



Vaasan yliopisto
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**Barriers and Enablers for Women's Leadership in Finland and
Japan**

Organisational Practices and Cultural Expectations

School of management
Bachelor's thesis in
International business

Vaasa 2026

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA**School of management**

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Title of the thesis:	Barriers and Enablers for Women's Leadership in Finland and Japan: Organisational Practices and Cultural Expectations		
Degree:	Bachelor of science in International Business		
Degree Programme:	International Business		
Supervisor:	Rodrigo Mello		
Year:	2026	Pages:	49

ABSTRACT:

Naiset ovat edelleen aliedustettuja johtajarooleissa ja lasikatto on edelleen ongelma naisille johtajarooleiden tavoittelussa. Tämä tutkielma käsittelee ja vertailee esteitä ja mahdollisuuksia naisten johtaja-asemien tavoittelulle ja johtajuudelle Suomessa ja Japanissa. Suomessa tasa-arvolle on vankka lainsäädäntö, mutta naiset kohtaavat silti esteitä johtajarooleiden tavoittelussa. Japanissa tasa-arvon toteutuminen jatkuu edelleen pitkäaikaisena haasteena, joka vaikuttaa myös naisten johtajuuteen. Nämä erilaisuudet maiden välillä tasa-arvon toteutumisessa asettavat myös erilaiset lähtökohdat naisten mahdollisuuksille tavoitella johtaja-asemia.

Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena on käsitellä esteitä ja mahdollisuuksia naisten johtajuudelle Suomessa ja Japanissa organisaatioiden käytänteiden ja kulttuuristen odotusten kautta. Erilaiset kulttuuriset arvot ja normit heijastuvat myös työpaikkojen käytänteisiin ja vaikuttavat naisten edistymiseen urallaan. Tutkielma hyödyntää myös sukupuolijärjestysteoriaa, jonka kautta näitä esteitä ja mahdollisuuksia käsitellään. R. W. Connellin sukupuolijärjestysteoria kuvaa valtasuhteita miesten ja naisten välillä. Koska nämä valtasuhteet ovat historiallisesti rakentuneita, ne ovat syvästi juurtuneita sosiaalsiin normeihin ja kulttuureihin, luoden haasteita niiden tunnistamiseen ja muuttamiseen. Ensimmäinen tutkimuskysymys keskittyy organisaatioiden käytänteisiin ja kulttuuriin odotuksiin, jotka muovaavat naisten mahdollisuuksia johtajarooleihin pääsyyn Suomessa ja Japanissa. Toinen tutkimuskysymys käsittelee keskeisiä eroja ja samankaltaisuuksia maiden välillä koskien näitä esteitä ja haasteita naisten johtajuudelle, ja kuinka niitä voidaan tulkita sukupuolijärjestysteorian kautta.

Kirjallisuuden perusteella perinteiset sukupuoliroolit vaikuttavat edelleen Japanissa, joka näkyy esimerkiksi epätasa-arvossa työtehtävien jaossa naisten ja miesten välillä, epävirallisissa säännöissä organisaatioissa ja isyyslomien stigmasoinnissa. Naisten odotetaan edelleen ottavan päävastuu perheen hoidosta. Tämä luo haasteita johtaja-asemien tavoittelussa etenkin naisille, joilla on lapsia perinteiseen työkuulttuuriin liittyvien pitkien työtuntien ja vähäisen vapaa-ajan takia. Myös Suomessa havaittiin piileviä stereotyyppisiä ja normeja yhdistäen johtajuuden maskuliinisiin ominaisuuksiin. Samalla kun miehet jatkavat korkeimpien johtajarooleiden dominoinnissa, naiset kohtaavat edelleen lasikatto-ongelman näiden positioiden tavoittelussa. Kaikkien tässä tutkielmassa tarkasteltujen sukupuolijärjestysteorian osa-alueiden; valtasuhteiden, feminiinisuuden aliarvostuksen ja androcentrismin, havaittiin esiintyvän ainakin jossain määrin molemmissa maissa. Näiden ilmiöiden esiintyvyys oli kuitenkin selkeämmin havaittavissa Japanissa. Suomessa tasa-arvoa edistävä lainsäädäntö ja erilaiset toimenpiteet ovat lisänneet tietoisuutta ja tukeneet tasa-arvon kehitystä. Myös Japanissa on otettu askeleita tasa-arvoisemman työkuulttuurin puolesta, ja naisjohtajien määrä on kasvanut vuosittain molemmissa maissa.

KEYWORDS: leadership, gender order, women leadership, organizational practices, cultural expectations

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1 Introduction

Despite the apparent equality between genders, the glass ceiling effect remains a barrier for women pursuing leadership positions (Watanabe & Kwarteng, 2024, p.1). According to Ramoses et al. (2022, p.1), women are still underrepresented in top management positions. Additionally, Aiston and Jung (2015, p.205) state that organisational culture and academic structures still privilege masculine practices.

The aim of this thesis is to compare Japan and Finland in terms of opportunities and barriers to women's leadership. The thesis focuses on the differences between the two countries in organisational practices and cultural expectations. In addition, these barriers and expectations are analysed through the lens of gender order theory.

Those countries were chosen because, despite both being developed countries, the level of gender-equality in workplaces is different, offering distinct starting points and opportunities for women to achieve management positions. Finland is one of the top five countries in the world with gender equality (United Nations, 2024), with well-established equality plans and legislations (Kohtamäki et al., 2024). However, there remain subtle biases and underlying stereotypes towards women's achievement of leadership positions (Salin, 2020), which this thesis focuses on. In Japan, on the other hand, gender equality is still a long-term challenge (OECD, 2023). The share of women in management positions is lowest among OECD countries (OECD, 2023). This, in turn, influences opportunities for women to enter leadership positions.

