

LOOKING BACK

A Female Student in the Pioneer Days

A Life as a Researcher at Kyoto University



Mieko Kimura, PhD

With a PhD in Agriculture, Kimura's research field encompasses nutritional science, social preventive medicine, analytical chemistry and environmental medicine. Even after retiring from Kyoto University, Kimura has continued to be active in her research on disease prevention and micronutrients, and is now the President of Takeda Research Institute of Life Science, and a specially appointed professor at Kyoto Prefectural University of Medicine. She has published numerous research papers and books.

It was in 1946, just after the end of the war, that female students first enrolled at Kyoto University. In his speech at the enrollment ceremony, the President of Kyoto University affirmed his 'trust in female students' academic ability and personal quality', and stated that they would 'neither be discriminated against nor shown any favor'. There were only 17 female students out of 1,505 at that time, who faced great challenges as the University did not yet have a system in place for accepting them. Ten years later, the education system changed. Mieko Kimura, who has direct experience of being part of the new education system, now reflects on her days as both a student and a researcher.

— *As you graduated in 1957, you were a member of the 10th generation of the University. How many other female students were there?*

Kimura: There were 43 female students in the whole University. When I checked with the record-keeper, I learned that there were 21 female students in the Faculty of Literature, eight in Pharmaceutical Sciences, four in Agriculture, three in Medicine, two in Law, two in Education, one in Economics, one in Engineering, and one in Science. At that time, Dr. Shizue Yanagishima (who graduated from the Faculty of Science, Biology and was the first female student at Kyoto University), and Dr. Kayo Ootsuka (who graduated from the Faculty of Science, Mathematics) were Associate professors of the College of Liberal Arts and Science.

— *Were male and female students treated differently?*

Kimura: In terms of the system, no. Actually, some laboratories refused to accept female students when the time came to choose a laboratory for graduate research. However, many of the professors did take care of us, and I had the opportunity to study under the supervision of Professor Yotaro Tsukamoto (1912-2005, Horticulture). He assigned me the research subject of plant hormone physiology, in particular clarifying the mechanism of the dormant and flowering stages of *Gladiolus*.

— *Did you already want to become a researcher at that time?*

Kimura: No, not at all. I just kept working on what I could do and what I loved to do, and as a result, I remained a researcher. The theme of my doctoral dissertation was: 'Studies of Occurrence and Distribution of Monoamines in Horticultural Crops'. I studied at Stanford University with my husband

*1 Kimura's research involves studying the mechanisms of micronutrients (vitamin and mineral) for disease prevention, and the development of methods of ultramicroanalysis. She has succeeded in developing an animal model for ischemia, bone dysbolism and gout, which was registered in the National BioResource Project in 2012 (NBRP Rat No:0626, Strain name: MKO/Tami). It is a rare rat model for lifestyle disease developed in Japan. Kimura has also led a project to produce drinking water from deep ocean water to prevent cardiovascular disease, and has led the development of an online nutrition administration system (<http://www.health-info.jp/nutrition/calcl/>). She has also contributed to the victory of Kyoto University's American Football Club through nutritional guidance.

and two-year-old daughter during the doctoral course. After returning to Japan, a professor at the Faculty of Medicine invited me to his division and I began a histochemical study on the neurochemical transmitter serotonin and catecholamine in plants, as a junior assistant. After that Motonori Fujiwara (Professor of Hygienics) appointed me as an assistant, and since then my research area has expanded to nutritional science, preventive medicine, and social medicine^{*1}.

— **Were there many women researchers at the time you were appointed to the Faculty of Medicine?**

Kimura: No, compared to today, there were far fewer women professors. The Kyoto University women professors' gathering^{*2} started as an informal tea party with three or four people in 1981, when Professor Yanagishima and Professor Otsuka of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, as I previously mentioned, asked me to join them.

Many people, including my supervisors, professors from other faculties, colleagues, and students supported me a great deal throughout my research career. In addition, I undertook collaborative research with many researchers nationally and internationally. I stayed in Thailand and China for a couple of weeks for my research on epidemiology and presented my work at international academic conferences. I appreciate the support of many people, and my husband, whose research field is completely different from mine, and my daughters. I rarely felt any inconvenience being a woman researcher. Even when I did have a few things that were on my mind, there is no use worrying about them as I can put aside trivial things. Overall, while raising my two daughters, I have been able to enjoy my work and family life to the full.

— **Do you think that the research environment and support system for women researchers now has improved compared with that during your student days at Kyoto University?**

Kimura: Yes, I think so. In the past, many women researchers remained single, but nowadays it is not unusual to balance research and child-raising. I expect there will be more favorable research environments for the next generation, by the time our grandchildren grow up, and I hope that younger generations of women try to realize this goal rather than just wait for things to happen.

I think the gender gap issue will still remain in the university setting as long as the term “women researchers” exists. Both male and female researchers are researchers.

Keeping in mind the memorable words of Kyoto University President Risaburo Torigai at the time of the first female student enrollment in 1946 — “I trust in female students' academic ability and personal quality, and they will neither be discriminated against nor will be shown any favor” — I hope that we keep advancing as researchers towards a brighter future.

— **Thank you very much for today.**

WEB www.health-info.jp/kimura/kimuramieko.html



A snapshot in her days in school



Kimura and peers at the 50 Year Reunion of the graduate class of 1957.

^{*2} The Kyoto University women professors' gathering is a voluntary, independent organization, which aims to: 1) Deepen friendship and promote exchange among women researchers at Kyoto University, 2) Promote information exchange about issues of common concern, 3) Raise the profile of women researchers and eliminate discrimination, and support various other activities. Informal discussion sessions with the President of Kyoto University began in the year following the establishment of the organization; these sessions have since become an annual event. The organization was renamed as the 'Women Professors' Group Meeting' in 2006, which hosts seminars in various fields, holds an annual meeting to address common issues and publishes a newsletter, with the goal of providing an informal forum for information exchange (<http://kyotoufemale.web.fc2.com/index.html>).