



Doctoral School of Regional and Business Administration Sciences

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**Challenges to women's leadership in business  
organizations in Japan**

Doctoral dissertation

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## **Introduction**

Gender diversity in organizations has attracted broad interest among policymakers, people in business and researchers. Although gender diversity and its management are not new research topics, most existing empirical studies have been conducted in the United States and Europe and have provided evidence that gender parity in the workplace, if reached, results in improved organizational performance. Conversely, there is a dearth of studies on gender diversity management in countries where the gender gap has been the widest, such as Japan or some of the Arab countries.

The current dissertation examines the multi-gender environment in Japanese organizations and investigates how women managers are embedded into business organizations in Japan, a country where culture and religion work against gender equality. According to Nemoto (2016), the traditional Japanese mindset has been the so-called “male-breadwinner” model. In the past,

government taxation and pension policies have reinforced this model.

Recently, closing the gender gap has become one of the key strategies for boosting the economy in Japan. Japan is currently setting a challenging goal to increase gender diversity both in the private and public sectors.

Past research on hindrances to women's access to managerial positions has shown that it is more difficult for women to build social capital due to the natural tendency of the male-dominated corporate elite to exclude demographically dissimilar others (Tsui et al., 1992). Additionally, women were found to be less instrumental compared to their male colleagues in the way they leverage their social networks to engage in organizational politics, especially in masculine organizational cultures (Doldor, 2011). This informal behaviour, linked to social norms, creates a disadvantage for women, who are already in structurally less powerful organizational roles.

The "glass ceiling" concept was introduced in the 1980s, symbolizing an unseen ceiling that prevents women from

getting through to reach the top management positions. Gender remains an important career determinant in Japan, and potential female candidates to management positions with excellent qualifications are actively ignored and have to face an unbreakable glass ceiling. Few women are not affected by the "glass ceiling" and succeed in reaching top management positions. The Japanese glass ceiling is also known as the "concrete ceiling", reflecting the high level of gender discrimination. Although the issues of the glass ceiling and gender roles are not unique to Japan, there are nuances related to the culture, which prove the unique character of the Japanese society and make research focusing on this country relevant (Futagami 2010).

### **Research questions of the dissertation**

This dissertation focuses on the issue of gender diversity from an inter-disciplinary perspective, which encompasses the management discipline, organizational behaviour and gender studies. It has three aims: first, to explore success factors and barriers to women's managers'

access and inclusion in the Japanese workplace and to identify research gaps. Next, to explain why organizational-level gender-equality policies and practices have had so far a weak impact on giving women managers active participation in organizational decisions. Finally, it provides an analysis of the relevance of individual-level factors for access to business leadership positions by investigating career aspirations and perceived occupation self-efficacy of women and men working in Japanese organizations.

To summarize, the research questions investigated are as follows:

- 1) What are the literature gaps in the domain of gender diversity and women leadership with specific reference to Japanese organizations?
- 2) What is the role that factors at different levels, organizational level factors (CSR programs, HR practices, diversity culture) and women's individual level factors (personality, motivation, experience, and background), play in

enabling/hindering effective participation of women managers in organizational decision-making in Japan, and what are the underlying reasons?

- 3) What is the impact of career aspiration and perceived occupational self-efficacy of women and men and perceived success factors? What is the influence of perceived career success factors on career aspirations?

The research work comprises three papers. Each research question is discussed in one or more of these papers. All three original papers in this dissertation focus on gender diversity and women's leadership in Japanese organizations; however, they take different epistemological approaches. Specifically, this dissertation comprises two empirical papers, of which one is based on extended interviews (Paper 2) using a qualitative approach, and one (Paper 3) is based on a survey approach adopting quantitative methods. Paper 1 applies the literature review approach.

## **Research Methods**

The first paper is based on a literature review. The first objective of the literature review was to collect first-stage insights about gaps in research about gender diversity of Japanese organizations; the second was to identify different layers of factors affecting women's access and inclusion in Japanese organizations; the third was to develop a framework based on literature review findings. In particular, the literature review showed the dearth of empirical evidence with respect to the role of individual-level factors.

The following electronic databases and sources were used for search: Scopus, Science Direct and EBSCO. The search was carried out in August 2019. By means of this search strategy, more than 100 contributions were identified. A significant part of this literature was related to the history of equality in Japan and equal employment opportunities and education, as well as gender roles as being women/mothers in Japan and gender stereotyping and social studies, work-life balance, in addition to studies

about women participation in civil and official political institutions of power in Japan.

