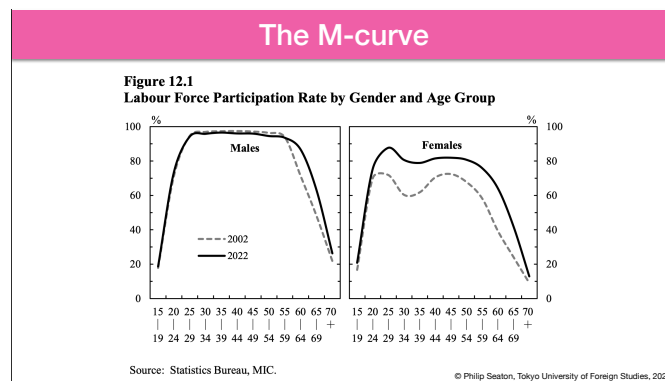




In our lecture today we are looking at the world of work. In particular, we are focusing on issues of gender equality in the workplace. The first part of the lecture is based on some of the statistics presented in the Statistical Handbook of Japan. Make sure to read Chapter 12 on “Labour” carefully. I will also introduce the main arguments of some of the articles linked from the website. There is a relatively high number of articles that you can read this week in preparation for your Active Learning Hours Project.

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Let's start with this set of graphs, which give a basic overview of the labour market. On the left is male participation in the labour force. By the time men reach their mid-20s, almost all are participating in the labour market. This continues until men approach retirement age. Some retire early, but others work into their 70s and beyond.

The pattern for women, by contrast, is represented by the so-called M-curve. Women enter the labour market in large numbers by their mid-twenties, although they never reach the same levels of labour force participation as men. In the main child-bearing years of the late twenties to mid-thirties, some women drop out of the work force temporarily, but then return in their forties. Then, in a similar pattern to men, women's participation in the labour force tails off when they reach their fifties.

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## Sex vs Gender

- **Sex:** biological characteristics.
- **Gender:** socially constructed. Norms, customs and practices associated with a particular sex. These may change over time.

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The difference between male and female participation in the labour force, of course, is largely a result of biological differences, namely the ability of women, but not men, to bear children. However, we must distinguish clearly sex and gender.

Sex is a set of biological characteristics.

Gender, by contrast, is socially constructed. It refers to norms, customs and practices associated with a particular sex. Furthermore, these norms customs and practices may change over time.

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## Gendered Division of Labour

**Table 12.3**  
**Employment by Occupation**

Occupation	2019	2020	2021	2022	(Thousands)	
					Percentage	
					Males	Females
Total <sup>1)</sup> .....	67,500	67,100	67,130	67,230	55.0	45.0
Administrative and managerial workers .....	1,290	1,290	1,290	1,240	87.1	12.9
Professional and engineering workers .....	11,790	12,210	12,650	12,770	52.1	47.9
Clerical workers .....	13,260	13,600	13,890	14,010	39.5	60.5
Sales workers .....	8,590	8,520	8,480	8,260	55.0	45.0
Service workers .....	8,520	8,310	8,060	8,170	31.6	68.4
Security workers .....	1,330	1,330	1,300	1,290	93.0	7.0
Agricultural, forestry and fishery workers ...	2,170	2,090	2,030	1,990	64.8	35.2
Manufacturing process workers .....	9,110	8,730	8,650	8,700	70.2	29.8
Transport and machine operation workers ...	2,220	2,180	2,140	2,160	96.3	3.7
Construction and mining workers .....	2,940	2,930	2,840	2,760	97.5	2.5
Carrying, cleaning, packaging, and related workers .....	4,920	4,820	4,880	4,890	55.0	45.0

<sup>1)</sup> Including figures unclassifiable or not reported.  
Source: Statistics Bureau, MIC.

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This table clearly shows gendered practices in Japan.

