

# IMPROVING WOMEN'S STATUS CREATES AN EMPOWERED SOCIETY

*Japan will host the World Assembly for Women (WAW!) this December to increase momentum toward achieving gender equality and empowering women. With extensive experience in developing corporate talent, ACHILLES Michiko—selected by the American magazine Diversity Global as one of the “2017 Top 10 Influential Women in Global Diversity”—talks about Japan’s efforts and the challenges involved.*

The Government of Japan is accelerating its actions toward gender equality and women’s empowerment to create a society in which everyone’s individuality and diversity are respected, regardless of gender. In December,

the sixth World Assembly for Women (WAW! 2022) will be held in Tokyo. The conference invites leaders in different fields from around the world for discussions on gender issues in Japan and other countries.

According to the World Economic Forum’s index of national gender gaps, Japan still has a long way to go. However, the country is making steady steps toward solving its issues. In June, the Kishida administration announced the Intensive Policy for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2022 (the Basic Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2022), which focuses on involvement by both men and women. The measures advocate for women’s economic independence through diverse lifestyles. One of the specific actions is the requirement that companies with 301 or more employees disclose their gender pay gaps.

ACHILLES Michiko, a member of the WAW! advisors and Japan’s G20 EMPOWER co-chair, recognizes the policy as “a major step forward.” She adds, “Governments and corporations are both taking action in a



Left: Women foreign ministers from seven countries joined the fifth WAW! in March 2019. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai (far left) was among the speakers. Bottom: Achilles was a speaker and on the host committee for the 2017 Global Summit of Women.

positive direction. That includes real efforts to address gender gaps within organizations and also among employees at the same job level. The next challenge will be to accelerate this drive.” Gender statistics and their disclosure are also essential from an ESG perspective, and the disclosure of Japan’s female manager ratio in the G20 EMPOWER 2020 report—in line with International Labour Organization (ILO)-standard statistical methods—is another step forward.

Japan is meanwhile putting effort into developing female talent in digital technology. In 2020, the modal (most common) age of death for Japanese women was 93. As we enter a time when many people live for 100 years, economic independence for women is absolutely essential. Japan has a three-year plan to focus on developing female tech talent to encourage women—many of whom have been employed in lower-wage industries—to work in digital fields. This is a promising measure to heighten women’s value in the labor market.

Achilles appreciates that the policy also focuses on men. She says, “In addition to supporting women’s careers, it’s important to change men’s behavior and encouraging men to take childcare leave is one way to do that. It would get men involved in their families and communities, letting married couples build their careers together.”

According to Achilles, Japan has designed several excellent systems that mark it apart from other countries, such as generous leave and financial support for childbirth and childcare, as well as public and private childcare centers with affordable fees. Achilles is enthusiastic about WAW! 2022. “It will be a great opportunity to have a deeper discussion about the priority policy measures and common global challenges and to learn best practices, such as family support policies,” she notes. “It is important to show our commitment to promoting women’s empowerment and their economic independence.”

Further promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment



will help build the foundations for accelerating diversity and inclusion in Japan. Throughout history, Japan has developed while taking in ideas from various cultures. Achilles cites Sony—which has emphasized and respected employee diversity while producing numerous innovations—as a good example of being proactive about adding various perspectives to their decision-making. With a smile, she says, “Besides, it’s more fun to work with different people with different perspectives, isn’t it?”

Women’s empowerment leads to growth for society and companies, and Japan will push to achieve that empowerment. ●



ACHILLES Michiko is Senior Advisor of HR Strategy at SAP Japan. She joined the APEC Women and the Economy Summit from 2010 to 2012 as Japan’s representative. Also representing Japan at G20 EMPOWER, an international alliance, she has worked to expand women’s involvement among corporate decision-makers.