

Experiences of Japanese Women Working in Nordic Companies Operating in Japan

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This thesis examines the experiences of Japanese women working in Nordic companies operating in Japan. The research aims to discover why some Japanese women have decided to work in Nordic companies rather than in Japanese companies by exploring their experiences working in Japanese and Nordic companies. Japanese women are facing significant obstacles in the labor market, primarily shaped by the strong gender norms that prevail in Japanese society. In Japanese society, women are expected to be the caregivers, while men are expected to act as the primary breadwinners. The research was conducted using qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The study reveals that participants' choices are influenced by their backgrounds and experiences in Japanese and Nordic work environments. They mostly had positive experiences working in Nordic companies compared to their negative experiences in Japanese companies, which encouraged them to seek alternative employment from non-Japanese companies. Equal treatment between genders, better possibilities for career advancement, and improved work-life balance were motivators for the participants to pursue careers in Nordic companies. This research provides a fresh perspective on research on gender roles in Japan with the help of comparing the working environments in Japanese and Nordic companies. I argue that some Japanese working women seek employment in Nordic companies as an alternative career option because of the gender-based norms and restrictions they face in Japanese companies. While women find a more balanced work-life environment and equal treatment in Nordic companies, there are still challenges. These challenges are, for example, double cultural expectations, small companies having fewer career advancement opportunities, in addition to having fewer companies to choose from due to the small number of Nordic companies in Japan.

Keywords: Working women, Labor force participation, Employment, Experiences, Gender studies, Women's studies, Japan, Japanese women, Nordic countries, Gender inequality, Gendered employment sector

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1 Introduction

In the *World Economic Forum's* (2023) Gender Gap Index, Japan ranks 125th, while Nordic countries like Finland, Sweden, and Norway are in the top 5. Because of this vast difference between the ranking, I wanted to see if there are any significant differences in the Japanese working environment compared to the Nordic working environment in Japan. Other reasons for choosing this topic for the research are my personal background in international studies and my interest in the Japanese working environment, especially from the point of view of women. To achieve this, I decided to research Japanese women working in Nordic companies operating in Japan and interview them about their experiences working in Nordic companies. By interviewing Japanese women working in Nordic companies on their personal experiences, I offer a new perspective on the research subject of gender equality in the Japanese labor force.

Japanese women face different obstacles and challenges in the Japanese labor market. A lot of the challenges are related to the gender norms in Japanese society and to women's role as the caregiver. This affects women's labor participation and advancement in their careers. After a thorough literature review and an initial analysis of the situation's status quo, I could form research questions for my own research. The interview questions (Appendix 1) were made based on research questions. The research questions are:

- What are some of the factors why Japanese women choose to work in Nordic companies over Japanese ones?
- More specifically, what is the role/impact of Japanese employment-related gender norms and roles in women's decision to work for Nordic companies?
- What kind of expectations do Japanese women in the labor force have of the Nordic companies and their gender-related employment policies beforehand?
- How were their expectations met after working in a Nordic company?

The main research questions are "What are some of the factors why Japanese women choose to work in Nordic companies over Japanese ones?" and "More specifically, what is the role/impact of Japanese employment-related gender norms and roles in women's decision to work for Nordic companies?", while the other two questions are supporting these main questions.

To find the answers to my research questions, I interviewed seven Japanese women working at Nordic companies that operate in Japan. The thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data from the interviews. All the interviews were conducted during student exchange in Japan.

First, in Chapter 2, I will introduce the thematical framework for this thesis. The thematical framework introduces the gender equality situation overall in employment. It focuses on Japan and Nordic countries, how international companies operate in foreign working environments, what kind of challenges employees might face in international working environments, and what aspects might affect a person's decision on their career. This chapter helps to better understand the current situation interview participants are facing in their work and lives.

Chapter 3 contains the methodology and methods used in this research. The data collection process was conducted during a student exchange in Japan. I used qualitative data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews, to collect the data. The data from the interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. I will also introduce the limitations I faced during this research.

Chapter 4 focuses on the primary data and its analysis, with the help of the themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes are personal experiences, company policies and atmosphere, gender roles, and changes in the Japanese working environment. First, I will explain how personal background affected participants' decisions to seek employment in Nordic companies. Then, I will explore more about how participants experienced the company policies and atmosphere during their previous and current employment. I will also discuss the gender roles and responsibilities these women faced during their careers. Lastly, I will explain how the participant sees how the current situation in the Japanese working environment has changed.

Lastly, before the conclusions in Chapter 5, I will combine the data with the thematical framework by comparing previous studies to my own findings. I will use the same themes mentioned above to help navigate the findings, starting with the impact of past experiences, company policies and atmosphere, gender roles, and changes in the Japanese working environment. Then, I will introduce other topics that emerged from previous research or the primary data.

This research topic is important because it provides a new perspective on Japanese working culture and gender equality, which could help us better understand the current situation that Japanese working women face in their work and lives.

2 Thematical Framework

Japan ranks 125th out of 146 countries in the Gender Gap Index, while the top 5 countries are Iceland, Norway, Finland, New Zealand, and Sweden. The Gender Gap Index measures four main components: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. Japan's parity in both Educational Attainment and Health and Survival is almost 100%. However, Japan's parity in Economic participation and Opportunity is 56.1%, while Political Empowerment is one of the lowest at 5.7%, bringing Japan to a lower rank in the Gender Gap Index. The gender wage gap in Japan is also one of the highest among the OECD countries. (*World Economic Forum 2023*, Peltokorpi *et al.* 2019 & *OECD*) In this thesis, I will focus on gender equality within the labor force and workplaces, in addition to domestic work in Nordic countries and Japan. First, I will introduce the overall situation regarding gender equality in the labor force and then, in more detail, the situation in Japan and Nordic countries. I will also explain how it is to work in international companies and what kind of challenges companies might face when combining two cultures. Lastly, I will discuss what might affect a person's career choices.

2.1 Key Concepts on Gender (In)equality and Gender Roles and Norms in Employment

Gender equality is an important goal of different international organizations that Japan is part of. These are, for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations. Gender equality is also a human right according to the International Human Rights Law by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Gender equality is part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were created to help countries improve life and protect the planet. SDGs include themes like no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, and gender equality. (Adema *et al.* 2023; *United Nations a* & *United Nations b*).

Improving gender equality is important now, as the population is aging rapidly, and fertility rates are decreasing. Promoting gender equality and including women in the labor force and decision-making can help improve the economy by activating productivity and growth. Currently, women face inequalities in workplaces, like the wage gap and occupational segregation, which can decrease their participation in the labor force. According to the *United Nations*, average women make 20 percent less than men. When looking closer at the gender

wage gap (Figures 1 and 2), the OECD average gender wage gap is 11,6. Japan (21,3) and Finland (14,6) from the Nordic countries have a higher wage gap than the OECD average, while other Nordic countries' wage gap is under 10. (Adema *et al.* 2023; *UN Women*; *United Nations a*; *United Nations c*)

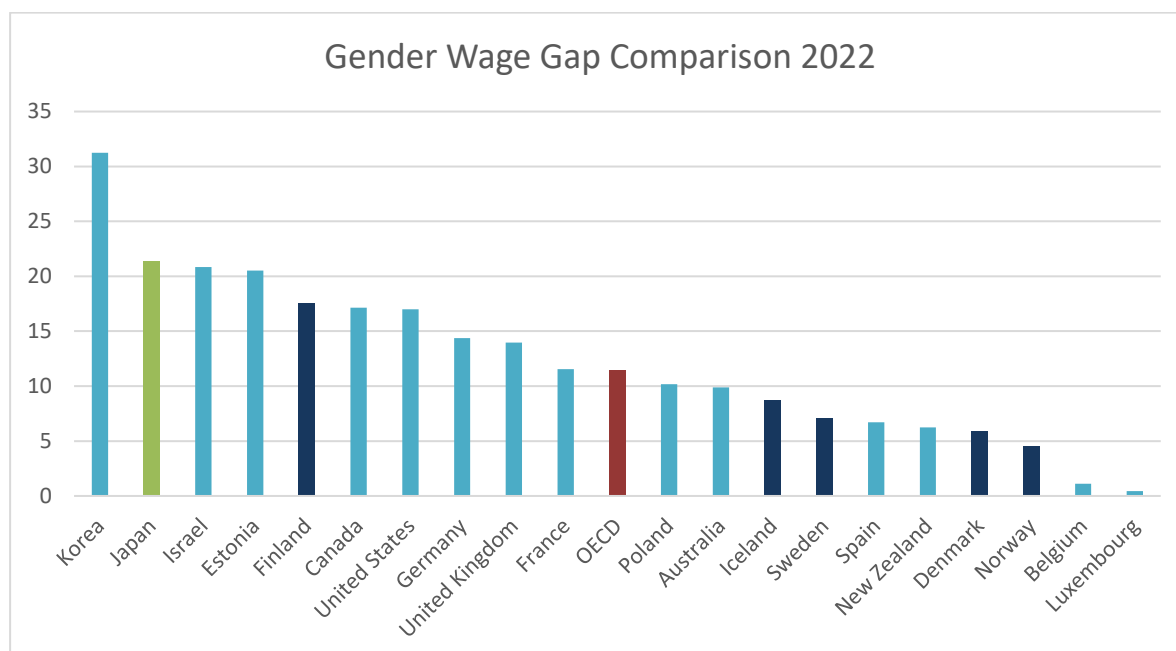


Figure 1. Gender Wage Gap in Some of the OECD Countries (OECD)

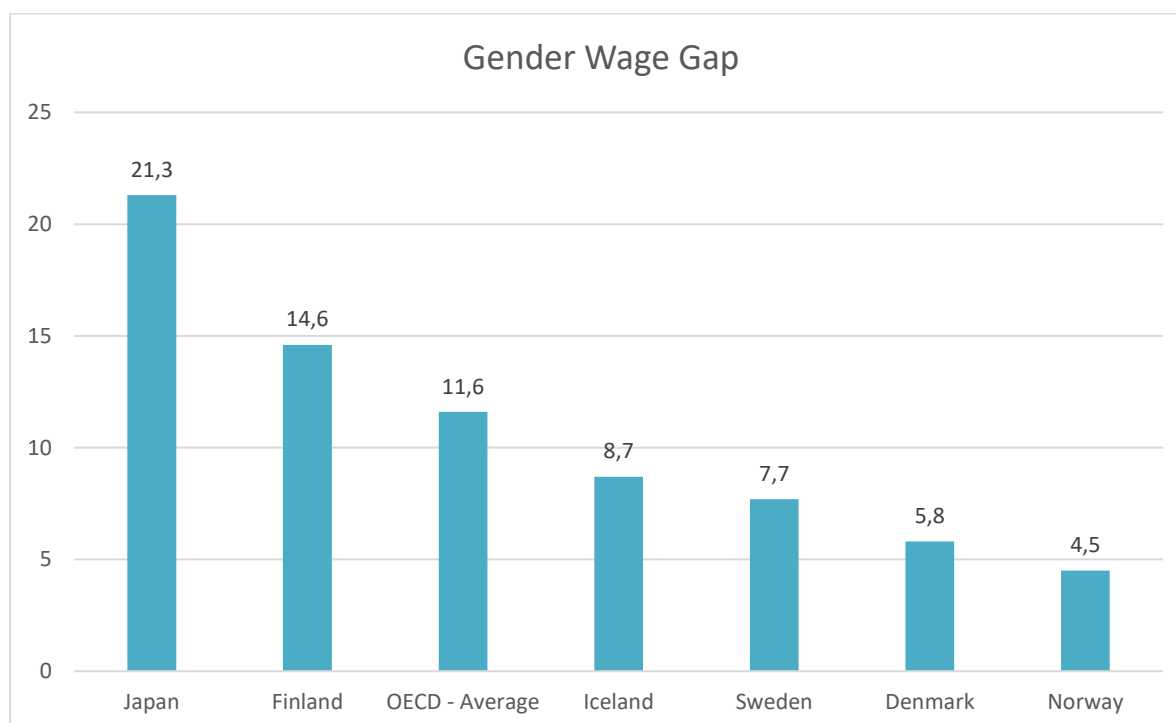


Figure 2. Gender Wage Gap in Japan and Nordic Countries (OECD Data Explorer – Archive 2022)

Gender Norms and Gender Roles in the Labor Force

Gender norms and roles could be the underlying reasons behind the gender gap in the labor force. Thus, gender norms and roles influence the labor force, so it is good to define those terms. In this research, I understand gender norms as defined by Cislighi and Heise (2020, pp. 415-416): “Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction.” Gender norms are social rules and expectations towards both genders. These are learned from parents and society during childhood and are usually maintained in policies, decision-making, and within different institutions. Gender norms can change depending on the culture and society to which an individual belongs. (Cislighi and Heise 2020)

Gender roles, on the other hand, are the “roles” associated with both genders. As Miville (2013, p. 3) explains, “In many cultures, women traditionally have been associated with feminine gender roles (e.g., domestic settings) and men with masculine gender roles (e.g., work settings).” Gender roles can affect social status and access to power, usually positioning women in inferior roles. One example of the power imbalance created by gender roles is the gender wage gap. (Miville 2013)

Women in Leadership Positions and Politics

Because of gender inequality, women are also under-represented in political and economic decision-making processes. According to the United Nations SDGs, it will take 140 years to achieve equal representation in leadership positions (*United Nations c*). In 2022, only 27.5% of management positions worldwide were occupied by women. Japan ranks under the OECD average (34.1%) in the share of women managers, having only a 12.9% share of women managers, while Nordic countries Finland (36.3%), Iceland (39.6%), and Sweden (41.7%) place above OECD average (Figure 3). (*OECD Data Explorer – Archive 2022*)

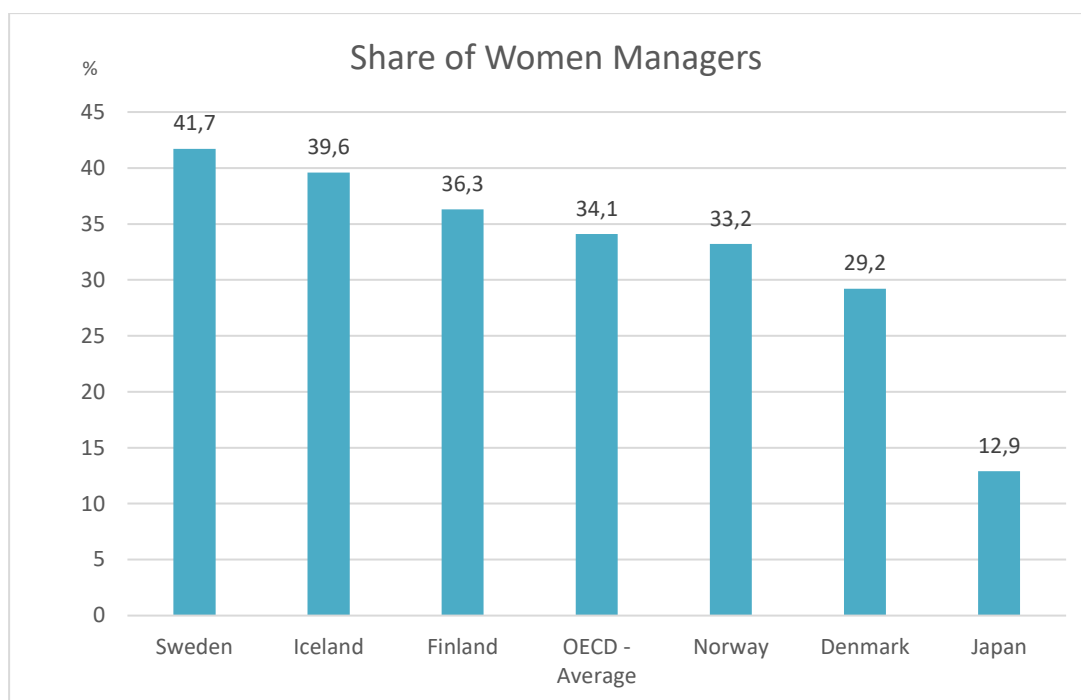


Figure 3: Share of Women in Managerial Positions (*OECD Data Explorer – Archive 2022*)

