

平成十五年八月一日発行 毎月一回発行 定価九〇〇円 本体九〇五円

The Japan Journal

AUGUST 2013 Vol. 10 No. 5



*Japanese Women
Blazing Trails*

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Maki Norika operates a machining center at the Nambu Company factory in Tokyo's Ota Ward.

In a bid to jumpstart the Japanese economy, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has implemented an economic program known as the "Three Arrows," comprising a bold monetary policy, a flexible fiscal policy and a growth strategy. A central component of the government's growth strategy is active participation by women. By ensuring the availability of nursery schools and otherwise helping Japanese women reenter the workforce after they become mothers, the government aims to build an environment which enables women to give full play to their capabilities in society at large. In this month's Cover Story, we spotlight some of the many Japanese women cutting new paths by putting their own technologies and ideas to work.

A drill bit turning at high speed bites a hole into a metal cylinder. Carefully monitoring her work is Maki Norika, her long hair tied back with a pink scrunchie.

"If you don't choose the correct bit, you can't make a hole the right size according to the specifications," she explains, "or sometimes the bit might snap. And the minute you sense anything strange in the sound or the smell, you cut the power. When drilling you really have to stay focused."

A female technician working at a factory of the Nambu Company Ltd. in Tokyo's Ota Ward, Maki is one of 107 employees. Now in her fifth year with the company, she operates a machine known as a "machining center." Working with such metals as conventional and stainless steel, she uses the machine for boring holes and cutting in the course of manufacturing specialized hydraulic cylinders. Nambu's specialized hydraulic cylinders are used for die-casting molds mainly to manufacture automobile engines. The company's share of the domestic Japanese market is over 70 percent.

In using the machining center, the technician normally inputs the data, including the hole location and drill rotation speed, and then pushes the start button, after which the machine performs the work automatically. But Nambu manufactures special-order hydraulic cylinders requiring precision in the hundredths of millimeters, so technicians have to be highly skilled indeed. Since the size and shape of the holes differ according to the product, they have to judge for themselves the drill diameter and the rotation rate appropriate for each product and work using all five of their senses.

There are about 4,000 manufacturing plants in Ota Ward, where Nambu's plant is located. The great majority of these are small factories which have ten or fewer employees and perform specialized contracting work such as grinding, polishing, shaping, refining or galvanizing of metal dies. The technicians working there include a fair number of journeymen who rely on long years of experience and a keen sixth sense to produce products unique not only in Japan but anywhere else in the world.

In the past, most of the technicians at these factories were men. Factory work is hard labor, and dangerous as well. Nevertheless, Nambu began hiring women as factory technicians in 1998.

"Metalworking machines are more automated now, so women can use them safely," says Nambu Chairman Nomura Kazushi, who was president when the company decided to start hiring women. "The atmosphere at the factory really brightened up when women began doing metalworking. The male technicians were all too happy to teach their skills to the ladies, and their rough way of speaking became a good deal more polite."

The manufacturing

plants of small and medium sized companies are closely associated with what the Japanese call the "three Ks," or *kitsui* (rigorous), *kitanai* (dirty) and *kiken* (dangerous), and many companies have a hard time just hiring male employees, let alone female ones. Nambu sought to change that image by using the occasion of its decision to hire

First-generation "Drilling Girl"
Hasegawa Megumi, who has used her refined skills to train technicians at Nambu's plant in Thailand



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women as technicians to aggressively pursue what it called the “Five Ss,” from the Japanese words *seiri* (sorting), *seiton* (setting in order), *seiso* (systematic cleaning), *seiketsu* (standardizing) and *shitsuke* (sustaining). At the same time, the company worked hard to improve the working environment by cutting overtime and increasing holidays.

Until 2008, the year of the Lehman shock, Nambu continued to hire one to three women each year as technicians to work in its factories. These women had absolutely no experience operating metal processing machines, but their skills rapidly improved as they worked zealously to learn techniques from senior technicians. It wasn't long before the female technicians working at Nambu's factories were being featured on television and in the newspapers, and they soon became known as the “Drilling Girls.”