Women are still underrepresented in leadership positions, both in Japan and Finland (Lawson et al, 2022). Gender is a pervasive system that is embedded in social relations, defining what it means to be a man or a woman (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). According to them, gender sets a difference in expectations, values and behaviours, creating a deeply rooted manner of how men and women are treated in everyday interactions. Furthermore, these differences become a source of inequalities within organizations and

workplaces (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022), affecting how women can achieve leadership positions. Women's underrepresentation in leadership positions is at least partly associated with gender stereotypes that associate only men with achievement-oriented traits, such as being e.g. assertive and decisive (Lawson et al, 2022).

1.1 Research questions and objectives of the study

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine the barriers and enablers surrounding women's attainment of leadership positions and the experiences of women leaders, comparing two countries, Finland and Japan. Those countries have differing organisational practices and cultural norms. Additionally, this thesis explores those barriers and enablers through gender order theory. The thesis is guided by one main research question examining how organizational practices and cultural expectations shape the barriers and enablers of women's leadership in Finland and Japan. This is followed by sub-questions that first analyse the barriers and then the enablers in both countries. Finally, the similarities and differences identified are interpreted through gender order theory.

Research questions:

- (1) What organisational practices and cultural expectations act as barriers to women's leadership in Finland and Japan?
- (2) What organisational practices and cultural expectations act as enablers for women's leadership in Finland and Japan
- (3) What are the key similarities and differences between Finland and Japan be interpreted through gender order theory?

1.2 Definitions of key terms

Definitions for the term "leadership" vary between sources. In organizational leadership Day and Antonakis (2012, p.6) (Le Vinh and Haar, 2024) define leadership as guiding and

directing organizational and human resources toward the organization's strategic objectives. Additionally, according to Campbell (1991, p. 1) and Le Vinh and Haar (2024), leadership involves the mobilization of resources to solve group problems and achieve goals, as well as directing actions and resources toward desirable objectives.

The gender order theory was originally found by R.W. Connell (1987), who defines the gender order as a pattern of power relations between men and women that affect the definitions of masculinity and femininity (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). Those patterns of power relations are historically constructed. Therefore, they are deeply embedded in societal norms and cultures, which can make them difficult to recognise or change (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022).

Ramos et al (2022, p.3) (Watanabe & Kwarteng (2024, p.1) argues that the glass ceiling refers to invisible barriers which are posed by organisational and ideological prejudices and discriminations that hinder women's career development or achievement of leadership positions. It is a global phenomenon, occurring more in developing countries, although being prevalent also in developed countries (Watanabe & Kwarteng, 2024, p.2).

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This study consists of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic, the key terms and the aims of this thesis. Additionally, it explains why those countries, Finland and Japan, were chosen for a comparison of female leadership. The second chapter focuses on the theoretical framework. It clarifies the key terms used in this thesis, including what factors are counted as barriers or enablers in the study and how cultural expectations and organisational practises are defined. It also defines gender order theory, which provides the theoretical framework for this study. Only the parts of the theory that are relevant to this thesis are discussed.

The third chapter compares women's leadership in Finland and Japan. The chapter is divided into two parts, Finland and Japan, and it defines the main barriers and enablers,

cultural expectations, and organisational practises for both countries. It aims to introduce which factors and practises in organisations impact on the opportunities for women to enter leadership roles. Similarly, it presents the cultural norms and expectations that may cause underlying stereotypes that impact the opportunities for women to achieve higher positions at work.

The fourth chapter puts together the main similarities and differences between Finland and Japan in terms of opportunities and barriers for women's leadership. It aims to summarise how these countries differ from one another in cultural expectations and norms and the practises that organisations implement. Additionally, those differences are defined through gender order theory. It defines how gender order impacts the cultural expectations, and organisational practises in those countries. The final chapter concludes the study by answering the research questions and summarizing the key findings presented throughout the thesis. In addition, it discusses the limitations of the study and offers suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical framework

As this thesis examines the barriers and enablers of women's leadership, comparing Finland and Japan through the lens of organizational practices and cultural expectations, this chapter defines the key concepts used in the study. It also introduces the gender order theory, focusing only on the aspects most relevant to this thesis. These include androcentrism, the division of labour and the devaluation of feminine as well as power relations, which are central to the analysis.

2.1 Women's leadership barriers and enablers

2.1.1 Barriers

In this thesis, barriers are defined as factors that hinder women's access to leadership positions. Those can also be limitations that slow down women's career advancement. Barriers are usually embedded in societal norms and cultures, and therefore hard to change (Mikkonen, 2022). Carli and Eagly (2016) (Salin, 2020) argue that there remain subtle barriers that hinder women's achievement of leadership positions in the same proportions as men. These barriers include the glass ceiling and multiple obstacles along the way (Salin, 2020). This thesis only handles the most prominent barriers for women's access to leadership positions, although it does not capture all possible barriers.

2.1.2 Enablers

Enablers in this thesis are defined as factors that facilitate or accelerate women's access to leadership positions or career opportunities. Similarly, as with barriers, this thesis only focuses on the most prominent enablers, not capturing all possible enablers. Enablers, along with barriers, help to identify concrete organizational practises and structural factors that influence women's leadership.

2.2 Gender order theory

Gender order is defined as invisible background expectancies about gender that affect interactions, appearing differently based on time, place and context (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022, p. 942). Gender reflects the power relations that structure society, and through their everyday performances, women and men can either reinforce or challenge existing systems of gendered privilege (de Simone et. al., 2018, p. 834). Because the gender order is fashioned by individuals and shaped by economic conditions and social and legal policies, it must always be contextualized (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). Ghererdi and Poggio (2001) argue in Zinn and Hofmeister's work (2022) that workplace cultures aren't genderless. On the contrary, workplaces set different expectations for women and men, producing inequality by acting according to gendered cultural and symbolic practices (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022, p. 942). Zinn and Hofmeister (2022, p. 943) argue that the background expectations are often seen but unnoticed, as they set up an order that appears to be "natural".

2.2.1 Androcentrism

Androcentrism is an orienting frame of gender order theory that describes the biased view that the male life course is the standard, without acknowledging or admitting the bias, excluding the fact that women don't function as men do (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). Crofts and Coffey (2017) (Zinn and Hofmeister, 2022) state that this can be seen in workplaces and organisations that are structured originally for men, with expectations of total availability, assumptions of no pregnancy, breastfeeding, menstruation or obligations as primary caregiver.

