

Gender (in)equality in business and countries' welfare systems - discussion from a comparative research on women's career development between Sweden and Japan.

Kuniko Ishiguro*

Abstract

This research discusses the issue of gender-(in)equality in business entities based on empirical research using qualitative methods focusing on life-history interviews. Data discussed in the research have been collected in Sweden in 2018, and are compared with the findings from the research and discussion on gender equality in Japan. The research suggests that promoting gender equality necessarily requires welfare policies, reinforced by mutual agreement among business and labour. Sweden, a case from the Scandinavian countries, has successfully developed a social culture, sustained by welfare policies, that appreciates both efficiency in business and humanity of working people. On the other hand, despite the government's effort to promote gender equality, the masculine business culture prevalent in Japan seems to ignore the humanity of employees, both men and women, and saps the energy of its people, as well as organisations and society. By comparing gender (in)equalities in Swedish business and Japanese business, the research found that various factors such as historical and geographical development greatly affect governmental gender policies, and the government's decisions have brought big differences between the two countries in the present time. The research also found, however, that gender equality is not merely about the participation of women in the economy, and there are further questions over women's achievement of active roles and real advancement in the business world in the contemporary global economy.

Introduction

This research discusses the issue of gender-(in)equality in business entities based on empirical research using qualitative methods focusing on life-history interviews. Based on the research on women's career development in Japanese companies, the author has conducted further research on women's career development in Europe, centring on Scandinavian countries since 2015 onward: 1) Japanese affiliates of European companies; 2) and field research in France, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands and Sweden. The purposes of this research series are to find out success factors

* 非常勤講師／労働社会学

for achievement of gender equality in business entities in Scandinavian countries, and compare them with Japanese cases where gender equality has not progressed despite years of government effort. For instance, if we look at the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Report, Scandinavian countries have always been at the top of the list (Table 1, Iceland, 1st, Norway 2nd, Finland 3rd, and Sweden 4th, while Japan was ranked 121st, in 2020, (WEF, 2020).)

Table 1. The Global Gender Gap Index 2020 rankings – selected countries

Overall ranking	Country	Economic Participation & Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health & Survival	Political Empowerment
1	Iceland	2	36	123	1
2	Norway	11	31	95	2
3	Finland	18	1	56	5
4	Sweden	16	59	117	9
5	Nicaragua	81	1	1	3
6	New Zealand	27	1	109	13
7	Ireland	43	47	113	11
8	Spain	72	43	93	8
9	Rwanda	79	114	90	4
10	Germany	48	103	86	12
53	United States	26	34	70	86
121	Japan	115	91	40	144

Source: ‘Global Gender Gap Report 2020’ (World Economic Forum, 2020)

Analyses of the factors that have contributed to gender equality have been conducted in several different areas including gender policies and practices in countries, female managers’ subjective experiences, and human resource management practices. These Scandinavian countries have achieved consensus among government, business, and unions on gender equality, and women’s representation in politics and business is high. In addition, the society accepts the higher tax rates in exchange for the benefits of welfare systems. How can companies, however, accept a welfare system that will incur high cost for them through such as long childcare leave for both men and women and flexible and irregular working patterns?

