



A study of gender equality for life enrichment—exploring how to make a difference for gender equality at work and at home

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Introduction

This study explores how Japanese workers can positively influence themselves and those around them to promote gender equality by eliminating work-life bias and reviewing previous studies on home economics.

Several Japanese working women have the same “advantages” as men under certain laws. That is to say, some of them could acquire “capabilities” as discussed by economist Amartia Sen. Here, capability means having boundless freedom to fulfill our lives. For example, these include opportunities to participate in the labor market, attain equal wages, and land promotions from an economic perspective. Japanese working women need economic and social power and freedom from gender roles or gender ideologies.

However, a new study about gender equality in employment from a home economics perspective is needed, which begs the question, how can Japanese workers, both women and men, overcome work-life bias? It is said that Japan has a strong ideology that workers should selflessly devote themselves to work or their companies. It is unfortunate that workers cannot enrich their personal lives if they are forced to keep their selfless devotion to work. Employees with family responsibilities cannot build their careers in such a working culture. Therefore, we need to contemplate how working women and men can overcome bias to achieve a gender-equal society.

Literature on Gender Equality in Employment

Gender Equality in Business in Japan

Gender equality in business has become one of the most important topics not only for Japanese social policies but also for businesses in Japan. Given that Japan has serious population problems, including ageing and a low birth-rate, the Japanese government and companies expect women to participate in the labor market to keep the shrinking Japanese workforce and social welfare system.

In 2015, the Japanese government implemented the “Act on the Promotion of Female Participation and Career Advancement in the Workplace”, which promotes labor participation of female employees and supports their work-life balance or professional development in their careers.

However, the Japanese gender gap ranks 117th out of 156 countries in business (World Economic Forum, 2021). Although the “Equal Employment Opportunity Law” enacted in 1985 banned discrimination in the recruitment and retirement of employees, other gender discriminative systems such as training and promotion gaps are still present in Japan. Women earn about 76.8%

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of men's income, and only 10% of board members in Japanese corporate are women (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2021).

Literature on Gender Equality in Employment

Studies on gender equality in employment have mainly focused on female workers in corporate management, economics, and differences in social policies.

Firstly, these studies have revealed the prevalence of discrimination against women at work. Presently, Japanese women are not treated equally to their male counterparts in their workplaces. For example, women's career paths are different from men's, and gender differences rather than educational background affect their chance of promotion. Furthermore, researchers have suggested that women need to have the same job opportunities as their male counterparts (Ootsuki,2015) (Yamaguchi,2017).

Secondly, studies on gender equality have focused on challenges in attaining a healthy work-life balance in the Japanese employment system that habitually excludes women with family responsibilities from the labor market. These studies suggest that there might be a strong correlation between the employment system and gender role ideologies. Therefore, researchers recommend Japanese companies abolish the outdated work culture that triggers the gender gap from effectiveness and productivity perspectives (Kawaguchi, 2008; Takeishi, 2012; Kawaguchi,2013).

A home economics perspective

There are several issues that home economics has to focus on these achievements regarding gender equality in employment.

Firstly, the goal of previous studies on gender equality in employment can likely be simplified into two objectives. The first is how working women can have the same financial and social advantages as men in the same level. The second is how to eradicate gender bias at work. It is essential that women have the same wages, training, and status as men do. However, exploring working women's holistic well-beings and development is a different ballgame altogether.

As Economist Amartia Sen said, gender equality is to let both women and men have the same capabilities (Sen,1999), meaning that we need to have many options to live freely. In particular, even if women can have labor rights, money, status, a persisting challenge would be how to free both women and men from the traditional ideology. Therefore, eradicating a bias like "Men should go out for work, while women should do housework and take care of family" should be a critical theme.

Undoubtedly, we need more studies on gender equality in employment focusing on work-life bias across both genders. The Japanese feminist Yumiko Ehara commented that the Japanese have a "work first" ideology, whereby they, especially working men, have a work-first attitude when managing their day to day lives.