For example, working times are presenting the idea of total availability, as some workplaces require very early starting times in the mornings. Especially in leadership positions workdays can easily be prolonged overtime, often without breaks (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). Therefore, workplaces can expect work to be the main priority, not considering that women with children require time outside of work. Zinn and Hofmeister

(2022) interviewed women professors working in universities who stated that the long and late meetings are a requirement of the job, often without breaks. Women in those interviews find it hard to cope without breaks. Therefore, as Brumley (2014) and Crofts and Coffey (2017) argue in Zinn and Hofmeister's work (2022), their acceptance of the situation is evidence of the 'ideal worker' model, which connects availability at work with masculinity.

The stoical suffering in some workplaces, particularly the lack of food and drink, creates physical discomfort, creating an assumption that the people in these jobs should be beyond materiality. The good worker accepts the conditions as they are (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). The expectation is that men keep silent about their discomfort and their power positions, so others feel compelled to accept that or risk outing themselves as not belonging (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). The interviewed women in the article claimed that they don't say anything about the situation in the fear of seeming "weak". Therefore, without argumentations against, the situations in the workplaces remain the same.

2.2.2 Division of labour and devaluation of feminine

Women's work is often devalued compared to men's work (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022, p. 949). According to Zinn & Hofmeister (2022), the female work sphere is disregarded and demeaned, and their participation to male sphere is protected. The demeaning often isn't direct, but rather embedded in humour, conversations or exclusion (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022).

Zinn & Hofmeister (2022) interviewed women professors in their article. Many of them reported verbal putdowns, such as calling woman colleague "little treasure" or "little one", speaking about a female colleague in a demeaning tone, despite holding equal positions as professors. Tasks that are historically and "typically" associated with women, such as domestic work or secretary tasks, extend to women professors' duties (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022, p. 950). The women interviewed in the article described that they

often gathered the dishes after a meeting or wrote down the minutes, while the men just left.

According to Oppong and Bannor (2022), power and gender are intrinsically related. They introduce a structure of cathexis created by Connell in 1987. Cathexis is the social structure that describes the different behavioural norms for men and women, enforcing male dominance over females. Coffman et. al. (2021), Feess et. al. (2021) and Steinþórsdóttir et al. (2020) (Oppong and Bannor, 2022) argue that cathexis explains why historically gendered power relations have favoured men and their interests. Therefore, as Sharma and Nisar (2016) argue in Oppong and Bannor's work (2022, p. 4), organisations can be seen as environments where existing societal structures operate, often shaped by patriarchal systems where men automatically maintain possession of power.

Additionally, division of labour is seen in activities that are usually associated with men, such as butchering (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). Their article shows an example related to butchering, as female butchers aren't accepted as 'real professionals'. Instead of conducting chores that are harsh and usually carried out by men, such as slaughtering and deboning of carcasses, they are relegated to less esteemed activities, such as selling and preparing meat products. This example highlights the workplace culture, where the figure of the "good employee" is male (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). This can be adapted to other, historically male-dominated professions.

2.2.3 The power relations

The power relations reflect the different positions of power in which women and men are positioned (de Simone et al., 2018). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) state in de Simone et al.'s (2018) work, that traditionally and through history, there has been the consolidation of hegemonic masculinity, which legitimises and preserves men's power and women subordination. Even though modern organizations have become more

democratic, gender inequalities act subtly through discursive mechanisms that are difficult to unmask (de Simone et al., 2018).

The hegemonic masculinity is one of the key dimensions of R.W. Connell's (1987) gender order theory (Armas et al., 2025). It refers to a culturally dominant form of masculinity characterized by traits such as success, self-sufficiency, heterosexuality, strength and emotional restraint (Armas et.al., 2025, p. 6). These traits have traditionally been associated with leadership, reinforcing the notion that the ideal leader is male and embodies hegemonic masculine qualities. The concept is culturally constructed, subordinating women and creating hierarchies among men themselves (Armas et.al., 2025). In 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt revised the concept, presenting it as a model that is dynamically constructed and socially situated, which is under debate (Armas et al., 2025). However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been criticised for privileging a particular form of masculinity and a specific group of men, reinforcing rigid role norms, and struggling to adequately account for the complexity of power relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

2.3 Interpretation of the theory

This thesis uses gender order theory as an interpretive framework. Androcentrism is used to analyse how organisational norms may treat the male career path as the standard. Division of labour and devaluation of feminine are interpreted to examine how tasks, care responsibilities, and women's work are valued. Lastly, power relations are applied to interpret how leadership decision-making and authority remain gendered in Finland and Japan.

2.4 Cultural expectations

Cultural expectations are defined in this thesis as cultural norms and expectations towards women and their achievement of leadership positions. Cultural expectations are shared societal norms and beliefs that define what is appropriate and how members of

a specific culture should behave (Klyver et al., 2020, p. 679). Klyver et al. (2020, p. 679) state that individuals in everyday practices classify each other in societal contexts according to their roles. These roles are, for example, partner, parent, friend, work colleague, business partner and so on. Typically, people occupy several roles simultaneously (Klyver et al., 2020). However, as individuals rely on these classifications, they can judge those who don't live up to those cultural expectations of what is considered as appropriate behaviour. Therefore, the cultural expectations in this thesis are defined by individuals' social position in relation to others (Klyver et al., 2020).

2.5 Organizational practices

This thesis examines organizational practices in Finland and Japan, in the aspect of their relatedness to women's leadership and their achievement of management positions. Organizations may have different practices for women and men, and this thesis focuses on those everyday work procedures. Organisational practices are defined in this thesis as practices and norms within organisations, based on stereotyped male and female workers (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Gendered norms and ideals are deeply rooted in organizations' histories, maintaining the traditional ideals about how women and men should work (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016).

