

Women in Japan: Updating Gender Roles in Society

4 April 2022 18:00-19:30 (JST) / 11:00-12:30 (CEST)

On 4th April, 2022, KAS Japan held 'Women in Japan: Updating Gender Roles in Society,' focusing on the societal and cultural aspects of the gender situation in Japan, and its history. KAS Japan invited a Norwegian expert on gender in order to learn the best practices of leading countries in this regard.

Rabea Brauer (Country Representative, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Japan) opened the session and began by introducing the moderator Shiori Kanno, Chair of the International Humanity Platform (IHP) and lawyer/former Member of the House of Representatives, Professor Kiriu Minashita of Kokugakuin University, and Professor Guro Korsnes Kristensen of Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Looking back on the first webinar of this series last December, she explained that the fundamental purpose of this webinar series is to raise awareness and improve the current gender situation in Japan and the environment surrounding women. This time, she expressed her hope to compare Japan with Norway through the discussions and stated that the best practices of Norway would be useful to Japanese policy makers and corporate leaders.

Shiori Kanno mentioned that the previous webinar provided insights into situations surrounding women under the pandemic and that, while the flexible ways of working stemming from the pandemic encourage women, female non-regular workers suffer from inequality. She explained that she, as a former Member of the National Diet, had been involved in efforts to improve the situation of the number of children on waiting lists to go to nursery schools, and to promote gender equality in the political field.

【Keynote Statements】

Summary of **Professor Minashita's** statements on how gender models have been created historically and culturally in Japan:

- During the Edo period, women were expected to 'follow others.' During and after the Meiji Restoration period, however, as expressed in the phrase 'good wife and wise mother,' there was a change in how women should behave. On the other hand, the patriarchal system introduced by the 1898 Civil Code incapacitated wives. The system was abandoned after the war and women's suffrage expanded, but while it improved institutionally, it did not improve either culturally nor socially.
- After World War II, the structural changes to secondary industries led to the development of an income environment that enabled the separation of labour by gender, the emancipation of women from three-generation households due to the shift to nuclear family structure, and the popularisation of the custom of stay-home wives.
- However, the number of dual-income households has increased rapidly since the 1980s, and due to the stagnant wage levels of men, and a slowdown in the salary base, it has become more difficult for younger generations without dual incomes to maintain their lives. The expansion of tertiary industry and higher education of women helped them become dual-income householders. In reality, the number of women working full-time has not increased (relatively,) and women still suffer from the double burden of paid and unpaid labour.
- The so-called 'male wage premium' and 'institutional inertia' (a state in which social institutions are too stable to reasonably solve major problems) are prevalent in Japan. Over the past 20 years, the share of the housework burden has not changed due to persisting gender norms and practices.

Women in Japan: Updating Gender Roles in Society

4 April 2022 18:00-19:30 (JST) / 11:00-12:30 (CEST)

- Women's empowerment through "Abenomics" is problematic in that it does not change the current gender norms or the burdens that women bear, nor does it change the way men live and work, and it even envisions women being appropriated to deal with social problems.
- The main points of contention are: the distortion stemming from rapid modernisation, unconscious prejudices, a society with a high cost of change, strong pressure to conform, and intolerance of individual freedom. There are a lot of issues to be tackled in women's empowerment policy with an eye to economic growth, but these issues are not being taken into consideration.

Summary of **Professor Kristensen's** outline of gender equality in Norway:

- Norway is regarded as a pioneer in gender equality. Women's participation in the labour market has historically ensured and strengthened their economic independence. Norway promotes male participation in housework and child rearing from the perspective of gender equality, and aims to create a model for both work and joint housework.
- Specific measures include protection from discrimination against women, equal work and pay, gender quotas, and family policies. (E.g., childcare leave is guaranteed for nine weeks with 80% of salary, there is a childcare leave system that can be divided between parents, and a guarantee system that children can enter kindergarten at the age of five.) On the other hand, women are situated in a position to support the career of their partners and family needs. The increase in the number of immigrant maids in recent years has raised questions about whether this has given rise to a social hierarchy.
- Immigrant maids make couple's lives easier by taking care of the housework which couples should share in terms of gender equality. To resolve these issues, it is important for various actors to strengthen the gender balance, to achieve equality, and to advance gender equality without compromise through labour laws, etc. based on democratic ideas.

[Panel Discussion]

'What has enabled Norway to break down cases of institutional inertia that are found in Japan?'

Professor Kristensen pointed out that in Japan, as a result of the low birth rate and ageing population, the demand for labour is increasing and there is a possibility that more women will enter the labour force, and that it is important to legally implement equal pay and equal work as well as welfare benefits.

Professor Minashita cited the movement toward social change related to last year's Olympic Games and the irrational visa system for foreign students, and argued that although all of these factors are involved, gender equality is considered to be of relatively low priority on the agenda, and that politicians should raise it as an urgent issue. On the other hand, when Moderator Kanno, during her time as a Member of the House of Representatives, took up the issue of the nursery school shortage in the National Diet, she saw it as a change in itself that reporters from the political desks of Japanese newspapers took up the issue, unlike in the past.

Professor Kristensen explained that in Norway, women's lib in the 1970s became a social movement, and spread to women's rights, abortion, childcare rights, and social, political, and economic rights. She also mentioned that there is now a national consensus for gender equality, and politicians cannot be elected unless they support gender equality.

Women in Japan: Updating Gender Roles in Society

4 April 2022 18:00-19:30 (JST) / 11:00-12:30 (CEST)

Regarding the humanitarian aspect of immigrant maids and fairness between countries, **Professor Kristensen** stated that migrant labour should not be used as a solution for gender equality, and expressed her concern that although immigrant maids become substitutes for household labour, the support for those workers, the lack of legislation, and the fact that women are responsible for household labour have not changed, and this stereotype may be reinforced.

In relation to this, **Professor Minashita** pointed out that in Japan housework is highly demanding, centred on meals, and families are closed. Although there is a reluctance to let others work for their household, it was not uncommon in Japan to have a maid at home until the early 1960s, after which the practice became forgotten. On the other hand, she added that drastic cultural and societal changes can occur, and if others do something, the Japanese have a national character of imitating others.

'Does Norway still have a sense of gender division of labour?'

Professor Kristensen explained the ratio of male to female workers in each industry, that efforts are being made in various areas to achieve gender balance, and that the 'papa quota,' which requires men to stay at home with their children for up to 15 weeks, was effective.

[Q&A]

On the issue of the increasing number of suicides in Japan, **Professor Minashita** stressed that we should have a sense of crisis, referring to the fact that the double burden of women has increased due to the pandemic.

Regarding the impact of the pandemic in Norway, **Professor Kristensen** explained that the burden on women to do household chores and raise children is also increasing and that immediate action is needed.

On the role of female prime ministers, **Professor Kristensen** pointed out that Norway has had a female prime minister since the 1980s, and the presence of a female prime minister has become a symbol of maintaining gender balance both in the political arena and in society. **Professor Minashita** explained that in Japan's revolving-door politics, where positions are decided by people in the 'old boys' network,' it is difficult for women to become prime minister or even cabinet ministers, and institutional inertia in policy and decision-making is very strong.

[Wrap-up]

Ms. Kanno, the moderator, expressed her expectations for the betterment of the gender situation in Japan despite the above-mentioned challenges and expressed her gratitude to the panellists and the audience.

Naoki Takiguchi, Akari Yoshida