Asia's Workforce: The Female Factor

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The number of women and men graduating from Chinese universities has reached near parity; however, less than 20% of leadership positions are held by Chinese women.

With similar trends in Japan and South Korea, how can business and government work together to seize these new employment and growth opportunities?

Key Points
• The problem of discrimination for women requires a custom-made solution depending on the country and environment; there is no “one size fits all” answer.

• Not only do men and women need to be educated on the career potential of women, but corporations need to be educated on the values and advantages women can bring to their business.

Synopsis
Although women are leaving their mark these days – as attested by Hillary Clinton, Eleanor Kagan and Sarah Palin on American politics – women still remain woefully underrepresented globally in the halls of power. In China, they make up only 3% of village heads or vice-heads; in India, only a miniscule percentage of CEOs are women; and Japan ranks especially low in the business world when compared with the United States and Europe.

The reasons are manifold. Women bear the social and cultural responsibility to ensure that their children are raised properly. In the workplace, they often lack a support system and adequate mentoring. One participant mentioned the struggles Taiwanese businesswomen face: their male colleagues cannot help them achieve and their female colleagues do not help them because they are too focused on their own survival in the enterprise. Compounded by the dearth of female role models and the perception of a glass ceiling in most industries, the failure of women to achieve high positions is in many cases a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Solutions need to be implemented on national, institutional and individual levels. One female lawyer described how her firm works its employees very hard in their fourth, fifth and sixth years, complicating the ability for female employees to juggle their careers and their families. She advocated educating women and their partners on relinquishing the societal expectation that a woman needs to manage childcare, freeing them to pursue their careers.

For those women who choose to leave work to start a family, an alumni programme would allow them to remain engaged. Modelled on successful university alumni outreach efforts, the programme would provide a network of former employees and support to ease the transition back into the workforce. To encourage firms to implement this system, publishing a database of firms that comply would allow women to select this perk and would have the added benefit of shaming companies that do not offer the programme.

A female lawyer cited the example of the publication The American Lawyer, which mentions all of the firms that contribute an adequate amount of pro bono; the legal industry collectively recognizes the importance of making that list. A Japanese firm instituted a system whereby a woman employee’s supervisor would mentor her and help the employee feel like she has a path and a future in the company.

Other Key Takeaways
Media and television can show that a woman’s place is not just in the home. Companies can allow mothers to continue working part time or from home. Everyone can be a part of the solution.

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Disclosures
This summary was written by Isaac Stone Fish. The views expressed are those of certain participants in the discussion and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants or of the World Economic Forum.

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