

**INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS**

To Rescue Economy, Japan Turns to Supermom

By JONATHAN SOBLE JAN. 1, 2015

TOKYO — When she was pregnant with the first of her three sons, Chiaki Kitajima, an advertising executive here, said her bosses were shocked that rather than accept reduced hours and a demotion after maternity leave, she made a presentation on why the company should subsidize child care.

“I had to fight to convince them that supporting me was a good investment,” she said. Ms. Kitajima, 47, is now the creative director of her advertising agency but says mothers at her professional level remain rare.

The Japanese prime minister would like to change that. And he has a fix for his country’s troubled economy: the supermom.

These days, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been encouraging Japanese women to have it all. A rewarding career. Children, preferably more than one.

In a country where juggling work and family has long been especially difficult, Mr. Abe has pledged to ease the way for women like Ms. Kitajima, with more state-funded child care and other measures to foster “a society where all women shine.” Tackling the nation’s shrinking population and declining labor force by encouraging working women is part of his broader effort to re-energize the economy, which is looking especially unsteady after Japan unexpectedly fell into a recession last quarter.

His promises, though, will be difficult to put into practice, given entrenched societal and corporate norms. While the share of working women has been steadily growing — and now exceeds the level in the United States — they tend to earn significantly less than men. Mothers, in particular, are more likely to drop out of the work force.

Mr. Abe must overcome an entrenched corporate culture that prizes long and inflexible hours favoring men, and the prime minister’s own conservative party

makes for an unlikely champion of women.

A decade ago one of his predecessors, Yoshiro Mori, said women who delayed giving birth in order to work were selfishly “exulting in freedom,” suggesting that those without children should be disqualified from receiving public pensions. A health minister in Mr. Abe’s first government, which lasted from 2006 to 2007, described women as “baby-making machines.”

This summer, a ruling-party member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly had to apologize for taunting a female legislator with calls of “Get married” and “Can’t you have a baby?”

At a campaign stop before the recent special parliamentary election that gave his government a renewed majority, Mr. Abe’s gaffe-prone finance minister, Taro Aso, said Japan’s demographic problems were caused by “not having children.” Although he did not specify who was at fault, the comment elicited an outcry. The leader of the largest opposition party said “statements that appear to blame women who cannot have children are unforgivable.”

The United States and Europe face similar challenges. National policies have largely failed to address pay inequalities or create broad support systems for working mothers.

But the gender gap in Japan is more pronounced. The national birthrate is just 1.4 children per woman, among the lowest in the world and well below the level needed to ward off a sharp decline in population in the coming decades. And when Japanese women do have children, they quit their jobs more often than mothers in other industrialized countries, leaving a hole in an already dwindling work force.

While many mothers start working again once their children reach school age, most take up low-paid part-time or contract jobs. This, experts say, helps explain why Japanese women earn 40 percent less than men on average and occupy only one in 10 management-level positions.

In September, the head of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, said significant steps to close the gender gap could increase Japanese economic growth by a quarter of a percentage point. That is not small in a country that has averaged less than 1 percent growth for the last two decades.

“Japan is using only half its population, so how can it compete internationally?” said Mikiko Fujiwara, a former investment banker who runs career seminars for female employees at businesses and local governments. Demand for her services, she

said, has increased since Mr. Abe began pushing his message of female empowerment on corporate executives. “They didn’t think it was worth the money to specifically train women before, but that’s changed.”

Mr. Abe’s record so far is mixed. In September, he appointed five women to his cabinet, equaling the largest number on record. Yet the majority belonged to the most socially conservative wing of his party, which opposes feminist causes like changing Japan’s male-only royal succession and allowing husbands and wives to keep separate surnames. Two of the women resigned in October, facing campaign-funding scandals.

One of Mr. Abe’s initial proposals has also come under fire. He outlined plans to extend unpaid maternity leave for up to three years, an idea that appeared to reflect the once-common belief in Japan that women need to “hug their children close” until they are toddlers. But such a long absence from work can also derail a career.

“The idea of taking three years off is absurd; nobody asked for that,” said Rumi Sato, a journalist and author of “Sugo-haha,” or “Amazing mothers,” a study of working mothers in Japan. “Women want to know that they can get back on track when they return.”

Mr. Abe’s most concrete policy moves have focused on child care, which is in short supply in major cities. His government is trying to eliminate nursery school waiting lists by creating 400,000 new spaces by March 2018. It is also working to loosen immigration restrictions that have limited foreign nannies and housekeepers.

The government is also debating whether to change tax rules that favor single-income families over those with two incomes. An exemption dating from the 1960s lowers taxes on men whose wives earn less than 1 million yen, or about \$8,300. Kaku Sechiyama, a specialist in gender studies at the University of Tokyo, estimates that as many as 80 percent of married working women are in part-time jobs that keep them just under the threshold.

“It’s rational for them, but it discourages work,” Professor Sechiyama said. “It’s basically a subsidy for housewives.”

Compounding the problem, women still have a tough time getting ahead at most companies. The demands on employees for long hours and after-work socializing are still pervasive, creating a double bind for working mothers since husbands are less available for child care.

Mr. Abe has set ambitious goals. He has revived a largely forgotten, decade-old

target of having women occupy 30 percent of “supervisory positions” in business and government by 2020. He is also pressuring — though not requiring — stock-market-listed companies to appoint at least one woman to their boards.

But Mr. Abe is mainly leaving businesses to set their own course, and there is a long way to go. Over 80 percent of Japan’s more than 3,600 public companies have no female directors.

Some businesses have been proactive, by breaking down the strict division between job tracks in Japan that limits opportunities for clerical and other “noncareer” staff, a disproportionately female group. KDDI, a mobile phone company, has started assigning two deputies — one female and one male — to each senior executive, an idea it borrowed from IBM.

The company is also offering more flexibility. Kaname Utsumi, 43, the manager of a team of 15 in KDDI’s human resources department, says she was the first woman of her level to return to a management job after maternity leave, three years ago.

Her husband, who also works for the company, drops their son off at day care and sometimes picks him up. She leaves work early twice a week, at 5:30 p.m., though she says she usually puts in additional hours at home.

“It’s hard,” Ms. Utsumi said. “But when you find a job you like, you don’t want to give it up.”

Nonetheless, it can still be tough to breach the upper ranks.

Shinobu Nagasako, 52, is suing her employer, Chugoku Electric Power Company, for discrimination, claiming that she was passed over for a management job because of her gender. Two-thirds of her male colleagues with the same amount of experience and education are now managers, she says, but only 12 percent of similarly qualified women are.

Chugoku Electric argues that the gap is because of differences in ambition. Many women, the company says, have intentionally chosen shorter hours and lighter responsibilities. While lower courts have sided with the company, the case is now before the Supreme Court.

“All the H.R. policies look gender-neutral on paper, but there’s a lot of discretion in who gets promoted,” Ms. Nagasako said. “Men are supposed to work, and women are supposed to take care of the home. So when you’re a woman, you start from a huge disadvantage.”

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