Women are underrepresented in the leadership positions and politics in many countries. It is harder for women to proceed in their careers because of their limited availability of paid work. The limited availability is a result of the expectations of women to take care of the household and family. According to Bruce *et al.* (2023), women may be underrepresented in politics and leadership positions because of the social norm where men are more likely to be viewed as better leaders than women. If women are underrepresented in decision-making, it may result in limited support in workplaces, society, and politics. According to Asao *et al.* (2024a), Having more gender-balanced boards and more women as managers can improve companies' performance and productivity. Companies with more women in managerial positions usually have more flexible work-time arrangements and better work-life balance. Having more women in higher positions can also help to decrease the gender wage gap. In addition, having more women in politics can help to achieve an increase in investments in health and education. (Adema *et al.* 2023; Bruce *et al.* 2023 & Asao *et al.* 2024a)

Domestic Work

Changes need to be made to utilize women as a resource in the labor force. Ueno (2021, p.18) explains that “in order to mobilize women to the workforce, family responsibility or care burden, which keeps women at home, has to be transferred from women's shoulders to somewhere else.” As shown in Figure 4, inequality can also be seen in domestic work, where

women use 2.5 times more hours in domestic work than men. Men in the OECD countries use 2 hours for unpaid work while women use 4 hours. From Nordic countries, Sweden has the most equal share of what men and women use in unpaid work. Swedish men use 3.1 hours for unpaid work and women 3.9 hours. Other Nordic men use 2.5 hours or more for unpaid work. In comparison, Japanese men only use 0.8 hours, while women use 3.6 hours on unpaid work. (UN Women; United Nations a; United Nations c & OECD Data Explorer 2023)

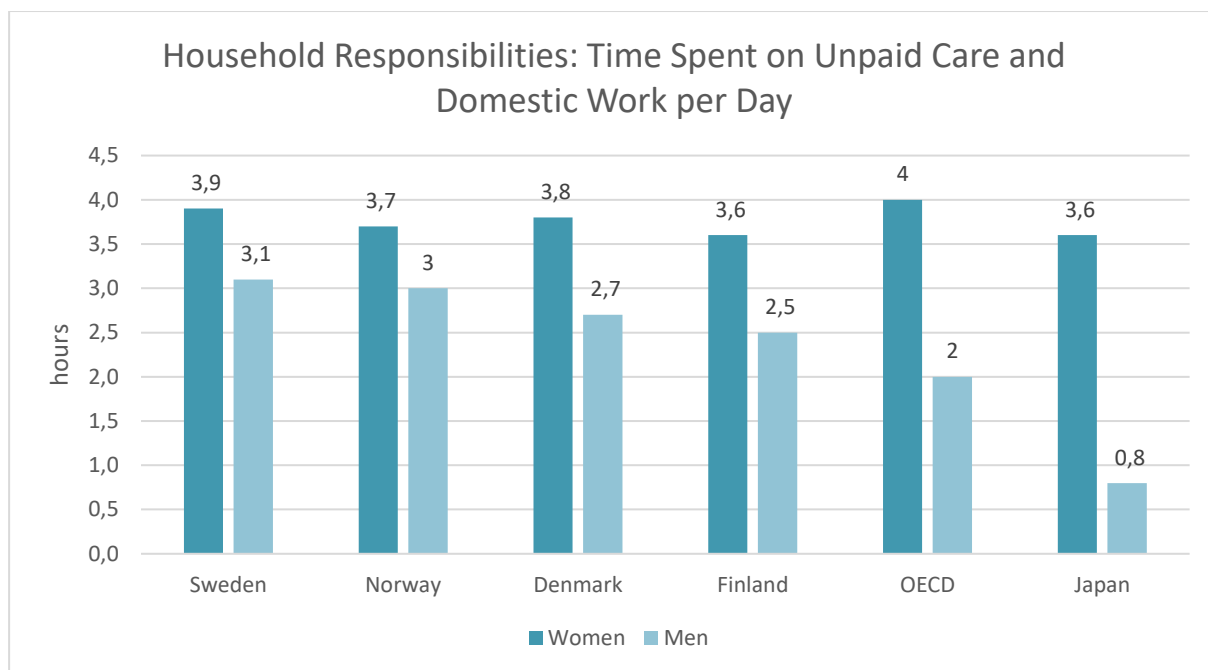


Figure 4. Time Spent on Unpaid Work (OECD Data Explorer 2023)

Gender Wage Gap

Adema *et al.* (2023) state that gender stereotypes contribute to gender inequality. They give an example of the education choices women and men make. Even though women and men tend to have the same level of education, women are more likely to pursue careers in education, health, and welfare, while men are pursuing careers in fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), which I will discuss more in chapter 2.3. This already contributes to the gender wage gap because the careers that women tend to pursue are lower paying. The wage gap is not only because of the segregation in the labor force but also because women tend to receive less salary from similar occupations as men. In addition, the wage gap tends to widen when women have children. This is because women are usually expected to take care of the family and household while men are expected to work and earn for the family. As a result, women are spending more time in unpaid work. This unequal balance between unpaid and paid work can affect women's return to the labor force once the children are older. According to

Fluchtmann and Patrini (2023), women are more likely to work in part-time jobs because they tend to have fewer working hours compared to full-time work, which may be because of the expectations mentioned above. Women end up working as irregular workers because there are better chances to take time to take care of the household and family. However, irregular work usually means lower pay and worse job security, in addition to the possibility of women missing possible career advancement opportunities. All of this contributes to the gender wage gap. (Adema *et al.* 2023; Bruce *et al.* 2023; Fluchtmann and Patrini 2023; Hijzen 2023; Lorenzo 2023 & Asao *et al.* 2024a)

Parental Leave

Fluchtmann (2023) further explains the benefits of parental leave and how it can positively affect mothers' employment continuity. Parental leave has many benefits for families and children while not disturbing or causing negative effects on their companies or co-workers. Parental leave can help women to reach higher positions in their careers. However, there may be negative effects on the career advancement for women if the leave is too long. Fathers' leave-taking can also positively affect women's employment rates and improve the father's participation in unpaid work within the family, such as childcare and regular housework. Social norms about parental leaves can negatively affect women's employment. Because women are expected to take care of the family and take parental leave, employers may be hesitant to employ women over men. (Fluchtmann 2023)

Closing the Gender Gap

According to Adema *et al.* (2023), closing the gender gap could help improve a country's economy by increasing GDP growth. Hellum *et al.* (2024) explain that changing gender inequality cannot be done only by improving women's situation in the working environment. Still, there is also a need to consider the traditional role of men and how it could be changed. To make the work environment more equal for both genders, Adema *et al.* (2023) and *OECD* (2018) explain that there should be more support for gender equality in education to further improve the situation in the working environment. Education can play a big part in closing the gender gap. Having more equal opportunities for girls and boys in schools can help ensure equal opportunities in the labor force. (Adema *et al.* 2023; *OECD* 2018 & Hellum *et al.* 2024)

In addition to more equal educational opportunities, Adema *et al.* (2023, 16) list some of these changes like more equal share of paid and unpaid work, better accessibility to childcare and

childhood education, more flexible working arrangements to make it easier to combine work and family as well as having better representation of women in leadership and management positions and politics. It is necessary to make it easier for both men and women to participate in caregiving. This could be achieved, for example, by supporting the father's leave-taking as well as supporting the mother's return to work. Better access to early childhood education and care can also help achieve better workplace equality. Asao *et al.* (2024b) explain that increasing childcare facilities better support women (re-)entering the labor force after having children rather than offering cash transfers. Companies could also focus on more flexible work arrangements by improving remote telework, which could help women to access full-time employment. As for women in leadership positions, quotas or other measurements could help decrease the gender gap. (Adema *et al.* 2023; *OECD* 2018; Hijzen 2023; Meeta 2023; Asao *et al.* 2024b & Khera and Gao 2024)

Changing the taxation systems of spouses could also help to decrease the gender gap and increase voluntary working hours. Adema *et al.* (2023, p. 19) explain that “tax-benefit systems can create traps which disincentive second earners (typically women) from entering or re-entering the labor force.” If second earners, who usually are women, are paying higher taxes depending on their income, this can negatively affect women's participation in the labor force. (Adema *et al.* 2023)

This thesis focuses on Japanese women working in Nordic companies and why they choose to work in Nordic companies. Therefore, it will focus more on the current situation of gender equality in Japan and Nordic countries. Next, I will introduce the current situation related to gender equality in Japan and then in the Nordic countries.

2.1.1 Japan

Ueno (2021) researched why Japanese women are usually at lower status in the labor force and its historical background. Japanese women rank lower than men in economic status because women tend to work as irregular workers. This is also because the Japanese postwar welfare system was built “based on the idea that family should primarily provide care work” (Tsuruoka 2023, p. 10). Japanese government's goal was to reduce the cost of care work with the current welfare and corporate structure. Japanese welfare and corporate system consist of a Japanese style of management and Japanese family ideology. (Ueno 2021 & Tsuruoka 2023)

Japanese family ideology consists of a male breadwinner, a housewife, and children. In this ideology, Japanese women face expectations to take care of household chores in addition to child and elderly care, which usually means that women are using more time in unpaid work. Japanese corporations and society also rely on the family ideology, which is that women provide the care work. Women can also receive help from their mother/mother-in-law to raise a child, but this is not possible for all women. Women's responsibilities as caregivers can be seen in how the Japanese government budgets for elderly care and childrearing compared to other medical care. According to Tsuruoka (2023, p. 9), Japan's budget for welfare support is relatively low. For 2023, elderly care was 10.1% of social security expenditures, while the share for childrearing was 7.5%. At the same time, pension and medical care both have a share of over 40%. (Ueno 2021; Tsuruoka 2023; Asao *et al.* 2024a & *National Institute of Population and Social Security Research* 2017)

Japanese-style management includes lifetime employment, seniority-based payment, promotions, and in-company unions. Ueno (2021) explains that the Japanese style of employment may have worked well during Japan's economic growth, but now, it creates obstacles and challenges for both women and men in the labor force. In the Japanese style of management, employees are expected to devote themselves to the company in return for benefits, secured employment for a lifetime, promotions, and welfare covering their families. However, it is good to remember that these benefits are usually available only in large Japanese corporations, although Japanese-style management is idealized overall in Japan's working culture. Because of the benefits employees would receive in lifetime employment, companies typically require long working hours and possible random relocations in addition to the expectation of total loyalty to the company. To achieve this, there was a need for women to stay at home and take care of the family. However, assigning women as caregivers keeps them out of the labor force and makes them dependent on male breadwinners. (Tsuruoka 2023; Ueno 2021; Rear 2016 & Sugimoto 2020)

As mentioned before, according to the *World Economic Forum* (2023), Japan ranks 125th out of 146 countries in the Gender Gap Index in 2023. Japan also has one of the highest gender wage gaps among OECD countries, in addition to low job security and lower career advancement possibilities for women. Japan's low rank in the Gender Gap Index is also low because other countries have made better progress compared to Japan; however, this is not the only reason for Japan's low rank. Women in Japan are expected to take care of the family, both children and the elderly, in addition to household chores, which usually means that they

quit their jobs after marriage or their first child. (Peltokorpi *et al.* 2019; Hamada 2018; Kemper *et al.* 2019; Li *et al.* 2023; Ueno 2021 & Asao *et al.* 2024a) Having the responsibility for both children and the elderly in addition to housework can place obstacles for Japanese women to return to the labor force.

Challenges in the Japanese Labor Force for Women

Japanese women face various kinds of obstacles in the Japanese work environment. These are, for example, lack of work-life balance, long working hours, and fewer chances for promotion compared to men. Additionally, they experience pressure to take care of family and household and thus often quit after getting married or having children. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2.1 by Adema *et al.* (2023), Hamada (2018) also writes that by utilizing the talents of qualified women rather than losing them, companies could boost their growth and thus further improve the economy. This issue is particularly prevalent in Japan, where the birth rate is declining, and there is less immigration, meaning that women could be one of the solutions to Japan's shrinking workforce. Japan's fertility has been declining since the 1990s. Behind the decrease is, among other things, fewer marriages, a gender gap in unpaid housework as well as women working in irregular employment, which contributes to the gender wage gap. Shirahase (2017) adds that one of the reasons for the declining birth rate in Japan is the high cost of child-rearing and education. (Hamada 2018; Asao *et al.* 2024b; Asao *et al.* 2024a & Khera and Gao 2024)

According to Peltokorpi *et al.* (2019, p. 395), Japan has one of the highest gender wage gaps among the OECD countries as well as “lower career advancement opportunities in domestic companies, ..., lower job security, wages and over-representation in irregular employment”. Moreover, strong gender norms affect women's chances of promotion. Women are expected to take care of the family and household and quit after marriage or their first child, and they tend to be less confident in aiming for higher positions. Koveshnikov *et al.* (2019, p. 45) also explain that manager positions are usually associated with “attributes such as 24/7 availability, readiness for constant mobility, and intense work orientation”. The Japanese work environment usually values length of employment over performance, which makes it even harder for women to be part of the workforce. Being available all the time and having no breaks in a career is hard for women with children. Kemper *et al.* (2019) add that longer working hours and overtime are issues for women who would like to continue working after having children. (Peltokorpi *et al.* 2019; Koveshnikov *et al.* 2019; Li *et al.* 2023 & Khera and Gao 2024). Thus, all these obstacles affect women's salaries and further widen the wage gap.

The ideology of *ryōsai kenbo*, “good wife, wise mother,” has influenced the role of women in Japanese society and asserted different expectations towards women as mothers. As mentioned before, Japanese women were expected to care for the home and family (good wife). In *ryōsai kenbo*, mothers were also expected to educate their children (wise mother). During the Meiji period (1868-1912), mothers were “responsible not only for the education of their daughters, but also for their sons” (Shizuko 2013, p. 32). The idea was that women could contribute to society by caring for the household and raising children. In contrast, men contributed to society by working, thus giving men and women equal positions in Japanese society. However, this forced women to be economically dependent on their husbands and placed them in secondary roles. (Shizuko 2013)

In addition to strong gender norms in Japanese society, the Japanese taxation system is also creating obstacles to gender equality in the labor force. This means that household heads, usually men, “can receive tax exemption for dependents, as far as their spouses’ income is lower than some 10 000 euros” (Ueno 2021, p. 15). In addition, the husband usually does not need to pay social security costs for their spouses, who are covered in their insurance as dependents. This could be one of the reasons why women tend to choose part-time work to keep their earnings under the limit and to be part of their husband’s insurance. All of this discourages especially married women from working longer hours. (Ueno 2021 & Asao *et al.* 2024a)

Career Opportunities and Type of Employment

As mentioned above, especially women face obstacles in career advancement. To reach higher positions and achieve a long career within the company in Japan, it is usually expected that the employee will be available to work for long hours, in addition to being flexible to go where needed and accepting transfers to other cities. This can be hard for women because they are expected to take care of the family, which could mean they have less time to contribute to work. As mentioned in Chapter 2.1, maternity leave can negatively affect women’s labor participation if the leave is too long. This is also the case in Japan, where maternity leave can affect promotion possibilities because the length of a career is valued more than performance. (Peltokorpi *et al.* 2019; Hamada 2018; Kemper *et al.* 2019; Li *et al.* 2023 & Ueno 2021) This also means that because women are expected to quit their jobs before giving birth, they cannot return to their previous positions and continue their careers.