However, conforming to this ideology would only propagate the current gap in equality, and gender roles at work and home in Japan will remain unchallenged (Ehara, 2022). Japanese workers are urged to be diligent by companies and society. However, the "diligence" definitely deprives workers of their life enrichment opportunities because such workers are always encouraged to prioritize work, sacrificing personal time. Notably, work and personal well-being are treated differently in the U.S; the importance of structuring a society where both the value of work and family care are guaranteed is expected (Slaughter,2016).

Secondly, previous studies have modelled the narrative mainly around women. While it is vital to discover how to eradicate discrimination against women and how they can empower

themselves through legislation or supportive resources, gender equality is an issue affecting everyone. Still, many Japanese men in their 30s work longer hours (more than 60 hours) in a week (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2022). Japanese men's notorious workstyle has not changed. Therefore, men also need to be free from the masculinity stereotype as breadwinners and promote a gender-equitable society with women.

Thirdly, previous studies on gender equality have attempted to solve gender issues from government and corporate perspectives. Improving legislation or reforming the work culture are essential topics for women's empowerment. In addition, workers, not only women but also men should advocate for their rights to governments. However, the home economics approach can also examine the possibility of workers eradicating the work-life bias. Because home economics studies have empowered and helped people solve problems related to our lives. The Japanese home economist Shunsuke Nagashima stated that home economics should resist the market socialism that degrades human life development (Nagashima, 2021).

Methods

This study conducted an internet survey of company workers in Japan in 2019. A total of 1000 workers (500 male and 500 female workers) participated in the study. In this study, workers refer to businesspeople employed at private companies.

Let us review some of the study's main questions for the participants.

First, "work-life bias" consisted of three opinions, and participants were offered four choices from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", as shown below:

- Those who prioritize personal life cannot have good results at work.
- Those who prioritize personal life cannot be first class businesspeople.
- Those who prioritize personal life cannot be trusted as businesspeople.

Second, in this study "advantage" means income and employment rank. As for the employment rank, this study divided the participants into two categories (regular workers or above chief clerk, regardless of their employment status).

Third, this survey asked the workers the experiences and opinions about life. At first, this study asked them the realization of learning about life. It is how they realize that they have "learned" various matters related to their lives. For example, we asked them how much they think they have studied "food", "clothing", "housing", "consumption", "child-rearing", "environmental issues" and so on in the past, including schooldays.

Next, this study asked them their current and future life value perspective. This study gave them five categories, referring to the Japanese opinion survey (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, 2019). We asked them to what extent they value each of the following five things in life: "health", "friendly relationships", "economic power", "worthwhile work and activities", and "having enjoyable hobbies". This study gave the workers four scales for these questions, "strongly agree" as 4, "agree" as 3, "disagree" as 2, and "strongly disagree", as 1.

The main characteristics are shown in Figure 1. Their average age is 46.5 years old as for women, and 47.1 as for men. About half of them have children. However, women are more likely than men to have them. As for the employment status, as a whole, about 70 % of them are full-time workers. However, there is a difference in the status between women and men. Currently, more than half of Japanese women are working as part-time. Therefore, the real ratio of women's part-time workers is higher than the data we had in this survey. In addition, about 70% of their employment rank is regular. And about 25% of them have university school diploma, and about 15% of them earn about two or three million yen in a year. We can see the gender gap in the data (Figure 1).

Fig 1. Main characteristics

Demographic	Women (500)	Men (500)	Total (1,000)
Average age	46.5 years old	47.1 years old	46.9 years old
With child	53.2%	42.8%	52.0%
Employment status	Full time 55.0% Part time 45.0%	Full time 81.6% Part time 18.4%	Full time 68.3% Part time 31.7%
Employment rank	Regular 88.5% Above chief clerk 11.5%	Regular 58.1% Above chief clerk 41.9%	Regular 73.2% Above chief clerk 26.8%
Education Background	High school 28.4% University 38.5%	High school 22.0% University 54.0%	High school 25.2% University 46.3%
Income (Mode)	1-2 million JPN (25.5%)	4-5 million JPN (17.0%)	2-3 million JPN (15.6%)
Sharing of the housework (couples)	81.4% (N = 255)	26.4% (N = 313)	51.1% (N = 568)

Results

Gender roles and gender bias

Sixty-four-point-nine percent of workers disagreed with gender roles despite income or occupational status. However, in reality, the ratio of those who did not have gender bias at work and at home were much lower (Figure 2).

