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— Creating Social Equality for Men and Women — Foreign Women Speak Out



Since the U.N. Decade for Women (1976-1985) Meguro has been making continuous efforts to establish equal opportunities for men and women with a view to furthering the cause of social equality between the sexes.

Meguro Monthly recently invited several women residents of foreign nationality to discuss the situation regarding women's problems in their own countries. The gist of the discussion is carried in this month's issue.

Discussion Participants

- ◆ **Ms. Shi Yang:** Chinese nationality. Presently living in Ohashi 1-chome and conducting postgraduate research on comparative literature and culture at the University of Tokyo.
- ◆ **Ms. Prue Moodie:** Australian nationality. Presently living in Mita 2-chome and working as a journalist.
- ◆ **Ms. Kazuko K. Drake:** Born of Japanese parents, married to an American and now holds U.S. citizenship. Presently living in Kamimeguro 1-chome and working as a company board member.
- ◆ **Ms. Midori Sato:** Moderator. Employed in the Women's Policy Section, Meguro City Office.

Situation of Women in Other Countries

Ms. Sato: Thank you for joining us today. This is the first time that we have asked foreign women to come and discuss women's issues, and I am looking forward to hearing your opinions. To set the scene, however, first I would like to explain to you the current situation in Japan. In most Japanese corporations, many women have to perform all sorts of odd jobs such as pouring tea for customers and colleagues, while on the other hand, at the management level where decisions are made, men are overwhelmingly more numerous than women. The statistical graph of women in the workforce by age is typically an M shape, the dip representing women in their 30s who have dropped out of the workforce to raise children. These figures testify to the difficulties women with children face if they want to work. In 1979, in an effort to improve this situation,

Meguro assigned some municipal staff to deal with women's issues, and in April 1992 established the Women's Policy Section*, with the task of promoting social equality between the sexes.

Now let's turn to the situation overseas. Ms. Drake, I wonder if you could fill us in on what is happening in the United States?



Ms. Drake: Previously I was a student in the States, and now my work takes me there frequently. Also, as my husband is an American, my life seems to be spent in an endless comparison of the two countries. When it comes to equality between the sexes, the U.S. is streets ahead of most other countries, and I need scarcely mention that there

are many women who occupy prominent positions in their professions, whether it be politics, business, education or some other field.

Many women, however, do stop working while they are bringing up their children, and it is often the case, as in Japan, that when they re-enter the workforce, they are not able to find positions where they can utilize their previous career experience. Some women, to be sure, have access to government child care and other facilities, and so manage to tide over this period. There many others, however, who are not able to manage so well, and in some cases, this can even lead to the breakup of the family. Divorce is often the downside of women remaining in the workforce, and the breakup of the family unit often results in suffering on the part of the children.

Ms. Sato: Let's turn to China. What are the child care and other facilities like there, Ms. Shi?

Ms. Shi: I don't feel that there is any sexual discrimination in the workplace. On the contrary, women's talents are in fact put to good use in China. For example, many language teachers are women, and their innate attention to detail is of use when teaching grammar. When it comes to childbirth, however, the back-up systems we have are inadequate. It is difficult for pregnant women to take time off, the only concession being that they are allowed to come to work one hour late after the seventh month. Maternity leave of three months is granted after the birth, and this can some-

times be extended to one year, depending on the pressure of work at the workplace. It is difficult, it seems, for women in important positions to take time off. In China, there are adequate facilities for children over the age of one, but many women with babies under one leave them with their parents or friends in order to go out to work.

Ms. Sato: I understand, Ms. Moodie, that you are working as a journalist, and I wonder if you could fill us in on the situation in Australia.

Ms. Moodie: Australia's labor unions were traditionally strong, and they support equality of pay and working conditions, which have been realized to a large extent, although there is still room for improvement. After childbirth, maternity leave can be taken for up to one year, depending on their contract. Australia suffers, however, from a lack of good child care facilities, which means that most mothers with small children are unable to get out to work.

Australia is an argumentative country, and people are not backward in making their opinions known. Women, also, if they are dissatisfied about something, will voice their complaints forcefully, even to men. This is somewhat different from Japanese people, who are more reticent about asserting their opinions.

Ms. Sato: Historically, the Japanese do not have a tradition of asserting themselves. So much so that men think women who actively assert their opinions

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about women's issues are somewhat daunting.



Ms. Moodie: I don't think it's just in Japan that women who actively advocate women's issues are disliked by men. Rather I think it is a phenomenon that is found throughout the world. (Nods of agreement from Ms. Drake and Ms. Shi.) As a result, women of any nationality try not to be too assertive when they are with a man they like. But when I first came to Japan, I noticed the exceptionally submissive way in which Japanese women act and speak. For example, Japanese women use less direct forms of speech than men. I was also very surprised by their high-pitched voices. (Ms. Moodie's demonstration has the other participants in fits of laughter.)

Ms. Sato: At home, Japanese women are in charge of the household accounts, but it seems that the real authority lies with the father who brings home the money. With regard to the division of labor within the home, both men and women seem to be firmly convinced that women should be in charge of housework and bringing up the children. Until very recently, it was common in senior high schools for the girls to learn cooking and sewing during the periods when the boys were learning martial arts.