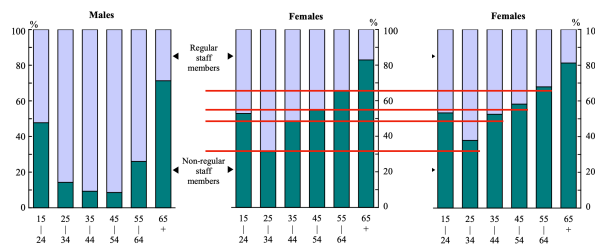
There is no biological reason why a woman cannot be an administrative and managerial worker, but the data says that 87.1 percent of workers in such positions are male. 87.1 percent! And this is 2 percentage points higher than it was just a couple of years ago. I strongly suspect the coronavirus pandemic had a damaging effect in forcing a lot of women out of administrative and managerial positions.

Likewise, there are no biological reasons why a man cannot be a clerical worker or a service worker, but women predominate in these jobs. To explain a large majority of either women or men in a particular profession, we must look at gender and society, not biology. It is social attitudes that create the imbalance, not any physical differences caused by a person's sex.

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## Regular and Non-regular Staff

Figure 12.4  
Employment Pattern by Gender and Age Group (2022)



Source: Statistics Bureau, MIC.

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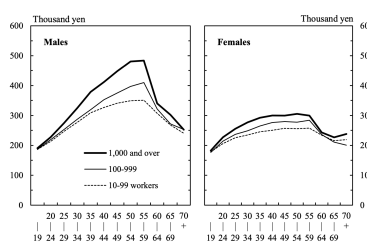
These imbalances have significant social impacts. These graphs compare patterns of regular and irregular employment by sex. Put simply, regular workers are on full time contracts and have many benefits through their employment, such as pensions and health insurance. Non-regular staff members are in less secure employment and have fewer benefits. They are also much more likely to be in low paid work. Notice how far more women than men are in irregular work, at all stages of adult life.

If there is an upside to this data then it comes from comparing the data for 2018 with 2022. You will see that across all age ranges, the proportion of women in regular employment has increased. Or perhaps this is a sign that households are struggling and more women are being pushed into regular work out of necessity. Whatever the main situation, the comparison with male employment patterns remains the same.

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## Cash Earnings

Figure 12.8  
Monthly Scheduled Cash Earnings by Size of Enterprise, Gender, and Age Group (2022)



Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

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This results in a major difference between the average cash earnings of men and women. Put simply, on average men earn more. Of course, there are laws that forbid employers paying women and men different amounts of money for doing the same job. What this graph tells us is that the structure of the Japanese economy pushes women into lower paid positions within corporations and the employment market. In other words, the issue is not so much discrimination against individual female employees compared to individual male colleagues doing the same job. Instead, the problem is structural discrimination that prevents women from getting into higher paid positions. For the rest of the lecture, I will try to explain how and why this structural discrimination exists, and what we should do about it.

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## Main Types of Employee

- **Permanent:** job-for-life, extensive benefits, long hours (often no overtime), expectation of loyalty.
- **Full-time (contract):** fixed-term contracts, full benefits while employed, overtime paid.
- **Part-time (contract):** fixed-term contracts, minimal benefits, overtime paid.
- **Part-time (irregular):** finding work day-to-day, no benefits, precarity or flexibility (depending on needs).
- **Trainees/Internships** (including doctors, post-docs, foreigners on government-approved trainee programs): worked/exploited very hard for little pay.
- **Self-Employed:** People who sell their skills. E.g. freelance translators and musicians.

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Let's start by considering the main types of employee, or the type of contracts on which people are employed.

First there are permanent employees. This is the famous lifetime employment of the Japanese system. People have a job for life and receive extensive benefits, such as paid leave entitlements, pensions and health care. But, in return they must work long hours, often without the right to claim overtime payments, and there is a strong expectation of loyalty to the employer. The employer typically becomes the centre of the employee's life and identity.

Next are full-time employees. These people work a full 40-hour week, but their contract is for a fixed term. Many such jobs have three to five year contracts, after which the employee is either made permanent or released. Such employees usually have full benefits while working, but lose them when leaving their employer. Usually overtime is paid in such positions.

Next are contracted part-time employees. Again, these workers have a fixed term contract, but the number of hours per week is limited. The workers have limited benefits, and received overtime for all additional hours worked.

