

Womenomics, Abenomics and some small talk

By Julie L. Kessler

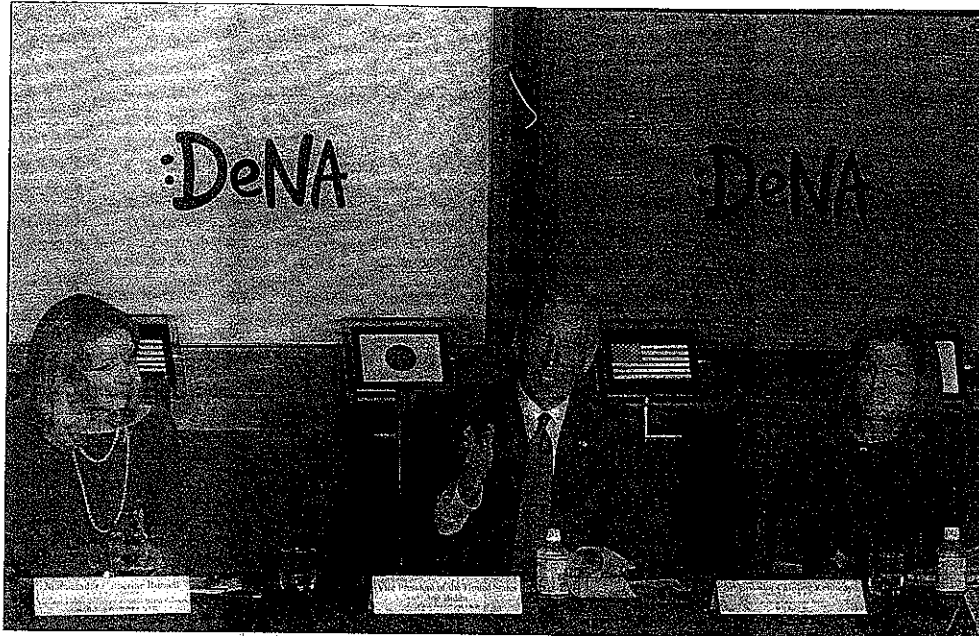
When Vice President Joe Biden was in Japan earlier this month, he surprised a few people by visiting the headquarters of DeNA Co., an Internet company in central Tokyo. While there and surprising a few more, Biden sat down at a table next to five young women and commenced his chit-chat with them by asking, "Do your husbands like you working full time?" What?

In addition to other high-cost fallout, this chatty gaffe managed to thoroughly discredit the entire purpose of Biden's visit to DeNA — to promote Japan's acceptance of more women in the workplace; a key position of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's domestic policy, and in support thereof President Barack Obama's foreign policy agenda.

Abe finally figured out that to boost economic growth in Japan and address its diminishing labor pool, he had to shore up Japan's numbers. In doing so, Abe will not be artificially maintaining near-zero loan interest rates, nor will he be "importing" inexpensive labor from nearby Vietnam, Indonesia or the Philippines. Instead, Abe plans to take advantage of an available resource which Japan has had access to all along, just ready for the taking, but summarily bypassed. He wants Japanese women to participate in the work force in greater numbers.

Given Biden's usual equal-opportunity stance and normally affable demeanor, his presence at DeNA, theoretically anyway, should have helped promote the concept, not make his communications staff immediately bristle and then spend its time conducting fast action damage control instead of focusing on high stakes meetings between the U.S. and China, Japan and South Korea.

Japan is, by far, the most developed and modern country in Asia. It enjoys the same 99 percent literacy rate as the U.S., France and Denmark. It is also extremely ethnically homogenous; it is an island nation consisting largely of ethnic Japanese. And by design it is a country to which people very rarely immigrate. Of the approximately 128 million people currently living in Japan, only about 2 million are expatriates.



Catherine Russell, U.S. ambassador at large for global women's issues, left, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy at DeNA Co. Ltd. on Dec. 3.

It is also not a country from which many emigrate; it has one of the lowest emigration rates in the world.

Despite high literacy and an excellent and inclusive educational system, however, it is still a very difficult place for women to embrace both a career and a family. This is partially due to age-old concepts of "Ie," which roughly translates to "household," and long-standing Confucian ideals regarding family. But it is also due to simple economics — there is almost no affordable childcare in Japan, and corporations simply make it impossible for women to return to work after the birth of their first child.

If all goes according to Abe's plan, this is about to change, though no doubt it will be a very slow process indeed. Abe's plan promotes maternity leave, and would increase government-sponsored childcare facilities. In addition, corporations would receive pecuniary incentives to hire more women. All lofty ideals in theory, and perhaps even grander in practice.

A further problem, however, is the income differential between Japanese men and women. In 2010, the Organisation for Eco-

nomics Co-operation and Development reported that Japanese women made the equivalent of 71 cents to every Japanese man's dollar (compared to American women's 81 cents to their American male counterparts). Japanese men also participate in household activities

which Japanese women would have to engage in order to complete their tasks.

Although there are many well-educated women who want to return to work after having children to maintain their career paths, the obstacles are many. Thus, despite their de-

for his plan to succeed. Those would include changes in the tax code, which now penalizes dual income earners, and other wholesale structural changes to promote far more equality than currently exists.

The bigger problem, however, may be a cultural one, for which it is, of course, nearly impossible to legislate any meaningful correction. Japan is, at its very core, a society that absolutely abhors conflict in literally all manner of discourse. That is the case in familial, social and commercial settings. (How else can one explain that there are at least half-a-dozen ways in the Japanese language of saying "no," none of which actually means "no," but all of which are instead indirect variants of something much less than "yes"?) Thus, even though certain corporate conduct in the employment arena is illegal, it happens with regularity. For example, violations against women employees which in effect prohibit their return to work are rarely reported, since that goes against these very notions of conflict avoidance. This cultural prohibition, coupled with the inherent national allergy to any aspect of discovery or litigation, will render the financial

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to a substantially lower degree than their American brethren (which isn't really all that much if we're being honest here). Add to this an aging Japanese population in which the vast majority of the burden of elder care falls on Japanese women, and it's not difficult to see why 24 hours in a day can almost never be enough for the enormous juggling act in

sires and abilities, the number of women in high-level positions in government and business is far lower than that of women in other advanced economies.

Abe's plan is a beginning, made possible by his recognition and acknowledgement of the problem. However, there will need to be other changes in Japan's domestic law as well

incentives to corporations to hire and maintain women in the work force even more critical to the success of Abe's plan.

Japan has long been blessed with a highly talented, dedicated, skilled and hard-working labor pool. However, demographics have shifted so that Japan's current and future employment needs will not be met as long as the old status quo remains. Abe's efforts to start a dialogue about and formulate a plan to tap into this enormous resource of women should be applauded. Though these able women have been present and available all along, the long awaited arrival of Abenomics and Womenomics is, of course, better late than never. The success of Abe's plan, however, will require a cultural shift, domestic law changes, and corporate compliance. And also perhaps, a far better script of questions from Biden's communications staff in the future. With an aging population, diminishing labor pool, and significant gaps in certain market sectors, it will be very tough for Japan to maintain its place in the world economy in their absence. Indeed, a return to the labor force of a significant number of Japanese women would probably not only save Japan's economy, but substantially propel it.

As any good captain knows, even in fair weather, it is very tough to sail a ship employing only half a mast, no matter how great or sturdy that half mast is. Under somewhat stormy economic skies, all capable hands should be on deck. Stay tuned.

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