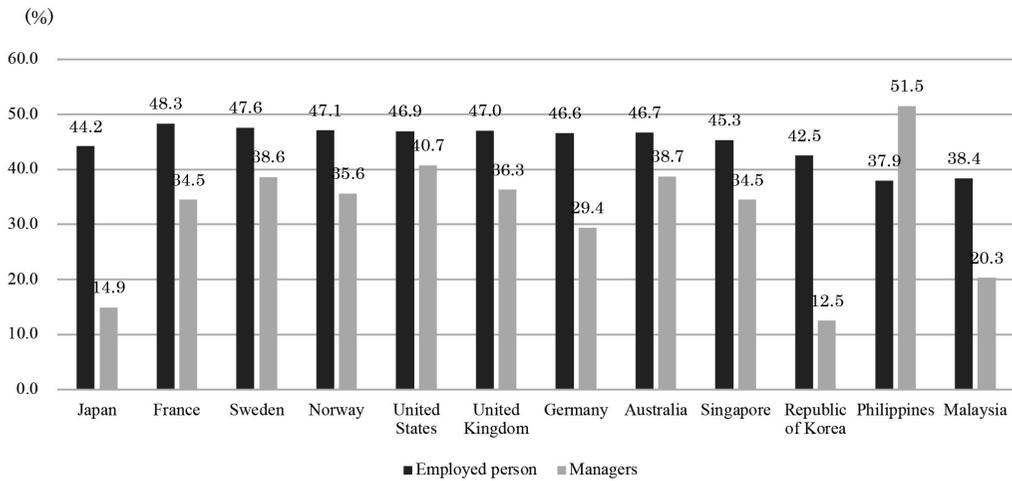
The first section of this paper will examine the background of this research, including gender relations in Japan, Swedish development of gender equality and the relationships around gender equality in employment and the welfare state system. The second section will present the method used in this research. The third section will present the case study of a field research conducted in a Swedish affiliate of one of the biggest Japanese production companies. The fourth section will analyse factors that have facilitated gender equality seen in the case studies, and

compare them with Japanese cases. Some criticisms on business practices regarding gender equality in general will be also discussed in this section. The concluding part will present the limitations of the present research and future research possibilities.

1. Research background

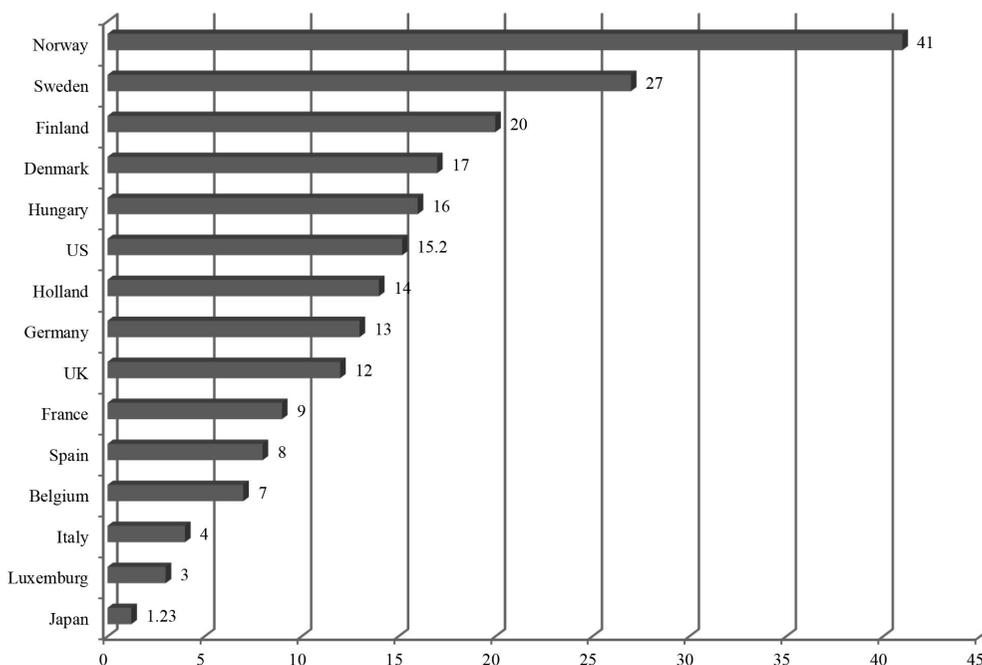
As has been seen, the general trend of the improvement of gender equality is still quite slow and low in Japan. Moreover, if we look at advancement of women in managerial positions, the data show considerably low representation of women. For example, there are relatively low percentages of women in management and serving on boards in Japan (Figures 1. and 2.).

Figure 1. Proportion of Employed Women and Women in Managerial positions (International Comparison)



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, “Labour Force Survey (Basic Tabulation)” and ILO, “ILOSTAT”, in “White Paper on Gender Equality 2019 – Summary” (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2019).

