On Thursday, September 7, 2017, the East Asia Institute (EAI) hosted Dr. Kumiko Nemoto, a professor in the faculty of Global Engagement at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies delivered a lecture entitled “Too Few Women at the Top: Organizational and Institutional Obstacles Against Gender Equality in Japan.” The lecture focused on gender inequality towards women in Japan despite an increasing number of college-educated employed women. She also highlighted the steps Japan was taking towards gender-equal government and corporate policies.

Nemoto began her lecture by stating the goal of her presentation, which was to answer questions and give insight into two key questions. Those questions were “Why are there few women managers? and “Will Japan catch up with the United States and other Western countries in terms of women’s economic status?”

Before answering these questions, Nemoto gave us some key information on the nature of the Japanese workplace. “Japan remains one of the least gender-equal among governments and corporations throughout the advanced countries of the world,” said Nemoto. “Women only constitute six percent of department managers and only three percent of board members in Japan.”

Nemoto’s, reasoning on how to determine why there are too few women in positions of power in Japanese corporations and government had to do with the economic model of supply and demand in Japan’s labor market, each being on the opposite side of the spectrum.

On the supply side of the explanation, “The general consensus in Japan was that women do things differently from men such as how they socialize, and most notably in gendered obligations and preconceptions where women are caretakers/child-rearing, whereas men are expected to devote themselves to work,” said Nemoto.

On the demand side explanation, Nemoto linked this interpretation to the organizational structure and the discrimination of the hiring process, and how pay, promotions, the lack of networking and in-group favoritism creates a disparity between men and women in businesses throughout Japan. A key idea of the demand side explanation is a term called “glass cliffs” which is where women would eventually become CEOs or boarding members only when a business is deteriorating in terms of profit. Nemoto stated that these preconceptions link to how corporate management has been in Japan for many years.

Nemoto listed how corporate management works in Japan, most commonly how longstanding customs within Japanese companies, such as lifelong employment, promotions based on seniority, and long working hours all contribute to the inequality seen between men and women in the business world. She went in depth for each of these topics and explained how each was affecting Japanese women’s chances at holding high positions in the business world.
When talking about seniority and age-based promotion, Nemoto explained that the reasoning behind this being such a large barrier for women, was linked to the Japanese way of promotion. In Japan, businesses tend to promote mostly based on age, rather than individual performance. She compared this to the United States where more often promotions are based on performance and happen very quickly in comparison to Japan where the first major promotion takes place after fifteen to twenty years on average. “Seniority works against women’s aspirations and family plans,” said Nemoto. “Combining long working hours and seniority-based promotions makes women question if it’s actually worth the effort to work long hours and not spend time to raise their family, when you do not get promoted based on performance.”

According to Nemoto, many of the women in Japan are hired and categorized into one of many career tracks such as an area career-track worker, contract/temp worker, or limited-term non-career worker among many, which generally means they can only advance within the particular branch they are in and cannot advance to a high position at a headquarters level. On the other hand, men are generally hired as a career-track worker, which means they can freely work and get promoted to many different branches and positions high on the corporate ladder. This further enforces the idea of the differences in gender treatment.

Nemoto finished her lecture by discussing the topic of workplace environment and stated how many workplaces in Japan are considered masculine, giving workers the idea that they need to constantly be working hard, for long hours, which reinforces gender biases against those that don’t. In short, the workplace environment is a reflection of the majority or those in power, which in this case are men’s thought process of working long and hard. This essentially ignores the thoughts of women; forcing them to follow this mindset, otherwise suffering some kind of ill effect, such as a reduced salary or loss in a chance to move up in their career.

After the lecture, a Q&A session was held. Members of the audience asked Nemoto about topics such as the business/workplace structure in Japan, the potential of them changing, possibly towards that of the U.S., and the issue of job segregation in terms of jobs and hierarchy. She ended the lecture stating, “Regardless of all the negative aspects of gender equality, I still welcome you all to come and enjoy Japan, as Japan is a great country.”

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