Ms. Drake: I think that the present situation is the result of the historical lifestyle patterns of each ethnic group, and it is impossible to change a country's systems overnight. What is important is to utilize the best from each country to create social equality between the sexes. In the U.S. many people are ready to learn from the good aspects of Japanese society. For example, they think Japan's system of the father going out to work while the mother takes care of the home is an effective way of maintaining a good family environment. The only problem in this situation is that it is difficult to find a solution to women's frustration — the feeling that they are not using their abilities to the full.

America's pioneer heritage, dating from the time when immigrants worked together to get things done, is the basis for the social equality of the sexes in the U.S. today. Families divide up home and outside responsibilities clearly, and each person consents to these arrangements. Thus, for example, if the mother is late home from work, then the father makes the children's dinner. The social framework which enables men to take on

these responsibilities without any demur is already in place.

Ms. Moodie: In Australia, women have full equality under law. They can go to their union for protection from inequality at work. If that's not effective they can apply for protection from a government body like the Anti-discrimination Board. That's the theory. In fact, Australian women still earn an average of 25% less than men for the same work.



Ms. Shi: The situation in China changed radically after the 1949 liberation. Before liberation (in my parents' generation) housework was considered women's work, just as it is in Japan today. After the liberation, however, in my generation, one never hears of husbands who refuse to do housework. That at least is the case among people I know, but China is a large place, and you may find differences from area to area.

Ms. Sato: Thank you for telling us a little about the situation in your countries. One other aspect of Japanese society that is pertinent to these issues, is that many men leave home early and return late, due to the longer Japanese working hours compared with Western countries. Combined with frequent overtime and long commuting hours, this means that many women feel that they cannot possibly ask their husbands to help with the housework. Thus, structural changes in Japanese social patterns are required if we are to achieve equality between the sexes.

Ms. Moodie: I have often been told that in Japanese families mothers give their sons special attention, and make their daughters help with the housework, while the boys are hardly ever asked to do anything. Is that really true?

Ms. Sato: A large number of families are like that but I wouldn't say all are.

Ms. Drake: I have two sons and I made them help with the housework. When my friends who came to visit saw my sons clearing away their own plates, some would criticize me saying, "Why do you make your sons help in the house?" A good many others, however, were impressed and vowed to make their children help too.

Women's Participation in Policy-making

Ms. Sato: I'd like now to turn to policy-making. In Japan, the number of women elected to the Diet and municipal assemblies is small. Meguro City has set a goal of encouraging women's participation in not only politics but also policy-making, as ex-

Women's participation in government policy-making

(in 1992)

Ratio of women to men in the Diet

6.5% (49 women)	93.5% (703 men)
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Ratio of women to men in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly

11.9% (15 women)	88.1% (111 men)
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Ratio of women to men in the Meguro Municipal Assembly

17.5% (7 women)	82.5% (33 men)
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pressed in the slogan "from political participation to policy planning". The impression I get from television coverage of China is that a large number of women are involved in politics. **Ms. Shi:** I think that, from a nationwide viewpoint, the number of women acting as people's representatives is small. In China, however, we have a women's organization known as the Women's Federation, and the managers' committee in each workplace includes at least one or two members of this Women's Federation.

Ms. Moodie: Australia is behind the U.S. when it comes to women's participation in policy-making. I would say the situation is no better than it is in Japan with regard to most other women's issues.



Ms. Sato: At the Meguro City Office where I work, the number of women holding management positions is small. I think, however, that this situation is attributable, in a large part, to the fact that many women feel that instead of becoming a manager and working long hours, it is preferable to have more time for themselves and their families.

Ms. Drake: In the U.S., people make a clear distinction between their work and private life, and view time spent with their families as very important. I doubt that the number of women managers will increase greatly in Japan until society as a whole no longer agrees to sacrifice private life for work. I think

that this sort of discussion is very valuable and it would be good if you could hold more sessions at regular intervals.

Ms. Sato: That's a good idea. We should plan some more. Thank you for the lively discussion we had today. Women's issues transcend national boundaries, and although the situation in each country is different, women need to create networks so that they can work together to solve the problems they share. I hope that you will let us know your ideas again from time to time.

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Meguro City Women's Action Plan

The draft of Meguro City's Women's Action Plan has been completed. Its goals are to clarify, systematize and promote policies oriented to encouraging women and men alike to utilize their individual abilities, and work together as equals in the family, local community and society at large to create a society where everyone is able to make their own contribution. The plan, which covers the period from 1993 to 2003, is outlined below.

- ◆ Concept of Equality Between the Sexes and Awareness of Women's Issues
- ◆ Improving Women's Health and Providing Support for Women in Diversifying Family Situations
- ◆ Creating Conditions Conducive to Women Joining the Workforce
- ◆ Promoting Equality of the Sexes Across the Board
- ◆ Creating the Necessary Organizational Systems

Women's Information Center
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Closed: Mondays

Hours: 9 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.
(9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on holidays)
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Women's Information Center, resource room

