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## **Boost women's role in society**

Japan may be the third-largest economy in the world, but its percentage of female legislators ranks only 121st among 186 countries, according to a white paper on gender equality approved by the Cabinet recently.

Female legislators comprised 11.3 percent of all legislators in Japan's Lower House after the 2009 elections. That compares to 45 percent in Sweden and 32.8 percent in Germany. The United States had 16.8 percent female legislators while China had 21.3 percent. Even South Korea bests Japan at 14.7 percent. Whatever else it has done, Japan's relative level of economic comfort and prosperity has not led to gender equality. In the corporate world, Japanese women's situation is even worse. Only 1 percent of Japanese corporate leaders are women, a mere 515 out of 42,000 executives in 3,600 listed companies, the white paper said.

In the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, Japan ranked 94th out of 134 countries in 2010. The opportunities and resources needed to achieve gender equality are available but are far from being utilized. The government has established a goal of raising rates for women in all aspects of society to 30 percent. This goal is admirable and undertaking it commendable, but the tough decisions and practical steps are yet to come. Many countries with a higher rate than Japan, such as those in northern Europe and South Korea, have a quota system. That system may go against democratic instincts, but selective seeding and fair allocation of women in key positions is one way to speed up the growth of equality. Even if the government establishes quotas in ministries, political parties still need to be more active in finding and promoting women

candidates. Companies need to shift the way they handle promotion and access to decision-making positions, as well as to consider women more seriously in hiring.

Higher education, too, needs to ensure that women are enrolled in all fields and given equal access to courses of study, advisers, seminars and gradual-level programs that will qualify them for future positions. Whether quotas are strictly enforced or remain hopeful guidelines, government and business can set specific performance objectives, both short-term and long-term, to help find a more equitable balance. Without the full participation of women, the rejuvenation of Japan's economy and society will be slower and less likely to succeed, and without immediate changes, women will continue to be greatly underrepresented in society, government and business.