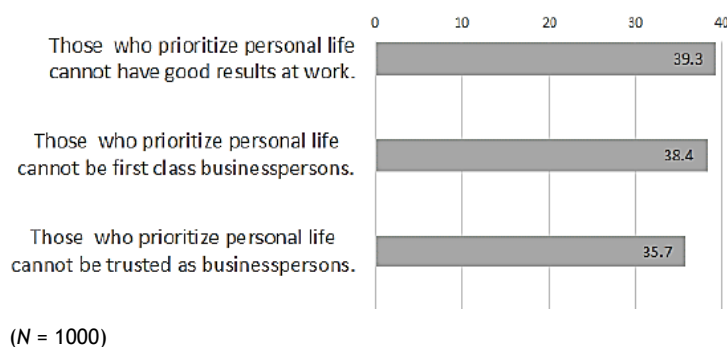
Fig 2. Gender roles and gender bias

Do you think that men should go out for work, while women should do housework and take care of family? (%)				
(x ² = 6.677, df = 1, p <0.05)	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Female workers (500)	156	31.2	344	68.8
Male workers (500)	195	39.0	305	61.0
Total (1,000)	51	35.1	649	64.9
It is natural that men work long hours (%)				
(N.S.)	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Female workers (500)	58.6	58.6	41.4	41.4
Male workers (500)	58.8	58.8	41.2	41.2
Total (1,000)	58.7	58.7	41.3	41.3
Men should be breadwinners (%)				
(N.S.)	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Female workers (500)	672	67.2	328	32.8
Male workers (500)	672	67.2	328	32.8
Total (1,000)	672	67.2	328	32.8

Work-life bias

This study investigated workers’ opinions on work-life bias. The chi-square test showed that there was no significance by gender. Of the total study population, 39.3% of participants agreed that those who prioritize personal life could not have good results at work. Next, 38.4% of them agreed that those who prioritize personal life could not be first class businesspeople. Lastly, 35.7% of them agreed that those who prioritize personal life could not be trusted as businesspeople (Figure 3).

Fig. 3 Work-life bias



Work-life bias and the possibility of remaining silent against gender discrimination

Next, this study tested the relationship between employees' work-life bias and the possibility to act against gender discrimination at work. It also examined if there was a difference between men and women’s tendency to speak up.

Figure 4 shows that 31.0% of female and 40.4% of male workers responded that they would not act if they witnessed or experienced gender discrimination. There was a statistical difference between women and men ($\chi^2 = 9.623, df = 1, p < 0.01$).

Fig. 4 The possibility to act when witnessing gender discrimination at work

	Will you do nothing when you see or hear gender discrimination at work? (%)			
	Yes		No	
($\chi^2 = 9.623, df = 1, p < 0.01$)	n	%	n	%
Female workers (500)	155	31.0	345	69.0
Male workers (500)	202	40.4	298	59.6
Total (1,000)	357	35.7	643	64.3
	Will you do nothing when you see or hear gender discrimination at work? (%)			
($\chi^2 = 4.801, df = 1, p < 0.05$)	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Female workers (I want professional skills and work dedication for society (Aspiration for working in future career))				
Yes (319)	88	27.6	231	72.4
No (181)	67	37.0	114	63.0
Total (500)	155	31.0	345	69.0
	Will you do nothing when you see or hear gender discrimination at work? (%)			
($\chi^2 = 3.469, df = 1, p < 0.1$)	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Female workers (I want friendly relationships (life value perspectives))				
Yes (448)	133	29.7	315	70.3
No (52)	22	40.4	30	59.6
Total (500)	155	31.0	345	69.0

Incidentally, as for women, when we asked them the spiration for working in future career, those who want professional skills and work dedication for society were likely to have wills to raise voice for gender equality. In addition, those who value friendly relationships (as their current and future life value perspective) were also likely to have wills to raise voice for gender equality (Figure 4).

Figure 5 shows the result of the t-test indicating that men are likely to remain silent if they agreed to two of the three work-life bias questions. This trend was not observed among female respondents (Figure 5).