“I wanted to do a job that allowed me to be more active than I'd be if I were just sitting behind a desk all the time, so I was really attracted to a factory job,” says Hasegawa Megumi. “And in fact it's really interesting to use your own muscle to make products with a specific shape. In the course of my work I've never felt anything particular about the fact that I'm a woman.”

Hasegawa is one of the first generation of “Drilling Girls,” hired in 1998. She married one of her coworkers and became a mother. She now works with her husband at the factory processing hydraulic cylinders, leaving her child at a nursery school during the day.

Having gained many years of experience at the factory, Hasegawa now serves as a mentor, passing on her technical knowledge to her junior colleagues. In 2004, the company sent her to Thailand to train Thai technicians at Nambu's newly built factory there.

“We didn't send her because she's female,” says Nambu President Nomura Takahide. “We sent her because she's an excellent technician.”

At a time when many small- and medium-sized companies are having trouble securing good technicians and retaining their technical skills, Nambu is always able to find staff, train them and maintain a high level of technical prowess. After the Lehman shock,

Nambu achieved a V-shaped recovery, and in 2011, opened a new plant in China. As in Thailand, female technicians are also active at the company's new plant in China.

“My impression is that women are very skilled when it comes to doing detailed work quickly,” says President Nomura. “That's why we plan to continue actively hiring women in Japan and overseas.”

Bringing Vitality to Society

The “Japan Revitalizing Strategy” adopted by the Abe Cabinet in June notes:

It is essential for the “power of women”—Japan's greatest potential which had not been leveraged fully to date—to be fully utilized. This is critical from the standpoint of securing human resources who will support the new growth sectors amid concerns over the decreasing workforce population due to the declining birthrate and aging population.

Promoting women's participation in the labor force and management will lead to the creation of new services and products that will reflect a diverse sense of values more than ever before, and bring vitality to the entire society. Besides, if more households will be with double incomes, it will lead to the increase in household income as well as purchasing power and set into motion a virtuous economic cycle, so that the people will enjoy a greater sense of fulfillment.

According to the 2011 White Paper on Gender Equality, the employment rate for Japanese women aged twenty-five through fifty-four is 68 percent, which puts Japan twenty-second among thirty Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. One reason the employment rate for Japanese women is so low is that many of them leave their jobs when they marry, give birth and begin raising their children.

Under Japanese law, both women and men are entitled to take childcare leave until the child reaches the age of

one, and in fact some 90 percent of women who have a child take childcare leave. However, a study released by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research in 2011 found that about 60 percent of women who had been working before giving birth quit their jobs afterwards. According to another study released by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in 2010, 40.7 percent of the women who quit their regular jobs after giving birth said they did so of their own free will in order to focus completely on caring for their infants. However, 35.5 percent also answered that they wanted to continue their jobs but feared they couldn't juggle both work and childcare at the same time.

The government is working out a variety of policy measures to address this situation so women can continue working. One such effort is increased construction of nursery schools. In October of 2012 there were about 46,000 children on lists waiting to enter the nursery schools of their choice. Although the parents had submitted entrance applications, the schools were full. With their children unable to enter a nursery school, many mothers have abandoned hope of getting a job. The government has set the goal of bringing the number of children on such waiting lists down to zero by the year 2017 through such efforts as providing public land and financial support for the construction of new nursery schools.

The government plans to help women return to their former jobs or to find new ones after their childcare leave is over. Thus, for those companies which provide employees either on or newly returned from childcare leave with the opportunity to improve their skills in subjects such as accounting or foreign language, the government is expected to subsidize the training costs or the wages of employees while they undergo training. The government will also provide a portion of the necessary startup expenses to women wanting to start a new business by leveraging their experience in childrearing.

Through these efforts, the government hopes to boost the employment rate of women aged twenty-five through forty-four from 68 percent to 73 percent by 2020.