Because women have been expected to act as housewives rather than participate in the labor force, Japanese companies have created two kinds of employee tracks for women (and men) to

take to increase women's participation in the labor force. These two tracks were the career track (*sōgōshoku*) and the non-career track (*ippanshoku*). The non-career track is sometimes called a mom or mommy track because women who want children usually choose this career track, and it is more compatible with childcare duties that women are expected to do. People who choose the non-career track are shut out of career opportunities, and there is less training involved compared to the career track. They usually cannot transition from their chosen career track to another later. This two-career track system is believed to be one of the reasons behind the gender wage gap; women in the non-career track have fewer opportunities to receive promotions, which reflect their salary. (Shire 2000; Dumauli 2019 & Asao *et al.* 2024a)

Hijzen (2023) explains that the gender gap tends to widen according to age, reflecting the gender differences in upward mobility in men's and women's promotion opportunities. This also affects the gender wage gap, and in the case of Japan, the wage gap increases significantly with age, while in Nordic countries, the gap tends to stay more even. As explained before, women usually work irregular and part-time jobs, which usually reduces their chances of getting promotions and thus reflects in women's wages. This is also the case in Japan, as seen in Figure 5. The wages of Japanese men tend to rise according to age, reaching the highest point at the age of 55 to 59. According to *OECD Data Explorer – Archive* (2022), 31.8% of Japanese working women ages 25-54 worked part-time, and 42% of Japanese working women ages 55-64 worked part-time in 2022, meaning that the share of women in part-time employment is increasing according to women's age. This could be explained by the tendency of women to stop working after having their first children and staying home to take care of them. After the children have grown, women re-enter the labor force as irregular workers, which usually means less salary and promotion opportunities than regular workers.

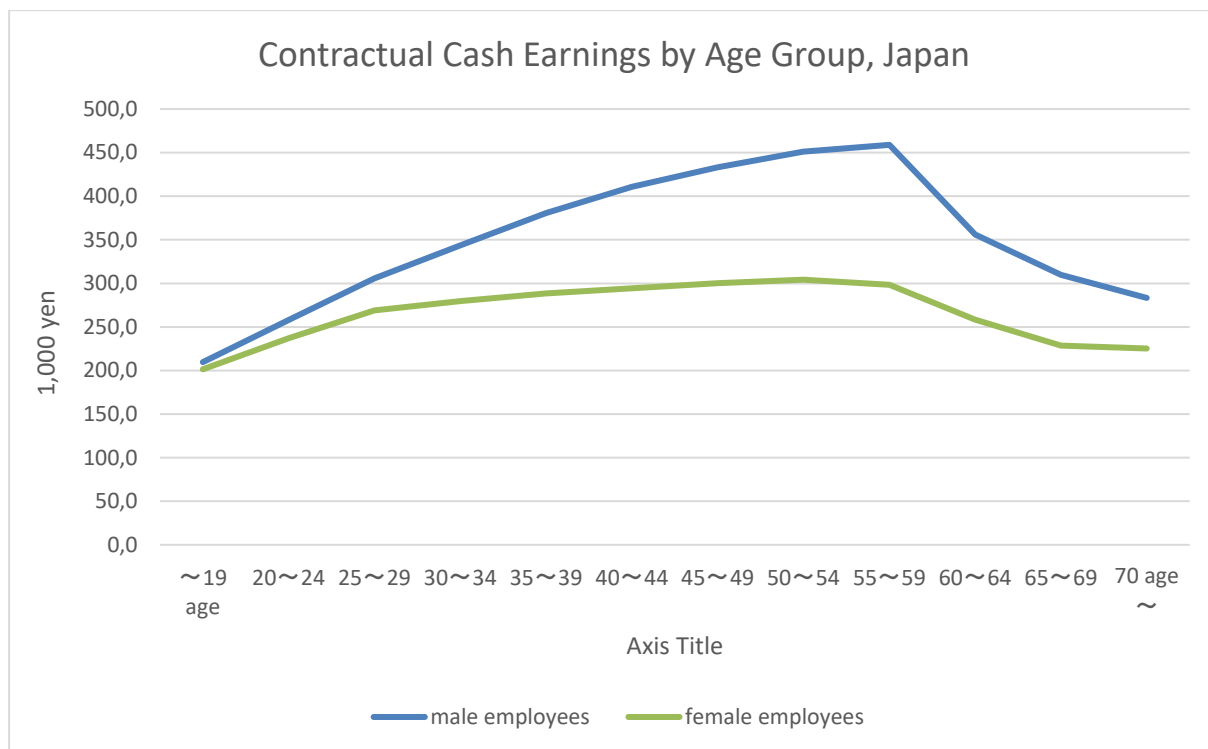


Figure 5. Contractual Cash Earnings by Age Group in Japan (MHLW 2023)

If the Japanese working environment were more suitable and equal for women, we could, for example, see more women in higher positions and having a lower wage gap in Japan. The current Japanese work environment does not seem to be suitable for women, especially mothers. For women who want to continue working after having children or who wish to advance in their careers, there needs to be a change in the Japanese working environment or alternative solutions. The Japanese government is aware of the current situation and has tried to improve the situation with different policies like *womenomics* but with less success. I will introduce some of the policies next.

Japan's Attempts to Improve Gender Equality in the Labor Force

Even though the Japanese government has attempted to promote women in the labor force, it has been less successful, and women are still “forced to choose between employment and raising family” (Shirahase 2017, p. 112). For example, the Japanese government enforced a law in 1986 to try to help close the gender gap in the labor force and to create equal employment opportunities for women and men. However, in answer to this Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), large Japanese companies created the two-track system mentioned above to give women an opportunity to advance in their careers. Before the EEOL, most companies would discriminate against women and hire men as managerial candidates because women were

expected to quit after marriage. However, even with the two-track system, companies would still hire more men in the career track. (Shire 2000 & Hamada 2018)

Another example of the attempt to close the gender gap was Japan's former Prime Minister's *womenomics* policy in 2013. Some of the goals of the *womenomics* policy were to encourage women to participate in the labor force and to reach a 30% share of women in leadership positions by 2020. To achieve these goals, various legal measures were created in addition to giving financial help to mothers and planning to create new 400,000 daycares. However, the goal of 30% of women in leadership positions was limited to companies listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange (TSE), which only employ less than 5% of Japan's total labor force. The goal was also voluntary and without any strict penalties if the target was unmet. (Hamada 2018 & Asao *et al.* 2024a)

Because of the limitations in *womenomics*, the goal of having 30% of women in leadership positions by 2020 was unmet. According to the *World Bank Group* (2024a), in 2023, only 10.3% of seats in the national parliament were held by a woman, and in 2021, only 13.1% of senior and middle management employees were women. Another problem *womenomics* faced was that even though the share of women participating in the labor force was increasing, the majority of them were in non-regular employment. This was because of the Labor Dispatch Law, which allowed "companies to use more flexible contractual arrangements to hire and fire workers, instead of giving them full-time, regular status" (Hamada 2018, p. 65).

Japan has also tried to address the issue of the wage gap between regular and irregular workers by issuing the Fixed-term Part-Time Employment Act in 2020. This act aims to ensure fair treatment for both regular and irregular employment types and achieve "equal pay for equal work" by prohibiting differences in wages, allowances, benefits, education, etc. The base salary, bonuses, and pay raises should be determined equally based on employees' skills and performance. However, as seen from the *MHLW's* (2023) data, there are still differences in regular and non-regular workers' wages and the wage gap between genders. Men in regular employment earn more money than women in regular employment. However, women in regular employment tend to earn more than men in non-regular employment until the age of 60, when the contractual cash earnings of men in non-regular employment reach the same rates. Women aged 19 and under in non-regular employment earn more than men of the same age and employment contract. However, after age 19, women in non-regular work earn the least. (Figure

6) (MHLW & MHLW 2023) Because the act was issued in 2020, there might not yet be much change to see in the situation.

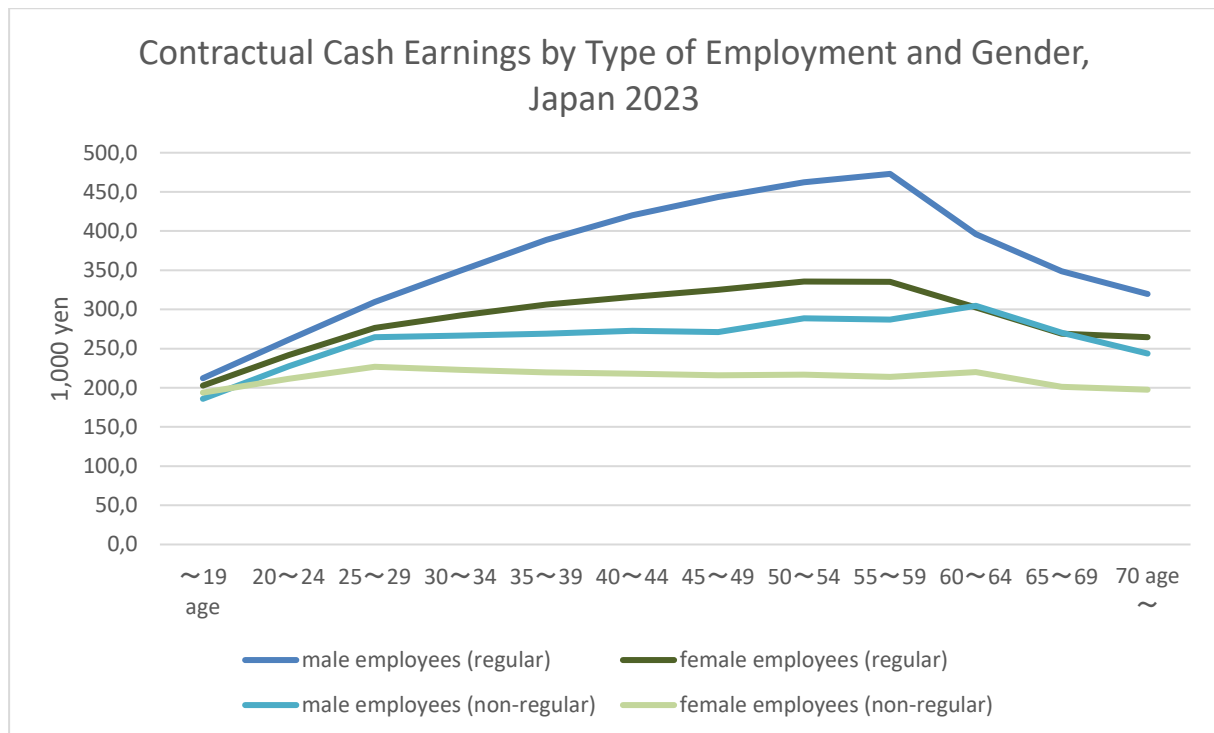


Figure 6. Contractual Cash Earnings by Type of Employment and Gender in Japan (MHLW 2023)

Increasing the fertility rate is one of the priorities for the Japanese government, and achieving an increase in the fertility rate in Japan can help Japan's economic growth. Asao *et al.* (2024b) explain that the best way to increase the fertility rate is to support childcare facilities, while cash transfers have no effect at all or have only a limited impact on increasing fertility. Having more childcare facilities would help women return to the labor force with less impact on their careers and income prospects. The Japanese government created the “Children’s Future Strategy” in 2023 to increase the budget for child-related spending in addition to expanding childcare facilities and supporting co-parenting. (Asao *et al.* 2024b, 2)

As mentioned in this chapter, Japanese women face different challenges as part of the labor force. The challenges are related to the strong gender norms in the work environment. Companies value loyalty and length of employment over performance in addition to a lot of overtime work. To achieve promotions, companies expect employees to dedicate themselves to the company fully. All these parts of the Japanese working environment place pressure on Japanese women as well as men. However, women are expected to play the role of caregivers,

which puts extra pressure on them. Even though the Japanese government has tried to improve the situation, there has not been much change.

2.1.2 Nordic Countries

According to the *World Economic Forum* (2023), Nordic countries like Finland, Sweden, and Norway are ranked in the top 5 with the lowest gender gap, which is one of the reasons I chose to compare Japanese companies to Nordic companies in Japan. To achieve this, I wanted to investigate how Nordic companies in Japan treat their women employees. In this chapter, I will explain the current gender equality situation in Nordic countries and its background to better understand the gender equality situation in Nordic countries.

Nygård *et al.* (2023) explain that gender equality is closely part of the Nordic welfare state, which can be seen in welfare services helping women to participate in the labor force, including different company policies like parental leave. In the case of parental leave, more equal policies tend to increase maternal employment and improve work-life balance, in addition to helping the relationships between children and parents. Taxation systems in Nordic countries also support the dual-earner-dual carer model, compared to the Japanese taxation system, which supports the one-breadwinner model. Both taxation and benefit systems are individualized. This is because they want to encourage second earners to participate in the labor force. Hellum *et al.* (2024) also explain that Nordic countries try to ensure health care, education, and economic safety for everyone regardless of their gender or background, which goes hand in hand with gender equality ideas. Even though Nordic countries have been able to decrease the gender gap, there is still an imbalance in power relations and levels of education and employment. Women also spend more time in unpaid care and housework than men, but the difference is less than in Japan, as seen in Figure 4 in Chapter 2.1. (Nygård *et al.* 2023; Hellum *et al.* 2024 & OECD 2018)

Type of Employment in Nordic Countries

While the Japanese family model focuses on the one-breadwinner model, Nordic countries try to promote the “dual earner-dual carer” model (OECD 2018, p. 14). Compared to Japan, Nordic countries also have fewer women working part-time. According to *OECD Data Explorer – Archive* (2022), the total share of working-aged women in part-time employment in Nordic countries is under 30%, while in Japan, the similar number is almost 40% (Figure 7). Looking at the number more closely by the age group in Finland, Denmark, and Sweden, under 15% of

working women ages 22-54 work as part-timers. The percentage increases slightly from ages 55-64 (Figure 8). Despite Nordic countries' efforts to achieve gender equality, women in Nordic countries still face challenges when progressing in management positions, which also reflects on the gender wage gap. (Hellum *et al.* 2024 & OECD 2018)

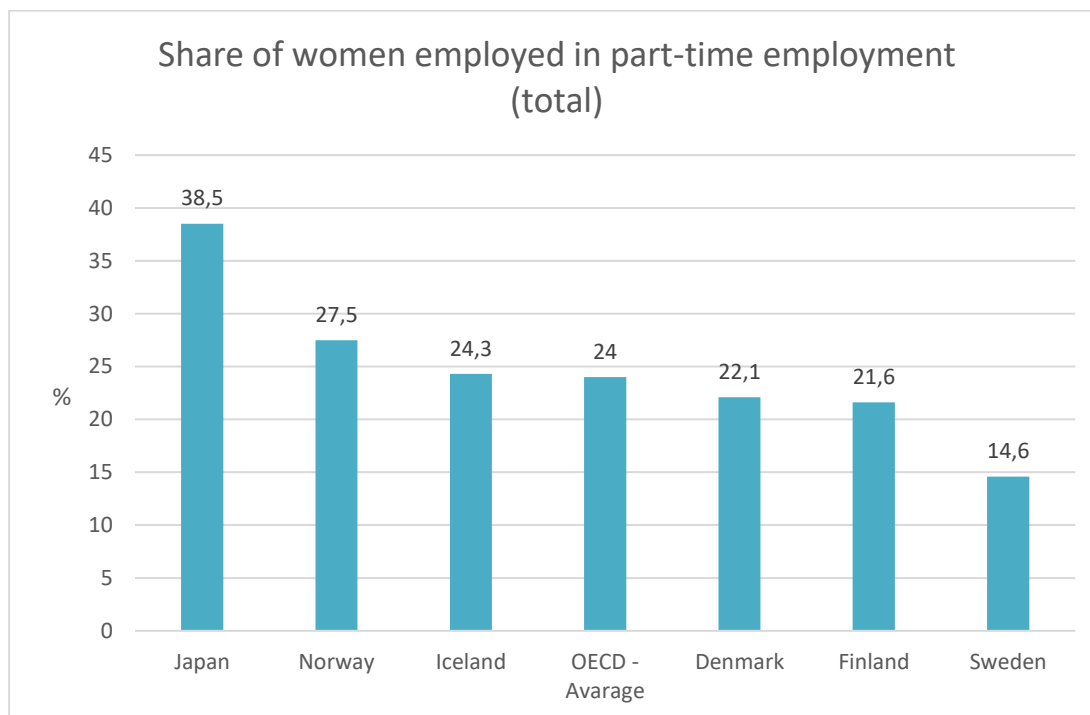


Figure 7. Women in Part-time employment (OECD Data Explorer – Archive 2022)

