opinion

The roles of women in influential positions

Toko Shirakawa

Popular interest in sociologist Chizuko Ueno appears to be picking up once again after her speech at the University of Tokyo's entrance ceremony last April became the talk of the town. In it, she exposed the structural discrimination in Japanese society by noting, "Society that does not reward you, no matter how great efforts you may make, awaits you" — became the talk of the town.

Ueno has since appeared on a TV program in which she engaged in a dialogue with younger women and she gave several media interviews. In a recent article in Seventeen magazine, which is aimed at teenagers, she gave advice to junior high and high school girls about their adolescent problems.

Born in 1949, Ueno has been a driving force of feminism in this country. As a sociologist, she was the first in Japan to launch women's studies. Each time she triggered one of the various booms she created, Ueno offered stimulus to multiple generations of women. Through the years, Ueno herself has not changed a bit — although society has changed a lot.

The 24th International Conference for Women in Business, held in Tokyo on July 7, offered a first-hand chance to listen to her speak. Ueno said it was her first-ever opportunity to speak at a business-related conference. About 90 percent of the participants were women in business from around the world.

"I initially thought it was a joke and that I should decline it," Ueno said of the request to give a speech at the University of Tokyo, popularly known as Todai. "I haven't changed. It is the University of Tokyo that has changed. Various issues such as #Me Too and discrimination against female applicants at Tokyo Medical University have caused those changes," she said. "Women in their 40s feverishly reacted to my speech. They all must have had hard experiences. On the other hand, I felt old-type men are being reincarnated in some 18-year-old boys."

Women account for less than 20 percent of students at Todai, while 52 percent of the male students at the university come from unified middle schools and high schools for boys. That may explain the hostile reactions from some men to her speech.

Todai may not engage in gender-based discrimination in its entrance exam, but the reason the number of female students doesn't increase at the prestigious university is because the number of female applicants doesn't increase.

This year, women accounted for only 28 percent of the applicants. "Businesses should also disclose the proportion of men and women among those who applied to join them and those who actually got hired," Ueno said, also questioning why the government would not set a target of having women account for 50 percent of people in leading positions in 2020, instead of 30 percent.

Working women like us have for years heard company executives say that they raise the scores of male applicants in entrance exams so they can hire them because they will end up hiring all women if they choose successful applicants based on test and interview results. It has been an open secret that companies control the male-female ratio in hiring, but nobody has raised a voice against this discrimination.

Ueno spoke at the conference of businesspeople because gender equality has become an important economic agenda. The word "gender" appeared six times and "women" 23 times in the leaders' declaration adopted at the Group of 20 summit held in Osaka in late June. Ueno, however, raised questions about such a trend.

Sociologist Chizuko Ueno, shown speaking at the University of Tokyo's entrance ceremony in April, has been a driving force of feminism in Japan. KYODO

Today nobody can openly oppose increasing the roles of women in every aspect of the economy and society, Ueno said. At first, increasing the number of women was promoted for the sake of social justice, and then efforts were made to persuade businesses to do so — an endeavor that, it has become clear, would make more profits, she said.

"But we need to go beyond that by discussing what we should aim for" by increasing the number of women in all layers, Ueno said. The goal should be to build a "desirable society," she said. "We want safe products. We want products that are gentle to children. We need to think about what is desirable. Is it OK just to increase the number of women (in jobs and other positions)?"

Institutional investors overseas view gender equality as a condition for sustainable society and business. Even in shareholders' meeting of companies in Japan, institutional investors raise the question of why the companies do not have female board members.

Certainly times have changed. But Ueno always focuses on the essential question: What do we want to achieve by pursuing gender equality?

"I kept saying the same thing for half a century. Are you serving tea for your colleagues at work? You are not. Please remember who made the efforts to bring about this change. We owe the present state to the many women who voiced what men did not like to hear and kept doing what they had to do despite the harassment by men," Ueno said.

Now, the changes that have been achieved must be handed down to the younger generations, she added. "Those individual women who put up their own fight and said 'No!' brought about the changes. We have to keep that up."

Her speech won a big round of applause from the floor, which was filled by women who fought their own battles in male-dominated business fields.

