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WOMEN'S INITIATIVE



2019 FINALIST FOR EAST ASIA

SAAYA NAKAYAMA

SHE Inc. - JAPAN

likes.she-inc.jp

“Making a short-term difference is one thing. The big challenge for a business is to make a long-term impact, and that is my ambition at SHE Inc.”

When Saaya Nakayama was a young girl in elementary school, she won entrepreneurial bootcamps to which her mother signed her up two years in a row. “It gave me my first interest in business!” she recalls. Her years at secondary school, a strict all-girls institution with old-fashioned ideas, confirmed her discomfort with the notion that “girls don’t go out to work.” Before finishing university she had founded her first business. Then during her first job at a leading IT firm, a business she created for the in-house contest was sold some three years later.

A NEW AGE

Entrepreneurship is clearly in Saaya’s blood, but as a girl she faced extra hurdles. Japan is a rich democracy with a strong work ethic, but despite record figures for female employment – 70% rising to 76.7% for 25-44 year-olds according to recent government figures – all too often their jobs are part-time or low-wage. For those who do work full-time, it remains difficult to progress in the same way as men, with Japan ranked 110th out of 149 nations for gender equality by the World Economic Forum. “For cultural and social reasons, Japanese women lack opportunities to find a job they love and make a living from it,” says Saaya. “They are still bound by old stereotypes and the choice between family and work.” Times are changing, however, states this dynamic CEO. “Young women today are finding the freedom to contribute to society through their work and to really shine.”

TOOLS AND SUPPORT

To give these women the tools they need to reach their full working potential, in 2017 Saaya and co-founder Eri Fukuda founded SHE Inc., a Tokyo-based creative learning and co-working hub that offers a programme called SHElikes. Daily lessons provide training in fields such as web design, writing, editing, branding and e-marketing – a creative suite of tools devised to help millennial girls assert and express themselves while priming them for jobs they will enjoy. SHElikes also offers mentoring programmes, access to job opportunities and support for women founding their own business or building a freelance career.

“We owe it to our students to establish a curriculum that is literally life-changing for every one of them.”

FEMININE SENSIBILITY AND CREATIVITY

SHElikes sessions are purchased in bundles of 10, 20 or 30, all offering access to the coworking spaces. Teaching focuses on leveraging feminine sensibility and creativity by targeting the growing need for communications, branding and PR expertise in a digital-native world. SHE Inc. has so far catered to 6,000 students seeking work/life/family balance and fulfilment. Most importantly, Saaya’s vision has created a space where women will feel encouraged and supported to break through traditional stereotypes. With soft designs and chic interiors, this is a feel-good place to work and build your dreams and talents. A host of community events are organised, including SHE’s first millennial summit. “Everyone can be brave and make a difference if they have someone rooting for them,” says Saaya. Online courses and an expanded B2B offer coupling SHElikes graduates with businesses in search of communications and branding professionals are among the objectives for 2019.

Japan’s declining birth rates, currently the lowest in its history, and high life expectancy have pushed the government to increase the place of women in the workforce, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launching the “Womenomics” programme in 2013 to encourage mothers and middle-aged women back to the workplace. In Saaya’s long-term vision, by the time SHE Inc.’s millennial graduates reach that age, encouragement would no longer be needed.

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