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Next are irregular part-time employees. These people find work day-to-day, often via recruitment agencies. There are very few benefits. For example, health care is not provided by the employer. The system of irregular work has bad sides and good sides. On the bad side, people who rely on irregular work for their livelihood are among society's poorest and most vulnerable workers. But, on the good side, if someone is simply looking to earn a quick bit of extra cash, irregular part-time work can provide income without significant responsibility.

Next are trainees or people on internships. Such posts exist in many professions and can have very different nuances. Being a trainee doctor or a university post-doc, for example, might be a stepping stone into a stable career. On other occasions, trainee is simply a euphemism for someone working hard for very little money. The experience or training that they are supposed to be getting is viewed as a benefit, or as a justification for exploitation.

The final category is the self-employed. These are people who do not belong to an organisation or company. Instead, they sell their time and skills. Examples include freelance translators and musicians.

## Main Types of Employer

- **National/local government and large corporations:** relatively safe employment for permanent employees, intense competition for permanent jobs, contract and part-time workers used as "safety valves".
- **Medium- and small-size corporations:** employment only as safe as the business.
- **Family businesses:** handed down from generation to generation. Controlled by the family members.
- **Start-ups:** from high risk to high return.
- **"Burakku kigyo" (black corporations):** with illegal and abusive working conditions.

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Let's now look at the different kinds of employer.

The first type of employer is national or local government and large corporations. There is a big difference in style between the way a bureaucracy works and a for-profit enterprise works, but in terms of employment patterns they are relatively similar. They have a core staff of permanent employees who are paid well and have good benefits. There is intense competition to get a permanent job in one of these organisations. However, these organisations also employ a lot of contract and part-time workers. These employees can be hired quickly in periods of extra work, and can be released relatively quickly when fewer people are required.

Next are medium and small-size corporations. People might be employed permanently or full-time at such companies, but their employment is only as safe as the corporation itself. If the company goes bankrupt, people simply lose their jobs.

Next are family businesses. These are typically handed down from generation to generation. The companies are controlled by

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family members, so people outside the family employed by the company are unlikely to get senior roles unless their loyalty is trusted.

Next are start ups. These are small companies that try to make a business idea work. Some succeed and go on to become mega-corporations. In 1998, Google was just another start up. Now it is one of the biggest companies in the world. But, there are many other start ups you will never hear about because they disappear soon after they are established. Employees at these companies are in a position of high risk, but also high return.

There is one other type of employer that you hear about in the Japanese context. It is a so-called burakku kigyo. A black corporation can be any type: large, medium, small, family or start-up. But, the corporation has illegal and abusive working conditions. For example, employees might be expected to do dangerous and illegal hours of overtime.

## Japan and Overwork

- **Karoshi:** death from overwork ... a recognized social phenomenon in Japan.
- In international comparison (OECD statistics), Japan does not seem so bad.
- But, where is the dividing line between work and rest? Is "voluntary overtime" counted?
- Article by Timinsky: "The Nation That Never Rests: Japan's Debate Over Work-Life Balance and Work that Kills"

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And this leads on to our next issue: overwork. Japan is famous for its long working hours and the phenomenon of karoshi, or death from overwork. Sometimes the deaths of workers pushed too hard by their employers makes the news.

However, if you look at the number of hours worked in international comparison, Japan is around average in terms of hours per worker. But these statistics, available on the OECD website, do not tell the full story.

I can tell you from my own experience that the number of hours I actually work, and the number of hours that I put into my monthly time card, are definitely not the same. The primary reason is that I cannot say clearly the difference between work and rest. If I go out for drinking in the evening with a research colleague, is that work or rest time? If I am watching the television news at home, am I relaxing, or does it count as work given that I teach this course on Japanese society and I need to know what is happening in the news? In other jobs, of course, the difference between work and rest is clearer. A factory worker, for example, is working only when on the production line. But many companies expect some "voluntary overtime" from their employees. And employees may give voluntary overtime in the hope of getting a promotion, permanent job, or some other

benefit. This is not recorded in the statistics.

So we must be skeptical and critical of statistics such as working hours. What we know is that the phenomenon of overwork is widely recognised in Japan and regularly causes people to collapse and die. For more on this topic, an article by Samuel J. Timinsky is linked from the class homepage.

