

## DIPLOMATIC DISPATCHES

Nora Boustany

### Japan's Joan of Arc Advocates New Way of Life

**O**n a whim, Hiroko Mizushima, a psychiatrist and political unknown, responded to a newspaper ad in 1999 seeking a female candidate to run for Japan's legislature, the Diet.

At the time, she was waiting to learn whether she had received a scholarship to attend Columbia University for specialized training on adolescent psychiatric issues, mainly eating and personality disorders. Prodded by her husband, Mizushima wrote proposals to the Democratic Party of Japan for a seat representing a prefecture north of Tokyo she had never even visited.

"I was not serious. One of my motivations to respond to the interview was to showcase my ideas to Diet members," she recalled, referring to her dedication to the welfare of women and children. "I thought I may have some influence, even if I just met them for the interview. I enjoyed the process."

She ended up beating a third-generation politician, whose family had dominated the political scene for 70 years.

Willful and daring, Mizushima, 37, is now often tagged as Japan's Joan of Arc. Serving her second term, she quipped half-earnestly that she hopes not to end up burning at the stake, like the French heroine, as she pursues her political passions: forging policy that allows for balance between work and family life and loosening social strictures to create a healthier environment for children.

"Japanese children are not educated to think for themselves or for society. We are notorious for stuffing students with knowledge," she explained. "I was a more independent student. At 18, I wanted to learn about my body. I was aware of what was going on, so I needed a specialty that would keep me involved in social issues."

Mizushima's husband, a freelance television director, has adopted her family name — they are prevented by law from each using their own. "I want the law to allow people to retain family names. Over half of the Japanese agree with me, but this is impossible as long as the LDP remains in power," she said, referring to the Liberal Democratic Party.

Because of the law, every time her husband renews his driver's license or passport, they have to get a divorce on paper and then remarry. "I think we are divorced at the moment," she said.

"We need to accept and respect variable values of each other, but in Japan, everyone has to be the same," she said. "This has led to a bully mentality at schools. You are only safe with one single reference. When you go beyond it, you suffer. That is why mothers stay at home."

"We have so many workaholics in Japan. Over 30,000 commit suicide yearly, while there are only 8,000 accident deaths. Mostly, the suicides are by middle-aged men who cannot share their burden or problems with their wives. Some prefer to die

than to tell their wives they were fired." Then there is the phenomenon of *karoshi*, a Japanese word for death from overwork.

Mizushima is in town with six other female policymakers from Japan for a weeklong exchange with their American counterparts, an event sponsored by the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, which promotes U.S.-Asian relations, the National Association of Japan-America Societies and other organizations.

Japanese media were intrigued when this female political upstart took on an established politician, Hajime Funada — a household name in Tochigi prefecture. His father had served as governor and his grandfather had also been a legislator.

Another twist in the campaign: Mizushima's father, a member of the LDP, was a member of the upper house.

The first two months of campaigning were hard. "At first I had my doubts.

Then I got to thinking: As an unknown female, this is the only chance I am going to get in a lifetime," she said. "Japanese people are too passive and timid when it comes to risk. I wanted to change that."

Mizushima moved to Tochigi with her husband and infant daughter and began a door-to-door blitz to win over the voters. "I want to do something about children," she told them. Eventually, her name became familiar.

Her husband gave up his job and began cooking and taking their daughter to school, knocking on doors and designing campaign leaflets. Mizushima worked one day a week at a private clinic in Tokyo to meet daily expenses, and her party gave her \$5,000 a month to fund her race. She won her first term in 2000.

Running for a second term was even harder. Funada won back his community's compassion and resorted to character assassination with leaflets charging that Mizushima was a "three-time divorcee," technically true. She lost the ballot by a slim margin but was saved through a system providing her with a seat based on the proportionality of the vote.

In 2001 and pregnant for a second time, she abandoned her daily two-hour commute by bullet train from her office in Tochigi to the Diet, a routine that meant leaving home at 6 a.m. and ending her last meetings at 8 p.m. Her family now spends weekdays in Tokyo. Still, she is not sure she can remain a representative for Tochigi.

"I may have to rethink my lifestyle. I do yoga and try to swim," she said. "... As a politician, I am more interested and concerned with what we in Japan call work-life balance, or even better, life-work balance. You need to remain a human being, not just a working machine. I see people in a more generous light now. I have gained maturity."



Hiroko Mizushima promotes balance between work and family.