3 Comparison between Finland and Japan in women's leadership

This section focuses on organizational practices, cultural expectations and the main barriers and enablers of women's leadership in Finland and Japan. First, it addresses these themes in Japan, followed by Finland. Because certain organizational practices and cultural expectations may function either as barriers or enablers, the corresponding subchapters focus on explaining and defining these concepts. Then, the subsequent subchapter on main barriers and enablers analyses these practices and expectations to determine whether they hinder or support women's leadership in each country.

3.1 Japan

Gender equality is a long-term challenge in Japan (OECD, 2023). Among OECD countries, Japan has the lowest share of women among master's graduates, and the labour force participation gender gap is larger than the OECD average (OECD, 2023). The low presentation of women is also seen in managerial positions as Japanese women have the lowest share of leadership positions in the OECD, both in the public and private sector. The share of women among managerial employment in 2023 was only 13% when the OECD average was 34% (OECD, 2023).

3.1.1 Organisational practises

Although being a developed country, there remains gender disparities in Japanese workplaces, despite the efforts to promote gender equality (Yamada, 2023, p.36). He notes that there are inequalities between genders, for example, wage differences, job segregation and women's underrepresentation in leadership positions.

According to Sato and Jones (2019) in Yamada's work (2023), traditional gender roles are still persistent in Japanese workplaces, as women received lower ratings and fewer opportunities for advancement in positions, despite being on the same level as their

male counterparts. The gender gap is seen in work allocation in Japanese workplaces (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Their study also found that women academics in Japan face challenges with respect to their academic role. According to their research, women in academia are more often assigned teaching and administrative tasks, reducing the time they can devote to research. Additionally, men colleagues are less likely to read women's research, which leads to women's lower visibility as academics, compared to their male colleagues. This reflects the longstanding structural inequalities in Japan. According to OECD (2023), women and men are often assigned to different roles and responsibilities within firms, despite having the same skills. This contributes to an unequal division of paid and unpaid work as well as the undervaluation of traditionally female-dominated jobs (OECD, 2023).

Paternal leave is still stigmatised in the workplace (OECD, 2023). According to OECD's research (2023), a big part of the gender wage gap is because women tend to take longer leave from work than fathers and sometimes only return part-time. However, the use of paternity leave has increased to 14% in 2021 from only 1% in 2010 (OECD, 2023; OECD Family Database, 2023).

Additionally, there are informal rules in Japanese workplaces. Informal rules are socially shared rules and expectations of how things are done, usually unwritten, communicated and enforced through unofficial channels (Flowers, 2025, p. 514). Chappel and Mackay (Waylen, 2017) and Franschet and Piscopo (2014) (Flowers, 2025, p. 514) state that those rules are hard to change and often work to maintain the gender status quo, enabling institutional actors to preserve influence. According to Flowers (2025, p. 514), those who break informal rules and challenge the status quo face social sanctions.

Examples of informal rules in workplaces are tracked hiring, long working hours and working over-time, including after-work socialising. To achieve higher positions, people are expected to work long hours and attend to after-work socialising (Flowers, 2025, p. 513). According to Flowers (2025, p. 513) tracked hiring, in which men are often placed

on the career track and women on the administrative or clerical track, reinforces the gendered labour market and perpetuates traditional gender roles.

On top of informal rules, informality in workplaces often turns into men's convenience (Flowers, 2025). Franceschet (Wiley, 2017) (Flowers, 2025), argue that the lack of formal and informal institutional rules often results in the emergence of practices that reinforce men's advantages in public life. According to Flowers (2025), the informal rules in workplaces were originally made for men, and when women first entered in workplaces, they faced the male-coded norms of presenteeism and total availability. Flowers (2025, p.523) defines that total availability requires work to take priority over everything else, including responsibilities with family. Presenteeism requires employees to be present in the office, working overtime even if it is not necessary and attending after-work socialising. Flowers (2025, p. 522) presents a few examples of interviews in MOFA in 2021, describing how women were rewarded for "behaving like men". Those actions included attending in games with male colleagues, such as golf and mahjong, smoking and prioritizing work over motherhood. Interviewees state that by those actions, there were a higher chance of getting a promotion (Flowers, 2025, p. 522).

3.1.2 Cultural expectations

Pianezzi and Inaba (2025) cite to Nemoto (2016), stating that leadership in Japan has traditionally been connected to masculine traits. Therefore, according to Kenny and Bell (2011), women often think they can't be like that (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). Additionally, long working hours and limited rest time in Japanese culture has led to a belief that women don't have time for managerial positions in work on top of their care duties at home, as Nemoto (2013) states in Pianezzi and Inaba's work (2025). Therefore, the cultural belief in Japan is that men are those who are devoted to work and women are committed to being caretakers of their families (Nemoto, 2013). The asymmetry is seen in expectations set for women and men, as an employed man is expected to be an ideal worker, who doesn't let his family life interfere with his work, and an employed woman

is expected to devote herself to work and at the same time fulfil her role as caretaker at home (Nemoto, 2013).

Women in Japan often must take care of their children, both of their parents and sometimes even their husband's parents, as well as the domestic duties in daily life (Morley, 2014, p. 122) (Aiston & Jung, 2015). According to Morley (2014), 62% of the spouses of male university teachers work as housewives. In addition, many mothers work part-time (OECD, 2023). Therefore, women with families simply don't have enough time to fully concentrate on their career.

Additionally, in Japan, there is a concept of "good wife and wise mother" which promotes Confucian ideals of womanhood (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). These Confucian ideals promote modesty, patience, loyalty and diligence that remain in Japanese culture, although many believe stark Confucian concepts, such as male superiority, as outdated, as awareness of gender equality raises (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). However, the clear division of labour originated in the Meiji era, when Japan embarked on a path towards rapid modernisation, aiming to achieve the level of Western countries (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). Therefore, elements of these gender roles and divisions of labour persist to this day.

3.1.3 Main barriers and enablers

Steps have been made to advance gender equality in Japan. The first Japanese prime minister, Takaichi Sanae, was elected in 2025 (European Parliament, 2025). The Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society (1999) and the National Basic Plan for Gender Equality (2000) are subsequently reviewed every 5 years (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025, p. 2166). In 2003, Prime Minister Koizumi started an initiative to increase the number of women in Japan's national bureaucracies (Flowers, 2025, p. 510). In addition, in 2024, the fifth Gender Equality Plan is in progress (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025).

