



Global Day of Parents

June 1, 2017

"The promotion of a work-life balance and family-friendly environment is critical for the promotion of good health and well-being. For parents, particularly working mothers, it is crucial to have a system that can support their needs of balancing work and family."

In celebration of the **2017 Global Day of Parents**, the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) is pleased to share excerpts from an interview with **Hon. Dr. Toshiko Abe**, Member of Parliament of Japan. In this interview, Hon. Dr. Abe spoke to us about issues related to the work-life balance in Japan faced by working parents, particularly the critical support needed for working mothers, and the challenges for parliamentarians in program implementation. The Global Day of Parents provides an opportunity to appreciate all parents in all parts of the world for their selfless commitment to children and their lifelong sacrifice towards nurturing this relationship.

Hon. Dr. Abe recently participated in the 2017 G7/20 International Parliamentarians Conference in May 2017 in Rome, Italy as part of the AFPPD delegation. In this conference, she presented the outcomes of the 2016 G7 Global Conference of Parliamentarians on Population and Development on behalf of AFPPD Chairperson, Hon. Professor Keizo Takemi.

BACKGROUND



Hon. Dr. Toshiko Abe
Member of Parliament, Japan

Hon. Dr. Toshiko Abe is a Member of the House of Representatives in the Diet representing the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Prior to the current position, she was a nurse with a passion for serving the poor, children and the elderly. In the wake of her doctorate program, Hon. Dr. Abe served as a Lecturer at Gunma University as well as Lecturer and Assistant Professor at Tokyo Medical and Dental University. She went on to pursue a legislative career in the government with a particular focus on health and nutrition for the elderly. She was first elected to the House of Representatives in 2005, and has also served as Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs and Vice-President of the Japanese Nursing Association.

INTERVIEW

May 4, 2017

Could you briefly tell us about the situation of the work-life balance for working mothers and fathers in Japan?

The promotion of a work-life balance and family-friendly environment is critical for the promotion of good health and well-being. For parents, particularly working mothers, it is crucial to have a system that can support their needs of balancing work and family. Several initiatives have been taken by the government to address this issue while areas of improvement also remain. Husbands' involvement in housekeeping and cooking chores is one area I would like to highlight. Parliamentarians are raising awareness on this subject in Japan. One example is to conduct cooking classes for male Japanese parliamentarians, including the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Another issue faced by working parents is the early closing time of childcare centers. Many of these centers, while subsidized, close at 5 pm. This is not designed for salaried men and women in Japan.

How can the Japanese government improve their support to working mothers?

Working mothers need support such as baby care and elderly care. At the same time, they need the incentive to work. The government can provide better tax incentives for women to pursue full-time employment. Currently, the spousal tax serves as a disincentive for a wife to work full time. If a wife earns less than ¥1.03 million, that income is free of tax.

Bringing more women into the labor force is one of the keys to address Japan's ageing and shrinking population.

How can the Japanese government improve their support to young girls?

We are worried about young girls engaging in dangerous businesses, particularly sex work for money. Some girls who seem to have neither family issues nor money problems still engage in dangerous work. They somehow feel that they don't fit into society. To address this issue, we will create multiple safe haven homes for girls which

are open for 24/7. Domestic violence occurs at times and girls escape from homes, ending up engaging in risky and dangerous businesses. Today, a few safe haven homes exist in Japan.

As parliamentarians, what more can be done to support working mothers in their well-being?

One of the roles of parliamentarians is to amend relevant policies. We, as Members of Parliament, have to worry about both domestic and international matters, as well as how we can implement related programs together. I recently visited New York and participated in a discussion about the United Nations reform. My focus was on issues of the Official Development Assistance, particularly for young girls and their rights to education, voting, and marriage choices, among others. We see many international organizations and NGOs working on the empowerment of women and girls, but such programs are not always as effective and impactful as they should be. While a large sum of the Japanese government's budget is allocated to the UN, we often question if these projects work as effectively and efficiently as possible, and if they serve the right purposes. It is the fact that there are many aspects of concerns in the UN system, which need to be rectified for effective implementation of such programs.

Parliamentarians have the role in controlling national budget and approving related programs. We will need to fulfill our oversight function in coming months and years.



Hon. Dr. Toshiko Abe presented at the G7/20 International Parliamentarians Conference in May 2017 in Rome, Italy.