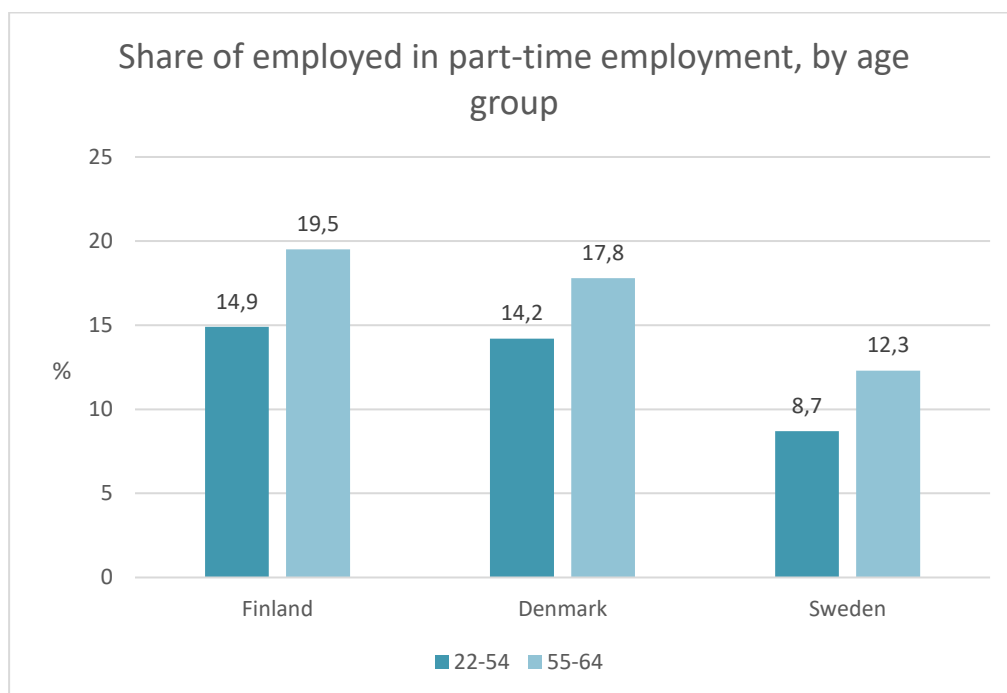


Figure 8. Share of Working Women in Part-time Employment in Finland, Denmark, and Sweden (OECD Data Explorer – Archive 2022)

“Work Friendliness and Full Participation”

Hellum *et al.* (2024) see that Nordic countries have been improving gender equality by focusing on policies and programs that focus on ensuring health services, education, and economic safety for all. Gender equality has been part of Nordic countries’ social policy model. By using these means, Nordic countries have been able to achieve better gender equality. Parents are encouraged to continue working after having children, with support for parental leave and childhood education and care. The state provides workers with services and support so that both parents can stay in paid employment. Employees in Nordic countries also tend to have some control over their working hours, which can help with childrearing. Compared to other OECD countries, parents in Nordic countries are more likely to take time off for personal and/or family reasons. (Hellum *et al.* 2024 & OECD 2018)

According to OECD (2018), Nordic countries act as evidence that increasing gender equality and women’s participation in the labor force can benefit economic growth notably. In the case of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, supporting women’s participation in the labor force has been “equivalent of about 10-20% of average annual GDP per capita growth over the past 40-50 years” (OECD 2018, p. 3). More women participating in the labor force and using their talents can also help deliver productivity gains. In addition to economic benefits, more gender-equal societies tend to be happier, healthier, and more trusting. While the Japanese welfare system is built on the expectation of women being responsible for the care work, the Nordic welfare system is built to encourage both women and men to continue working after having children. This means focusing on “work friendliness and full participation” for both women and men (OECD 2018, p. 13). (OECD 2018) I believe this is the most significant difference between Japan and Nordic countries, which could explain the differences in gender equality in those countries. Because of all of the points mentioned in this chapter, I believe Nordic countries are an excellent comparison to Japan when researching gender equality in the labor force.

2.2 Working in the International Environment

For this thesis, it is important to understand what kind of working environment international companies could offer Japanese women. In this chapter, I will explain the benefits and demerits women might encounter working in an international company operating in Japan, in addition to what international companies could offer Japanese women. I will also explain the possible hierarchical differences between different cultures and how they can be shown in a working environment.

2.2.1 Women in International Companies

Foreign companies can offer more attractive job opportunities for Japanese women than Japanese companies. This is because, as mentioned before, Japanese companies provide few opportunities for women to advance in their careers and have families simultaneously. Groznaya (2011) explains that this might be because Japanese companies have been slow to adapt to the changing job market, while foreign companies have recognized the potential of Japanese women as employees. However, companies with foreign origins can face many challenges when entering the Japanese market and trying to change some of the practices in a work environment. Changing existing attitudes in the working environment can be challenging for international employers and takes time. Japanese expectations of women's roles in the labor force are slow to change, which could also slow down efforts to close the gender gap. (Olcott and Oliver 2014 & Groznaya 2011)

Olcott and Oliver (2014) explain that when a foreign company takes over another company, the new owner can introduce new practices that are used in their home country. Their research found that "foreign ownership led to a significant and, in some cases, immediate impact" (Olcott and Oliver 2014, p. 218). This was especially true in the case of a rising number of women managers. (Olcott and Oliver 2014) However, in Olcott and Oliver's research, the focus is on situations where a foreign firm takes over a local company, which is different from the situation in this thesis. This thesis focuses on Nordic companies operating in Japan, not Nordic companies taking over Japanese companies. Despite that, they bring up interesting facts about how the working environment might change when two different cultures combine inside one company.

Japanese women looking to continue their careers usually prefer international companies over Japanese companies because they have better opportunities to advance in their careers. Due to less traditional human resources policies, international companies are more open to hiring women in managerial positions. Starting salaries for women are usually higher compared to those of Japanese firms, and holiday benefits are better in addition to better training and working conditions. Foreign companies tend to offer skill-based benefits over seniority-based benefits like Japanese companies. Japanese women usually have shorter careers than men because of the expectations that women would stop working after childbirth. This is why Japanese women may see international companies as more attractive as employers because there are better chances for higher salaries and faster promotions compared to Japanese companies. However,

job security can be lower in international companies. (Groznyaya 2011 & Olcott and Oliver 2014)

In Groznaya's research (2011), some women purposely aimed to work in international companies because they could not see a future for their careers in Japanese companies. Other reasons for choosing an international company were, for example, a women-friendly environment, equal opportunities and better career opportunities for women, as well as being able to express oneself. However, there are also some challenges when working in international companies. These can be, for example, cultural misunderstandings and communication difficulties. In Groznaya's research (2011, p. 132), women also mentioned that international companies operating in Japan tend to "become very Japanese," which can be seen as a negative thing. In addition, smaller-sized foreign companies might experience difficulties reaching qualified women and can be disadvantaged in the Japanese labor market. (Groznyaya 2011)

2.2.2 Hierarchy in Different Cultures

There are hierarchical relationships in workplaces, which can depend on the cultural context and the work environment. Simply explained, hierarchy is the relationship between superiors and subordinates and the power distance between them. This could be the relationship between the boss or manager and their subordinates in the working environment. If the power distance (hierarchy) is considered to be high, there usually are tall organizational pyramids where power comes from the top, and promotion is based on education and seniority. If the organization has a low power distance, the organizational pyramids are usually flat, where communication is from the top, down, and lateral, and promotion is based on performance. According to *the Culture Factor Groups'* (2024) country comparison tool, in the Nordic countries, the power distance is under 35, while Japan scores 54. (Hofstede 2013) This could mean Japanese organizations have more hierarchical structures than Nordic ones. I use Hofstede's theory of power distance in this research; however, I am aware of the criticism Hofstede's theory has received. For example, Weil (2017, p. 134) brings up issues like insufficient samples, representation of the participants for national cultures as a whole, as well as the issue of "promoting a largely static view of culture."

When looking at the hierarchy in organizations and companies, in countries with higher power distance, it is more common for superiors to make decisions within the companies, and employees may even be hesitant to participate in decision-making. The communication in the high hierarchy companies goes from top to bottom, rather than horizontally, and subordinates

may feel reluctant to express their opinions. Usually, the communication gap between superiors and subordinates is higher. However, in companies with high power distance, decision-making can be fast when there is little resistance from lower-level employees, and the few people on the top make the decisions. Companies with lower power distance (low hierarchy) tend to focus more on individuals with training and responsibilities. This is to “help employees use their own judgment and intelligence in making decisions” (Ghosh 2011, p. 91). Superiors tend to consult their employees in decision-making, and employees may feel free to express their opinions. (Ghosh 2011) When comparing Japanese and Nordic companies, it is more likely that Nordic companies have a lower hierarchy structure because Nordic countries have smaller power distance scores than Japan. This could mean that communication in Nordic companies is more horizontal, and employees participate more in the decision-making than in Japanese companies.

2.3 Education and Choosing a Career in Japan and Nordics

It is also important to understand people's reasons when deciding on their potential employer and career. According to Chen *et al.* (2020), it is more likely that people will choose a career that they would enjoy and that they believe that they would be able to achieve it. Gender stereotypes can play a role in deciding what career a person might pursue. Society places certain expectations on women and men, which might be why women tend to choose different kinds of careers than men. This can be seen in gender division in the Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. (Chen *et al.* 2020) In this chapter, I will also explain in more detail the gendered division in education and employment related to the STEM fields and how it might reflect the gender wage gap. In addition, I will discuss being a housewife in Japan because it is still seen as a plausible option for Japanese women.

2.3.1 Gender Division in STEM Fields in Education and Employment

Gender stereotypes affect boys' and girls' choices in education and careers. Boys are more likely to pursue education in Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), which are usually higher-paying fields in the labor force. Girls are more likely to study education, health, and welfare. While women are under-represented in STEM fields, men are also under-represented in fields of health, education, and welfare. When looking at the OECD average, there has been some improvement in women choosing to study in fields of Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics; however, the numbers still vary a lot depending on the countries. Men are still dominant in the fields of Engineering and Information and

Communication Technologies (ICTs). In addition, Encinas-Martín (2023) explains that women may not pursue careers in STEM fields because of the lack of role models in those fields. Because there are fewer women in STEM fields, girls do not have “tangible evidence to disprove the stereotypical notion that mathematics and science are somehow more “masculine” discipline” (Encinas-Martín 2023, 109). (Encinas-Martín 2023)

This gendered division in STEM fields can be seen in Nordic countries as well as in Japan. According to *the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare* (2023), 20% of STEM students in Finland were women, while in Education, health, and wellbeing, the share of women was 82% in 2022. According to the *World Bank Group* (2024b), in 2017, 35.5% of women graduates in Sweden were studying in STEM fields. In Norway, the share of women was 28.5%, and in Denmark, 34.2%. According to *OECD* (2022), 27% of new entrants in Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics in Japan were women in 2020. The share of women in Engineering, manufacturing, and construction was 16% in Japan. There was no data on women in ICTs. Having fewer women choosing STEM fields in schools is affecting the number of women in STEM fields in the labor force. Having fewer women working in STEM fields also contributes to the gender wage gap because careers in those fields tend to have higher salaries.

2.3.2 Being a Housewife in Japan

As mentioned in Chapter 2.1.1, Japanese women are expected to take the role of the housewife and take care of the children and family; the Japanese welfare system is dependable on this fact. With women being housewives, men could dedicate themselves to their companies. Some Japanese women may not want to lose their “freedom,” and they would like to pursue careers on their own rather than stay home as housewives, which is also one of the reasons behind Japan’s low fertility rate. However, some of the women, usually married, think that women should be the ones to take care of the children and not work. This way of thinking is also common among younger generations.

According to the Sixteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey (*National Institute of Population and Social Security Research* 2024), in 2021, only 13.8% of never-married women answered that a full-time housewife is their ideal life course. This number has been decreasing over the years. However, in the same survey, 50.0% of never-married women between ages 18 and 34 agreed that “at least while children are young, it is desirable for mothers to stay home and not hold job.” 54.3% of never-married men of the same age also agreed with that statement. This

is also supported by a survey made by ソニー生命 (*Sonī seimei*, Sony Life Insurance Co., Ltd.) (ソニー生命 2020) in 2020, where 29.8% of women wanted to be full-time housewives. Of the people who answered yes, 41.7% were in their 20s, meaning that some younger Japanese women would like to stay as housewives and care for the family. This survey was answered by 1000 Japanese women from ages 20 to 69. (Shirahase 2017 & ソニー生命 2020) Although the idea of a full-time housewife has been decreasing, being a housewife and staying home to take care of the family and children is still a common mindset in Japanese society, even among Japanese women, which could mean that being a housewife is still appreciated in Japan.

3 Methodology and Methods

This chapter will introduce the methodology and methods I used in my research. I chose to use qualitative methods in my data collection and analysis process. This includes semi-structured interviews in data collection and thematic analysis in the analyzing process. According to Clarke and Braun (2017) and Nowell *et al.* (2017), qualitative research can be used when researching human experiences. Tuomi *et al.* (2018) add that qualitative research can be used to help understand different events or phenomena, meaning the research target. They also mention that to make the research process and analysis trustworthy, the researcher needs to openly communicate how they collected their data and explain the analysis process. I believe that qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis are fitting choices for my research. Both methods are suitable for research focusing on experiences. With thematic analysis, I can find important themes from the data I collected for this research with semi-structured interviews in addition to the themes found in the previous literature. I will explain the data collection and analysis process in more detail below.

3.1 Data Collection Process

To answer my research questions, I decided to do semi-structured interviews with Japanese women who are or have been working in Nordic companies located in Japan. I chose this method because it is widely used in qualitative research, and Galletta and Cross (2013) explain that semi-structured interviews have much freedom to change the structure of interviews fitting the purpose of the research in addition to having the freedom to explore the themes of the research topic. Semi-structured interviews also provide openings for the interviewees to discuss their experiences on the research topic. Another advantage is the possibility of adding follow-up questions based on the previous answers. (Kallio *et al.* 2016; Galletta and Cross 2013 & Tuomi *et al.* 2018) According to Cohen *et al.* (2018), unstructured interviews can provide a good understanding of participants' knowledge and experiences on the research topic.

Semi-structured interview questions are based on the previous studies of the research topic (Appendix 1.). Researchers can use interview guides during the interviews, but there is no need to follow them strictly. As mentioned above, during the interview, the researcher can ask follow-up questions based on the participant's previous answers. Because the purpose of the interview is to collect data on the research topic as much as possible, it is reasonable to provide the interview questions beforehand for the participants. (Kallio *et al.* 2016 & Tuomi *et al.* 2018)

I offered interview questions to the participants before the interview to allow them to reflect on the topic and their answers before the interview. However, during the interview, I also asked follow-up questions based on the answers provided by the research participants. Based on these follow-up questions with the first two participants, I added two more questions for other participants to answer. These questions were about role models in Japanese and Nordic working environments, as well as other additional questions about adjusting to the Nordic working environment after working in a Japanese company. Interview questions were first made in English, read through, and approved by the thesis supervisor. Interview questions were translated into Japanese, and the Japanese was confirmed by one of my Japanese language teachers at Rikkyo University. The plan was to do the interviews in English and use Japanese as support if there were difficulties with English terms.

Because the research is about Japanese working women, the target group is Japanese working-age women. According to the *Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office*, in 2022, 72.4% of Japanese women aged 15 to 64 were working. Having all Japanese working women as the target group would be too broad, and because the research focus is on Japanese women working in Nordic companies, the target group was narrowed down to Japanese women working in Nordic companies. According to Tuomi *et al.* (2018), having a target group with experience in the topic is important, which sometimes can mean having a smaller size target group would be preferable to having a large target group. My goal was to find five to ten women for the interview. In the end, I was able to interview seven Japanese women of working age. Six participants are in Japan, and one is in Denmark. Their experience in the Nordic companies varies from one year to over 20 years. They all had experience with Japanese companies, and some had worked for other international companies.