## Gender Equality

- On paper, Japan has gender equality. And the government makes positive noises about "Women's Empowerment".
- Assmann: "Gender Equality in Japan: The Equal Employment Opportunity Law Revisited"

"On paper, the EEOL [Equal Employment Opportunity Law, 1986] remains a powerful tool for implementing gender equality, in particular after the two revisions of the law in 1997 and 2006/2007 that signify a recognizable shift from a focus on women to a focus on gender. However, there are significant problems with the EEOL. One is its lack of effective implementation. To this day, corporations that do not comply with the law do not have to fear sanctions. The EEOL retains the character of a guideline. So, as we have seen, structural factors such as gendered role divisions, a gendered education system, a two-track career system, and gender specific wage discrepancies all remain in place. Childcare places are in short supply, and maternal care, which dominates the first years of childcare, leads to the temporary withdrawal of women from the labor market."

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As we have already seen in the statistics about types of employment and levels of pay, there is significant gender inequality in Japan in the workplace. Of course, the Japanese government promotes what it considers to be positive achievements. But, the recommended reading on this topic is Stephanie Assmann's article "Gender Equality in Japan". This paints a much more complicated picture. In short, there is a gap between equality on paper and in practice. Assmann concludes:

"Quote".

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## Structural Impediments to Equality

- Macnaughtan: "Womenomics for Japan: is the Abe policy for gendered employment viable in an era of precarity?"
- Macnaughtan discusses improvements, but also pinpoints the **spousal tax system**:

"Married women who keep their annual income under ¥1.03 million pay no income tax or social security, and their husband gets an income tax deduction for them as a dependant." [...]

"There is nevertheless a cluster of some 14 million married women who keep their income below the ¥1.03m yen ceiling, and it is estimated that this costs the government ¥600 billion in potential annual fiscal revenue in addition to the amounts provided to such households in tax relief."

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Assmann identifies structural obstacles to gender equality in the workplace. Let's now look at some specific examples of these structural impediments.

One is described in Helen Macnaughtan's article, "Womenomics for Japan". While recognising some improvements in recent years, she discusses the spousal tax system.

In this system, "Married women who keep their annual income under ¥1.03 million pay no income tax or social security, and their husband gets an income tax deduction for them as a dependant." In other words, a married woman has a considerable incentive to seek limited part-time work. She effectively needs a full-time job to make it worthwhile earning over 1.03 million yen.

Macnaughtan continues, "There is ...". In a nutshell, government policy is to subsidise an incentive for women to choose limited poorly paid work. This ensures a large pool of female workers for Japanese companies who do not want to earn too

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much. Of course, Japanese businesses are grateful for this pool of cheap female labour.

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### Structural Impediments to Equality

- **Blatant (illegal) structural discrimination:** an example is the 2018 scandal at Tokyo Medical University of doctored entrance exam scores.
- Schieder: "A 'Necessary Evil'? Keeping Women Out of Medical Schools Won't Fix What Ails the Japanese Medical Profession"

"There is a gender gap in terms of working long hours in the medical profession, and this gap is used by some to justify depressing rates of female doctors to maintain staffing levels at hospitals. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Work found that 41 percent of male physicians and 28 percent of female physicians work 60 or more hours a week, and 11 percent of male physicians and 7 percent of female physicians work more than 80 hours a week. Among men in their 30s, 56.9 percent work over 60 hours a week."

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Another structural impediment to equality is blatant, and illegal, discrimination. A good example of this, or perhaps I should say bad example, was in 2018, when it emerged that Tokyo Medical University had been systematically giving female applicants lower scores. This suppressed the number of women becoming doctors. And other medical schools were found to be doing the same thing.

The justification for discriminatory practices in this case rested on the perception of women's abilities to work long hours. Chelsea Schieder writes:

"Quote". Put simply, some professions want men because they work longer hours. So, while this scandal caused considerable and justifiable outrage among women, actually I think men should be equally outraged. What it shows is that the system is not only discriminating against women. It is also seeking to exploit men. If you are a man, you can be more easily employed, but that is only so somebody can make you work longer hours than a woman for the same pay. This sort of incident shows why the eradication of discrimination against women should be a male priority. Men benefit from gender equality, too.