I think Ueno is trying to teach people who have risen to their respective positions in their careers how they should behave and pass on their experiences to future generations.

In recent years, the number of women who began their career as the first generation under the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law and are now filling influential positions such as executives or company president has noticeably increased. Interviews with them give a sense that things have changed. Previously, such people did not like to be called "the first woman" to achieve something or fill a certain position. But now they are willing to talk about the extra hurdles they have to clear as women or their private lives — issues that their male counterparts would not discuss.

Earlier, many of the women in the first generation under the 1986 law would try not to show the problems they're enduring, saying that they did not face any particular disadvantage because they were women, or that their companies do not have gender-based discrimination against employees. But was that true? Ueno pointed to a weakness phobia, often seen among elite women. The more competent women are, the more they want to avoid admitting their weakness — perhaps all the more because they survived the harsh environment where exposing one's weakness meant instant defeat.

Nobody would doubt the competence of those women who have risen to the leading positions. I wish that those women would now speak out and say that they have overcome their inner weaknesses as women — or the weaknesses that they had to live with because of the structure of gender-based discrimination. Otherwise, subsequent generations might think that they cannot possibly be superwomen like them. They should try to lower the hurdles for women of future generations by introducing measures and systems for them, instead of dismissing the need for such steps because they did not have any such extra support.

Once they have come to grips with their own weaknesses, they could then think about other people who cannot work hard enough or tenaciously enough to build a successful career. The society built by powerful men has left many people behind. Women now in decision-making positions in the business world are in a position to be able to do what Ueno said in her Todai speech: "Please do not use your efforts and tenacity only for your own survival. Please use your blessed environment and talent not to pull down unblessed people but to help them."

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Britain: Keeping calm amid chaos

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During the German blitz in the Battle of Britain, correspondent Edward R. Murrow marveled at how Londoners stoically carried on amid the nightly horrors of aerial bombing.

In an obviously different context, I find a similar mentality prevailing in England as the summer of 2019 ends. The message I take away from London and the countryside is, "We've had three years of continuous inconclusive debate, now let's get on with it and leave the European Union no matter what on Oct. 31."

This readiness to move on, I think, is what Prime Minister Boris Johnson is banking on when he called for "prorogation" (i.e., a suspension of parliamentary debate) until mid-October. Outside politically active circles, his announcement has largely been greeted with a yawn. There's been enough talking.

Of course, in the Brexit debate, many important issues cry out for resolution. Foremost is the Irish border. And what about the nearly 2.5 million EU-born, non-British people living in the United Kingdom? I put that question to almost every person I met.

Whether in London or elsewhere, it's clear that Britain would grind to a halt without foreign labor. Unemployment in the U.K. is at a 44-year low of 3.9 percent. In such an economy, there aren't enough Brits to fill the jobs that exist.

And that's where the Eastern Europeans come in. Their labor has contributed to the U.K. boom. At present, there are about 250,000 east Europeans working in Britain. Without exception, those that I talked to intend to stay.

At a hotel/restaurant near Cheltenham in the Cotswolds, I discovered that 30 of the inn's 40 staff are Eastern Europeans. They were lured to Britain by high wages and the English language. I spoke to five employees — from Bulgaria, Czechia, Latvia and Romania — and not one professed to be worried about Brexit. A Czech waiter said, "I've been here five years. Something will work out. I'm absolutely not concerned." The Bulgarian barman sniffed, "they're not stupid here. Of course, things will work out."

During the three years since the Brexit referendum, uncertainty and the need to plan prompted many Eastern Europeans to leave. In 2018, 76,000 departed but that outflow has diminished this year.

Outside the circles of Tory hardliners, there are few who believe that Johnson can work any magic on the EU to win a better deal from Brussels and the other EU capitals.

That, however, is pretty much the prerequisite for Johnson's prorogation of Parliament to make sense. If that doesn't happen — and the very strong odds are that it won't — then what Johnson is left with for a general election is the argument to get rid of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Already, Johnson and his hard-line advisers in Downing Street No. 10 have gotten rid of those obstinate Tories — many stalwarts of Conservative Party politics — that have been yammering for so long about further options. They were simply eliminated from the Tory party ranks, but may in future run as independent candidates.

