



Interview: Minister Masako Mori

A HEROINE AT THE
HELM OF A SOCIETY
WHERE WOMEN SHINE

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At the end of 2012, a new Japanese heroine was born with the appointment of Masako Mori as Minister in charge of Support for Women's Empowerment and Child-Rearing. She paid her own way through university and became a lawyer, studying at the New York University School of Law and going on to work in Japan's Financial Services Agency before becoming a member of the National Diet. She has tirelessly dedicated herself to the relief of the socially vulnerable throughout every stage of her career.

Mori is also a working mother, succeeding in one of Japan's top career paths even as she finds time to tweet pictures of the school lunches she makes for her two daughters each morning. I spoke to her about the Japanese government's efforts toward promoting the empowerment of women.

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'The active participation by women' is being touted as a core of Growth Strategy. What are your thoughts on this?

In order to revitalize the Japanese economy and recover from the Great East Japan Earthquake, we need to employ the latent power of women. 60 percent of women currently quit due to pregnancy and childbirth, and the number of women looking for work stands at 3.03 million. According to the IMF's preliminary

calculations*, if we raise the rate of working women to 70 percent**, the average GDP per person will go up by roughly 4 percent. If we raise it to the level of Scandinavia, the average GDP per person will rise by 8 percent.

If more women participate in the development of new products and services, we can expect their diverse experiences and values to be reflected in the opening up of new markets.

There have been positive reactions from abroad regarding 'the active participation by women' as a core of Growth Strategy. What has attracted the most attention?

The international community has highly evaluated Prime Minister Abe's deep commitment to the promotion of active participation by women, placing women's policies not just in the realm of human rights issues, but at the very core of economic policy. When I announced this last September at the APEC Women and the Economy Forum held in Indonesia that 'Abenomics' will not succeed without 'Womenomics,' other ministers of the APEC region approached me with words of admiration. In the address at the Sixty-Eighth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, the prime minister defined the active participation by women as a prerequisite for further economic development, and has referred to this issue in each of his speeches delivered in Japan. Prime Minister Abe himself has been directly involved in lobbying efforts aimed at the business world,

rapidly expanding child care centers across the country, offering subsidies and awards to private firms that aggressively promote the active participation by women, and implementing senior-level promotions of women working as national public servants. I feel that the determination of both the Abe administration and the nation itself to reform Japan into 'a society in which women shine' is being felt both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, in the area of disaster reduction, we've collected the lessons learned from 2011's Great East Japan Earthquake into 'Guidelines for Disaster Planning, Response and Reconstruction from a Gender Equal Perspective.' Such examples of our engagement of women in contingency planning against natural calamities have also been praised by our friends abroad.

As a Japanese woman who built a high-profile career while raising two children, how do you think the mentality of Japanese society needs to change?


We speak of 'glass ceilings,' but the roads of Japanese society are also strewn with 'glass pebbles' that trip up women who try to make progress. Men can't see them, so they don't understand why women stumble. I've seen these differences in perspective throughout my career, and struggled to work through the obstacles that come with them. We have to make these pebbles visible to men as well, and work together to pick them up one by

one. I hope to ease the burdens of the women who are shouldering our future, and establish a society where they can succeed to the fullest.

Our objective is to increase the ratio of women in leadership positions to at least 30 percent by 2020, the year Tokyo will host the Olympic and Paralympic Games. To realize this goal, we're promoting the voluntary engagement of each sector by increasing the visibility of women's recruitment and promotion in business and government. In order to achieve this, it's also essential to continue our efforts to raise awareness among men, including executive-level employees and business leaders, on the topics of work-life balance and the involvement of men in child-rearing.

The Abe administration is guided by the motto, 'One positive result is better than a hundred empty words.' As the Minister in charge of Support for Women's Empowerment and Child-Rearing, I continue to devote my energies to realizing a society in which a woman can feel at ease raising a family while shining in any field, pushing for one change at a time throughout 2014.

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The momentum of the new change spreading through Japanese society can be felt in Mori's words. With her intrinsic wisdom and strong conviction, she is sure to bring about positive results as she continues to cut through the remaining wilderness in Japanese society. 

* Preliminary calculation as of October 2012
** Measured as actual working population as a percentage of total working-age population