Fig 5. The relationship between the possibility of acting when witnessing gender discrimination at work and work-life bias (Male workers)

Work-life bias										
Will you do nothing when you see or hear gender discrimination at work?		Those who prioritize personal life cannot have good results at work.			Those who prioritize personal life cannot be first class business people.			Those who prioritize personal life cannot be trusted as business people.		
		MEAN	N	T-test	MEAN	N	T-test	MEAN	N	T-test
YES	YES	2.40	202	2.806**	2.34	202	1.504	2.32	202	2.761**
	NO	2.20	298		2.23	298	+	2.12	298	

Note ** $p < 0.01$, + $p < 0.1$ There are four scales in these work-life bias questions, "strongly agree" as 4, "agree" as 3, "disagree" as 2, and "strongly disagree", as 1.

Women's gender-equal advantages and their work-life bias

This study also attempted to establish whether female workers can avoid work-life bias when getting gender-equal advantages like income and employment rank. Therefore, this study assessed the correlation between female workers' income and work-life bias. In addition to that, it conducted a t-test analysis between female workers' employment status and their work-life bias. However, there were no statistically significant differences.

Next, this study investigated whether female workers who seek gender-equal advantages can overcome work-life bias. Therefore, the correlation between employees who seek higher wages and social success in their future careers and their work-life bias was examined. Figure 6 shows that the higher women's aspiration for promotion or social success in their future careers, the more they agreed to all work-life bias questions (Figure 6).

Fig. 6. Correlation between women's aspiration for working and their work-life bias

Aspiration for working in future career	Work-life bias		
	Those who prioritize personal life cannot have good results at work	Those who prioritize personal life cannot be first class businesspeople	Those who prioritize personal life cannot be trusted as businesspeople
I want to work to earn a higher income.	0.097	0.079	0.036
I want to be promoted and be socially successful.	0.251**	0.300**	0.293**

NOTE: ** $p < 0.01$ There are four scales in these questions, "strongly agree" as 4, "agree" as 3, "disagree" as 2, and "strongly disagree", as 1.

Can a company reduce workers' work-life bias?

This study explored how companies can overcome work-life bias. Therefore, workers were divided into two categories: high work-life bias workers and low work-life bias workers, using the median value of the three total work-life bias scores as a baseline. A t-test analysis was also performed to determine which group conformed to their companies' 21 practices for work-life balance, gender equality, and workers' comfortable workplace. A 4-item scale was provided for each question, from "agree" to "disagree", and if the total score of the 21 practices were high, the conclusion was that the workers complied with the companies' practices. However, there were no statistically significant differences across the scores.

How can employees overcome bias?

Finally, this study used discriminant analysis to forecast employees likely to experience a high work-life bias and those who will have low ones in the future. Factors affecting employees' lives (e.g., their life value perspectives and learning experiences) and their impact on their work-life bias were investigated. This study included both female and male workers because work-life bias applies to both genders, and work and personal life are equally important.

The analysis results showed that if the absolute value of the independent variable is high, it can have a substantial effect on the dependent variable (Work-life bias). In addition, if the independent variable is positive (plus), it shows that it can impact the dependent variable positively (leading to more bias), and if the independent variable is negative (minus), it can impact the dependent variable negatively (leading to less bias).

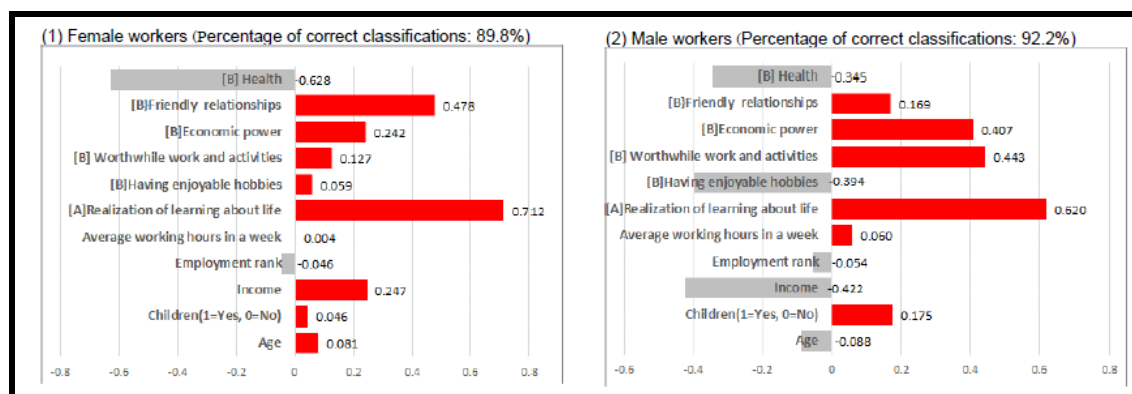
Work-life bias (Female employees)

