

The 20th Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women

The Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women (KFAW) held the 20th Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women under the theme “Women Now in the world-Viewing the world from Kitakyushu” on November 28 (Sat) and 29 (Sun), 2009 at the Kitakyushu Municipal Gender Equality Center “Move.”

■ Keynote Address “Women Now in the World: Actions to Promote a Gender-Equal Society and the Future Prospects”

Thirty years have past since the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. Japan ratified CEDAW in 1985, but how much gender equality has been realized? In July 2009, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women pointed out to the Japanese government such problems in the Civil Code as the single-surname system for married couples and the difference in the minimum marriageable age for men and women, as well as social problems such as the low proportion of women in managerial jobs and the wage gap between men and women.

During the 20th Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women, a keynote speech was delivered and a panel discussion was held to offer an opportunity for the audience to think about how the world is working, what actions Japan should take, and what each one of us should do to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and realize a gender-equal society.

Ms. Agnes CHAN, singer, essayist and the ambassador of the Japan Committee for UNICEF, delivered the keynote speech on the current situation of discrimination against women.



▲ Ms. CHAN

Reality in the world 1: Child prostitution, trafficking

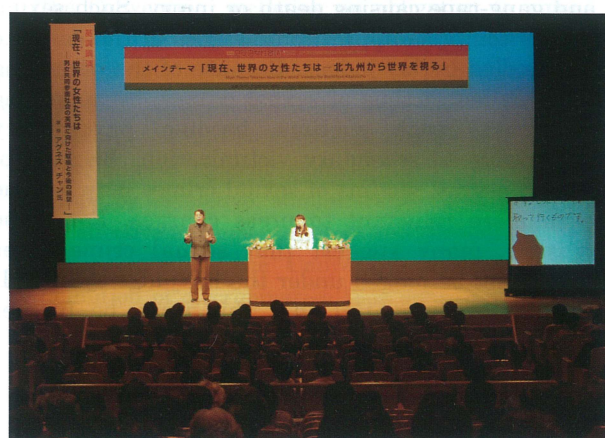
When I visited Thailand in 1998, I learned there were families that could not survive without selling their children. If the girls are sent to a brothel, they are forced to serve the customers every day; 30 to 50% of them in time become infected with HIV. They are forced to sell themselves until they develop AIDS; once they get ill, they are abandoned in the mountains far away. Children without notification of birth are most likely to be the target of such treatment because no one would notice their disappearance unless their parents look for them. Thus, it is always the girls in the weakest class who are targeted.

I met Sally in Cambodia, who had been sold twice by her mother. I visited Sally's mother and blamed her for selling Sally. But I learned that ever since Sally's father had left the house, the mother could not feed the family. Being a woman, I could understand the mother's sadness at having to sell her own child, and I could no longer blame her.

Women are always in a vulnerable position. The father who left the house is the one to be blamed most. But no one notices this. It is wrong that the father takes no responsibility. But this is reality.

Reality in the world 2: Discrimination against women

I visited Mumbai, one of the richest cities in India which is famous for the film industry. But 70% of the population of Mumbai live in slums. Girls can only go for the first couple of years of elementary school. Marriage arrangements begin between the ages of 10 to 12. Brides



in India are required to bring a large wedding dowry to the marriage. Some parents burst into tears when a daughter is born because they worry about being able to afford to arrange a marriage for her. Many mothers therefore have abortions once they find out they are expecting a girl. Women are seen as less valuable than men. Without correcting such discrimination, society cannot improve, since women constitute half of the population of society.

Discrimination against women is firmly established in traditions and customs that have been preserved in various cultures over a long period of time. This is why progress in eliminating discrimination is slow. But we must patiently try to improve the situation of women, step by step.

Eliminating discrimination against women

1: Need for enhanced awareness and action among men

To improve the status of women, it is crucial to change the minds of men, as well as to enhance the awareness of women. Actions by those discriminated against can change the situation only slowly, even when the discrimination is severe. But if men take action, the progress will be accelerated.

Eliminating discrimination against women

2: Importance of education

About 100 million children in the world today are not able to receive an elementary education. The problem is that girls are not allowed to go to school once they grow old enough to help with housework, or they are not allowed to go to school at all. However, it has been proven that infant mortality is low among daughters of women who have received at least six years of education. This means that if you want to help children, you should provide education for girls. This will also improve the economy. Thus, education for girls and women is a most effective investment.

■ Panel Discussion “The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Japan's Role in the International Community”

In the panel discussion, after the panelists talked from their different viewpoints on the current situation and efforts concerning the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, a discussion was held in which Ms. Agnes Chan also participated.

First, Ms. Yunsook LEE, Board Member of the Korean Association of University Women and Advisor to the UN Association of the Republic of Korea, gave a presentation on the changes Korea has made toward realizing gender equality with CEDAW.



▲ Panelists

Changes CEDAW has brought to Korea : Women's participation in politics

Korea signed CEDAW on May 25, 1984, ratified it on December 27 and enforced it in 1985.

CEDAW brought Korean women great progress in gender equality. The amendment of the Political Parties Act in 2003 made the greatest contribution and brought a substantial change to women's participation in politics. This amendment stipulated that the odd numbers of the proportional representation list must be assigned to women candidates. As a result, in the 2004 general election, among the total 299 seats, women won 29 of the 56 proportional-representation seats. With ten female candidates winning in the regional districts, women won 39 seats in total, accounting for 13% of all lawmakers.