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## Attitudinal Impediments to Equality

- **From social attitudes to sexual assault.**
- The expectations among both men and women that women should play a “housewife” and “mother” role supporting her “breadwinner” husband.
- Women are evaluated mostly on their appearance: Dress codes, shoes (#KuToo) and glasses. → Patriarchy in the workplace.
- When it becomes physically and psychologically dangerous to work in “a man’s world” (e.g. the case of Shiori Ito).

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Behind these various structural impediments to equality are attitudinal impediments. These range from what we might call “traditional views of gender roles” all the way through to sexual assault.

There are many people who think that women should play a “housewife” and “mother” role supporting her breadwinner husband. This was active government policy until the end of World War II. Many people, both women and men, still believe and follow this gendered division of labour. And, it has to be said, if both women and men are happy being in this situation, it is their right to choose this way of living.

The danger, however, is that if such attitudes transfer into the world of work, it greatly holds women back. It pushes women into roles where they are merely supportive or even decorative. Women are only given roles supporting men in the workplace, and are judged more on appearance than performance. Such practices merely replicate patriarchy at home with patriarchy at work.

At its most extreme, attitudinal impediments to women’s advancement in the workplace result in abusive behaviour, whether harassment or even sexual assault. Sometimes it can even be physically and psychologically dangerous for women to work in “a man’s world”. A prominent example is the case of Shiori Ito, a journalist who alleged she was raped after a work dinner with a male colleague. This has gained a lot of media attention in recent years, especially when Ito won a civil lawsuit against her assailant in 2019.

## A Man's Choice

1. **Work full-time:** be a "proper man".
2. **Choose an alternative lifestyle:** with one eye on not fulfilling the "ideal".
  - Cook writes in *Reconstructing Adult Masculinities: Part-time Work in Contemporary Japan*:  
"Although most of the men I worked with were not interested in becoming a salaryman per se, they continued to reference this figure as a dominant symbol, in varying ways, in their explorations and narratives of what it was to be a "proper" adult man." (Cook, 2016, p. 3).
  - Read more of her work open access in *Intimate Japan: Ethnographies of Closeness and Conflict* (chapter seven, "Power, Intimacy, and Irregular Employment in Japan")

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To summarise, social attitudes play a huge role in determining the options that women and men have as they choose their life paths in Japan. Let's start with men, who only have two choices.

The first choice is to work full-time. This is the expectation regarding men if they want to be considered a "proper man".

They could choose an alternative lifestyle, but this often leads to a considerable loss in status as they do not fulfil the perceived "ideal" male role.

Emma Cook has written a fascinating book about men who work in part-time jobs and their views of masculinity. Even men who do not want to be a salaryman recognise the power this image has. Cook writes: "...". There is a perception that men who cannot work full-time and support a family are somehow failures. This drives most men to consider full-time employment as their only reasonable life path.

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## A Woman's Choice

1. **Work full-time:** be a salarywoman/professional. Match the salaryman's long hours, while dodging the misogynous men (and even some women) who think a woman's job is managing a household and producing babies.
2. **Alternate between full-time, part-time and no work according to circumstances:** an option that usually only comes when a woman is part of a household (marriage or living with parents).
3. **Work part-time:** earning up to 1.03 million yen can be attractive for a woman married to a salaryman. For a single woman, especially single mothers, part-time work usually means (dire) poverty.
4. **Do not work:** have wealthy parents or a husband with a well-paid job.

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Women, by contrast, have a greater range of options, or perhaps paths is a better word because they might not be options for all women.

A woman may work full-time as a salarywoman or other professional. But, she probably has a more difficult time than men in building her career. She must match the salaryman's long hours, while dodging the misogynous men (and even some women) who think a woman's job is managing a household and producing babies.

Her second option is combining periods of full-time, part-time and no work according to circumstances. In other words, rather than a career, she goes through phases when paid work has different levels of significance in her life. This pattern is usually only possible when a woman is part of a household, either as wife or daughter.

Her third option is working part-time. This option can be very attractive for women married to salarymen. She has some independent income, and if she earns less than 1.03 million yen she loses no benefits she gets as a dependent. However, for

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single women, especially single mothers, getting stuck in part-time work usually means dire poverty.