Figure 2. Percentage of female board members (International comparison)



Source: “Towards the achievement of the goal ‘30% by 2020’”, (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2011)

The Japanese government’s quantitative goal is to increase the percentage of women managers in leadership positions to 30% by 2020 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2011); however, among women in managerial positions in private companies 18.9 % are at the Chief level; 11.4% at Manager level, and only 6.9% at Director level in 2020 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2020). In terms of the salary differences, if the salary of male regular employees is 100, for female regular employees (*Seishain*) it is 76.6. Furthermore, the goal “30% by 2020” has just been postponed to “a period as early as possible by 2030” in June 2020 (The Mainichi, 2020).

How about the case of Sweden? Historically, Europe has had generous social welfare and healthcare models. An emphasis on social protection is reflected in ex-post benefits for traditional risks/needs, the major role of ‘passive’ transfers during non - employment (pensions, unemployment, disability, sickness, maternity, family dependents etc.), and residual safety nets (against poverty) to protect households with such as female carers (SensAge, 2017). Education and training are outside social protection in some countries (ibid.). Even among European countries, we can see different patterns of social welfare systems (ibid.). The comparison indicates the high social welfare expenditure, employment rate, redistribution of tax money, private provision of social support and

low poverty rate of the Nordic / Scandinavian model among European models such as the Central/Eastern Europe, Mediterranean/Southern Europe, Continental/Bismarck and Anglo-Saxon models (ibid.).

Table 2. shows the comparison of changes in the percentage of expenditure on social security benefit against GDP, and Table 3. Shows the international comparison of social expenditure by percentage of policy areas.

Table 2. International comparison of Social Expenditure by percentage of GDP (selected year).

Unit: %

	Japan	USA	UK	Germany	Sweden	France
1985	11.17	12.99	18.40	21.25	26.94	25.34
1995	13.47	15.55	17.19	26.71	30.85	28.70
2005	17.50	16.06	19.05	27.20	27.70	29.17
2015	22.66	24.50	22.47	27.04	26.74	32.16

Source: "The Financial Statistics of Social Security in Japan FY 2017" (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2020)

Table 3. International comparison of Social Expenditure by percentage of policy areas (2015)

Unit: %

	Japan	USA	UK	Germany	Sweden	France
Old age	46.1	26.0	32.2	30.5	33.9	39.4
Survivors	5.5	2.7	0.2	6.8	1.2	5.3
Incapacity-related benefits	4.6	6.1	8.6	12.6	17.0	5.6
Health	33.9	57.0	34.2	32.8	23.5	27.3
Family	6.3	2.6	15.4	8.4	13.2	9.1
Active labour market programme	0.7	0.4	0.8	2.3	4.7	3.1
Unemployment	0.8	0.8	1.2	3.3	1.2	5.0
Housing	0.5	1.1	6.8	2.0	1.7	2.6
Other social policy areas	1.5	3.2	0.5	1.1	3.5	2.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: The Financial Statistics of Social Security in Japan FY 2017" (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2020)

As seen in Table 2., the social expenditures in Japan almost doubled during the last thirty years. It shows; however, the percentage is still slightly lower compared to the other countries. There is another notable characteristics which may relate to work and life balance of women with family responsibilities. While nearly half of the expenditure is spent for old age-related expenditure, family related expenditure is considerably lower compared to the surveyed countries with the exception of the USA.

Okina et al. (2012) summarise the characteristics of Scandinavian models as policy-innovation, close links between labour market – financial market – tax, finance, social security systems, strong sense of solidarity in the society, faith of people in politics, together with strong and autonomous individuals. In addition, the society cultivated a transition from the traditional master-servant to subordinate-superior relationship models (e.g. in the relationships such as parent-child, family, workplace and community).

