

Introductory Speech for Panel Discussion on women entrepreneurs by Taro Kono,  
Minister for Foreign Affairs “WAW!2017” Special Event on Women’s Empowerment  
co-organized by the Government of Japan and the World Bank  
November 3, 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning.

This is the final event of “WAW! 2017,” which we have held every year since 2014. Thanks to your insights and thought-provoking discussion, this has been, once-again, an extraordinary forum for women’s empowerment. Thank you.

And now to our event on women entrepreneurs. A positive consequence of the rapidly changing world that I discussed yesterday is that more and more women are launching businesses. I would like to disseminate once again the message that they bring new viewpoints and ideas to the world marketplace, and outline Japan’s supports for such wonderfully talented women entrepreneurs around the world.

I would like to introduce you to two Japanese women entrepreneurs on our panel today, Ms. Rika Yajima and Ms. Kaori Sasaki, who have brought their unique perspectives to their own business ventures.

Ms. Yajima is putting a modern twist on a centuries-old Japanese tradition to ensure it is handed down to future generations. “Edo-Sarasa” is a 16th-century cloth-dyeing technique from the Tokyo region that is used for making “kimonos,” which are traditional Japanese robes. However, Japanese nowadays don’t wear kimonos much, so Ms. Yajima makes aprons for infants using organic cotton cloth dyed with the “Edo-Sarasa” technique. Ms. Yajima’s received high marks for her business model during APEC last month.

Ms. Sasaki established a translation agency in 1987. Since then she has been doing various activities in the field of human resource and products development from the viewpoint of working women. Recently, she partnered with a food company to create powder salad dressing with toppings. The idea was triggered by listening to working women who said they would like to eat more vegetables easily and keep good nutritional balance among their busy daily lives at the office and home.

Both of these entrepreneurs have created businesses with viewpoints unique to women. I think that creating products to meet a need in daily life that has not yet been met is one of women's great strengths.

However, it is still difficult for women to launch their own business. The percentage of women entrepreneurs in Japan is roughly 30 percent.

It is said that women face many obstacles when they try to launch businesses in Japan. Acquiring professional knowledge on business and management is one of such obstacles. Moreover, women feel difficulties when they try to have access to loans for their business. The situation for women in developing countries is much severer.

The government of Japan wants to tear down these obstacles, which is one of main reasons we support "Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi)," which was launched at the G20 Summit in Hamburg in July of this year.

We-Fi is an initiative established in the World Bank to help women entrepreneurs and women-led small and medium enterprises in developing countries to overcome obstacles to success. Ms. Ivanka Trump, Advisor to the President of the United States, contributed to the launch of the initiative. Japan will support We-Fi as much as possible so that the initiative can be run smoothly and help women around the world reach their full potential.

It is not easy to change the way of thinking and concept of values of all people. However, we are committed to working on a local and global scale to overcome obstacles to women entrepreneurs and greater empowerment.

Thank you very much.