I collected my data during a student exchange in Japan from September 2023 to March 2024 (Table 1). Before the student exchange in August, I made an initial list of people and organizations I could contact and inquire if they could help me find potential interviewees. These were The Finnish embassy in Tokyo, Business Finland, the Finnish Chamber of Commerce in Japan, and the Nordic Innovation House. I also used other non-official channels, such as a Facebook group called "Suomalaiset Japanissa" (a Facebook group for Finnish people living or staying in Japan). I mostly used email to contact these organizations, and they were approached in September 2023. After a while, I was able to find the first three interviewees by sending emails and contacting people on Facebook, as well as receiving contact information from the first interviewee. Because my goal was to have at least five interviewees,

I decided to start contacting some of the same places again in addition to new organizations and companies during the end of 2023 and the beginning of January 2024.

For the third time, at the beginning of February 2024, I decided to try to contact potential interviewees using LinkedIn. On LinkedIn, you can search by company and filter where people are living and where they are currently working. I used this method to find Japanese women living in Japan who are working for Nordic/Finnish companies. I messaged some of the participants from LinkedIn via LinkedIn and some via another employee from the same company. I searched companies like Finnair, Marimekko, Fiskars, Wärtsilä, UPM, and Stora Enso. However, you need to have a LinkedIn premium account to contact people with longer messages than 200 characters. I found the 200 characters too limiting to explain the purpose of the research and explain myself in the best and most understandable way. Thus, I used the free month LinkedIn offers for their users to contact potential participants. However, this only gave me five free messages at first. Later, I found out that there were two free messages that I could use to contact more people. In the end, I was able to reach some of the people with this method, and I was able to find the rest of the interviewees.

Table 1. Timeline of the Data Collection

2023	September	October	November	December
	Contacting organizations and people in Japan. Contacting the Facebook group.	Contacting more organizations and companies through email.	Contacting the first participant.	Contacting more organizations/companies. 1 st interview session. Reaching out for 1 st participant's contacts.
2024	January	February	March	
	Reaching out to new participants. 2 nd interview session. 3 rd interview session. Contacting more organizations/companies.	Contacting more people via LinkedIn. 4 th interview session.	5 th interview session. 6 th interview session. 7 th interview session.	

All of the interviews were conducted online, even though I had the impression that Japanese people would prefer in-person interviews. However, I believe that COVID-19 had some effect on this matter, and having meetings online is now used more. This also helped me because there was no need to travel for the interviews and no commute time, which was the same for the

interviewees. Having an online interview was also preferable for some of the participants because of the interviewees' personal or family situations at that time. Most of the interviewees were living in Japan, and because I was staying in Japan during this time, there was no need to think about the time differences (except for one of the interviews). The interview dates and times were decided via email or LinkedIn. I sent the interviewees the interview questions, information sheet, and informed consent form for participants. All the interviews were conducted in English, and the interviews itself were conducted online via Zoom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to text format to make coding and analyzing the interviews easier. During April and May 2024, I started the coding and analyzing process and made some initial findings, which I will explain in more detail in the following subchapter. I have given a pseudonym for the interview participants so they would not be recognized (Table 2). I chose random Japanese names reflecting the first seven alphabets.

Table 2. Interview Participant Information

	Age	Duration	D/M/Y	Platform	Time in Nordic Companies	Employer's Country (Location)
Aoi	48	43min 26min	20/12/2023 09/01/2024	Online, Zoom more questions via email	3 years	Sweden (Japan)
Benio	43	45min	24/01/2024	Online, Zoom more questions via email	3 years	Finland (Japan)
Chiaki	29	37min	26/01/2024	Online, Zoom more questions via email	3 years	Denmark (Denmark)
Daia	37	1h 20min	27/02/2024	Online, Zoom	7 years	Finland (Japan)
Erika	32	50min	02/03/2024	Online, Zoom	1 year	Finland (Japan)
Fumika	51	1h 6min	05/03/2024	Online, Zoom	21 years	Finland (Japan)
Gumi	36	56min	06/03/2024	Online, Zoom	4 years	Finland (Japan)

3.2 Analyzing Methods

I chose to use thematic analysis to analyze the data from the interviews. Thematic analysis is an analysis method used in qualitative research. Clarke and Braun (2017, p. 297) explain that “thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data.” With thematic analysis, researchers can identify,

analyze, organize, and report different themes found in their data. Some advantages of thematic analysis are its flexibility in fitting in with various kinds of studies and its ability to provide rich and detailed data. It is a helpful method when researching different experiences and finding differences and similarities in the data. (Nowell *et al.* 2017 & Clarke and Braun 2017) However, there may be some challenges when using thematic analysis as an analysis method. Nowell *et al.* (2017) explain some of the disadvantages of thematic analysis compared to other qualitative methods. Even though thematic analysis is flexible, researchers may face some restrictions when using thematic analysis. For example, it can be harder to analyze the language used in the dataset, or it can be hard to be consistent and clear when identifying and defining codes and themes because of a lack of rules.

In thematic analysis, a researcher can create codes that they can use to help find relevant data for the research. This usually starts after the researcher is familiar with the dataset and has an idea of which topics are interesting and relevant to the research itself. To create fitting codes, researchers usually revisit their dataset multiple times. These initial codes then form themes and larger patterns, and some of them may work as a subtheme. The themes bring together ideas and experiences which are relevant to the research question. It is good to recognize that not all the initial codes may not fit in any of the themes. Then, a researcher can form a “miscellaneous” theme where they can put those codes. (Nowell *et al.* 2017 & Clarke and Braun 2017) With thematic analysis, the goal is to “identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question” (Clarke and Braun 2017, p. 297).

Braun and Clarke (2006, 2017) state that thematic analysis is flexible and suitable for larger and smaller datasets. The analysis process can start when a researcher collects data with different patterns and potential interests (Braun and Clarke 2006). I am using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) outline guide as a guide for my analysis process (Table 3).

Table 3. Phases for Thematic Analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87)

Phase	Description
1. Familiarizing with data	Transcribing and (re)reading data, taking down notes on initial ideas.
2. Initial codes	Coding interesting features and collecting data for each code.
3. Searching themes	Combining codes with potential themes and collecting relevant data for each theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Confirm if the themes work with the codes and the entire data set.
5. Defining and naming themes	Creating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing report	Final opportunity to analyze.

The familiarization started when I transcribed the interview audio data into a text format (phase 1). I printed out the transcripts of the interviews and added handwritten notes on the side of the paper identifying different parts fitting for my initial codes (phase 2) (Table 4). I used one word to describe the topic of the answer. These words were improvements, eye-opening, negative and positive experiences, pressure, roles, hierarchy, expectations, mentality, natural, division, atmosphere, respect, support, policies, equal, slow, society, and larger problems. I combined these notes for bigger codes and themes (phase 3). First, there were six themes: personal experience, policies, atmosphere, role models, gender roles, and improvements. However, I was able to combine some of these themes and create the final four themes. From the six themes, I combined atmosphere and policies as well as gender roles and role models and went through the whole data set with these themes (phase 4). The final themes are Past experiences, Company policies and atmosphere, Gender roles, and Changes in the Japanese working environment (phase 5). For these four themes, I used different colors to highlight the parts of the interview according to the themes. Using these four themes, I started looking for answers to my research questions from the dataset. (phase 6).

Table 4. Themes and Codes

Themes	Past Experiences	Company Policies and Atmosphere	Gender Roles	Changes in the Japanese Working Environment
Initial Codes	eye-opening, negative and positive experiences	hierarchy atmosphere respect support policies equal	pressure roles expectations mentality natural division	improvements slow society larger problem

3.3 Limitations of the Research

Interviews are a relatively popular data collection method, which is why many starting researchers use them in their research. Many novice researchers may face different challenges when doing research. These challenges can occur during various phases, like planning, interviewing, coding, or analyzing. (Dodgson and Trotman 2022) I also faced some problems during my interview process. These problems were related to language, time management, and finding participants. The data collection process can be time-consuming and requires much planning.

Interviews were conducted in English. However, English is not the first language of the participants or me, so there is a possibility of some misunderstandings during the interview process. To prevent this, interview questions were provided in English and Japanese beforehand, giving the participants time to read through them. I also prepared some notes for myself to help explain some topics that may have been difficult to understand. For example, I prepared some examples of gender policies to explain if needed.

I encountered some issues in my research related to time management during the data collection process. For example, it is important to consider the time you can use for your research if you are conducting interviews simultaneously as being in student exchange. I did have a plan for what I would be doing and when, but studies and exchange took much more of my time than I believed it would. It is good to have an initial list of contacts before the exchanges; preferably, you could already contact them before arriving in your target country. It is also good to consider some of the biggest holidays.

I was surprised by how hard it was to find contact information for companies and organizations. Sometimes, it took up quite a lot of research via Google and LinkedIn. It was easier to receive answers from smaller organizations, which could also provide you with more potential contacts. It is also good to consider alternative ways to contact people, such as LinkedIn or different forums. When looking up possible events and fairs, it is best to look at them quite early. In my case, when I started to look up the events, they were already over, or they would have been after I left Japan.

4 Analysis of Primary Data

For the analysis, I adopted four themes to help me to answer the research questions. The first theme is past experiences, which include participants' background and their positive and negative experiences with Nordic and Japanese companies in addition to their image of Nordic countries prior to working in Nordic companies. With this first theme, I wanted to explore how personal experiences have affected participant's decision to seek employment in a Nordic company. The second theme is company policies and atmosphere in Nordic and Japanese companies, including the hierarchy and support they provide to their women employees. The third theme is gender roles, the overall mentality in Japanese companies about genders, as well as women in higher positions, including role models for women. The last theme is Changes in the Japanese working environment, which explores how participants see Japanese work culture and society and whether there has been any change for better gender equality.

4.1 Impact of Past Experiences

From the interviews, I discovered that past experiences related to the Nordic countries and Japanese companies have affected the employment decisions of those who participated in this research. Most of the participants' experiences with Nordic countries and companies have been positive and thus have worked as motivation to pursue a career in a Nordic company. However, when I look at participants' experiences with the Japanese working environment, I see that there are some negative experiences that have affected their decision to look for a job somewhere other than a Japanese company. In addition, the participants mostly had a positive image of the Nordic countries before starting to work in a Nordic company, which could have helped with the decision to seek employment in a Nordic company.

When asked what kind of image the participants had of Nordic countries or Finland, they mainly mentioned things like Moomins, Marimekko, IKEA, northern lights, sauna, and a good and high level of education. The Nordic welfare system was also mentioned a couple of times, and Fumika mentioned how social welfare is connected to high taxation, which can be seen as a negative point. In addition, they did note that the society is more flexible, gender equality is higher, and the work-life balance is better compared to Japan. Chiaki also talked about the flat hierarchy within society and Nordic companies, which I will address more in Chapter 4.2.1. Another more negative image of the Nordic countries, in addition to high taxation, was the high suicide rate.

4.1.1 Personal Background

Most of the participants and their parents had some international background in the forms of student exchange, a degree from a university outside of Japan, or work experience. For example, Aoi graduated from graduate school in the United States, her father worked in a Japanese company doing international business, and she had an opportunity to live in Finland for two years, which inspired her to apply for a job at a Nordic company. Additionally, Gumi has lived in England for one year, which is why she feels slightly more comfortable working in a Nordic company than a Japanese company. The following comment, and all hereafter, from the interviews have been kept in their original style without editing.

Aoi: “I had opportunity to live in Finland for two years. Before that, I really didn’t know anything about Finland or Nordics. But I was quite inspired by the society. And coming back (to Japan), I wanted to seek for a job that is related to Finland or the Nordics.”

Gumi: “I stayed in England for one year. I feel kind of similar atmosphere there so I’m just a bit different from traditional Japanese women who stayed only in Japan. So, I’m slightly... not the same, but similar to European culture. So that’s why I feel a bit comfortable or easier in Nordic Company and the people, especially in European countries.”

However, in comparison to other participants, neither Daia nor her parents had any prior international experience before she started in a Nordic company. In her case, she had left her previous Japanese company because of health issues in her family. Because of these health issues, she wanted to have more flexibility to leave earlier from work or take more days away from work. Fumika also feels that in Japanese companies, there is still room to improve the working environment regarding taking time off for family matters.

Daia: “They (Nordic companies) really respect it to take care of their families first. So it’s common sense for Nordic people. In Japanese typical company, especially the women hesitate to say, “I will take break for kids and myself”. Always the boss asked me the reason (for the break). And after leaving and holidays, traditionally you need to say thank you to have chance to take care of myself and the kids so... I don’t like this culture.”

Fumika: “Japanese companies still do not seem to have a good working environment for female workers. I think it is especially important to create an environment where women who take maternity or childcare leave can work for a long time. It is also important for both women and men to have work environment where it is easy to take time off.”

Fumika further explains that in Nordic companies, it is much easier to leave earlier if needed, for example, to go to a family-related event. She felt that working hours are more flexible in the Nordic companies, making it easier to take time off for family. Aoi also feels that in Nordic companies, they tend to speak more about their families and children between colleagues regardless of gender.

4.1.2 First Impressions

First impressions of Nordic companies have played a part in their decisions to join their current Nordic companies, in addition to prior experience with Nordics. Participants Daia, Erika, and Gumi all describe their first impressions of Nordic companies.

Daia: “[company name] arranged to learn Swedish and Nordic circumstance [...] it was really good chance, and I still remember it fresh. The (Nordic) persons’ characteristics very... yeah comfortable with me.”

Erika: “I firstly like the atmosphere of the people working in there. They are so nice. (During) the hiring process they’re so nice and I felt they are really kind of... let’s say honest to hire someone. I felt they really care about the people who they hire.”

Gumi compared the atmosphere of the hiring process in Japanese companies to Nordic companies, and they felt that in the hiring process for a Nordic company, she could express herself a little bit more freely:

Gumi: “In most cases in Japan job interview is like acting. We cannot say what we really think or what we really want. Just pretend to be person who is suitable for the position or the company. So we have to mimic or create the answer interviewer like. In [Nordic company] I could talk slightly better. [...] It’s definitely nicer than other companies. [...] That is why I chose this company.”

Four of the participants had been working for Japanese companies before their current job in a Nordic company. Three of the participants had experience working in an international company, and two of them had already worked in a Nordic company before starting their current jobs. The experience in the previous Nordic company had a positive impact, which is why, when changing jobs, they searched for other Nordic companies to apply for. For example, Fumika feels that Nordic companies value their employees the most and that they give more priority to them. She had an “eye-opening” experience related to that:

Fumika: “[Nordic company] was treating people really nicely, equally and they respect employees. That’s what I felt. One incident was that HR lady came and told me that “please take holidays, please don’t miss it, and don’t hesitate to take

holidays because you are entitled to take it. If you have any difficulties taking it because of the workload or something, please consult me. And if there is some difficulties it is not your fault.” That was really shocking experience for me [...] I felt that this company really respects me.”

4.1.3 Negative Experiences

Some of the participants had negative experiences in their previous workplaces, which may have influenced their decisions to start working in a Nordic company. For example, Aoi explains that her reason for quitting a Japanese company was that she did not see any role models in her company. I will discuss more about the role model situation in Chapter 4.3.3. She also had another negative experience in a Japanese company 20 years ago.

Aoi: “In the first place when I entered the company, they asked all the new employees to what they want to do. I wanted to go into the energy sector in the international market to build like energy plants. But then they clearly said that is not really for female. [...] I was located to a division on PC marketing. It turned out nice, I mean it was a good team with more female actually. But yeah, I think the culture they had was very male-dominant. And I think I realized as 22-23 years old that this was not really my place to be... to spend too much time here. [...] Then I quit after three years.”

Chiaki also shares her experience in a Japanese heavy industry company, which she found to be “one of the most traditional Japanese companies.” She had a similar experience in her second job, which was also at a Japanese company.

Chiaki: “In the first career, I used to work for the one of the most traditional Japanese company. It was heavy industry and there the tradition still remains a lot. And I was the only female employee in my department. [...] I had a kind of pressure from others that I should be... humble, more humble than others, and they don't expect me to have good opinion, but they expect me to follow the rules or follow the opinion they had. And I also needed to do some smaller tasks that other women did, like cleaning or something like that. Other workers in my position didn't do so. It was... Yeah, not so good experience.”