As shown above, “strong ‘egalitarianism’ is the fundamental principle of the Nordic model” (Popova & Kozhevnikova, 2013, cited in SensAge, 2017) and “the social benefits are distributed among all the members of society on the base of equality” (Ferrera 2013, cited in SensAge, 2017), creating strong universalism and a service rich social investment element (including active labour market policies). In terms of work and life balance, the dual earner model (DEM) emphasises female employment and gender equality and has led to strong but limited safety nets, low poverty and high inclusion. Sanandaji (2012) argues that this model is a combination of free market economy with a welfare state, in which the forces of supply and demand are free of interference by the state, price-setting monopolies or other authority, but state plays a key role to protect and promote economic and social welfare of its citizens (Sanandaji, 2012, cited in SensAge, 2017).

In Sweden, in order to discourage parents from withdrawing from employment, the country provides various support measures for parents with family responsibility. For example, women in Sweden usually give birth in hospital and the birth and the following hospital stay are almost fully tax-funded. In terms of support for parents with children, parental leave provisions include:

- Parents in Sweden are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave. Of those, 90 days are reserved for each parent.
- A prerequisite is that people are covered by Swedish social insurance, which most people living in Sweden are.
- If a parent has had a job, s/he gets paid up to 80 per cent of the salary for 390 days.
- For the remaining 90 days s/he gets a lower daily pay of SEK 180 (2019).

*The terms of parental benefit for adopting parents are generally the same if you are adopting. They can receive the parental benefit from the date they received the child into your care.

(Swedish Government, 2020; European Commission, 2020)

How about housework and childrearing responsibilities among family members? We can see stark contrast between Japan and Sweden in this area. Table 4. shows time spent on childcare and housework by wives and husbands. In Japan, wives spend around six times as many hours as their husbands on housework, seven times as many on childcare, while in Sweden, even though

wives still spend more time on house work and childrearing, the gaps are much narrower (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2018).

Table 4. Hours spent for housework and childcare related work among couples with children under 6 years old (Per one day, International comparison)

(Unit: Hour)

		Total	(Childcare)
Japan	Wife	7:34	3:45
	Husband	1:23	0:49
Sweden	Wife	5:29	2:10
	Husband	3:21	1:07
USA	Wife	5:40	2:18
	Husband	3:10	1:20
UK	Wife	6:09	2:22
	Husband	2:46	1:00
France	Wife	5:49	1:57
	Husband	2:30	0:40
Germany	Wife	6:11	2:18
	Husband	1:23	0:49
Norway	Wife	5:26	2:17
	Husband	3:12	1:13

Source: White Paper on Gender Equality 2018 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2018)

Researchers also argue that Sweden provides a unique model of gender equality, social welfare policies and economic activities. Daly and Rake (2003) compared Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Ireland, France, Italy, the USA, and Sweden. They point out, however, that gender imbalance exists in economic activities even in European countries.

The authors argue that the role of the state in the organisation of the “private sphere” and that of paid work are inextricably intertwined, both part of a broader system of social organisation. In these relationships: 1) women’s caring roles and activities will define their capacity to do paid / unpaid work; 2) the welfare state shapes both the demand for and supply of women labour by defining care as public care services depend mainly on female labour; and 3) the components of income support provisions significantly affect labour market participation, and in the case of mothers and married women influence their capacity to earn an independent income. From the research the authors found that across the EU women still dominate low-skilled jobs in service and agriculture sectors, working in part-time jobs with fixed duration. The authors further mention that vertical and horizontal segregation exist, and stratification in employment, which determine women’s participation and activity in employment and the quality of women’s employment. As a

result, there will be a power relationship between women and men as individuals and concerns about the reconciliation of work and family life.

There are various similarities and differences among researched countries, however Daly and Rake (2003) argue that Sweden is a very particular case of ‘large state’ and ‘small family’ in which gender inequality is relatively low. Employment and citizenship operate as gateways to welfare state resources for all. In addition, with the high degree of individualisation of benefits, the intersection between care and employment has been made quite public; people tend to be stripped of their family commitments. In this society, a broad-ranging notion of welfare citizenship prevails where the state acts directly to integrate citizens into employment and, thereby, into society. As a result, although not equal to those available to men, Swedish women have a richer and more diverse range of opportunities than available elsewhere. The existence of a large part-time sector, in a positive way, allows women some flexibility with regard to being in the labour market.

