

Kimie Iwata

A portrait of Kimie Iwata, an elderly woman with short grey hair, wearing a dark blue top and a necklace of blue and white beads. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera. A green plant is visible behind her.

Keys to Women's Empowerment

KIMIE Iwata is the chairperson of the Japan Institute for Women's Empowerment & Diversity Management. When serving at the Ministry of Labour (now the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare), Iwata worked on the drafting of the "Act on Securing, Etc. of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment (hereinafter called the Equal Employment Opportunity Act)." We asked Iwata about women's empowerment today.

Increasingly, women have been excelling in a variety of fields. What do you think of this?

I am under the impression that women have finally begun to excel. In particular, large corporations based in metropolitan areas have focused on the full utilization of regular female employees.

Discussions about the utilization of a female workforce have been held for forty years. From the 1970s to the 1980s, discussions about gender equality were the focus of attention, symbolized by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, which went into effect in 1986. Because of this Act, companies created a formal framework for the utilization of female workers, but they were not serious about it as a management issue. From the 1990s until around 2010, the "M-shaped curve (refer to the link)," which shows female retirement for

childbirth and child-rearing, was the center of interest. The main focus was how to compensate for the decrease in the working population due to the declining birthrate, which was symbolized by the Act on Childcare Leave, Caregiver Leave, and Other Measures for the Welfare of Workers Caring for Children or Other Family Members, which went into effect in 1992. But Japanese companies had redundant workers when the bubble economy collapsed. The utilization of female workers was a social issue, but corporations could not get it as their own issue.

Because the current Japanese administration has regarded female empowerment as a core strategy for economic growth, companies changed. Companies have come to realize that they would be unable to achieve sustainable growth and would lose competitiveness with their past treatment of female workers. Many issues continue to exist, but this recognition is very significant.

What do you think are those issues?

The issues are the continuation of work (resolution of the M-shaped curve) and career development of female workers (the increase in the percentage of women in directors and managerial positions). The former is improving, especially in large corporations in metropolitan areas. However, for rural areas, small and medium-sized enterprises and non-regular employees, the continuation of work cannot yet be assumed. For the latter, with regard to the percentage of women in directors and managerial positions of listed companies, women made up 3.4% of directors and 13% of managerial positions in 2016. Because Japanese companies take a lot of time for human resources development, tangible effects remain to be seen.

An environment needs to be created for female empowerment.

The largest obstacle to the realization of the continuation of work and career development of female workers is the long working hours of Japanese workers. During the period of rapid economic growth, long working hours directly led to performance results, but this is not true today. Now companies do not know what to produce and they compete for how to find new values and win markets. This does not mean that if you work for many hours, you will find the answer.

If the deep-seated awareness of the division of roles between men and women is dissolved as well as solving long working hours, I am sure that women will automatically become empowered.

What do you think is the key to solving long working hours?

Companies try to tackle this issue, but their efforts are only superficial, such as setting no-overtime work days and lights out at offices. Unless you apply human resources and time to higher-priority works that directly leads to sales and profits and simultaneously attempt to reduce lower-priority works, you will not be able to solve these problems. You also need to standardize and simplify work processes that tend to be based on personal judgments. Fundamentally speaking, the difference between men and women is time restrictions due to child-rearing and nursing care. Creating an environment where women with time restrictions can flourish, this is work style reform. That is, you have to treat the promotion of female empowerment and work style reform as different sides of the same coin.

What do you think about the role of the government and public administration?

There are things that companies cannot tackle alone. As I said, one is social awareness of the roles of men and women. This is the societal belief that men should be the breadwinner and women should do the housework, child-rearing and nursing care. As long as this consciousness remains, female empowerment will have difficulty expanding. In recent years, not a few young men have raised their awareness that family life is more important or that both family life and working outside are important. The government needs to take leadership in promoting awareness reforms in society as a whole.

Another issue is child care facilities. Some large companies have child care facilities of their own, but not many companies can do this. You have to depend on the central and local governments for child care centers.

What do you think about female career development?

Both men and women have no choice but to develop themselves through work experience. There are cases in which women decline

difficult jobs, personnel transfers and promotions to managerial positions due to a lack of experience, lack of self-confidence or fear of failure. Companies, bosses and women themselves need to have appropriate recognition that the accumulation of work experience leads to female career development.

On the other hand, we are also seeing an increase in the number of women who start up their own businesses. In the past, many women who gave up their career due to childbirth and child-rearing started a business by making use of their experience as housewives. But in recent years we have seen an increase in cases in which young men and women start business by making use of their IT skills, coming up with good ideas. If women develop more IT skills, they will have more opportunities for becoming entrepreneurs.

We have heard that enhancing diversity as well as female empowerment is important for corporate growth.

For many years companies carried out operations mainly through male Japanese workers who were employed as new graduates. But I think that this only creates a homogenous culture and makes it difficult to innovate. For corporate growth, it is important that human resources with different attributes and experiences, including men and women, young and old people, Japanese and non-Japanese people, employees who joined companies after graduation from school and people who were employed halfway through their career, get together and pool their diverse information, values and networks.

The late Masaru Ibuka, one of the founders of Sony Corporation, said that innovation occurs where common sense and extraordinary sense meet. To borrow this idea, common sense is an accumulation in companies from Japanese men working long hours. Of course, this is important. But women, foreigners and people who are employed halfway through their career could bring extraordinary sense to work places. I believe that innovation will be created by putting more importance on people who have not had the chance to perform well until now. ■

Interview by HITOSHI CHIBA