Japan's government ordered that national bureaucracies were required to hire at least 30% of women, and the number of women serving in all of Japan's ministries has increased significantly (Flowers, 2025). According to Statista (2020), the number of Japanese women in leadership positions has been growing slowly over the last couple of years. Even though Japan had a goal of filling 30% of managerial positions with women by 2020, only 7,8% of those positions were held by women in 2020 (Statista, 2020). However, 7.5 percent of companies that Statista (2020) surveyed reached the 30% point and since 2016, even 40 percent of companies stated they were "aggressively" hiring women to higher positions. This isn't, however, seen in results, as the number of women in managerial positions has increased only 1,4% from 2015 to 2020, see Figure 1 (Statista, 2020). However, the number of women in managerial positions has increased every year after 2020, from 7,8% to 10,9% in 2024 (Nippon, 2024).

The share of women in leadership roles in Japan

Share of management positions held by women in Japanese companies (in percent)

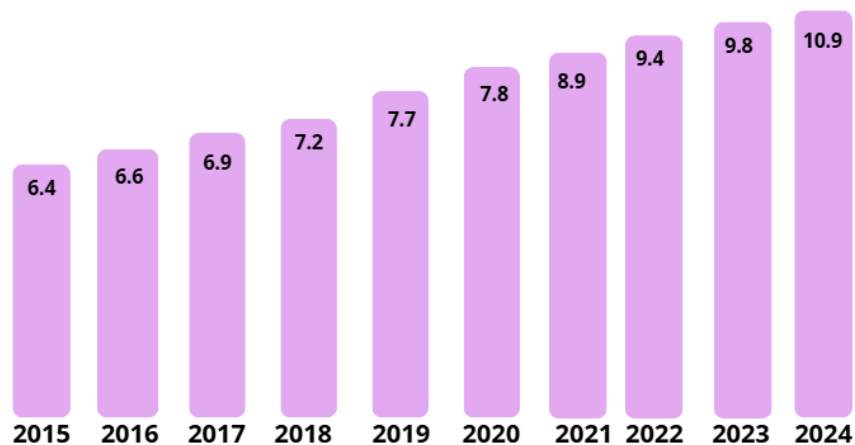


Figure 1 The share of women leaders in Japan, adapted from the table by Statista (2020) and Nippon (2024).

However, there remains several barriers for women's entry to leadership positions. One is the balance between work and family, as mentioned before in cultural expectations. According to MOFA's (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) study of women working there, 75% of them had challenges balancing work and family, and had considered leaving the organization (Flowers, 2025, p. 510). There is a lack of rules regarding how women balance family responsibilities, and this gives way for informal institutional rules of total availability and presenteeism (Flowers, 2025), as mentioned in the section of organisational practises. Especially in ministries, people are expected to work long hours; the longer the working hours, the more likely one is to get promoted, which creates a challenge for women with children (Flowers, 2025). Additionally, the breaks in career due to maternity leave can hinder women's career advancement, because when paternity leave is still stigmatised, women take the main role as caregiver at home.

Contrary, according to Aiston and Jung (2015), the career breaks Japanese women take to take up caring responsibilities don't affect academic women's productivity. According to their analysis, women academics who have taken a career break are more productive than those who haven't. However, their study focuses on academic women. Even though career breaks might not influence women's productivity or research output, breaks from the career can still hinder women's achievement of leadership positions.

As stated in the section of organisational practises, there is inequality in Japanese workplaces in terms of how tasks are divided. When women in academia are disproportionately assigned, for example, administrative and teaching responsibilities, they have less time to devote to research, compared to men (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Therefore, the lack of respect for women, especially in academia, might hinder women's career advancement to leadership positions.

Caglar (2013) and Lambardo and Meier (2006) state in Pianezzi and Inaba's work (2025) that there is also discursive ambiguity surrounding gender equality in Japan. Individuals, who implement activities that support gender equality in governments, are faced to

challenges trying to address feminist demand, at the same time as navigating potentially conflicting political opinions and business administration (Piazzzi & Inaba, 2025, p. 2165). Challenges may arise especially from those who view gender mainstreaming as a deradicalisation of feminism, as Marx (2019) states in Pianezzi and Inaba's work (2025).

One barrier for women's achievement of leadership positions is the lack of female role models in Japan. Pianezzi and Inaba (2025) interviewed city hall officer Mr. Manabu Okamoto and, according to him, the lack of female leaders as role models may cause difficulty for young women to imagine themselves in higher positions, such as managers or heads of departments.

Another thing that may hinder women's choice of pursuing higher positions in Japan is taxation (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). The spouse with higher income, usually a man, can claim a spousal exemption, only if the other spouse earns less, making less than 1.03 million yen per year. That is why some women only do jobs that make money within that limitation, not surpassing the support limit. Many women do low-income jobs, especially after having children (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025).

3.2 Finland

Finland is among the top five countries in the world in gender equality, with 86,3% gender gap (United Nations, 2024). Also, Finland scores 68.3 points out of 100 in the Gender Equality Index and ranks 8th in the EU (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025). According to that, Finland is improving gender equality over time. Additionally, Finland has well-established equality plans and legislations (Kohtamäki et al., 2024, p.85). However, these high international rankings can create the illusion that gender equality has already been achieved, as Korvajärvi (2002) states in Salin's (2020) work. There remain subtle biases and underlying stereotypes in women's achievement of management positions, which the following chapters examine.

3.2.1 Organisational practises

In Finnish organizations, despite well-established equality plans and legislation, there is identified hidden discrimination and gendered structures (Kohtamäki et al., 2024, p.85). As Mikkonen (2022) states, there are still underlying stereotypes towards women in working environments.