▲ Ms. LEE

Women's labor in East Asia

Mr. Kaku SECHIYAMA, Professor at the University of Tokyo Graduate School of Arts and Science, gave a presentation focusing on the unchanging labor trends in East Asia, not the legal aspects associated with CEDAW.

There are two types of society: one where women with higher education are more likely to work and one where women's employment rate stays low even if their educational level rises. In a society where women with higher education tend to become housewives, the social status of housewives is very high, whereas in a society where women's employment rates increase along with the rise in women's educational levels, the status of housewives is relatively low.

In East Asia, the rise in educational levels boosts women's employment rates in Taiwan, while it does not make much difference in Korea. Japan seems to be midway between these two countries. In terms of Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM), Taiwan, according to its own calculation, has a far higher score than Japan and Korea. Korea's GEM has not improved despite its efforts to introduce the quota system so as to increase the number of female lawmakers.

As for women's labor participation rates, the rates are low in Japan and Korea for women in the period of childbirth/child-raising. In Taiwan, however, women in their 30s shows a very high labor participation rate, even though this rate of women in their 30s is the lowest in Japan.

These trends cannot change rapidly. It seems to take longer to change the social background mind than to change legal aspects.



▲ Mr. SECHIYAMA

Impact of CEDAW on actions by Kitakyushu City for gender equality

Ms. Yoshiko MISUMI, Advisor to the Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women, talked on the efforts by Kitakyushu City to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

CEDAW had a big impact on the actions of Kitakyushu City. In 1985, five years before the establishment of the Kitakyushu Women's Plan in 1990, the 3rd World

Conference on Women was held in Nairobi, Kenya. We went to Nairobi to see the situation in the world, where we had exchanges with women from various countries and realized that women's issues should be addressed not only as issues of Kitakyushu, or of Japan, but as a global issue. Without turning our eyes outward, even the problems of the women in Kitakyushu cannot be resolved. Thus we became determined that the Kitakyushu Women's Plan should focus on the international community. In 2002, the Kitakyushu City Ordinance for Promoting Gender Equality was enacted and enforced, a rare ordinance declaring commitment to promoting the formation of a gender equal society in cooperation with the international community.



▲ Ms. MISUMI

Background conditions that allow women to continue working: Cases in Hong Kong

After presentations by the three panelists, discussion was held.

Ms. Agnes Chan pointed out the existence of housemaids in Singapore and Hong Kong as a factor that enables women in their thirties to continue their careers after having babies. If a married couple has a double income, they can hire a maid so that the wife can keep on working, though it means the sacrifice of another woman. The fact that women are fairly treated in worksites in those countries is another background factor that enables women to continue working. They can be promoted if they work hard, but this means they must keep on working to be promoted, and their career may be damaged if they quit their job.

Mr. Sechiyama, while agreeing with the role of housemaids in Hong Kong, pointed out the fact that many women who work very hard in their thirties, even with babies, tend to quit jobs in their forties, and few of them are working in their fifties. In Japan, the labor participation rate of women in their fifties is as high as that of women in their twenties, while in most Chinese culture-based areas the labor participation rate drops sharply for women in their forties.

Cooperation between Japan and Korea toward realizing gender equality

Ms. Agnes Chan said that the case of Korea was a good example of the fact that the amendment of domestic laws based on the CEDAW can make not only women, but also men, happier as well, and can also make all of human society equal and free. She thinks a better society can be created by introducing the perspectives of women and children.

Ms. Yunsook Lee pointed out that the situation of Japan is similar to that of Korea. In order to persuade Korean men, who are in decision-making positions, it is important to encourage exchanges between Japanese and Korean women, and to tell Korean men how much progress has been made in the position of Japanese women, and that Korean women can enjoy the same level of progress.

In response to this, Ms. Misumi expressed her hope that this conference would lead to active exchanges that will benefit the women in both countries.



▲ Ms. CHAN

Summary by Ms. Yasuko YAMASHITA (Coordinator)

Finally, Ms. Yasuko YAMASHITA, professor at Bunkyo Gakuin University and President of the Japanese Association of International Women's Rights, concluded the panel discussion by talking about the amendment of the Civil Code and implementation of temporary special measures to promote employment of women and their participation in political and public activities listed as the principal areas of concern and recommendations in the Concluding Observations which was submitted by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2009.

As to the amendment of the Civil Code, as is widely known, the minimum age for marriage is 16 for women and 18 for men in Japan. Only women are required to wait at least six months before they can get married again after divorce. The Committee has urged the Japanese government to change the minimum age for marriage to 18 for both men and women, to abolish the six-month waiting period required for women (but not men) before



▲ Ms. YAMASHITA

remarriage, and to take immediate action to amend the Civil Code with a view to adopting a system that allows for a choice of surnames for married couples. The Civil Code currently requires married couples to choose the surname of either wife or husband, which is not acceptable by CEDAW, which requires virtual equality.

As to the implementation of temporary special measures to promote employment of women and their participation in political and public activities, the Committee urged the Japanese government to adopt temporary special measures with numerical goals and timetables for increasing the representation of women in decision-making positions at all areas and levels. To achieve this, the Japanese government is being urged by the Committee to take positive actions to save those discriminated against and submit a report on the results of those actions in two years.

Korea has ratified the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, which stipulates that any violation of CEDAW that cannot be resolved under the domestic judicial system may be brought to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, where the case will be examined and a concluding recommendation will be issued. Japan has not signed this Optional Protocol.

Women must work hard to resolve all of these problems. Our society will not change without our power. Let us take advantage of this good opportunity and make lasting changes.



▲ Audience enthusiastically listening to the discussion