With these backgrounds, the next section will present notable testimonies of women in the research, and characteristics found from the research.

2. Research method

This research mainly employs qualitative research method centring on life-history approach interviews with female managers in a Swedish affiliate of a Japanese production company. As has been mentioned, Sweden has been ranked among the top countries in the Global Gender Gap report, and is the biggest country in the region, which renders it most suitable for comparison with Japan, though the size of its economy and population is around one-tenth of that of Japan. In addition, the fact that Sweden’s economy has been driven by industries such as manufacturing and electronics makes it the most appropriate Scandinavian country for comparison with Japan.

With these assumptions in mind, I started looking for a case company from early 2018. Fortunately, I found an HR director of the European region of a Japanese production company that operates globally. This person introduced me to the HR manager of the company’s Scandinavian office, through whom I gained access to three female managers. The field research was conducted in March 2018 in Stockholm, in the company’s offices. The interviews, conducted in English, were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Relevant information on the three women interviewed and the company is provided as follows:

- Interviewees:
 - Ms A, Human Resource Executive (30s, married, first employer)
 - Ms B, Service Delivery Manager (50s, married with children)
 - Ms C, Public Relations Manager (50s, married with children)
- Company location: suburb of Stockholm (Swedish office)

- Employee structure: Japanese GM and local staff (relatively small, less than 50 people)
- Employment practices: applies local rules and regulations (e.g. working hours, benefit provisions and hiring practices).
- Low level of control from the Head Quartets in Japan. There is a UK HQ of European operations.

In addition, I had an in-depth interview with Mr. M, a Japanese business executive who studied and worked in Sweden for long time, in order to have wider understandings on the characteristics of Swedish society (2018 in Tokyo). The analyses of the cases were conducted by comparing the testimonies with past research into Japanese cases, referring to the historical development of employment and gender policies derived from the interview with Mr. M.

3. Interviews with female managers

The past research conducted in European countries found general trends of women in management such as: 1) good educational attainments, some had pursued graduate studies during their career break; 2) combining and balancing work-private lives; 3) good housework arrangements and clear efforts to arrange these (with the husband); 4) high motivation to work and career focused attitude; and 5) diverse experiences worldwide and having a global mindset (Ishiguro, 2014; 2017).

In the research with Swedish managers, I identified the following notable points: support for childcare responsibilities that enable women to continue to work, high expectation and awareness on gender equality both at home and at work, women's perspectives on business and career. At the same time, I observed important systems including women in employment, important roles of the unions, and changing gender relations.

• Childcare responsibilities and maternity leave

Ms. A, 30s, in HR, told me about the support on childcare responsibilities and maternity leave. But since she works in HR, she also experiences difficulties in fulfilling an ever-changing resource management role in the workplace.

“When children are sick, if they are sick they cannot go to kindergarten. Then the authority pays you money to be home with your child. The employer doesn't have to pay for those days. (...) Both the father and the mother can take these days. I think most couples now are trying to have this 50-50. (...) I know that people, especially the younger generation, they are really focusing on the 50-50.”

“... The manager, she was like almost counting down. Of course, then it’s a bit tricky because you have to find replacements for them and so on. But on the other hand, there were a lot of – I know that people who are also – when someone has children, they tend to be more loyal to the company. They tend to actually work a lot more efficiently sometimes because they want to go home and do everything.”

• **Career progress / motivation / ambition**

Ms. C, 50s, PR, described clear ambitions and goal-oriented attitude towards career progress, but not a confrontational attitude towards men.

“Of course, I have friends that have had more difficulty, but I think also given that I had some track record and am very result-oriented, I want to see things happen and I’m not afraid of – sometimes it gets very prestigious or people get on their high horses, as we call it. I think I am a doer in that sense. I want to see action. This is also what people are recognising with me, that I’m very result-oriented.”