According to Mikkonen (2022), stereotypes are socially constructed and culturally time-bound and those represent traits that one views as characteristics of social groups or individual members of those social groups. Stereotypes are often subconscious and difficult and slow to change, because they have been passed on for decades from one generation to another (Mikkonen, 2022). The underlying stereotypes can be seen in organizational practices, such as bias in decision-making, power relations and organisational culture (Mikkonen, 2022). For example, according to Kohtamäki et al. (2024), men attend to decision-making processes more than their women colleagues at the department level.

However, according to Lundqvist et al. (2023), there is a relatively powerful working unions and a high union density. Additionally, there are collective agreements between unions and employees, and those unions help to resolve conflicts between employers and employees (Lundqvist et al. 2023). Therefore, in case there are gender-based inequalities in workplaces, those unions can function as an institutional enabler of gender equality. Moreover, leadership in the Nordic emphasizes participation, self-governance and collaboration to a greater extent than other cultural contexts (Lundqvist et al., 2023).

Holgersson (2012) states in Salin's (2020) work that there remain some underlying norms connecting leadership with masculine agentic traits such as dominance, assertiveness and competitiveness. According to Mikkonen (2022), women often work as middle managers or in positions traditionally viewed as more feminine and supportive, such as human resource management. Oppositely, the more operational positions are often held

by men (Mikkonen, 2022). According to him, the general idea of leadership positions remains masculine and prizing masculine traits. Therefore, women in management positions must adapt to the more masculine leadership norms and culture (Liff & Ward, 2001) (Mikkonen, 2022).

According to Mauno et al. (2005), in female dominated fields, there is a long-standing tradition that women use family supportive arrangements, and those have created a more family-supportive culture in these fields. Women are expected to use those family-friendly arrangements and emphasize more family-related issues than men do (Mauno et al., 2005). However, according to Mauno et al.'s (2005) research, Finnish employees are satisfied with their work-family arrangements to a greater extent than employees in other countries, where there isn't such a wide variety of arrangements related to work and family and not required by law.

Additionally, according to Ikävalko's and Kantola's (2017, p.246) research, there is resistance to feminism in Finnish organizations. The resistance appears mostly silently, such as refusal to engage with concrete actions for gender equality and attempts to change unequal practices. According to them, the gender equality plans in Finland can provide opportunities for resistance to feminism, such resistance is always contradictory, uncertain and context dependent. Additionally, it is continuously challenged.

3.2.2 Cultural expectations

Finland, along with other Nordic countries, is among the most gender-equal countries of the European Union (Jansesberger & Lefkofridi, 2025, p. 284), which is seen in the Finnish culture. According to Jansesberger and Lefkofridi (2025, p. 284), household chores are less gendered. Additionally, men and women have equal rights to attend to politics, and women's high engagement toll in politics reflects the low gender gap (Jansesberger & Lefkofridi, 2025).

Although Finland is a very equal country, the challenges in cultural expectations are subtle, but still there, considering women leaders and women's achievement of leadership positions. Women are expected to be communal, in other words, nurturing and caring, whereas men are encouraged to inherit agentic traits such as assertiveness and independence (Salin, 2020). These agentic traits are again connected to leaders (Salin, 2020). Salin (2020) claims that these expectations are seen in performance appraisals in real life. She examined research that studied gender equality in Finland, with a sample of young and highly educated attendants. In these performance evaluations, women were described with adjectives such as supportive, collaborative and helpful, whereas men were described focusing on their assertiveness, self-confidence and independence. Additionally, men's feedback was more often linked to their business outcomes or technical expertise, while women's feedback was vaguer, focusing on their 'communication style' (Salin, 2020). She argues that these stereotypes may cause hesitation for women, whether they are likely to be successful leaders.

In addition, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) argue in Salin's (2020) work, that women who exhibit these agentic traits and are successful at tasks traditionally seen as male are often considered to be violating gender stereotypes. Heilman et al. (2004) state in Salin's (2020, p. 64) work that successful, strong and competent female leaders are assumed to be cold and receive lower ratings in likeability. Overall, the results of Eagly et al.'s (1992) and Bolino & Turney's (2003) research presented in Salin's (2020) work suggest that negative behaviour is tolerated more from men than from women. Additionally, Salin (2020) argues that female leaders are more often labelled as 'poor leaders' if they don't show enough consideration and support than expected. Therefore, the results of those studies suggest that the authoritarian traits are more accepted by men leaders, compared to women leaders.

In Finland, family life is an important part of the culture, and so pressure related to family responsibilities can hinder women's achievement of leadership positions (Mikkonen, 2022). Even though women aren't always expected to take the main responsibility for

their families, combining family and work can be challenging. Additionally, according to Mikkonen (2022), combining work and family is often viewed only as woman's problem. Furthermore, according to Mikkonen's (2022) research, decision makers can view women as not suitable for demanding positions, because they already assume women to be responsible for family and home.

Contradictory to that, the interviewees in Mikkonen's (2022) research stated that they didn't feel that being a mother hindered or restricted their leadership possibilities to a greater extent than being a father. The interviewed managers in that study were from Nordic football organisations, along with Finnish football organization Suomen Palloliitto. The interviewees stated that the attitude towards family and personal life was supportive and flexible. For example, parental leave is equal in Finland for both parents, and flexible hours are offered for both (Mikkonen, 2022). Therefore, the assumptions and expectations towards women's responsibilities as the main caretaker of the family vary across organisations.

3.2.3 Main barriers and enablers

Finland is a pioneer in gender equality as the country was first in the world to extend the right to vote and stand for elections in 1906, to all women and men (International Gender Equality Prize, n.d). As stated before, according to Rolin and Vainio (2011) (Kohtamäki et al., 2024, p. 80), Finland has well-established equality policies. Women have good opportunities to enter in leadership positions, which is seen in statistics, in the year 2023, as 46% of members of Parliament in Finland were women and 12 out of 19 Ministers in the government were women (International gender equality prize, n.d.). Finnish universities are obliged to have equality plans, to avoid discrimination and enhance equality (Kohtamäki et al., 2024, p. 80). Nori et al. (2021) (Kohtamäki et al., 2024, p. 80) state that access to higher education and equality in higher education are Finland's national priorities, and Finland has women make up most of master-level graduates since the mid 1980's. Additionally, the legislation system in Finland

emphasizes equality which has brought awareness and developed further the gender equality (Kohtamäki et al., 2024).

