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Statement submitted by International Women’s Year Liaison Group, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Japan has been slow in taking measures to close gender gap and to achieve gender equality in education in general which had not helped her situation among countries of the world. But, in 2022, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and several universities are making new efforts to encourage women and girls to study engineering and science. We, the International Women's Year Liaison Group, expect that the measures to be taken will contribute to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

Global Gender Gap Index 2022 of the World Economic Forum assessed Japan as ranking the first, together with 29 other countries, in education. In comparison to the miserable figures of political influence (ranked 139th) and economic participation (121th), this suggests that women in Japan are generally well-educated. Yet, there must be something wrong in society where well-educated women seem to disappear into black holes, unable to fully participate in the higher echelons of political and economic activities even with their degrees. Are there translucent silk curtains and invisible bamboo traps, as well as glass ceilings, preventing women from fully engaged in, and properly valued as full members of society?

The 2021 statistics from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology suggest that 45.6% of 2.6 million undergraduate students and 32.7% of about a quarter of million graduate students are women. If we were to examine these figures, some fields seem to appeal more to female applicants as we find female students tend to concentrate in some disciplines: 65.5% of students in arts and humanities, 63.3% in public health and welfare, and 59.0% in education are women, compared to 27.8% of students in natural sciences and 15.7% in engineering. Is that their "real" choice? Are they lead to believe that majoring in science or engineering is not becoming of women?

The Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office published a report on project to promote women in science fields in 2018. According to this report, there are evidence supporting the proposition that parents' degrees in science and the existence of female science teachers at secondary schools make a significant difference in students' choice. So, the answer to the above question is yes: the culprit is this gendered society. If we want girls and young women to learn more about science and engineering, society as a whole has to change.

The ratification of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1985 expanded choices for women in Japan by opening theretofore exclusively male universities to women applicants. This meant that women may join pretty much male-dominated environment if they dare. Even then, women's colleges and universities, both public and private, continued to offer limited fields such as humanities and home economics, unconsciously or inadvertently reinforcing gender roles. One ought to mention that two national women's universities did establish natural science faculties: in 1950 at Ochanomizu National Women's University and in 1953 at Nara National Women's University respectively. These were accomplished by splitting pre-existing faculties of home economics, to establish faculties of education, management, public health and welfare, and natural sciences. If we were to include department of natural science at private university, Tsuda University was the first women's university to establish its department of mathematics in 1949. Girls and young women were not exactly deprived of their choice to major in science, but only a few did in 1950's.

Just in time for the ratification mentioned above, a statute promoting welfare of working women was restructured and renamed as the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1985. The Act apparently encouraged some young women to seek opportunities

to “work like men,” but unfortunately, a strong bias against women choosing science or engineering degrees persists till this day. The number of female students in natural science and engineering disciplines remained low in co-ed universities until now, as the statistics above mentioned illustrates. The fact that seven women’s universities and colleges had been offering architecture courses since 1960’s, preparing students to sit for national architect examinations, appears to be something of an anomaly, until one realizes that this degree usually is a very well-trodden road to qualify as interior designers and home decorators rather than architects and construction managers.

The second decade of the twenty-first century is bringing some visible changes: the Faculty of Engineering of Nara Women’s University welcomed their first students in April 2022. In 2023, Kyoto Women’s University will open its new Faculty of Data Science, and Ochanomizu Women’s University plans to establish Faculty of Engineering, tentatively named “Faculty of Co-creative Engineering” to start in 2024. These new schools of engineering are expected to correct unfounded bias that science and engineering are “unsuitable for women” and to encourage young people interested in science to choose from a wide variety of works without being trapped into the pink ghetto of nursing and pharmacists where women dominate in number. Although considered as science majors, 91.3% of students in nursing and medical care, and 60.7% in pharmaceutical sciences are female, according to the 2021 statistics from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

Taking these low numbers of female students in science and engineering very seriously, as it would jeopardize technologically bright future of Japan, the Ministry is now taking lead to increase female students in engineering by asking, in June 2022, the forty-nine national universities with faculties of sciences and/or engineering to set aside quotas for female students, an attempt that did not fly two decades ago.

This year, Tohoku University is making a notable attempt, to implement its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Project. Its School of Engineering placed calls for five professorships in April, exclusively asking for female applicants. By August, it announced that the School and its laboratories received more than sufficient number of applicants and closed offers. It looks likely that we will see more women professors at the School of Engineering next April. Some might question whether the project to set aside five out of two hundred fourteen professorships is, in itself, sufficient to achieve “equity, if not diversity.” To us, it certainly is a first step in the right direction. It already has sent clear messages to young scholars that Tohoku University welcomes new approaches not just to research projects but to evaluate scholarly abilities and their progressive approach will not be confined to undoing gender roles. It also sent warnings to the academia that there are many more qualified people who had not been given their chance to illustrate their competence because their profiles do not fit into existing understanding of who is good and competent.

Although we might not be the best example to close gender gap so far, we can state that our government and our institutions of higher learning are seriously tackling the issue in their hands, and we are very proud to report Japan’s progress to achieve gender equality in this digital age.