However, adjusting to Nordic companies can also have some challenges. For example, the hierarchy and figuring out who is responsible for different tasks was seen as difficult when first entering a Nordic company. Some participants felt it was easier to tell who was responsible for the projects in a Japanese company. I will discuss more about hierarchy in the next chapter.

4.2 Company Policies and Atmosphere

In this chapter, I will discuss how the participant experienced the company policies and atmosphere through themes such as hierarchy, career advancement, work-life balance, and

parental leave in their previous employment in Japanese companies and in their current employment in Nordic companies.

4.2.1 Hierarchy

One of the big differences between Japanese and Nordic companies is the hierarchy within the company and the power structure between colleagues. Because of this, some participants felt they had more work responsibilities. All the participants mentioned the flat hierarchy in Nordic companies, and some of them felt that it is much easier and more open to discuss different things in the workplace. However, the flat hierarchy can make it a little bit harder to figure out who oversees specific projects and who they should consult when needed, especially when working in teams. Erika talked more about this issue:

Erika: “Sometimes it’s really hard to figure out who’s really the person in charge of the task, like since they are always working in a team. And I think the strategy of our companies is to make the tasks that can be done by anyone in the team. [...] So I have to sometimes consult three or four people to figure out who can do this. I think it’s rare to happen in Japanese company.”

Aoi describes the situation where, in the Japanese working environment, it is common to ask for approval from your boss before, for example, releasing something to the public. However, now, she feels that she has more responsibilities in the Nordic company. Benio also feels this way.

Aoi: “I think I have more responsibilities and like control of what I do. I think it’s maybe because in Japan you have so much layers you have to go through. Whereas in Nordics it’s kind of flat.”

Benio: “Our boss let me decide everything. I can have the responsibility just decide everything. So she is very flexible and she can rely on me. That is very different from Japanese company, because when I was in Japanese company, even a small thing, I need to ask my boss’ permission all the time.”

Especially Benio feels that by having more responsibilities, the projects can proceed more smoothly. As they mentioned, in Japan, you usually must ask permission from your boss, and usually, that boss has their own boss, who they need to confirm first, and so on. By having more responsibilities, Benio feels that the projects can proceed much faster in a Nordic setting.

Hierarchy can also affect the atmosphere if the employees feel that they can openly discuss different matters or express their opinions in the workplace. For example, Aoi describes the atmosphere and relationships as “very flat and very casual.” Some participants felt that it is

much easier to discuss with their boss in a Nordic setting. Participants Chiaki and Daia explained this situation more:

Chiaki: “So regarding the hierarchy, it is true. Meaning that you can call my boss with first name without any like Mr. Miss or something, or manager like in Japan. And so that’s one thing... I think you are allowed more to express your opinion even without any title to someone with higher position than you.”

Daia: “It’s easy to communicate with the executives. [...] In basic Japanese company it’s impossible or super difficult to talk with the high title persons. And also, I feel more, I know the (Nordic) company respects the employees at the bottom side of the employees. They try to always listen to the lower title persons and gather their opinions.”

4.2.2 Career Advancement

It is also good to address the fact that four out of the seven participants mentioned that they work in small companies and with smaller teams. This could affect the situation with how they feel about the hierarchy within the working environment. For example, Aoi explains that she feels more comfortable working in smaller teams. However, working in a smaller company also affects the possibility of career advancement, which Aoi explains. This could mean that if the participants wish to advance in their careers, they must search for promotion opportunities outside their current company. In the case of changing companies in search of promotion, Fumika feels that if she wanted to advance in her career, her current company would support her decision. Benio also adds that there might be better promotion opportunities depending on how the company can grow.

Aoi: “Honestly speaking, I do not see so much promotion opportunities here at my current role. We are very small organization. Our daily operation consists of two persons, me and my director.”

Benio: “I think it (career advancement) depends on the company growth. If our company grow and expand the business for example, build a new laboratory or hire more persons. I hope I can get promoted on higher position.”

This does not mean that there are no career advancement opportunities available at all. Chiaki says that she received a promotion after starting in a Nordic company based on her performance and outcome. However, there are some differences in women's career advancement opportunities in Nordic and Japanese companies. Daia explains that she feels that the promotion opportunities for women and men are more equal within Nordic companies. In contrast, Chiaki explains how career advancement for women can be different in Japanese companies.

Chiaki: “In Nordic country there are more chances for woman in case of career. While in Japan [...] there are so called mom track or something like that. So even if woman got a job as like for employee contract... once they get married and get child they will automatically get the next simpler, less... how to say... less important work in mom track. And I think that’s really sad.”

4.2.3 Work-life Balance

Work-life balance was mentioned several times during the interviews. Participants felt that in Nordic companies and for Nordic people, it is easier to separate work from their own time. They also explained that they felt that the Nordic companies are more flexible when dealing with family matters and working hours. These could be things like health, taking kids to school, or other family events. Daia also explains that the task volume for the day is suitable for the eight-hour workday to complete and there is no need to stay for overwork.

Aoi: “I think one thing is... That, you know, people are more free, or most people would just leave their working place at a very early time. I mean, compared to Japan’s work. You know, they will just leave at four and it’s really OK or it’s really natural to leave even earlier to pick up your kid or have some school events.”

Erika: “The atmosphere itself is really so flexible and open for everyone. Like there is ... a male salesperson who has five-year-old kid and he sometimes (is) late to work because he has to take care of his kid in the morning. But like, there are no one who’s making comments about him being late. So and there is no atmosphere or blaming or anything, which is really nice I think.”

Fumika: “They (Nordic company) always respect this work and life balance. That’s very important. For example, another experience in (previous Nordic company) was that one of my colleagues said “OK, I’m leaving at four today.” But “four??” I thought, because you have to work until 5:30 as a company regulation. But she said, “I will leave office at four because I go to see my son playing for game and he will play in a very important game today”. So that’s another wow-experience. You can leave office early because of the family, mother event.”

Daia also feels that the Nordic company she works for respects their employees’ personal situations, like health issues. It is easier to take leave from work for health issues and not just for family issues, while in Japan, it may affect employees’ chances of getting promotions and advancement in their careers. Erika also feels that working in a Nordic company is better for her health. However, it is good to notice that health problems are not only women’s issues, and while the topic is interesting and could be researched more, this thesis focuses on gender roles in the labor force.

Daia: “They (her employer) naturally respected personal situations. So for example, my global colleague have serious... matter of heart. But still he is working as

strategic purchaser [...] after overcoming his illness. But the Japanese situation completely different. So for example, if the person finds serious illness or trouble of the physically (for) that position, their possibility to get the high position disappeared.”

Erika: “When I was working in (Japanese) trading company, I did have kind of bad health condition because of the work. So, for me it was really important to working in the less stressful environment.”

There are some gender differences when dealing with family matters at the workplace. Chiaki mentions that in Japan, it is usually expected that women pick up the children, and it is more easily accepted if women leave work early to pick up their children. However, Chiaki sees that in Nordic countries, men also participate in those kinds of family matters. Chiaki is currently working and living in Denmark.

Chiaki: “I notice here in Denmark when you have children... either if you are mother or father you can just... If there is anything for a child like you need to pick up the child or child got sick or something, you can just easily leave work and then pick up the children. In Japan it is not something that always works for mother and father, but when it works (picking up the children) it’s more for women. Or the tolerance is high from the colleague that when women go to pick up they may say yes.”

When Nordic companies operate in Japan, their policies may not be the same as when the companies operate in their home countries. International companies may need to adjust their policies to fit the local culture better. Country laws can also affect company policies. Aoi addresses this matter in the case of working hours and work culture, while Benio explains that her maternity leave follows Japanese regulations.

Aoi: “I think because we are in Japan, you know, we are kind of a Nordic organization, but we’re based in Japan, so we are influenced by the Japan’s working culture as well. So people do work longer hours, maybe... compared to Nordics.”

Benio: “In my company [...] I need to follow Japanese regulation. And then the company adjust Japanese regulation. So, in Japan I can take maternity leave up to one year.”

4.2.4 Parental Leave

Maternity leave and parental leave were also talked about in five of the interviews. Participants feel that in their current working pace, there are equal chances for both women and men to take up parental leave and return to work in the same position in their company. They believe that taking parental leave would not affect the possibility of receiving promotions in their current company, unlike in Japanese companies. Benio mentions that the person who is taking care of

the family has the chance to work remotely from home. Chiaki and Erika also explain that their women colleagues had children and returned to the same position after parental leave. In Gumi's case, she mentioned that she had a woman and a male colleague who both had parental leave and could return to the same position as before. Erika added that she felt that her company would greatly support her if she had children. In comparison, Fumika feels that Japanese companies do not have enough support for mothers.

Erika: "I'm married, but I don't have any baby kids so far. But in the future in case I would ever have my baby, I think this company will support me a lot. And also I don't think my current coworker would not get uncomfortable or anything of me being on a leave."

Fumika: "Japanese companies still do not seem to have a good working environment for female workers. I think it is especially important to create an environment where women who take maternity or childcare leave can work for long time."

However, parental leave is not the only support that women need in the labor force. Fumika especially feels that there is a need to give working women more support within companies. This could help companies to keep women with good knowledge and skills as part of the labor force in Japan.

Fumika: "Like (it's) especially (important) to create... to have enough support for ladies who have... Ladies who has to go this life stage like a marriage, childbirth and so on. [...] It is very important to support these ladies in those life stages, if the company wants to keep the person with good knowledge and abilities. That kind of idea is still very weak, especially in the certain industries and maybe in smaller size companies in Japan."

4.3 Gender Roles

When I asked if the participants felt that there were any gender roles in their current workplaces, all of them except Gumi said they felt like there were no gender roles. Gumi mentioned that because she is located in Japan and works with Japanese companies and people, sometimes she needs to consider her gender and position when communicating with them. This is because there are still some embedded gender roles and expectations towards working women within the Japanese working environment. If she does not consider her gender while dealing with Japanese companies, it could cause some problems.

Gumi: "If I don't follow gender roles in Japan I will have difficulty in communication. [...] The current company is mixture of Nordic culture and Japanese culture, [...] I have to also consider about the other side or the other path and the Japanese way respecting other in this higher position. So I have to adjust."

However, in the Japanese working environment, some roles are usually divided between men and women. Women are typically assigned assistant and supporter roles. In more traditional companies, women may be expected to take care of smaller tasks like cleaning and serving tea for customers, making appointments, and booking meeting rooms. Chiaki and Aoi say this is not expected of men in positions similar to women's. Even if the participants had no experience with this, they recognized that it still happens in Japanese companies. Benio also explains that having women act as “decorative flowers” in the company may be considered harassment nowadays, but despite that, it still may happen.

Chiaki: “I needed to do some smaller tasks that other women did, like cleaning or something like that. Other worker in my position didn’t do so.”

Aoi: “For example, there was a male and a female and even though the male was lower experience [...] this female person would have to serve tea.”

Gumi: “Women are basically hired as assistants and no career change (in Japanese companies).”

Fumika mentioned how roles are divided by gender in Japanese companies, and women usually work in assistant roles. However, this does not mean that it only happens in the Japanese working environment; it can also occur in Nordic companies. Fumika feels that, like in Japanese companies, more women in Nordic companies tend to work in assistant roles compared to men.

Fumika: “Even in Japanese companies or Nordic company, when you look at the personal assistant most of them are ladies, aren’t they?”

4.3.1 Gendered Division

There is a clear division between women's and men's roles. This can be seen in the education program students choose and the field they enter as workers. Men study in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, while women study in non-STEM fields like literature and education. This same division and mindset usually continue in the work setting. Benio addressed this in the interview, and Daia says that these kinds of roles are “naturally” part of the Japanese work environment, and usually, women’s position is “not linked to the higher position.”

Benio: “Japanese female don’t usually go to the science degree or something that women prefer to do more literature or language. [...] In a general Japanese company the back office, for example, the accounting or HR, the females are taking that position.”

However, this kind of division is not a problem only in Japanese workplaces. Daia feels like the division of women and men in different fields is more of a global problem. Gumi also had an experience during her employment in a Nordic company where her Japanese male manager explained that “women need to be helpful as assistants and pay attention to details by guessing before or without asking” and that this kind of ability is “only unique to women's nature.” So, there is a need for women to navigate through two cultures in an international company and be aware of their position as women in the company, which can create their own expectations towards them.

4.3.2 Family and Career

The mentality of the Nordic and Japanese companies differs in regards to how they deal with their employees' family matters. Daia, for example, explains that in a Nordic company, it feels like the employers respect their employees with children, which makes it easier to take time off from work to take care of family issues. Aoi feels like it's more natural in a Nordic work environment for men to speak about their families and children, while it may not be the case in a Japanese work environment. Aoi also mentions how, in Nordic countries, there is better childcare, which can ease women's burden of balancing family and work. Nordic society is more supportive of women's employment and careers.

Daia: “They really respect it. To take care of their families first. So it's common sense for Nordic people. [...] In the typical Japanese company, especially women hesitate to say “I will take the break for kids, for myself.””

Aoi: “In Japanese organizations, I think like... males don't... people will be surprised if a male employee talks about their kid or say that they have to pick up their kid today. [...] Whereas in the Nordic organization it's very natural regardless of gender.”

Some of the participants who have children of their own felt that it was impossible to continue working while caring for young children. For example, Aoi quit her job after she got her son. This was because she felt that it would be too much to be working at the same time as taking care of a small child. This decision was based on what she had seen in her previous work environment. She felt that it would be more manageable to balance work and taking care of small children if there were help from your parents or grandparents, and she believes that most mothers who work have their own parents helping with childcare. Benio also hesitates to apply for a Japanese company because of her children. She does not think that she would be able to work overtime, which is usually required or expected in a Japanese working environment.

Aoi: “I mentioned that I quit my job when I had my son. So I was away from my work for several years. The reason why I did this because just watching the people or friends that still work when they had their babies... it was just... It was just so much work. Too much work for them and I couldn’t think of myself coping with it. It seemed as though they were really really having hard time.”

Benio: “Thinking about my position. I hesitate to apply Japanese company for example, because I have small baby and I might not be able to work overtime job. I might not be able to go to business trip so that’s why I hesitate to apply for the Japanese company.”

Overall, women in the Japanese work environment face more pressure to balance work and take care of the family and household. Aoi feels like men do not face similar kinds of pressure, and thus, they can focus on their careers more easily. Meanwhile, Chiaki expresses that most women pursuing careers are not usually married because balancing family and work can be hard. However, if a woman wants to have both a family and a career in a Japanese company, she may start to receive easier “less interesting” tasks.

Aoi: “(Employee) herself could have concerns about if she can manage her work, if she can balance her time with her family and the work. Most of the time male employees don’t think that way, they can just simply pursue their career. But in Japan women has more burden on that, to balance her time between family and work.”

Chiaki: “What I saw at the Japanese company was that if you are a woman and you want to have career and you are often not married because it doesn’t... you cannot balance family life and work. Or if you want to have a family, then you might be able to keep the job, but you will get like less interesting assignments or tasks.”

Women also face other kinds of pressure in the Japanese working environment. For example, Chiaki explains that there was a difference in how she was supposed to behave in comparison to her male colleague in a similar position when she was working in a Japanese company in a male-dominated industry. Women are expected to act humbly and not to express their opinions, while men in similar positions can express their opinions more freely. Because of this experience, Chiaki still feels like it is hard to express her opinions in the Nordic work environment even though her other colleagues do express their opinions freely to people in higher positions.

Chiaki: “It’s more like I am limiting myself like... I often think if I’m allowed to say my opinion in public. [...] I don’t know if I can say something against him (her manager) or not, but I think some other workers here, women, they like directly say they opinion.”

Erika and Gumi explain that these expectations towards women and the overall mentality of women being caregivers are “rooted in Japanese culture” and already “installed” while growing up. Erika feels the need to sacrifice your private life for work is a common mindset among Japanese people.