Although men continue to dominate top-level academic and management positions, there is a slow progress towards decreasing gender disparities (Kohtamäki et al., 2024, p.85). One factor that enables women to access management positions is the European Parliament's target requiring that all EU member states achieve a minimum of 40% representation of the underrepresented gender -women- on the boards of publicly listed companies (Euroopan Parlamentti, 2022). The directive also states that countries failing to meet this target will face sanctions. The European Parliament's quota target has accelerated progress in Finnish corporate boards, as the number of women leaders has clearly increased in recent years, by approximately one percentage point per year (Kullas, 2025).

However, women's representation among academic leaders is relatively low (Kohtamäki et al., 2024, p. 85). Therefore, the quantitative studies regarding women's experiences as academic leaders are also rare. Rolin and Vainio (2011) state in Kohtamäki et al.'s (2024, p. 85) work, that the ongoing hierarchies and male dominance in department-level hinder the development of a gender-neutral culture and organization.

Despite the institutional-level gender equality plans, the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986) and the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014), the equity of gender-neutral procedures in staffing or academic career development are not guaranteed, as Rolin and Vainio (2011) state in Kohtamäki et al.'s work (2024, p. 80). Even though women constitute the majority of those with higher education, for example, in 2024, 50,3% of women aged 25-64 had a higher education degree compared to 35,5% of men, they are still underrepresented in leadership positions (Kullas, 2025; Mikkonen, 2022). According to Kullas (2025), one explanation is that leadership positions are often reached through fields such as engineering or economics, in which women are typically underrepresented. In Finland, women are more likely to work in the public sector,

particularly in education and healthcare, where opportunities to start and develop private businesses are more limited.

According to Mauno et al. (2005), women in the public sector have experienced minor harmful effects on their career development, if they had used work-family benefits. Therefore, family-life and interruptions in career path due to that may have a negative effect on women's career development. However, Mauno et al.'s (2005) research only examined the public sector in Finland, where career advancement possibilities aren't vast. On the other hand, in the male-dominated private sector in Finland, the arrangements such as part-time work, long paternal leaves and job alternation leaves aren't used as much as in the public sector (Mauno et al., 2005.) Additionally, their research found that managers in the private sector are more supportive towards family requirements of female personnel than those of their male workers. This highlights the gender role expectations, where a man is seen as the main breadwinner in the family, and his work can't be interrupted by family issues (Mauno et al., 2005). However, the attitude of managers towards family-arrangements between men and women varied between organizations, especially between the public and private sector.

Women are underrepresented, especially in the highest leadership positions, where men are still dominating (Kohtamäki et al., 2024). Therefore, women still face the glass ceiling when trying to achieve top-management positions. In 2025, only seven women served on the boards of publicly listed companies (Kullas, 2025). Across all leadership positions in Finland, women held 37,7% of roles in 2024, making a slight decline from 38,4% in the previous year (Kullas, 2025). Overall, the number of women in leadership positions has increased over time, but the decline in 2024 and the Figure 2 suggests that progress has been uneven. According to Kullas (2025), one possible explanation for this trend is Finland's weak economic situation. Figure 2 illustrates the number of women in leadership positions in Finland.



Figure 2 The number of women in leadership positions in Finland. Adapted from ILOSTAT (2024).

Again, one obstacle to women's career advancement in Finland is the parental leave system. According to Kela (n.d.), each parent can have parental allowance for 160 working days. Long absences particularly disrupt careers in the private sector, where a replacement is often appointed for the absent manager, and career interruptions can slow the return to positions of responsibility (Kullas, 2025).

Lastly, as Nikunen (2014) and Sannino and Vainio (2015) find in Kohtamäki et al.'s work (2024), the main barriers for women in leadership are related to carrying marginal positions in academia, being an outsider and lacking status among the top academic ranks, which hinder women's career development in a male-dominated leadership environment. Kohtamäki et al. (2024) argue that academic women have experienced attempts to marginalise and silence them, for example, when their viewpoints have been ignored, both in large and small matters. Therefore, as Kohtamäki et al (2024) concludes, gender neutrality appears to only be an ideal illusion without sufficient realisation.

4 Comparison and interpretation

This chapter examines the key similarities and differences between Finland and Japan in terms of women's leadership and possibilities to achieve leadership positions. Those similarities and differences are examined through organizational practices and cultural expectations. In addition, the differences are reflected through gender order theory.

4.1 Barriers to women's leadership in Finland and Japan

In both countries, the parental leave system and long leaves from work when having children act as a barrier for women's achievement of leadership positions. In Finland, career interruptions can slow the return to positions of responsibility (Kullas, 2025). The same is seen in Japan, where the breaks in career due to maternity leave may hinder women's achievement of leadership positions (Flowers, 2025). Additionally, in Japan, paternal leave is still stigmatised (OECD, 2023). In 2021, the use of paternity leave in Japan was only 14% (OECD, 2023; OECD Family Database, 2023). Also in Finland, the harmful effects of taking work-family benefits can be seen, as women in the public sector have experienced minor harmful effects on their career path due to that (Mauno et al., 2005). According to them, in the male-dominated private sector, arrangements such as part-time work, long paternal leaves and job alternation leaves aren't used as much.

Similarly, in both countries, the care duties at home might hinder women's achievement of managerial positions. However, the expectation that women take the main responsibility of children, care duties, and domestic work is higher in Japan. Women in Japan must often take care of their children, both of their parents, sometimes even their husband's parents, as well as the domestic duties at home (Aiston & Jung, 2015). On top of the expectation of presenteeism and total availability in Japanese workplaces, there is a difficulty for women to balance work and family life (Flowers, 2025). In Finland, the family life is also an important part of the culture, but the care duties are divided more equally for both parents. For example, parental leave is equal for both parents and flexible hours are offered for both (Mikkonen, 2022). There is still variation between

organizations, regarding how much family responsibilities might hinder women's career advancement in Finland (Mikkonen, 2022).