“You need to have the right manager. Your immediate boss needs to be someone that has a very open-minded understanding of equality. (...)”

“It’s a system behind, supporting everything. But just on a very personal level, I think you need to have a manager that would want to promote you, to respect what you do and work with the personal development plan because in a big company like this you need to have someone helping you to make your way through the system and see new opportunities, supporting that you are that type of person that would like to do something different or try something new.”

“I don’t know if I am naïve but I would say that I don’t think that the men don’t want us to be part of that group, but having another fellow or friend or someone who knows someone, it’s a little simpler then, you know. There is a lot of push and pressure around transparency. There are lots of articles each and every week almost on these topics from the daily traditional newspapers. I think as a big company, you cannot neglect it or you just need to do something to be on the same side, not being too exposed and having a negative impact on investor relations or the stock market or whatever. I think there are some quite big changes ongoing.”

Ms. B, 50s, Service and Support, also mentioned women and career progress. She recalls past gendered perspectives.

“Yes. I think it’s much better now, but sometimes when I was younger, maybe a couple of years ago, there are some values that still persist, that you are a woman and you can’t do that. I will take the leadership. If you want to be the one who is taking care of it, you have to fight for it. It’s harder for a woman when you’re not – first you have to fight to get to that position and then you have to fight to stay.”

“Sometimes when you get angry or you don’t like a decision, I think that is the hardest point because the men don’t like a woman to be angry, or engage. You should just be nice.”

- **Gender equality in business and at home**

Ms A also mentioned balancing work responsibilities and family responsibilities.

“Gender-wise it’s a big – it’s an ongoing fight for equality, for women and men. There are debates every day. I’m actually following a lot of people on Instagram that are pushing for this because you think that we are equal here, because we are very equal but not nearly enough. Somehow even if we think we are, we’re not really acting in the reality as we are. I guess in most of the homes, the women are still doing most of the housework. However, maybe if we look back in the days, maybe women did 100%. Now, maybe women do 75% and the men...”

“With children I think they are doing a lot more as well. But if we look at washing, cooking, cleaning, things like that, and shopping, I think there is a lot to be done, a lot, unfortunately.”

- **Women’s participation in employment and changing gender relations in business sectors**

Ms C’s testimonies illustrate the social perceptions and working culture in Sweden.

“We all work. Even if you have children, even if you have family you tend to work. I have friends who of course stayed at home a little bit longer whilst they had their first or second child. But then again after a couple of years, 3, 4, or 5 years they took up where they sort of left off before they had children. Many of them have university degrees and they are into careers or finding work, decent positions that they can combine their family life.”

“Of course, in the public sector we have a lot of women working. But I must say that it’s – you can clearly see more women also taking higher positions and there is a lot of debate and dialogue from the communities also that want to see a change.”

“Also, there have been a lot of dialogues on voting based on gender. I think it’s an ongoing conversation that if you are a big company in Sweden you cannot really have a board full of men or only men in the management group because you get exposed in a bad way. This is like a men’s club or something like that. It’s not working. It’s not appropriate anymore. This has really shifted.”

In addition, different corporate cultures and structures were described in the Swedish business sector.

“We have Spotify in Sweden. Young companies, they have people in their companies from all over the world, different genders, different everything. That’s completely different. But in these bigger companies like Volvo, ABB, Telia, they have the old style and old structure. It is so strange because you have all the – you can really have the possibility for change because there are a lot of women who have their education, and they have the time. I don’t know why, really. It’s a bit slow.”

- **On union activities**

Finally, the HR manager, Ms A mentioned the importance of collectivity of employees and unions’ roles.

