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Warm greetings from Paris. I thank Kobe University for giving me the opportunity to address you virtually at this important Forum, which marks the end of an important project entitled Initiative for Realizing Diversity in the Research Environment. I am honored and proud to be involved in this initiative since its beginning in 2018.

We have to remember that this project was implemented over a period of time that witnessed an unexpected global pandemic that required very drastic, strict and different measures on working modalities, on travel (including within national borders but more so on an international level), on our plans for life in general. These changes came in mid-cycle for the project. In many institutions, especially research that did not have urgency was put on hold. It would not have been viewed negatively or considered a failure if project managers decided to take a break. But that is not what happened. Work continued with some pivots and thoughtful changes. So, I want to congratulate everybody involved for their commitment, adaptability and agility.

It is also rare in 5-year projects to have such a thoughtful process of constant assessment and re-adjustment of different methods. Hence, this is quite an exemplary effort that would benefit similar efforts in the future if Kobe University carefully and succinctly documents all of the thought processes that went into planning, adjusting, and readjusting action plans and share them widely within and outside Japan. Lessons learned from this project would be invaluable for diversity efforts not only in universities but in other institutional settings and the corporate world.

I have been collaborating with Kobe University for almost 15 years now. I am very impressed with the progress the University made in promoting gender equality, diversity and inclusion. Starting from very low participation of women in senior management, the project has achieved and surpassed its target of 4 women and today it has 6 women in those senior positions.

We are going through an interesting period in our common history. While changes in technology are outpacing our ability to absorb new developments, we were also forced to slow down due to the pandemic. Both of these developments – i.e., technological shifts and the pandemic – brought to light the fault lines in our efforts to promote gender equality and diversity.

According to the World Economic Forum 2023 report, we still need 131 years to close the gender gap. That is beyond the lifetime of all of us at this Forum and it is not acceptable. In East Asia and Pacific, the region Japan belongs to, progress on parity has been stagnating for over a decade. Globally, data shows that while women account for almost 42 % of the labor force, the share of women in senior leadership positions has only been increasing by 1% for the past 8 years.

Women in senior management positions is still a rarity in Japan. Despite a government led push for women's empowerment since 2013, only 8.2% of 1.2 million Japanese companies had female presidents according to a survey by Teikoku Databank. Of those, more than half, inherited their position via a family business.

While many firms now provide services and incentives for women, such as generous maternity leaves, they lack post-maternity mentoring programs or services and incentives to keep them in their work place. Around the world, there is still a cultural tendency to evaluate employees on the number of hours they work rather than actual output (this can be research papers in the case of universities) with the result that some women get demoted after they return to work. In Japan, the government supports a merit-based system but application of this system still needs to be supported. The pipeline of female senior executives is another area that needs serious consideration and this could be an important goal as the project moves forward and some of the resources under the Diversity Fund can be allocated for this purpose.

In the area of diversity, the world is facing serious challenges with rising nationalist and populist movements in many parts of the world, and with increasing conflict in and among countries. One of the common reactions of people who face challenging political and economic conditions is to turn inwards, to blame an external enemy and hence damage efforts for diversity. Diversity in all of its forms has been documented to be positive for moving forward, in the economy, in research and innovation, in social development, etc.

It is important that leading higher education institutions, such as Kobe University, continue to spearhead efforts to promote gender equality and diversity and to advocate for it with its partners and allies to expand it beyond the university. This is not the time to slow down but to strengthen and accelerate our efforts to achieve gender equality and promote diversity and inclusion.

We already know that we will not reach the targets set by the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders, including Japan, in 2015. This is all the more reason to double our efforts and to strive to build our economies and societies struggling with the Pandemic with better results, that is with the full participation and representation of women. After all, trying to build a future without the full participation of women will be like trying to type with one hand.

My current work focuses on Artificial Intelligence, especially bias in AI, through a think tank I founded in Canada and in France. So, I want to say a few things about women's participation in STEM areas and why it is important to keep our focus on STEM education for girls and STEM and technology careers for women.

Across the labor markets of today and of the future, STEM jobs are expected to grow in scope and significance. Yet, women remain severely underrepresented in this field with only about 30% representation. In AI, although there has been a surge, women's representation in technical teams is still low and in senior management, it is under 10%.

In order to build a more equal future, we need more women seated at the table when discussions about technology, AI, its development, regulation, governance take place at the national and international levels. Women need to be involved in deciding about and designing AI so that they

can play a role in steering them with a view to address bias. Technologies built without women's input are designed to fail in being inclusive – technology isn't neutral, and biases are more likely to be embedded in tech applications and systems that are built by men only.

We need to address this stark situation by attracting more women and girls to STEM and ICT studies – and by supporting them to transition into the workplace, both in academia and in the private sector.

Hence, as I did in my last video clip a couple of years ago, I urge Kobe University and everyone watching this clip to make a commitment to ensure quality STEM and ICT education for girls and much improved academic and career opportunities with the full and equal participation of women technologists and scientists.

Congratulations to Kobe University's senior management, leaders and managers of this project and all of the researchers who participated in this wonderful and successful initiative. I would like to send my special regards and congratulations to the Gender Office at Kobe University and its members over the years. I have had the pleasure to partner with them starting in 2010 as the Director for Gender Equality at UNESCO. They have surprised and impressed me with their enthusiasm, knowledge, willingness to learn and try new methods and their unwavering commitment to promote gender equality, diversity and inclusion. They are many but I would be remiss if I do not mention a few names: I met Professor Roumiana Tsenkova and Professor Junko Okada on my first visit to Kobe University. They introduced me to the world of Kobe University, its Gender Office and guided me through the beautiful complexities of Japan. Among the many members of the senior management team of Kobe University that I have had the pleasure to interact with, I have to mention Professor Uchida who stayed as a strong and unwavering ally of the Gender Office and visited me at UNESCO with Professor Okada. Professor Ronni Alexander made sure I stayed connected with the project and kept me informed about the achievements of both the Project and the UNESCO Chair.

As this project comes to a close, I deeply appreciate my long-term association with Kobe University, its management, faculty and staff over the years. I wish you all continued success with all your projects and endeavors.