

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY
MS. KEIKO TAKEGAWA, DEPUTY DIRECTOR GENERAL
CABINET OFFICE, JAPAN
AT THE 3RD EAST ASIA GENDER EQUALITY MINISTERIAL
MEETING**

Madam Chair,
Honorable Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

On behalf of the Government of Japan, I would like to thank Madam Chair and all those involved in the Government of the Republic of Korea for the efforts you have directed toward organizing this 3rd East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting.

In her role as the Minister of State with overall responsibility for gender equality, childrearing support and support for children and the youth, Minister Yuko Obuchi has been providing leadership in these areas and also has the distinction of being the first in Minister of State in Japanese history to exercise her duties while pregnant. Had she been able to take part in today's meeting, she would have herself embodied the progress that Japan is making in gender equality, but she has unfortunately been unable to leave Japan due to the importance of getting legislation for which she is responsible through the Diet.

I shall therefore take her place on this occasion to offer a brief presentation of the issues that women are facing in the midst of the current economic crisis and of the response being offered by the Government of Japan to these issues. I would also like to stress in the strongest terms that the key to opening up new vistas extending beyond the immediate economic crisis is going to be the encouragement of activities by women on the basis of linkage and cooperation throughout East Asia.

The issues faced by women in the economic crisis and the response being offered by the Government of Japan

Accompanying the deterioration in employment conditions that we are witnessing at

present, the first point I would like to make is that there is concern that people may be subject to disadvantageous treatment such as being dismissed from work on grounds such as childcare leave, pregnancy and childbirth, or that they may be subject to discriminatory treatment on the grounds of gender under employment restraint. Such developments must not be allowed to happen as they threaten the very fabric of gender equality on the level of employment. Indeed in Japan they constitute violations of the law. In Japan, an administrative guidance is being conducted appropriately to ensure that the law is rigorously applied in this regard, and the Diet is currently deliberating a bill intended to revise the law so as to incorporate measures that assure the effectiveness of the law.

The second issue we face is that, despite the fact that more and more women wish to work while bringing up their children in order to support family finances under pressure, the infrastructural conditions that enable people to combine work with childrearing, as represented for example by the availability of nursery places, are failing to keep pace with demand. This is an extremely serious problem that has the effect of impeding women's activities. In order to provide a rapid response to such conditions, Japan is striving to expand nursery services by establishing a new fund with the aim of making urgent improvements to nursery availability, and efforts are also being made to improve the system of support for childrearing in local communities.

The third point is concerned with the serious repercussions that are being had on people who lead economically insecure lives such as those in families with only a single parent and those in insecure employment. Japan has seen an increase in recent years in the number of people experiencing difficulties in the conduct of their daily lives, including not only economic difficulties but also difficulties affecting the everyday conduct of life and their lives within their local communities. This tendency is especially prominent among women, due to the influence of stereotyped perception of gender roles that men should engage in gainful employ while women should remain looking after the home; because women are more likely to have to stop working for childbirth and childrearing; because women tend to have relatively lower incomes than men and their employment status is inherently insecure; and because of the repercussions of violence inflicted upon women. Deliberations are currently under way in Japan into how urgent support can be given to ensure the self-sufficiency of fatherless families.

Encouragement of activities by women as the key to tiding over the economic crisis and opening up new vistas

Various topics, several of which I have already mentioned, have come into focus under the severe economic conditions pertaining at the present time, but, on the other hand, we will be called upon in the future to surmount the current economic crisis and open up new vistas for the economy and society as a whole. From the standpoint of society at large, encouraging women to participate in a wide range of activities within the society is likely to result in the introduction of more diverse perspectives, the full use of the abilities of a wide range of people and, by extension, to the creation of new values and new needs. This will in turn serve as the force that will underpin the creation of a sustainable and vital society. Furthermore, as far as individual companies are concerned, making full use of women's abilities and encouraging the development of new products and services that respond to the diverse needs of society will have the benefit of strengthening competitiveness. There are many dynamic companies in Japan that are successfully improving their results even in the current recession by appointing women to senior managerial posts and by using the female perspective to develop products that prefigure the needs of society.

A case in point is UNIQLO, the Japanese clothing company whose sphere of business includes South Korea and further afield to China and Hong Kong. This company has placed women in charge of product development, and this move has resulted in the development of a series of highly successful functional products that fully anticipate and grasp the latent needs of women. UNIQLO is also implementing a "Female Store Manager Project" aimed at supporting career development on the part of female store directors and a "Women' Forum," a training project in which men are also free to participate. Such efforts to encourage activities on the part of women are thus being made throughout the company and have been a contributory factor in enabling this company to achieve its highest ever sales figures last year. UNIQLO is thus continuing to expand as if wholly oblivious of any talk of recession.

Women are playing active roles in many other areas within Japanese society and are invigorating society as a whole through their activities.

Female power lies at the fount of economic and social vitality. It is my fervent belief that efforts to encourage the activities of women and to create a society based on gender equality in which each individual can display his or her individuality and abilities to the full will be the key to opening up a bright new future for society and the economy.

Conclusion

Madam Chair

We need to see the economic crisis as an opportunity to further strengthen international links and cooperation, to learn together, and to gain new stimuli that will accelerate attempts to realize gender-equal societies throughout East Asia as a whole.

I feel sure that, under the determined leadership of you yourself and of everyone present here today from many different countries, this Meeting will prove to be enormously productive and that it will create a strong foundation for stimulating activities by women throughout East Asia in the future.

I would like to end my address at this point with my best wishes for the success of this Meeting.

Thank you very much.