“The collective agreement. I think if you are a big company, you should probably also have a union club, the employees in that company creating a club. If you have that, it will put much more pressure on you as an employer to involve them in all the processes and have everything approved. You have to inform them on everything. We had that in the past when we had this other division that we sold off. But nowadays we don’t have a club. Therefore, what I am doing is I am really contacting the unions via email, and telling them if there is a change. Let’s say that we are employing someone new, a new role or we are changing something, it’s just small, I will just inform them via email. They will say ‘okay, we understand we have no complaints against this. But if there is a big change, then of course we have to negotiate about that.’”

- **Analyses**

From the examination of gender policies, historical development of gender relations and women’s testimonies, we will now analyse two big points: 1) comparison between Sweden and Japan to find out reasons why Sweden has been able to achieve advanced gender equality while Japan is still struggling to improve the situation; 2) if there are any issues in business that fundamentally create gender inequalities, even in countries such as Sweden which have achieved relatively high gender equality in the society.

In Sweden, we have observed various positive factors on gender equality such as:

- Maximisation of practical usage of social welfare provisions
- Consensus on gender equality among parents, spouses and children
- Agreement in the society and organisations on the diverse career models / choices
- Socialisation of the care and dependable social support system by the government that enable women to appreciate and have balance between their work career and private lives
- Positive viewpoint, forward-looking society

On the other hand, in Japanese society, our past research found these contrasting facts:

- Well-prepared but practically limited social welfare provisions
- Half-blinded consensus on gender equality
- Standardised and limited career / life models and choices based on traditional / expected values and norms
- Individual care responsibilities that limit individual freedom and autonomy
- Difficult to balance work and family responsibilities
- Defensive viewpoint, anxiety driven society (Ishiguro, 2012; 2019)

As a result, in Sweden it seems that various types and groups of women can participate in the employment market while only a limited number of Japanese women, with a conducive environment and family and company circumstances, can successfully participate and stay in the employment market.

Mr. M, a Japanese business executive who studied and worked in Sweden for long time, identified several factors that have brought positive results in Sweden (from the interview with Mr. M, 2018). Historically and geographically Sweden has frequently encountered conflicts and enemies, therefore a great sense of survival has been imbedded in the people. As a result, the country inevitably developed a diverse and inclusive society. Also, the Swedish people's Viking ancestors, the major roles played by aristocrats, and history of guilds all contributed to creating this diverse society. In addition, the economic challenges in the 1970s required the country to summon available labour forces regardless of gender. At this time, the country did not provide advantages for women, but it acted to remove and eliminate impediments for women. He claims the importance of these points to analysis of the advanced gender equality in Sweden.

Practically, gender equality is currently much progressed in Sweden because of :

- 1) Governmental support for families that encourages women to participate in the employment market
- 2) Prevailing perceptions and culture on gender equality seen in public opinion,

- community, and family, support gender equality
- 3) Good access to education that enhances employment opportunities
- 4) Well established service sector for housework and care work
- 5) Temporally and geographically diverse working culture

There are, however, many problems associated with gender relations in business, including the deep-rooted perceptions of business as a man's world or boys' club, and there are still more men in top management (Swedish Government, 2020). There are still gender wage gaps, even in Sweden, and no country has achieved a zero-wage gap between the two genders. As the testimonies of the women in the case study told us, and as many researchers and business people struggle, gender equality has still not been fully achieved and the progress is too slow. It is also true that in most countries, although the extent may differ, women still take on the majority of the housework and that affects women's working patterns and career development.

Conclusion

From the analyses, we can say that indeed there is a positive relationship between various governmental gender policies and practices and women's participation in the employment market through effective integration of the private sphere and work. However, women's positions and career progress in business are still limited, as found in the case of Sweden, even though they are moving in a positive direction. These points prompt further analysis and questioning: there are big differences between gender in employment and gender in management. The welfare state, such as that in Sweden, has indeed brought gender equality, but more changes will be needed in the business sector.

What can Japanese society and companies do to initiate women's active participation in the employment market, as well as to promote women's advancement in the business world? There still seem to be many agendas for the country.

In order to analyse the gender relationships in business, we will need to accumulate more data on practical HR programmes and analysis on factors that create gender differences in the workplace.

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