Regardless of which side of the political equation of Brexit one stands on, most people in the U.K. have an abiding sense that the time for resolution has arrived.

After all, the blitz lasted only eight months. The Brexit conundrum has already droned on for more than three years.

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Why climb Mount Everest?

Reaching the summit of the world's tallest peak has become an immoral, personal act

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Dozens of climbers wait in line to reach the summit of Mount Everest on May 22. AFP-JIJI

In 1953, when Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first people to reach the summit of Mount Everest, I was seven years old. For a time, I was immersed in the stories of the epic climb. It seemed like an achievement for all of humankind, like reaching the South Pole. Would there still be any frontiers left, I wondered, by the time I grew up?

A photo of the southern summit ridge of Everest has brought these memories back to me. But what a different Everest this is! The splendid isolation of the top of the world has gone. Instead, there is a long line of climbers waiting their turn to stand briefly on the summit.

It's not hard to see why. As the expedition company Seven Summit Treks advertises: "If you want to experience what it feels like to be on the highest point on the planet and have strong economic background to compensate for your old age and your fear of risks you can sign up for the VVIP Mount Everest Expedition Service." You need the "strong economic background" because it will cost you $130,000. There are less expensive ways to climb Everest, but they all start with the $11,000 fee that the Nepalese government charges for a permit.

We shouldn't object to the government of a low-income country seeking revenue from wealthy foreign climbers. But even with the best support money can buy, in the thin air above 8,000 meters, people die — 12 in 2019 alone. There are at least 200 bodies still on the mountain, some in crevasses, others buried by avalanches. Still others have been described as "familiar fixtures on the route to Everest's summit."

It used to be taken for granted that if a climber was in danger, others would help, even if that meant abandoning their own plans. No longer. In 2006, it was reported that David Sharp, who had chosen to climb Everest without Sherpa support, slowly froze to death while about 40 climbers passed him on their way to the summit. Edmund Hillary found it "horrifying."

Later reports suggested that most of the 40 did not notice Sharp, or were unaware that he needed help. But some climbers, like the Australian Brad Horn, have been quite explicit in saying that they are on the mountain only to get to the top and will not stop to help anyone else until they have achieved that goal.

I've used the example of rescuing a child drowning in a shallow pond to explore questions about our obligation to save the lives of strangers. When I ask my students if they would wade into a shallow pond to save a drowning child, even if doing so would ruin their favorite, and most expensive, pair of shoes, they tell me that you can't compare a child's life with a pair of shoes, so of course they would save the child.

What if the only way to save a child from being struck and killed by a runaway train is to divert it down a siding where it will destroy your most precious possession, a vintage Bugatti, into which you have sunk most of your savings? Never mind, most still say, you have to save the child.

If that's right, then why does climbing Everest allow one to refrain from saving the life of a fellow climber? Is it because, as Horn says in defending his attitude, "Everyone knows the risk"?

That may be true, but, as Immanuel Kant argued, our obligation to help strangers is grounded by our own desire to be helped when in need. Hence, we cannot will, as a universal law, that people pass by strangers in need. Horn would need to reply that, had he needed to be rescued, other climbers would have been justified in leaving him to die as they headed to the summit.

In any case, even if you are lucky enough to get to the top of Everest without passing a climber in need of help, you are still choosing to reach the summit rather than to save a life. That's because the cost of the climb would be enough to save the lives of several people, if given to an effective charity.

I enjoy hiking and being in wild places. I like hikes that take me to a summit, especially one with a view. So I can understand why Hillary wanted to climb Mount Everest. But I have trouble understanding why anyone would see that as a worthwhile goal today. It does not require great mountaineering skill and it is very far from a wilderness experience.

Arnold Coster, a Dutch mountaineer who organizes Everest climbs, says that many of his customers are more like trophy hunters than mountaineers. Tim Macartney-Snape, who climbed Everest in 1984, says that today's climbers are "more interested in talking about it at a cocktail party than actually being in the mountains. It's a status-enhancing thing."

If that is right, one can only regard it as a pity that the desire for status leads us to set goals that involve pointless or even harmful activities, rather than goals that have value independently of status, like helping those in need and making the world a better place.

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