

The Global Debate Over Gender Equality

Takeaways from a Round Table Discussion on Gender Equality at UN Headquarters



A roundtable discussion on gender equality took place at the United Nations' Headquarters in New York on March 15, 2023.

A total of 53 senior managers from nations around the world, most of whom are responsible for sustainability and diversity, gathered for a roundtable discussion on the role of male allies in promoting the women's empowerment principles (WEPs). Four people from four companies* in Japan, including Seiko Epson, participated.

* The other three companies were Nissan Motor, SoftBank, and Sompo Japan Insurance.

Representing Seiko Epson was Emiko Nemura, general manager of the DE&I Strategic Promotion Department. We asked Ms. Nemura how it was that she got invited and what she took away from the conference.

Interviewee	Interviewer
	
<p>Emiko Nemura, General Manager, DE&I Strategic Promotion Department.</p> <p>Joined Seiko Epson in 2005. Ms. Nemura's previous work involved overseas marketing of printers, launching new sensing product businesses in Japan and abroad, and global corporate marketing. She has been the general manager of the DE&I Strategic Promotion Department since 2022.</p> <p>Ms. Nemura is exploring how to make the most of her own working life while enjoying time spent with her daughter, who is in the third grade.</p>	<p>Fumi Shimizu, PR & IR Department</p> <p>Third year working in internal communications. She has chosen to work a shorter workdays for childcare reasons.</p> <p>Ms. Shimizu studied abroad in Southeast Asia when she was a university student. She began her career at Epson in production control and procurement. Her duties included working with people at Epson's overseas affiliates in procurement and import/export control. Working with all kinds of people both inside and outside the company has been both challenging and fun. She hopes that the penetration of DE&I will change attitudes and foster diversity in the way people work.</p>

▼ **Contents**

- Epson being proactive as the world works toward gender equality
- Men threatened by gender equality
- Women's advancement or gender equality?
- The true importance of involving men
- Is the issue of diversity misunderstood?

Epson being proactive as the world works toward gender equality

Shimizu: How did you end up participating in the roundtable?

Nemura: Epson got invited to the roundtable discussion in New York after I contacted the [Global Compact Network Japan](#) to find out about what kinds of companies from Japan were going to participate. Epson ended up being recommended as a participant because of our proactivity in promoting programs like paternity leave.



The gender gap in Japan is large even when looked at from a global perspective. [Japan ranked 116th out of 146 countries](#) in a 2022 gender gap survey. The world is moving toward gender equality but there is a limit to what individual companies can do to close Japan's gender gap. Japan is not going to quickly catch up with the leaders. There are not many practices that we can simply borrow from other companies and countries. So, we need to gain new perspectives through participation in conferences like this. The fact that four Japanese companies participated in this conference, which involved representatives from 20 countries, indicates that Japanese companies are taking gender equality more seriously.

I thought it was important for Epson to show the world that we are being proactive in addressing diversity, equality, and inclusion (DE&I). I felt that this would be a valuable opportunity to reach young people, who have a high level of interest in DE&I and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and familiarize them with Epson.

Shimizu: Tell me about the format of the roundtable discussions.

Nemura: We were divided into groups of six or seven people and seated around a table. The organizers made sure that discussions would include men by having at least one or two men at each table.



A roundtable group discussion involving practitioners ©UN Global Compact

Men threatened by gender equality

Shimizu: It seems that the organizers emphasized that men need to participate if we are to achieve gender equality. What kind of topics were covered?

Nemura: Something I hadn't considered before was that some men feel threatened by gender equality. This came as a surprise and made big impression on me. It is embarrassing to admit, but gender had never been an issue on the job for me, so this wasn't something I had never really considered. When I heard gender equality mentioned as a "threat" to some men, a lightbulb went on in my head.



It seems that in many countries, women's empowerment is seen as giving women preferential treatment. Some men come to realize that they might have been enjoying certain advantages all along, so they have mixed feelings about gender equality. On the one hand, they feel that they can come out ahead even on an even playing field. On the other, however, they worry that maybe they can't. Multiple men expressed the same opinion, so it made me realize that this attitude might be one of the barriers to promoting diversity.

Shimizu: The issues run deep, don't they.

Women's advancement or gender equality?

Nemura: The fact that some men feel threatened by women's empowerment was a huge lesson for me. Part of the problem might be the phrase "women's empowerment," which doesn't sit quite right with me. That's why we are moving toward using the phrase "gender equality" internally.

There was also debate at the roundtable about whether to use "women's empowerment" or "gender equality." When we talk about "women's empowerment," the focus is on examining how women can be empowered within existing systems. On the other hand, "gender equality," it was argued, focuses on breaking out of the current framework and redressing past injustices. Personally, I found that this helped articulate and dispel any lingering doubt I had.



Group photo with roundtable participants ©UN Global Compact

Shimizu: So, you found that exchanging ideas with others who have a different perspective helped you to develop your own ideas? It sounds like it was a very meaningful debate.

Are there any other stories you can share?

The true importance of involving men

Nemura: There's another phrase that comes up in the context of DE&I that I am not very comfortable with.

That phrase is "involvement or engagement of men." The words "involve and engage" imply that the other party is passive and there is a sense that it is their responsibility for being involved or engaged, don't you think? As discussions progressed and sharing what I'd been feeling, I came to understand the importance of involving and engaging men.

A lot of people are not interested in gender equality. Some think that gender equality already exists. The reality is that simply changing these people's minds won't change anything. To change the actions of the majority, deliberate engagement is crucial. This idea made sense to me.

Shimizu: That's an interesting point. Engagement can have the effect of changing one's consciousness.



Is the issue of diversity misunderstood?

Nemura: After talking about men’s engagement, we went on to discuss the main topic of the conference: the role of male allies*. We came to the conclusion that an ally is someone who recognizes who should have the opportunity to thrive but can’t, sees why that is happening, and joins the minority in making changes.

* In this context, “ally” refers to someone who advocates for or supports action to rectify discrimination against marginalized groups such as sexual minorities and to increase diversity.

Shimizu: I see. A lot of people probably have a vague idea that an ally is a supporter, so it is important to correctly understand the word in the context of promoting DE&I, isn’t it.

Nemura: “Diversity promotion” is another phrase that is often misinterpreted as meaning that everything up to now was a mistake and that promoting diversity means to correct those mistakes. Until I started working in DE&I, I think I probably also felt this way to some extent. However, in exploring various initiatives and listening to those directly involved or affected, I have learned—and am still learning—that promoting diversity is by no means synonymous with a blanket negation of the past.

The primary goal is to empower people to live up to their full potential and to be more inclusive, to make life within the company easier for all. To achieve this, we need to understand what behavioral changes are necessary. We have to ask ourselves what human resources programs and policies are right for Epson. I

think the best approach for us would be to decide on and implement these programs and policies based on societal trends and an understanding of where things currently stand.

The conference helped me better understand that this approach is not only applicable to gender equality but also serves as a fundamental approach to people of all ages who are already empowered.

Shimizu: It seems that you learned a lot and that the conference was meaningful. I gained some insights as well. Nemura-san, thank you so much for sharing today.



When asked to choose between work and her daughter, Nemura-san replied, "They're not something that can be compared, but my daughter comes first, of course!" She says that she used to have a strong sense that she had to do everything herself, but now she feels able to rely on the members of her team, which has made balancing work and parenting mentally easier.