4.3.3 Role Models

One of the issues participants raised in the interviews was the need for more role models for women in their previous employment in Japanese companies. While I did not consider role models when preparing the interview questions myself, I wanted to explore that topic more and added questions about role models for the interviews. Because fewer women are working as managers and leaders, it is harder to see what kind of possibilities they will have in their careers. This was one of the reasons why Aoi quit her job at a Japanese company. This is not the only problem within Japanese companies, and Fumika mentioned that there are no role models for her at her current job at a Nordic company. However, this can be because she works in a male-dominated field. Despite that, she tries to be a role model for others herself. Chiaki and Gumi also mentioned that even if there was a potential role model for women in Japanese companies, they usually “live for a career,” which could seem too much for some women. Daia also feels that the majority of women who advance in their careers do not get married and have children because doing both may take too much energy and time.

Aoi: “So maybe we can talk a little bit about the reason why I quit. Because that illustrates what I saw in the Japanese company. So why did I have to quit? Why did I make the decision to quit is because I couldn’t see any role models in my company. I entered my company when I was 22, so there was only these younger females. There were no female employees in their 30s, 40s or 50s who... Yeah I mean there wasn’t any people to look up to.”

Chiaki: “That’s were I struggled because I didn’t find anyone that could be my role model. There are several women at the higher position, but as I said they are... like they were really dedicated to their job life. They lived for career and that’s it. They didn’t marry to someone or they didn’t have a child. And my impression was that if I want to continue with that direction, then I would need to give up my private life.”

Gumi: “Women are not the main character in Japanese company. Or the woman who is highly promoted as like super women, who is doing every aspect in career, job and as well as raising child or taking care of her husband. But it’s too high or too difficult to achieve that position. It needs some... Maybe not only the energy of herself, but it also the cooperation from people surrounding her. It is very lucky person or rare case.”

Erika: “Inside Japanese company you don’t really see female manager or director or leaders. Not so often. So there we don’t see a lot of role... let’s say role model. And the other thing... like we see a lot of managers, directors working so long, so hard and they’re really really stressful environment in Japanese companies. Like a lot of pressure from up, so like... many people don’t even want to promote.”

Some of the participants mentioned that they think Nordic companies have more opportunities for women to proceed to higher positions, which could be why they believe there are more potential role models within Nordic companies. For example, Chiaki explains that Nordic countries have “more chances for women in case of career.” Aoi also feels that having more women in higher positions and acting as role models would inspire younger women to see that it is possible to manage work and family simultaneously.

In Japanese companies, it is harder for women to proceed in their careers because of the expectations they face in the work environment and personal lives. As the participants mentioned before, women are expected to take care of their children and families, which is why they cannot dedicate themselves fully to work. For example, Daia feels that because women are expected to take care of the family and men are usually the ones focusing and dedicating themselves to work, women have fewer chances to advance in their careers. This way of thinking is “naturally” embedded in the Japanese society.

Daia: “Nordic woman naturally work the same as the men. Maybe it’s common sense there. [...] In Japan the situation is completely different. So naturally the mother take care of the kids and doesn’t work. It’s natural situation. Because of this background Japanese women doesn’t consider the career stages naturally and not strongly seek to the higher position. So they are the completely different mindset.”

As Benio and Erika explain, Japanese people may tend to think highly of lifetime employment and people who work for one company for their whole lives. Companies themselves tend to appreciate people who can work longer hours, which gives them better chances for promotion.

Benio: “People still think that working in one company for life, lifetime employment is a good thing. Finding job at older age might be difficult in Japan”

Erika: “I feel that still inside Japanese company there are this atmosphere that the longer you work the better you are considered. Something like that, like without taking holiday, long working hours is considered to be something virtue, something good. [...] That is why people are not willing to take day offs or holidays for a long time because they don’t want to be considered lazy. They don’t want to make other people too busy or make trouble.”

Appreciating lifetime employment and dedicating yourself to work over private life can cause some challenges for mothers in advancing their careers. Erika explained during the interview

that mothers who take maternity leave may face difficulties in receiving promotions due to being away from work for a long time. Gumi adds that in smaller companies, there might be problems managing the work the person on maternity leave usually did, which means that the people who are left working need to take up the work left behind by the person on maternity leave. This kind of situation may continue even after maternity leave if the mother needs to take a day off or leave earlier to take care of their children. Erika also mentioned her friend, who had a similar experience as a person who needed to take care of the work of a working mother with smaller children.

Erika: “In Japanese company, I would say it’s still kind of hard for female to get higher position. Like Japanese company does not allow you to be in higher position after, especially after long leave, like maternity leave. So technically if you take long break from work your career is kind of stopped.”

Gumi: “In smaller company cases the people working there are not sufficient basically, so if someone get maternity leave for one year, then how the work she’s in charge of will be managed by others just without adding someone else. That is problem.”

Erika: “I actually hear some of my friends who are married and don’t have baby kids saying that she is working really busy because she has to support other working mothers. [...] The tasks that the working mother who’s working initial time cannot finish in time, my friend has to take care of the task of that person, and she claims that it’s kind of unfair.”

Sometimes, achieving a promotion may require participating in activities outside work to build relationships with your managers and people in leadership positions. These activities can be, for example, going drinking after work with your boss and colleagues. However, this may not be possible for women with children because, as explained before, they are expected to take care of their families. This means women tend to have less time to participate in these kinds of activities outside working hours.

Erika: “If you really want to get promoted you have to have good relationship with your supervisors and your managers and that kind of communication is sometimes outside of the company. Like having drinks together or having cigarette break together, something like that. Like build the relationship outside the office and then they are getting closer and then you can get more chance for promotion. In some cases it makes women to have less chance to get closer to your... especially male managers, leaders.”

4.4 Changes in the Japanese Working Environment

Even though some participants had negative experiences working in a Japanese company, they see that the situation has improved concerning the working environment for women. However, interview participants see that the change within the Japanese companies and society has been too slow. Even though the change has been slow, they feel that it has been mostly positive. For example, Aoi explains that she feels like there are more Japanese couples having children and splitting housework more equally. Daia also mentioned that the Japanese government has been more supportive of men's parental leaves. Japanese companies have tried to stop assigning supportive tasks to women, like serving tea.

Aoi: "Definitely the people's mindset are changing. So if you see like couples in their 20s and have small kids, they both work. They really divide housework 50-50 and that's becoming more natural and majority, I think."

Erika: "Like traditionally... I heard that woman... like for example when customer visit in your office women had to serve tea or sweets to the customer, not men, just women do that kind of job. But it's kind of traditional nowadays and most companies stopped doing that kind of thing."

Some negative points arose during the interview. For example, Aoi talked about legislation that should ensure equal treatment of gender in the labor force, but she feels that not all companies have enrolled these laws. Daia also feels that one of the problems could be that the majority of the managers and company leaders are older men who may not understand the problems women face while working and take care of the family at the same time. Fumika and Gumi explained how Japanese politicians are mostly men, which could be behind the slow change in society in regard to gender equality.

Daia: "Especially for the companies management, meaning older men managers, I think... maybe after few decades the companies and the Japanese society (are) completely different, because majority of men and women manager (have) experienced taking care of the kids."

Fumika: "I'm hoping that it's (gender equality) improving and that we are moving towards the better way. But still, when you look at this diet, a lot of politicians are guys and which is why the improvement is slow."

Gumi: "Majority of executives and politicians in Japan are men, which prevents improving gender equality in general and causes huge delay of facilitating better work environment for women. [...] The brains in the political world are most dominant in old man who is not in charge of the house managing. It's very difficult to image what is really needed or what is to be changed."

Not having a gender-equal working environment can also be seen as a negative thing that could affect the company's reputation. Daia explains that global Japanese companies try to build gender-equal working environments and support women to maintain their appearances and reputations. Fumika adds that having a good reputation for gender equality is connected to the overall image of the company, and having better equality could improve the company's image.

Fumika: "I think companies try to change it (gender inequality). Of course, it's also related to the current... let's say trend that you need the better image of the company. So companies also try to increase the number of female managers."

International and multinational companies have mostly positive images among the participants. For example, Erika hopes that Japanese companies would learn from Nordic companies. Aoi also feels that multinational companies are putting more effort into promoting women in higher positions. In addition, Benio felt that Japanese start-up companies have a work environment that is more similar to the Nordic work environment in Japan.

Erika: "I still have worked for really short time in this (Nordic) company, but I don't really... Like compared to my previous working experience in Japanese companies, this company is like heaven. I think Japanese companies can learn a lot from these companies' culture. Like you don't really have to make yourself stressed out too much because the work is just part of your life."

Aoi: "Especially like those global multinational companies, they have strong gender policies these days. So they're really active really positive in hiring more or promoting more females to management roles. So it's, I mean, its really long road to go, but at least things are changing in a positive way, I think."

The participants' overall hope is that Japanese society will continue improving the current situation for working women. They hope that women can continue working and advancing in their careers while taking care of their families.

Aoi: "I really hope that in the future or the younger generation these days don't have to choose between having their kids and working 100%. I really hope that they can do both of them."

All the participants mentioned that they would like to continue working in Nordic companies or continue their careers in companies from other countries rather than Japanese companies. Only Aoi mentioned that she would like to challenge herself by working in a Japanese company again and trying to introduce the positive parts of Nordic working culture to Japanese working culture.

Aoi: "The thing is that I think I would feel more comfortable if I stay in the Nordic (company) because of the lifestyle that... the working style that I have been used

to for these years. And how, you know, the work-life balance is secured. So I will feel more comfortable. But then on the other side [...] I have this feeling that I would like maybe to challenge myself in a Japanese organization.”

Chiaki: “I want to continue my career in this direction and hopefully with more responsibility or manager position or something. But... And I don't want to work for Japanese company anymore. [...] I don't restrict to Nordic company, but maybe company from other culture would work.”

Daia: “I really prefer to work in this (Nordic) company. But the number of (Nordic) companies is not so big. But maybe I don't choose the Japanese company anymore. Yeah... So it is the other countries.”

5 Discussion

In this chapter, I will go through the findings from the primary data, combining them with the thematic framework and previous research. I will use the same themes that emerged from the interviews to walk through the results of the interviews. These themes were personal background, meaning participants' past experiences, company policies and atmosphere, gender roles, and changes in Japanese working environments. Lastly, I will review topics that emerged from previous research but were not mentioned during the interviews.

5.1 Impact of Past Experiences

Participant's international background could have played a part in choosing a career in an international organization or company. All the participants except one had an international background themselves or their parents had worked in international companies. In addition to their international background, all the participants had a positive image of the Nordic countries prior to working in a Nordic company. They mentioned how in Nordic countries, there are good welfare systems, work-life balance, and higher gender equality rates than in Japan. This can also be seen in other research made about Nordics. As Hellum *et al.* (2024) and *OECD* (2018) write, in Nordic countries, the welfare system is based on an ideology of providing health care, education, and economic safety for all regardless of their background in addition to their "dual earner-dual carer" model where both parents are encouraged to work. This is reflected in the company policies about working hours and the support they give to working women, especially working mothers.

Other personal circumstances also affected participants' decisions to work in Nordic companies. These included health issues within the family and other family circumstances. For example, Daia wanted to be able to take time off from work or leave earlier due to health issues, and other participants mentioned that taking time off for family matters was important to them. I will discuss this in more detail in the following subsection.

5.2 Company Policies and Atmosphere

The work-life balance was mentioned several times by the participants during the interviews. They felt that working in Nordic companies gave them more freedom in their working hours in addition to taking time off for personal and family matters. As Nygård *et al.* (2023) write, the Nordic welfare system is somewhat based on helping women to participate in the labor force.

Hellum *et al.* (2024) and *OECD* (2018) also add that to create better work-life balance, Nordic countries try to encourage both parents to continue working (“dual earner-dual carer” model) with the help of parental leaves and childhood education which is many times provided by the state. The same could be said about this research’s participants’ feelings on their current companies. The volume of work tasks is suitable for an 8-hour day, meaning there is less need for overwork. The overall atmosphere in the working environment is accepting of arriving later or leaving earlier for health or family matters compared to the Japanese working environment. In Japanese companies, long working hours are considered a “virtue.” This could be because, as Ueno (2021) explains, lifetime employment, dedicating oneself to the company, and career length are valued in Japanese society. Because of these values, in Japan, it is easier for one of the parents to stay home to take care of the household while the other concentrates on their career and providing for the family (“one breadwinner” model).

As Nygård *et al.* (2023) and Hellum *et al.* (2024) explained, Nordic countries' social policy model encourages parents to continue working after having children by providing parental leave for both mothers and fathers. Because the goal is to encourage women to stay in the labor force, parental leave does not affect their promotion possibilities. This, however, has often not worked in Japan, where the length of a career is valued. Five of the participants who mentioned parental leave during their interview mentioned that taking parental leave in a Nordic company would not affect women's promotion opportunities, and women could return to the same position after their leave. In comparison, they felt that if women were to take parental leave in a Japanese company, they would not be able to continue in the same position, or they would lose their chances for promotion. This could mean that Nordic companies in Japan are trying to help women stay in the labor force.

Another major topic that arose during the interviews was the hierarchy within the Nordic and Japanese companies. When talking about hierarchy, participants mentioned that the hierarchy in their current Nordic work environment was “flat,” and communication felt more open. You could address your boss without any titles, and they felt that their opinions were welcomed. In contrast, in a Japanese company, there is a need to get your boss's approval for decision-making, who sometimes needs to ask the same from their own supervisors and so on. Some participants also felt they could not openly express their opinions. The participants who talked about hierarchy mentioned that they felt like they had more responsibilities now than when they were working in a Japanese company. This could be explained by having more authority to make decisions rather than needing to get confirmation from a supervisor.

The flat hierarchical structure and open communication between supervisors and subordinates could be explained by the power distance differences between Nordic countries and Japan. Individuals who have more responsibilities are also tied to power distance. As mentioned in Chapter 2.2.2, Nordic countries have lower power distance compared to Japan, meaning flatter hierarchical structures within the company. In addition to flatter hierarchical structures, companies from countries with low power distance usually have more horizontal communication between employees, and performance is valued over seniority. As Hofstede (2013) and Ghosh (2011) explain, if the power distance is lower, the communication goes from top to bottom as well as horizontally, which can narrow down the communication gap within the company. This could be one reason why participants felt it was easier to express their opinions in Nordic companies. The same goes for responsibilities. With a lower power distance, there is more focus on the individual's own decision-making than on consulting supervisors.

However, there are two things that are good to consider when looking at the topic of hierarchical structure in this research. First, it is good to remember that the participants worked in smaller companies, which could affect the hierarchical structure inside the company. The hierarchical structure might be different in bigger Nordic companies located in Japan. The second thing is that when you work in an international company, there are usually at least two different work cultures combined. Groznaya (2011) also mentions a similar situation where foreign companies operating in Japan start to feel more "Japanese," which could mean that foreign companies begin to adapt and combine Japanese working culture with their local working culture. As Gumi mentioned, she needed to consider Japanese and Finnish cultures and how she communicated with others at work. While communicating with Japanese colleagues and customers, there might be a need to consider their background and behave as they would expect you to build a better relationship with them. This could also be because the participants themselves are Japanese, which is why other Japanese people might expect certain ways of behavior from them. Their position at work could also affect how they are expected to behave in different cultures.

5.3 Gender Roles

There were certain expectations towards working women and no role models for women in the Japanese working environment. Some of the expectations they mentioned were to be "humble" and women working in supporter roles. The "supporter role" was also expected from women who worked in the same role as their male colleagues, meaning they were expected to do

smaller tasks like serving tea for customers, cleaning, making appointments, etc. The same tasks were not expected from their male colleagues.

This “supporter role” may be because of the overall expectations Japanese women face in their lives related to their caregiver role in Japanese society. This topic also emerged during the interviews. Women are expected to take care of the children, meaning staying home to take care of them or taking and picking them up from daycare. There is a shared mentality that if there are some problems, for example, health issues within the family, women most likely will leave work earlier or take time off to deal with it rather than men. As mentioned also by many researchers (Peltokorpi *et al.* 2019; Hamada 2018; Kemper *et al.* 2019; Li *et al.* 2023; Ueno 2021; Tsuruoka 2023), Japanese women are expected to take care of their families rather than pursue careers. This usually means that they stop working after marriage or first child. Because women have the role of caregiver in Japanese society, it could be one of the reasons why they usually have the supporter role also in the work environment.

