraging his daughter to do. He didn't specify what career, if any, he'd choose for her.

"She has 100 per cent freedom. She has options," Nishida said.

© The Gazette (Montreal) 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.

CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.