A woman's final option is to not work at all. This, however, requires wealthy parents or a husband whose job covers all household expenses. Nevertheless, the full-time homemaker role remains a recognised and respected option for women within Japanese society.

While a woman has more options than a man, therefore, in none of them is it easy to become professionally independent. And there are very few occasions on which a woman can find a man willing to support her career in the way that many wives in Japan support their husbands. This is the true indication of gender inequality in the Japanese workplace.

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### Summary

- The Japanese employment system is built around two core assumptions:
  1. people are members of households more than individuals
  2. a male is the head of the household and primary breadwinner.
- This is not going to change until there are:
  1. many more female parliamentarians
  2. many more female managers
  3. and many more **men** who realize that **they too will benefit from reforming the system.**

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So, to summarise. In Japan the employment system is built around two core assumptions.

The first is that people are members of households more than individuals.

The second is that the male is the head of the household and primary breadwinner. This is the system that underpins excessive work hours. The husband can be expected to work long hours because the wife is at home taking care of the household. The wife can have, but does not need to have, a career beyond supplementing her husband's income via part-time work. Of course, many women and men do not follow this path. My key point is that the tax, benefits and employment systems in Japan are designed to reward the married couples who do follow this path.

And to be honest, this is not going to change until there are huge attitudinal shifts in Japan. This will not happen, in my view, until there are:

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first, many more female parliamentarians. Until women sit in legislative bodies and shape the tax, benefits and employment laws, such laws will be written mainly by men in a way that sustains the patriarchal assumptions surrounding employment and women's roles.

Second, there need to be many more female managers in all types of institutions. Only when there are powerful female leaders will changes enabling gender equality filter down to all other levels of companies and organisations.

The third point is the one that I have a strong personal interest in as a man in the world of work. Many more men need to realise that they too will benefit from reforming the system towards more gender equality. The status quo is built on the expectation that male workers will work longer hours than women. In other words, in this male-dominated employment system, powerful men exploit weaker men. When men fight for a fairer workplace for women, therefore, they are also fighting for a better workplace for themselves.

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### Finally ...

- My observations on gender balance in the workplace over the past 20 years.
- **Male-dominated organizations:** Competitive & hierarchical. It perpetuates patriarchy.
- **The female leader:** Often has to be very "masculine" herself. Not changing society.
- **Female-dominated organizations:** A different set of power relations.
- **The gender-balanced organization:** More egalitarian, democratic and collaborative.
- **My advice:** Aspire to work in organizations that genuinely promote gender equality and gender balance. And observe what happens at TUFS ...

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Let me finish with my observations on gender balance in the workplace during my over 20 years working in Japanese organisations, and more generally, my observations of the way society works.

When the leader is male and he is surrounded primarily by other men, the organisational atmosphere can become hierarchical and competitive. The organisational culture is top down, and younger employees compete with each other to reach the top. Women face a disadvantage in this race from the very beginning, and many choose not to take part. The system of powerful men at the top just continues to reproduce itself. This is the pattern of patriarchy that generates unequal societies both in terms of gender and wealth.

Sometimes a female leader rises through this system to take power. But, she has to be even "more masculine" than most men to achieve this. So, having a woman at the top of a male-dominated society doesn't change anything. In fact, it can make things even worse as there is the appearance of gender equality without substantial change.

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Going the other way, if the leadership of an organisation is dominated by women, a different set of power relations comes into play. The politics of all-female groups can become highly competitive, just as in all-male groups.

My experience, therefore, is that organisations work best when there is an even balance of women and men of equal professional status, and an even balance of women and men in the leadership positions. When this happens, the organisational dynamics change dramatically. The atmosphere becomes more egalitarian and democratic. It becomes more collaborative and less competitive. This is when both women and men gain from a better working environment.

So, my advice to all of you is this. Aspire to work in organisations that genuinely promote gender equality and gender balance. If your organisation does not have that balance, do what you can to make the balance happen. And learn from gender relations among the staff at TUFS. No organisation is perfect, but of all the places I have worked, TUFS is easily the best example I have seen of an organisation that practices gender equality in the workplace to the benefit of both its female and male staff.