Promotion opportunities could be related to power distance because companies with lower power distance tend to value skills over seniority, as Hofstede (2013) has mentioned. Participants felt that overall, in Nordic companies, promotion opportunities are more equal for both women and men than in Japanese companies. For example, in a Japanese company, maternity leave could affect a woman’s chances of receiving a promotion because maternity leave creates a gap in women’s careers. Koveshnikov *et al.* (2019) also mention that Japanese companies tend to value the length of employment, which could then be disturbed by maternity leave. The overall mentality of Japanese style management and Japanese family ideology mentioned by Ueno (2021) and Tsuruoka (2023) can create challenges for women wanting to advance in their careers. Valuing length of employment and dedication to the company combined with expectations for women to take care of the family creates challenges for women to try to pursue careers. Women who are expected to take care of the children cannot dedicate themselves to the companies, which decreases their opportunities for promotion in Japanese companies. This is a shared feeling between the participants. While working in Nordic companies, participants felt there were more equal possibilities for women to receive promotions.

The lack of role models is connected to the promotion of opportunities for women. If there are no opportunities for women to advance in their careers, there are no role models at all to look up to, or the image of the role model is not realistic for all. This was especially a problem in

Japanese companies, but there was some lack of role models within Nordic companies. This is also supported by the data from *OECD Data Explorer – Archive* (2022), where we can see that Japan only has a 12.9% share of women working as managers. While Nordic countries have more women working in manager positions, the share of women managers in most of the Nordic countries is under 40%.

The lack of role models for women can also be seen in STEM fields. Women tend to pursue careers in non-STEM fields, as mentioned by Daia and Gumi during the interview. Gender division starts from education choices, where women prefer to choose to study, for example, literature and languages, and not in STEM fields. This statement is also supported by Chen *et al.* (2020) and Encinas-Martín (2023). Women are underrepresented in the STEM fields, and this could be because of the lack of role models in STEM fields. This gender division continues in the labor force, which could be one of the reasons why women are usually assigned to assistant roles.

Another point that was brought up in the interviews was the “superwomen” as role models in Japanese companies. This meant women who were able to combine work and take care of the household at the same time, in contrast to other working women. As Aoi mentions, these “superwomen” with careers and children usually receive help from their parents and/or grandparents with childcare, which helps them focus on their careers more. However, this is not possible for everyone. Other types of role models in Japanese companies were women who only dedicated themselves to work without starting a family and having children. Because Japanese women tend to quit their jobs after marriage or first children and the share of women in managerial positions in Japan is low, there is a shortage of role models for women in the Japanese work environment.

5.4 Changes in the Japanese Working Environment

As mentioned in Chapter 2.1.1, the Japanese government has tried to improve women’s situation in the labor force via different policies (e.g., EEOL and *womenomics*), but with little success. Interview participants themselves also felt that there have been some improvements, but it has been too slow. They mainly mention that there has been a change in people's mindset rather than the policies and laws that have helped the situation. As mentioned by Asao *et al.* (2024a), all Japanese companies are not required, for example, to increase the share of women in leadership positions like the goal was on *womenomics*. The goal was only required from the companies listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, which covers only a tiny share of the Japanese

labor force. This could be why it feels that the change is happening slowly. In addition, Aoi mentioned in the interview that some companies do not even implement laws about gender equality in their daily operations. This might be because, as Asao *et al.* (2024a) mentioned in their research, a lot of the goals were voluntary and without penalties.

Another topic that arose when talking about the developments of the gender equality situation in Japan was about the leaders and politicians being older men. As we can see in the *OECD Data Explorer* (2023), in 2020, the share of women in managerial positions in Japan was only 12.9%, while in the same year, women only held 10% of the seats in national parliaments (*World Bank Group* 2024c). Participants felt that older men who are responsible for making the change in Japan may not understand the pressure women feel in their working environment and home. This could be one of the reasons why the change is slow, and having more women in leadership positions could help Japan achieve better gender equality faster.

5.5 Other Topics

Some topics related to choosing a career were not discussed in this paper or in interviews at all. These could be things related to the salary and if that was motivation to start working in the Nordic company. However, this research focuses on gender roles, and during the interviews, salary was not discussed, nor was it mentioned by the participants. More research could be done on the salary differences between Japanese and Nordic companies in Japan. In more detail, there could be research on the wage gap in those Nordic companies operating in Japan. As Fluchtmann and Patrini (2023) mention, Japanese women tend to work as irregular workers, which affects the overall wage gap in Japan. It could be a possible research topic to compare the wage gap in Nordic companies in Japan and to see if wages play any part in Japanese working women's decision to work in Nordic (or other international) companies.

One of the other topics discussed in Chapter 2, but not in the interviews, was how the Japanese taxation system is potentially affecting Japanese women (re-)entering the labor force. As Adema *et al.* (2023) mention, the Japanese taxation system can act as a trap for second earners, who usually are women, by not encouraging them to re-enter employment where their annual salary is high enough to lose the tax benefits. No one mentioned this “spouse tax” during the interviews. The taxation system in Japan could be a possible topic for further research and discussion. The topic could be explored from the point of view of women and how they themselves see how the system might affect their re-entrance in the labor force.

The other topic mentioned in the previous literature in Chapter 2 and not discussed in the interviews was job security. It would be interesting to explore how Japanese women see job security in Nordic companies and if that has played any part in their decision to join Nordic companies. Especially because Japanese women tend to work as irregular employees, who usually have lower job security, it would be interesting to see how relevant it is for deciding on their careers. Only one of the participants mentioned that she worked as an irregular worker in the Nordic company. To research this topic, there is a need for more comprehensive research on employment contracts in international companies in Japan.

6 Conclusions

This research focuses on the experiences of Japanese working women in Nordic companies operating in Japan. This research aimed to discover why Japanese women would seek employment in Nordic companies and how gender roles might impact that decision. I interviewed seven Japanese women who are currently working for Nordic companies. The data for this research was collected via semi-structured interviews. Some participants had prior experience working in an international or Nordic company. I argue that some Japanese working women seek employment in Nordic companies as an alternative career option because of the gender-based norms and restrictions they face in Japanese companies. While women do find a more balanced work-life environment and more equal treatment in Nordic companies, there are still challenges. These challenges are, for example, double cultural expectations, small companies having fewer career advancement opportunities, in addition to having fewer companies to choose from due to the small number of Nordic companies in Japan.

Japanese working culture and environment can create challenges for working women. There are different kinds of expectations towards women; most expectations are related to family matters and women's role as caregivers. Women are expected to take care of the family, while men can dedicate themselves to their employers and provide income for their families. Women face challenges concerning career advancement and finding role models for themselves. The Japanese government has attempted to improve the current situation through different policies and laws but with little success.

As introduced at the beginning of this paper, this research aimed to determine why Japanese working women would choose to work at a Nordic company rather than a Japanese company. The research questions were created based on the literature review as follows:

- What are some of the factors why Japanese women choose to work in Nordic companies over Japanese ones?
- More specifically, what is the role/impact of Japanese employment-related gender norms and roles in women's decision to work for Nordic companies?
- What kind of expectations do Japanese women in the labor force have of the Nordic companies and their gender-related employment policies beforehand?
- How were their expectations met after working in a Nordic company?

Some factors that emerged from the data as to why Japanese women choose to work in Nordic companies were a positive image of Nordic countries and/or negative personal experiences working in Japanese companies. Nordic countries had an overall positive image among the participants, which could have helped them to decide to seek employment in Nordic companies. Personal negative experiences also had an impact on the decision. The expectations and pressure they felt in the work environment made some women quit their jobs in Japanese companies and seek employment elsewhere. Their personal international background could have also played a part in this. All the participants, except one, had some international experience, for example, exchange studies or they have lived abroad for some time.

In addition, they mentioned topics like work-life balance and family circumstances. Some of the women had children of their own, which also affected their decision to seek employment with more freedom in terms of working hours. There was a common feeling that working in a Japanese company with children was not possible due to the expectations of long working hours or overwork. Combining family and work was more manageable in Nordic companies. The hiring process in Nordic companies was also based on skills, which could have helped these women re-enter the labor force after having a career gap due to staying at home and taking care of the family. Health was part of one of the participants' decisions to seek employment in a Nordic company. She felt that it was easier to take time off or adjust the working hours if there were health issues in the family.

The impact of gender roles within the Japanese company in participants' decisions to seek employment in Nordic companies was not only related to employment-related gender roles but overall gender roles present in Japanese society. Women are expected to be the caregivers in Japanese society, meaning that they are the ones taking care of the family, while men tend to focus more on their careers and providing income. This was also seen in the data. Overall, there was agreement that balancing family life and work was more complicated in Japanese than in Nordic companies. In Nordic companies, it was more "natural" to talk about family matters, and it was more acceptable to leave work earlier or take time off for family matters.

There were other expectations women faced in the Japanese working environment. Women were expected to act humbler than men and not express their opinions as openly as men were able to. Women were also expected to take the role of supporters. This meant taking care of smaller tasks like serving tea or booking meeting rooms. The same tasks were not expected from men in similar positions. However, not all the women experienced this, but they have

heard from their friends and families about those cases, which could imply that this is still the case in the Japanese working environment.

Before working in Nordic companies, participants had a positive image of Nordic countries. They mentioned things like welfare, work-life balance, and overall respect for families and employees. Participants did not have so many expectations of the company policies themselves. Still, they expected to receive a more flexible working environment and equality, in addition to expecting the employer to respect their employees. There were also expectations to have better gender equality within the companies as well as achieving better work-life balance. This could help combine family and work and make it easier to take time off if needed. Work-life balance was essential for one of the women because of the health issues mentioned before.

Their expectations were quite well met. They all had positive experiences working in Nordic companies and a feeling of being respected more. The women who had their own families felt that it was easier to combine work and family, and the others who did not have children were convinced that the company would keep supporting them even after they had children of their own. All participants mentioned that they would like to continue working in Nordic companies. However, one of them mentioned that she would like to challenge herself in a Japanese company to try to introduce the positive aspects of Nordic companies to Japanese ones. There were no restrictions to only Nordic companies, but other international companies would be possible options for some of the women.

However, there were some difficulties finding role models in Nordic companies. While most of them mentioned that there were role models in Nordic companies, which they could not see while working for a Japanese company, not all of them were able to find themselves role models. The hierarchy and finding the person responsible for different projects created some challenges for some of the participants. While in Japan, it is easier to find a supervisor for teams and projects, it can be confusing in Nordic companies where there are fewer hierarchical structures.

This research only focuses on Japanese women working in Nordic companies operating in Japan. This specific target group is relatively narrow and does not represent all Japanese working women. It is good to remember that the number of Nordic companies in Japan is limited, which makes me wonder if Nordic companies could offer Japanese women a better working experience and environment than Japanese companies. The working culture within the company can also be different depending on how much they adopt the Japanese way of working.

It would be interesting to explore more on how companies' working cultures and dynamics operate in international companies with two or more different cultures combined, which is why it could be an exciting topic for future research. This topic could also be expanded to women who work in other international companies and how they see their working environment in companies with different working cultures than Japan. It would be interesting to see if the women's experiences would be similar to this research.

Overall, this research on Nordic companies operating in Japan and Japanese working women's experiences while working in them creates a new point of view for discussions on Japanese working culture and could help us better understand it.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Questions

General information

1. name, 氏名
2. age, 年齢
3. occupation, 職業
4. current title, (previous titles), 役職 (title) * 職務名 * 前職の役職
5. small job description 簡単な職務内容の説明
6. previous work experience and occupations (international companies or Japanese companies) 以前の職務経験と職業 (日本の会社も海外の会社も)
7. education background: schools, education level, exchanges, etc.
学歴: 教育レベル、留学経験
8. Family background 家庭環境 home environment: parents and their occupations/professions (Maybe it's enough to ask if they had any experience working in an international company, if yes, Which country was the company from
両親と彼らの職業について (外国の企業での勤務経験がありますか。ある場合、国名を教えてください)

Current work/Work environment 現在の仕事について:

1. How did you find your current work?
どのように現在の仕事を見つけましたか。
2. What made you decide to start working in this company?
なぜ御社 (your company) 働き始めましたか。
3. Is it easy to find a job in an international company in Japan?
日本では、外国の企業の仕事は見つけやすいですか。

Nordic companies 北欧の国の会社//北欧の会社:

4. What did you know about Nordic countries (/Finland) before starting to work in a Nordic company?
北欧の会社で仕事をする前に、北欧の国々 (フィンランド) について、どんなことを知っていましたか。
5. What did you know about Nordic companies before starting to work in one?
北欧の会社で働く前に、北欧の会社について何を知っていましたか。
6. Have your knowledge/ideas changed after working in a Nordic company?
北欧の会社で働き始めてから、あなたの考えは変わりましたか。

Japanese working environment 日本の職場環境:

1. How would you describe work at a Japanese company from the point of view of a female employee (it is okay if you do not have any prior experience working in a Japanese company. You can describe what you have heard or learned from elsewhere, and what kind of image you have. Your friends'/mothers' experiences etc. are ok too.)
女性社員として日本の会社で働くことについて、どう思いますか。述べてください。
(日本の会社での職務経験が無ければ結構です。聞いたことや学んだこと、あなたが持っているイメージについて教えてください (お母さんとか友達の経験))
2. In your opinion/experience what are the biggest differences in the international working environment compared to Japanese (from a female/gender point of view)?
あなたの考えや経験から、日本の会社と外国企業の職場環境の違いはなんですか。(女性やジェンダーの視点から)
3. What kind of roles do women have in the Japanese work environment?
日本の職場環境では女の人はどんな役割がありますか。(男の人に比べて)
4. How about roles in the Nordic work environment?
北欧の職場環境での女の人の役割はどうですか。

Policies 方針 and gender roles 性別役割 (性役割)

1. Do gender roles affect your work? If so, How? (e.g. work tasks, role, “men’s work/women’s work”, working hours, workload, and so on.)
性別役割は仕事に影響を与えますか。もしその場合、どのように影響を与えますか。(仕事の内容、役割、男性の仕事と女性の仕事の違い、労働時間、など)
2. Do you feel that there are different expectations or roles for Japanese women compared to the women from Nordic countries within the same company?
同じ会社内で、北欧の女性と日本人の女の人と北欧人と比べて、期待役割が違いますか。
3. How do you see your own possibilities for career advancement キャリアアップ/昇進 in this company? (Promotions, managerial positions, etc.)
御社ではどのようなキャリアアップの機会がありますか。キャリアアップができますか。
 - a. Do you think gender plays a role in career advancement?
キャリアアップに性別が影響を与えますか。
 - b. What kind of career advancement possibilities does your company have?
御社には、どのようなキャリアアップの機会がありますか。
 - c. Is there a difference between Japanese and Nordic companies in terms of career advancement for women?
女性のキャリアアップに関して、北欧の会社と日本の会社ではどのような相違がありますか。
4. Does your company have any specific policies targeted at women? What kind of policies?
現在勤務している(今働いている)会社には女性を対象とした特定の(明確な clear)方針がありますか。どのような方針ですか。
5. How would you describe your current company’s gender policies? (if there is any) Are they talking in the company?
現在勤務している(今働いている)会社にはジェンダー政策がありますか。
どんなジェンダー政策ですか。
会社でジェンダー政策について話しますか。

Gender policies: maternity leave, returning to work after maternity leave, taking care of the family (children and elderly), working hours and flexibility, work-life balance, 育児休暇、育児休暇後の職場復帰、家族の世話(子供、お年寄)、労働時間の柔軟性、ワークライフバランス

Future:

1. Where do you see yourself in 5/10 years career-wise?
キャリアについて5年と10年後どんな状況がありますか。
(5年後、10年後、どのようなキャリアプランを考えていますか。)
2. Will you still be at a Nordic/Finnish company?
引き続き北欧の会社で働いていますか。

Open questions:

1. Is there something you would like to say or add?
他に何か言いたいこと、あるいは付け足すことがありますか。
2. Is there something you think is important, but was missing from my questions?
面接の質問で、他の大切だと思うことがありますか。