Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Minister's Award

What's in a Name?

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What name would you like to have when you get married?
The chatter of junior high school girls is always filled with yearnings about romantic love and marriage.
"Jinguji would be a really cool surname!"
"As long as it's the name of the person I love, I don't care what it is."
Though this wasn't a conversation I really wanted to get involved in, someone asked me, "What do you think, Kotona? What sort of name would you like in the future?"
"Hmm..." As I hesitated over my reply, someone considerate of my feelings said, "Kotona is going to inherit the household, and they will take in a *muko* (husband or son-in-law) so that she can keep her surname." Then someone else said, "Oh yes, that's good. It'll be easy to find her on social media even when we're grown up!" Everybody laughed. Feeling relieved, I laughed with them.

My household comes from a lineage of Shinto priests of a shrine dating back more than 400 years. Since I was little, it has been my dream to inherit that work. Both my family and people in the community seem to be pleased about that, which makes me happy too. But occasionally I hear words that trouble me. For instance, those words "take in a *muko*." Certainly, my household has always been "the Suda family of Shinto priests", and I have only sisters, but do I really need a *muko* to look after the shrine?

These days, I often hear the phrase "a system allowing both a husband and wife to adopt separate surnames" in the newspapers and on the TV news. Under the current law, which stipulates that married couples must use the same surname, only those who have to change their surname will be at a great disadvantage, so the debate still seems to be continuing. In Japan it is customary for women to change their surname and in the overwhelming majority of cases—96 percent of the total—women change their surname to the man's. Because of that, many people say this is a women's rights issue.

However, it is the other four percent that weighs on my mind. So long as I want to fulfill my dream, will I have to ask the person who shares my life to put up with a disadvantage that only four percent of men suffer? When I start thinking about this, envisioning the future even becomes a little unpleasant. Wondering if there might be other people with similar worries, I did a little research and found that there are various opinions and issues that need to be resolved, such as the limitations of using the maiden name as a common name or the issue of deciding on children's names. I also understood the argument that it is fair that either the man or woman can change their surname when they get married. But there is another reason why I feel slightly apologetic towards my future partner in life.

The shrine is my mother's family home, so it was my father who changed his surname. He is one of the rare four percent. I once asked him if it was a lot of trouble to change his name.
He replied, "I had to change everything that was under my original name, notify all my friends and acquaintances, and persuade my parents. I lost a sense of my identity. Certainly it was hard, but there

was something even harder."
My father paused for a moment, then he said, "That was to be labeled as a *muko*. As a matter of course, your mother and I made separate family registers, and at that time I chose to take your mother's name. That's all there is to it."
"But you are a *muko*, aren't you?" I asked.
My father's face suddenly became serious as he said, "Kotona, always remember this. In marriage all men are grooms and all women are brides. There is no system in Japan today of *muko* and *yome* (wife or daughter-in-law). You may hear people say 'we took in a *muko*' or 'I took a *yome*,' but those words might unintentionally cause offence or humiliate people, so you should be very careful."

Then I realized something. *Oyome-san* (wife or daughter-in-law) is a word I often hear in daily conversation, and the old men in our neighborhood always refer to their wives as *yome-san*. Thinking about what my father said, I realized that even those words could spring from prejudice and preconceptions.

Ever since then I have been thinking about the words *muko* and *yome*. The concept of a *muko* or *yome* entering the household, which was customary under Japan's old patriarchal system, still remains in today's Reiwa era. In rural areas such as where I live, men who change their surnames are still ridiculed and women tend to be burdened with the roles of a *yome*. Even when people say without malice things like "I feel sorry for him because he's a *muko*" or "she's a *yome*, so of course she should change her name," I feel that they are disrespecting those people's human rights by deciding their social status based on labels they arbitrarily attach to them.

I think confronting others with mistaken assumptions is discrimination, and discrimination is without doubt a disregard of human rights. The debate about a system allowing both a husband and wife to adopt separate surnames will become increasingly necessary. At the same time, it is an urgent task to promote a mature society where it will be normal for married couples to choose which surname they want.

Of course, the junior high school girl's dream of taking the name of the person I love is a wonderful sentiment. But whichever name we choose, I want my future partner and I to be equal always.

Therefore, I will start by not making prejudiced remarks to people and will constantly question whether my assumptions are mistaken. I will also try to convey these thoughts to the friends who support my dream.