The statistically influential variable to the dependent variable were, Realization of learning about life, (0.712), Health (Life value perspectives) (-0.628), Friendly relationships (Life value perspectives) (0.478), Income (0.247), and Economic power (Life value perspectives) (0.242) for female workers (Figure.7).

Work-life bias (Male employees)

The statistically influential variables to the dependent variable were, Realization of learning about life, (0.620), Worthwhile work and activities (0.443), Income (-0.422), Economic power (Life value perspective) (0.407). Having enjoyable hobbies (Life value perspective) (-0.394). In addition, the score of Health was also big (-0.345) for male workers (Figure 7).

Fig. 7 Discriminant analysis (How can employees overcome bias?)



NOTE: [A]This is the total score of workers' understanding of learning life skills, including "food", "clothing", "housing", "consumption", "child-rearing", "environmental issues" and so on in the past, including schooldays. This study offered participants a 4-item scale for each question. [B]They are questions related to "Life value perspective".

Discussion

Japanese workers' work-life bias and life enrichment

Many Japanese employees have work-life bias in addition to gender bias (in Results (1)(2)). This will not lead Japanese working people to their life enrichment. According to the findings of the present study in Results (2), approximately 40% of Japanese employees are likely to think that businesspeople should prioritize work rather than personal life and accept the status quo as a norm to be acknowledged and respected as businesspeople in the workplace. Both female and male Japanese workers agree that their personal lives are not considered critical to their well-being due to their higher tendency to prioritize work. Japan is known as a country with notorious long working hours.

Some people have reportedly died from being overworked. In recent years, several women in regular positions (with the prospect of promotion) died from being overworked. Arguably, Japan ranks poorly with oppressive and dangerous conditions for workers. Because the Japanese work culture still disregards personal time or time for family responsibilities.

For Japan to achieve gender equality in employment, both women and men should reconsider the recognition of the work-oriented ideology they embody.

The effects of men's work-life bias on "silence"

It is crucial for men to overcome work-life biases. Results (3) showed that men with higher work-life bias are more likely to remain silent and take no action when they face gender discrimination at work. Moreover, Results (3) showed that male workers are more likely than women to be silent when they witness gender discrimination at work. The number of male workers failing to take action against discrimination was about 10% higher than that of female workers. If male workers increasingly acknowledge that work should be prioritized over private life, they lose the capacity to support initiatives to end gender discrimination at work.

Effects of gender-equal advantage on work-life bias against women

The elements of gender-equal benefits do not always make women overcome work-life bias at work.

Several improvements in legislation and promotion for gender equality by the government or companies have resulted in a narrower wage gap in the Japanese workplace. Furthermore, these initiatives have decreased the board members gap in the Japanese workplace, albeit at a slower pace compared to other developed countries.

However, the survey (4) investigated whether female workers have higher income and employment ranks, their work-life bias scores were almost statistically the same. In addition, female workers seeking promotion were more likely to accept work-life bias than those who did not.

Undoubtedly, Japanese women can achieve equal opportunities as men at work. There is a need to transition from a gender-oppressive culture towards a gender-equal society. However, we should be concerned that even when women achieve gender equality at work, they may remain trapped in the Japanese traditional ideology that work should come before private lives. The Japanese government and several companies have encouraged women at work and created promotional campaigns to improve women's empowerment in the corporate world. However, it is vital to understand how female workers can eradicate their work-life ideology and establish a solid foundation free from work-life bias for future generations.

