Japanese women are smart and entrepreneurial, so why is so little effort made to harness their talents?

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Japan mat' be the world's second largest economy, but half of its population is still preserved in the amber of a tradition-bound past. During the country's bubble years, when jobs were plentiful and hopes were high, women began to expect botte a greater role in the workplace and a lesser rote in the home. In 1985, Japan's parliament passed a law ensuring gender equality at work, and men's magazines ran serious articles on the joys of cleaning a toilet. But then the golden apple was snatched away. Once the bubble economy burst in 1992, women were the first to be laid off. Although more women work now than a decade ago, they are still the last to be rehired to full-time jobs.

In May, a gender-gap survey by the World Economic Forum found that, in terms of economic opportunity and political empowerment, Japanese women ranked 52nd and 54th respectively out of 58 developed and emerging economies. And even though women were named as heads of two major Japanese companies earlier this year—at supermarket chain Daiei and electronics maker Sanyo-only 7.7% of departmental and section managers are female. Just 30% of working women stay on after childbirth, according to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. "This is a critical period in Japanese history," says Hiroko Hara, a member of the Advisory Committee for the Prime Minister's Office on Gender Equality. "We have to figure out whether to keep fighting for our dream of equality or just give up on having it all.”

In one way, there's nothing special about Japan. Women in the developed world have played out variations on the work vs. home theme for decades. But the stark career-orkids choice in Japan has created a demographic nightmare. Because Japanese women are expected to quit their jobs when they have children, a record number are forgoing marriage altogether. Today, some 25% of Japanese women in their early 30s are single, up from 14% a decade ago. As a consequence, Japan's fertility rate fell to a record low of 1.29 in 2004 compared to 2.13 in the U.S., giving it one of the lowest birth rates in the world. Demographers predict that the population will start declining in 2007. If trends continue, Japan will shrink from a nation of 127 million today to 64 million by the end of this century—and from 2010, that decline will adversely affect the economy. Yet compared to other developed economies, Japan under the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been slow in implementing polcier like flexible hours for working mothers, enhanced day-care options and incentives for bearing children.

That means Japan is not getting anything like the mort out of its work force. Indeed, even though Japan will soon face a shortage of workers, a Cabinet Office survey released in July found that 63% of Japanese companies had no plans to try to hire more women. Tomoyo Nona ka, who took over as chairman of Sanyo in June, remembers her first attempts to get a job as a photojournalist. Nonaka had an advanced degree in the field but was told she was unqualified fired because she wasn't male. "That was my start in Japan,” she says. "A very clear 'No, thank you:' And those who get yes for an answer know they are fortunate.

Yukari Yamashita Yui develops satellites for the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, a government agency, so ber hours are regular. "I'm very lucky, because I couldn't do this at a private company; she
Half of my female friends from university have quit their jobs as astronomers. They wanted to continue working, but they had no choice. The working environment is almost impossible for mothers:"

You’d think the government might want to do something about that. On the contrary, allege critics: "There is no sense of crisis within the LDP, and no interest either," says House of Representatives member Seiko Noda. "Why? Because the main opinion is that [the falling birthrate] is the women's fault and the men do not need to do any thing:' Noda, a former LDP member who fell out with her party's leadership over post office privatization, the issue that sparked September's parliamentary elections, is one of only 43 women in Japan's lower house. That's just 9% of the membership, even though a record number of women were voted into office in the poils and the LDP itself fielded 26 female candidates, all of whom won. But many LDP politicians would much prefer to see women return to, the role of okusan- "person in the back of the house' as avives are commonly called in Japan. Last year, an LDP panel on constitutional reform issued a report recommending that the constitution, which guarantees equality between the sexes, should be revised because it has promoted "egoism in postwar Japan, leading to the collapse of family and community:'

This summer, ruling-party members, including acting LDP secretary-general Shinzo Abe, publicly criticized a governmental draft report on how to achieve gender equality. "A [gender-free] concept that ignores the value of marriage and the family is linked to the destruction of culture," said Abe during a party conference. Minoru Nakamura, a popular assemblyman from the Tokyo suburb of Funabashi, was even more blunt about those who advocate equality between the sexes. "Pitiable women who direct their dissatisfaction at being ignored by men toward society ... are truly laughable," Nakamura said. He then added: "It's also strange how these women, compared to their peers, are uglier.'

In theory, younger Japanese men are far more open to equality than their fathers. They have to be: two incomes are often the only way that a family can maintain a comfortable lifestyle in Japan's big cities. Still, the pressures of a workaholic culture dissuade many men from cutting out early and doing a little dusting. Only 0.4% of men take paternity leave, while 73% of women take maternity leave. Wives also shoulder most of the burden of caring for the country's rapidly aging population. "Women must work twice as hard as men to advance their careers because of prejudice within Japanese companies," says women's rights activist Hara. "And then they have to go home and work three times as hard there:' Hara's housework estimate, in fact, may be too low: a survey by the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation found that women spend a daily average of 3 hours and 49 minutes on such chores. Men? They spent just 32 minutes a day on them.

