

Only 1 in 7 Japanese scientists are women: study

April 15 2014, by Kyoko Hasegawa



Haruko Obokata, a researcher at Japan's Riken Institute, speaks at a press conference in Osaka, western Japan on April 9, 2014

Just a seventh of scientists in Japan are female, government figures show—a record high rate for the country, despite being the lowest rate of any developed nation.

The figure comes amid a high-profile row in Japan that has pitted a

young female researcher against the scientific establishment, and after repeated calls for Tokyo to boost female participation in the workforce to help plug a skills gap in the economy.

A nationwide study by the internal affairs ministry found that in March last year there were a record 127,800 female scientists in Japan, accounting for 14.4 percent of the total and up 0.4 percentage points from a year earlier.

"Compared with 10 years ago in 2003, the pace of increase in the number of female scientists surpasses that of males in all organisations," the ministry said.

Despite being a personal best for Japan, the percentage is the lowest among countries with comparable data in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), sometimes called the rich nations' club.

In Russia it was 41.2 percent in 2012, 37.7 percent in Britain in 2011, 34.9 percent in Italy in 2011 and 33.6 percent in the United States in 2010.

The Japanese figure, released Monday, is also lower than Germany's 26.7 percent, France's 25.6 percent and South Korea's 17.3 percent, all in 2011.

Focus on researcher's 'feminine charms'



Haruko Obokata, a Riken Institute researcher, works in her laboratory in Kobe in Hyogo prefecture, western Japan on January 28, 2014

The findings come as a scandal plays out involving one of Japan's premier research bodies and a 30-year-old female scientist who claimed to have made a groundbreaking discovery in stem cell research.

Haruko Obokata, whose work was published in the British journal "Nature", outlined a way to change adult cells into the basic material for any body tissue, potentially offering a ready supply of transplant organs.

Obokata's research was hailed as revolutionary, but much of the popular media coverage focused on the fact that she is a young woman in a world

dominated by middle-aged men, with newspapers and television offering profiles that concentrated on her supposed feminine charms.

When questions were raised about the science, with claims that data had been manipulated, sections of the media turned on the young scientist.

Obokata insisted her findings were valid, but one newspaper covered her acknowledgement that she had been sloppy with the evidence by publishing a huge front-page picture of her tear-stained face, setting off a social media debate about sexism in Japan.

Economists and commentators around the world agree that Japan's well-educated women are a huge source of untapped potential, with many dropping out of the workforce when they have children and few returning to their careers.

Studies have shown that Japan's economy could benefit substantially from boosting the number of women in employment, perhaps helping to compensate for years of tepid growth.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pledged to focus on increasing female participation in the labour force, which lags well behind that of many other developed economies.

"The government is seeking to raise the rate of women in leadership positions to 30 percent by 2020—an ambitious target which some say is unfeasible—but we'll somehow achieve it," Abe said last month during a meeting on gender equality.

The rate is currently around 11 percent in the private sector, and less than that in the public sector.

In politics, women occupy just 78 of the 722 seats in the two legislative

chambers of parliament.

The administration has also pledged to provide childcare services for 400,000 more children of working parents by March 2018, to help resolve a dire shortage that is often blamed as a contributing factor in the low number of working women.

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