Workplace for women's empowerment and bias

According to the results (5), this study reveals that companies' women's empowerment practices do not directly change workers' work-life bias, which begs the question: How can female employees overcome bias? Results (6) shows some crucial points.

The first is that workers' disposition to learning about life skills can impact work-life bias. If female workers perceive themselves as adequately knowledgeable about life skills, they may advance the ideology that work and private life should not be treated equally.

Notably, the Japanese home economics education has taught Japanese students how to manage their lives for a more life enrichment, including achieving independence, building stronger partnerships between family members, and creating sustainable development goals. Furthermore, these home economics education practices have contributed to creating a gender-equal society for students.

In this study, questions related to the realization of learning about life were not directly related to home economics education. This study shows that there may be a hidden norm that "Private life should be offered in workplaces if requested" in our family, community, schools, workplaces, and the whole society. We have to provide people with the opportunities that embody what a "rich" life represents.

The second valuable finding is that women's tendency to seek friendly relationships in their lives possibly increase their likelihood to experience work-life bias at work. Taking care of others' well-being is one of the important factors to healthy and effective interpersonal relationships. However, if Japanese working women value cooperativeness with other people, including colleagues excessively, the Japanese work-oriented culture would remain unchanged. To eradicate this risk, results (6) showed that it is important for women to focus on their physical well-being (healthy life). In addition, women's employment rank can lead to lower work-life bias. However, it is likely that the power of influence is small. In addition to, equal income opportunities can lead to lower work-life bias for women.

The third is that men's economic or social fulfillment at work can increase work-life bias. Although, it is desirable to have worthwhile jobs, motivation, and earning. Results (6) showed that these factors increase the risk of their work-life bias. To avoid this, it is important for men to be more focused on their physical or cultural well-being rather than finances. A higher income can force men to advance mal-associated work-life bias, which was unlikely among female participants. Further, employment rank did not influence the biases.

Conclusions

First, we have to acknowledge the reality that many Japanese businesspeople experience not only gender bias but also work-life bias, regardless of gender. Both women and men have been victims of the Japanese traditional norms in business, prioritizing work than private life, and even sacrificing their private or family life for the workplaces. Also, this study showed that men who responded to remaining indifferent against gender discrimination at work perpetuated strong work-life bias. Both women and men are still in the ideology trap that work and private life are not guaranteed equally, necessitating the need to achieve gender-equal workplaces.

Second, women's financial and social advantages do not directly contribute towards reducing their work-life bias. For example, 50 years ago, many Japanese companies discriminated women by saying that "Women are less motivated and inferior to men in business". However, the society proves that it was a mistake. Nowadays, several policies on gender equality and work-life balance have introduced more gender-equal practices at work, although resolving the

gender gap still requires more work. However, there was no difference in work-life bias between working women with higher incomes or employment ranks and those with lower incomes and employment ranks. Moreover, there is the possibility that working women seeking success in business (being promoted) experience more extensive work-life bias than those who do not pursue the same goals. It is hard to imagine that such working women can be supportive to those who want to balance work and their lives.

This study suggests that studies on gender equality in employment focus on how we perceive our lives. Even if the Japanese government and companies urge women to focus on financial success and climb career ladder, it may be challenging for both genders to work in work-life bias-charged atmospheres.

Third, there is the possibility that work-life biases can be eliminated when workers learn their life and their life values both in the past and the future, even amidst companies' practices that fail to address work-life bias.

However, there are critical challenges to overcoming bias. The Japanese society has to re-examine the existence of a hidden social norm; it is acceptable and natural that our private life can always be used at workplace. Furthermore, we need to talk about it together. For example, home economics can deal with these norms at school. Of course, the home economics education has taught girls and boys the importance of life skills and management. It is expected to appeal to shape the students' likelihood to value private and family lives more.

In addition, Japanese workers, both women and men, need to think about their physical or cultural life values in current and future life perspectives. From studying home economics, these perspectives can help employees overcome work-life bias. The eradication of work-life bias will be a solid foundation for gender equality in employment.

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