IT WAS ALL SUPPOSED TO BE SO DIFFERENT. IN 1988, when the Japanese economy—remember?—was the wonder of the world, the Nikkei publishing group launched a magazine called Nikkei Woman. "We thought the age of the career woman was about to start, and we wanted it to be at the forefront of the trend," says editor in chief Hiroko Nomura. It was a fine dawn. By the mid-1990s, Japan was deep in a recession and many women had scaled back their career expectations. "We knew that men's attitudes would be slow to change," says Nomura. "But we found that women's own expectations of what they could do were changing, too. They were putting the brakes on their own careers.' So Nikkei Woman rebranded itself as a handbook for office ladies and part-timers. (One-third of Japanese women work largely dead-end "womenonly" jobs.) Nomura is philosophical about
the shift in content. "We were too far ahead of the times," she says. "If the bubble had continued, then progress for women would have been much faster."

To be sure, not everyone has given up. Indeed, the changing fortunes of Japanese professional women over the last two decades have produced sharp divisions in the way that women regard work. Some have bailed out, depressed because they think they will never crack the bamboo ceiling—full-fine female workers earn just 69% of what Japanese men make—or because they are unwilling to commit to the rigorous work in Japan. But for women who have managed to secure a career, life can be good. Many thirty-something women in Japan who began their Bues at work during the final years of the bubble economy now revel in their ability to live like the stars of Sex and the City—sans husbands, of course. Junko Sakai, 38, is single, buys chic clothes and laments dating men who are "litter toilet paper when what you really ant is tissue paper." Last year, she published a collection of essays entitled Howl of the Loser Dogs. Japanese society, she says, veneration the winner dog, the housewife who waits with a var of miso soup for her husband and kids. Sakai, a childless single, champions a different lifestyle. "Society mat" call us loser dogs; she says, "but we are happy and independent."

Yet Sakai admits that Japanese women in their 20s seem skeptical of the way that those litter her have focused on their careers. "We are seen as selfish," Sakai says. "The lesson younger people take from us is that if you do as you please and have a job and but things, then you end up alone." Says newscaster Tanimoto, also single: "I thought our exciting careers would show younger women that there is a path to success. But I think they actually feel sorry for us." As if to make that point, the poster child for the new Japanese woman is a dooey model named Yuri Ebihara. Through her appearances in youth fashion magazine CanCam, Ebihara is spawning merchandising unes that extol the virtues of the office lady. "In the '90s, the trend in fashion magazines was 'New York. career women;" says CanCam's editor in chief Yutaka Onishi. "The concept was cool, sharp, Independent was a trend. Ten years later you look around and realize that it was just an illusion."

The answer, perhaps, is to define an exciting career in a new way. Since so many of Japan's conglomerates have proven themselves wary of placing women on the career track, females are becoming entrepreneurs themselves. Today, 65,000 companies in Japan are owned by women. Most are mom-and-only-mom operations that allow working mothers flexible hours.

Mika Noguchi, a mother of four, runs a company larger than most. Although she never went to college, at age 21 Noguchi knew one vert' important thing: what lingerie women liked to wear. In 1987, eschewing the sexy styles of male designers, she began designing the frilly, flowery creations that she calls "I love me" underwear. Her company, Peach John, is now Japan's answer to Victoria's Secret, with $145 million in sales last year. At Peach John's Tokyo headquarters, all but one of the 42 employees never attended college. "And no one came alter me until I was 53 years old," when VW hired her. Yet for all those who appear to be harbingers of a new Japan, - - more many have left the labor market. Hitomi Asano, once the owner of her own casting agency in Tokyo, now Bues on the outskirts of Sendai, in a rice-growing patch of northern Japan. In 1995, aged 35, Asano married a doctor and the pair moved first to a small town where lie worked at a local hospital-wives in Japan follow their husbands' jobs. One day, she were her fur coat out, and an elderly man scooted away in terror. "He thought I was a bear," recalls Asano. "I didn't fit in vert' well."

Two years later, the couple moved to Sendai, also a place that had no need for casting agencies. So Asano did what middleclass housewives in rural Japan do. She joined the choir, planted orchids, learned traditional calligraphy. But she still feels that something is missing. "In Tokyo, I had a passion, and in Sendai I don't," she says. "Sometimes when I'm at home alone, I put on my fancy clothes from Tokyo and just walk around pretending I'm back at work." Asano knows she's a winner dog by Japanese standards; she is married to a doctor, no less. But so long as Japan-aging, shrinking Japan-can't find a way to lure skilled women liter her back into the workplace, the whole nation will lose. - - reporting by Yuki Oda, Toko Sekiguchi and Michiko Sogame/Tokyo