The second paper uses qualitative methods, namely in-depth interviews of top and middle-level managers in Japanese organizations. The sample is made up of both female and male managers stratified by work location, i.e., whether the workplace is in Japan or abroad, and nationality of the manager (whether Japanese national or other nationality). The interview protocol comprises a series of open-ended questions meant to explore organizational gender diversity and understand the possible antecedents of their introduction and implementation. In the within-interview analysis, we manually and inductively coded perceived success factors and barriers to workplace gender equality, separating organization-level factors from individual-level factors. Based on theory and literature on workplace gender diversity, indicators were organized according to their relevance for gender equality in hiring (Gorman, 2005), career development (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2016) and



participation in decision-making (Grosser and Moon, 2005).

Paper 3 uses a survey to collect the empirical research data since this study concerns relationships among the variables of interest (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). The empirical data of this research was obtained through an online questionnaire. The researchers administered the questionnaire through a professional organization in Japan, which supports women in business in the Kansai region. The survey was open from September 10<sup>th</sup> to December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Additionally, social networks were used to extend the number of respondents. All the respondents resided in Japan and worked for Japanese organizations.

The core part of the questionnaire measured self-efficacy using the scale developed by Chen, Gully and Eden (2001) and leadership aspiration levels using the Leadership Aspiration subscale of the Career Aspiration Scale-Revised (CAS-R) proposed by Gregor and O'Brien (2015). The study relates aspiration levels, self-efficacy and

perceived success factors to career advancement. The list included individual, organizational and institutional factors (Aycan, 2004; Saitova and Di Mauro, 2021).

## **Findings**

Paper 1 contributes to the literature on gender diversity in Japan by reviewing and investigating the various gaps in the literature. This study has organized the literature on workplace gender diversity in Japan based on several layers of factors. Five main areas of research were identified: Japanese culture, political institutions in Japan, organizational changes through the prism of HRM and CRM practices, and interpersonal and personal issues that can support or hinder gender diversity and inclusion in Japan.

The literature review showed the scarcity of empirical evidence from Japanese organizations, particularly concerning the role of personal factors. Additionally, there is no evidence on the impact of moderators of diversity at a team level, e.g., if specialization, task complexity, or

team tenure can moderate the link with women's participation in decision-making. Next, most of the studies cover problems and issues that women face during career advancement. Conversely, there is not much evidence of "success stories" and what the triggers and key factors of such favourable outcomes are.

Paper 2 focuses on the political issue of enhancing the inclusion and participation of women in decision-making (Grosser and Moon, 2005) within Japanese organizations. Specifically, it compares the role that organizational level factors (CSR programs, HR practices, diversity culture) and women's individual level factors (personality, motivation, experience and background) play in enabling effective participation of women managers in organizational decision-making in Japan. Results suggest that, in spite of the fact that companies formally espouse gender diversity values and policies, organizational structures and practices to support gender equality are still ineffective and peer-to-peer, and leader-to-peer relations are still characterized by gender segregation.

Ineffectiveness implies that the personal traits of women managers (such as being self-confident and the ability to stand up to men) are considered by the respondents crucial in giving the woman manager a “voice” within the organization.

Results highlight that government-level and organization-level agendas should give importance to the political role of women inside the organization, alongside the emphasis on equality of access to managerial positions.

Paper 3 analyses career aspirations and perceived occupational self-efficacy of women and men working in Japanese organizations and provide a comparison between genders. Results reveal that the null hypothesis of equal mean between men and women is rejected for all items in the aspiration level scale, pointing to a significantly lower aspiration level for women with respect to men. Conversely, it is impossible to detect any significant difference in the measurement of self-efficacy. Results also indicate that factors for a successful career differ by gender. To illustrate, institutional factors (family and

policy support) are considered more critical enablers of women's career advancement than men. Similarly, workplace characteristics such as leader and peer support and performance evaluation systems are recognized as more relevant for a career by women than men.

### **The original research papers**

Paper 1 – Saitova, E. & Di Mauro, C. (2020). An analysis of factors driving gender diversity and inclusion in Japanese organizations, *Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings*. C. 262-272.

Paper 2 - Saitova, E., & Di Mauro, C. (2021). The role of organizational and individual-level factors for the inclusion of women managers in Japan. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-09-2021-2946>

Paper 3 - Saitova, E. & Di Mauro, C. (2022). The impact of gender on career aspiration levels and self-efficacy in Japan: What's new? *Gender in Management: an*

*International Journal* (under review). The paper has been submitted for peer review.

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