

Savvy Businesswomen Storm Services Sector

By Suvendrini Kakuchi

At 55, Noriko Suda is the proud owner of a chic clothes boutique that enjoys a downtown Tokyo address, and she loves every minute of her work. "With the children grown up and my husband spending long hours in his office, I decided to start my own business," said the fashionably dressed, vivacious woman.

From becoming owners of thriving companies to breaking into the male-dominated fortune-telling business, Japan's women are shouldering their way into the business world to prove, as if with a vengeance, that they are a capable workforce on a par with their male counterparts.

Even more noteworthy is the support extended to these women by the government, which has long been accused of dragging its feet in supporting gender equality. "The last three years have seen mind-boggling breakthroughs for women who want to break away from customs that insisted that they concentrate on the family while men pursued their careers," said Masako Hiramatsu of the Ichikawa Memorial Association, one of Japan's oldest feminist groups.

Among the most telling indicators of the new mindset is a report from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry that called on women to play an active role

within enterprise. In its release of the report, the ministry, which is not known for its conservatism, raised eyebrows throughout the country. Among the agency's recommendations is that firms adopt measures to encourage women within their activities to increase productivity. The government has

business talents of women and help them launch new companies, a development seen to help boost the sluggish Japanese economy. "Studies showed a lot of women want to start businesses but cited financial problems as their biggest hurdle," he explained.

Advancement of Working Women, was also launched in January 2001 by Japan's Health, Welfare and Labour Ministry to aid women entrepreneurs. Said Katsura Yamamoto, spokeswoman for the centre, "Our surveys show that more women are keen to start their own businesses. They believe to advance their careers rather than be employed in large companies."

Is this just another trend in the evolution of the notoriously inert Japanese economy, or is this a genuine landmark for the recognition of women and their place in Japanese society?

Surveys indicate that the most important reason why women want to start new businesses is that they want to pursue lives that help develop themselves. "Working in a company is stifling for women in Japan, where men are paid higher and given more promotions," Noriko Suda said.

Women now make up just over 50 percent of Japan's workforce of 49 million people. But more than half this number is restricted to part-time jobs, and in Japan's companies—bastions of patriarchal stodginess—managers who are women are only 9 percent of the total.

Source: Inter Press Service, 31 October 2003, <<http://www.ips.prg>>

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also decided to fund the setting up of new support schemes for potential women entrepreneurs.

There is at least one precedent for such an approach. In April 1999, special loans carrying annual interest rates of a low 1.5 percent were extended only to women by the public-sector Life Finance Corporation.

According to Yamafuji Santo, the corporation spokesman, the service was established to recognise the

Since then, the number of recipients of the low-interest loans has soared. A survey last year revealed that 3,277 cases—the equivalent of US\$17 million in disbursements—were supported. The same survey showed that the most common new businesses were in services, including small restaurants, take-out food stores, nursing, massage centres, relaxation clinics, and pet grooming.

A similar programme, called the Centre for the