There are hidden discrimination and gendered structures in both countries. As stated before, leadership in both countries has been connected to masculine traits (Salin, 2020; Nemoto, 2016). In Finland, women often work as middle managers or in positions traditionally viewed as more feminine and supportive (Mikkonen, 2022). Additionally, as Kohtamäki et al. (2024) argue, women carry marginal positions in academia, being an outsider and lacking status among the top academic ranks. In their research, women have experienced attempts to understate them, such as their viewpoints being ignored. However, their research only examined academic organisations, and therefore, the results can't be generalized to all organizations.

Furthermore, the same is seen in Japan, but the discrimination is more evident. The organizational practices, such as in task distribution (Aiston & Jung, 2015), reflect the discrimination of women in Japan. Also, the lack of respect in some Japanese organizations towards women act as a barrier for their opportunities to achieve management positions. Additionally, the informal rules in workplaces often turn into men's convenience in Japanese workplaces, as Flowers (2025) stated. According to him, the informal rules were originally made for men. When women first entered the workplace, they faced the expectations of total availability and presenteeism (Flowers, 2025). In addition, his research claims that women were rewarded for "behaving like men", such as attending to after-work socialising and games with male colleagues.

Additionally, in both countries, there is an expectation to embody masculinity in leadership roles, acting as a barrier for women's leadership. However, this is more persistent in Japan. According to Nemoto (2016), leadership in Japan has traditionally been connected to masculine traits. The long working hours and limited rest time create a belief that women don't have time for managerial positions (Nemoto, 2013)(Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). The expectation to embody masculinity is also slightly seen in Finland,

as Salin's (2020) work argues that the underlying norms that connect leadership to masculine agentic traits are still persistent. Mikkonen (2022) supports this statement in her work, and according to her, women in management positions must adapt to more masculine leadership norms and culture.

One barrier for women's leadership in Finland is the fact that leadership positions are usually reached through fields such as economics or engineering, in which women typically are underrepresented (Kullas, 2025). Women are more likely to work in the public sector, such as healthcare and education, where opportunities for career advancement are more limited. On top of that, according to Rolin and Vainio (2011) in Kohtamäki et al.'s (2024) work, there are still hierarchies and male dominance at the department level, hindering the development of a gender-neutral organization culture in Finland.

Lastly, in Finland, there was found resistance towards feminism in Finnish organizations (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017). That is, for example, refusal to engage with concrete actions to change unequal practices. However, as they argued, such resistance is always context-dependent and contradictory. In Japan, the taxation system and lack of female role models act as a barrier for women's leadership (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025).

4.2 Enablers for women's leadership in Finland and Japan

Finland has a more extensive legislative framework for gender equality than Japan. In Finland, gender equality is in the Constitution, in addition to gender equality plans, the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986) and the Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014). Additionally, in 2023, 12 out of 19 Ministers in the government were women (International gender equality prize, n.d.), illustrating the strong state of gender equality in Finland. Furthermore, Finnish universities are obliged to have equality plans and enhance equality, and higher education and equality in higher education are Finland's national priorities (Kohtamäki et al., 2024). The legislation system that

emphasizes equality has brought awareness and further developed gender equality (Kohtamäki et al., 2024).

Japan has Articles on equality in its Constitution, such as Article 13, Article 14 and Article 24 (Shugiin, n.d.). Additionally, the Japanese Act on Securing, Etc. of Equal Opportunities and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment (1985), also prohibits the indirect discrimination of women (Monolith Law Office, nd). However, the laws in Japan are less legally enforceable in practice, as there are no strict sanctions (Japanese Law Translation, 2019). Therefore, organizations are legally bound to gender equality in Japan, but the mechanisms of enforcement and penalties are often limited. Finland's enabling factors are more firmly embedded in institutional structures through legislation, such as parental leave policies and equality planning. In Japan, on the other hand, these factors rely more on gradual policy initiatives, with weaker enforcement mechanisms and greater resistance from traditional workplace norms.

However, Japan has taken steps to advance gender equality. For example, the first female prime minister was elected in 2025, and the legislation on gender equality are subsequently reviewed every five years (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). According to them, in 2024, the fifth Gender Equality Plan is in progress. National bureaucracies in Japan were demanded to hire at least 30% of women, and in all of Japan's ministries, the number of women employees has increased significantly (Flowers, 2025). There is also initiatives to advance transparency in equal pay, access to flexible work opportunities, and increase the number of women in private and public leadership (OECD, 2023).

In Finland, the parental leave is equal for both parents, and more often, both parents take the leave from work. Therefore, women aren't the only parent that has break in their career path when having children. Both parents have 160 working days of parental allowance in Finland (Kela, n.d.), but in Japan, paternal leave is still stigmatised (OECD, 2023), as stated before. Additionally, in Finland, employees are often satisfied with work-family arrangements to a greater extent than employees in other countries, where the

variety of those arrangements is more limited and not required by law (Mauno et al., 2005).

Although in Finland men continue to dominate the top-level management positions, there is slow progress towards decreasing those disparities (Kohtamäki et al., 2024). For example, the European Parliament requires all EU member states to achieve a minimum of 40% representation of the underrepresented gender, typically women, on the boards of publicly listed companies (Euroopan Parlamentti, 2022). According to Kullas (2025), the number of women in leadership positions has increased in recent years by approximately one percentage point annually.

Additionally, the working unions and high union density in Finland (Lunqvist et al., 2023) enable the opportunities for women to advance in their career. Unions help to solve gender-based inequalities in workplaces (Lunqvist et al., 2023). Furthermore, according to them, participation and collaboration are emphasized more in Nordic countries than in other cultural contexts.

4.3 Interpretation through gender order theory

Elements of gender order theory interpreted in this thesis: androcentrism, division of labour, devaluation of feminine and power relations are all reflected in both Finland and Japan. Androcentrism refers to the tendency to treat the male career path as the norm. The division of labour is reflected in how work and care responsibilities are divided between women and men, while the devaluation of the feminine describes how women's work, leadership style or contributions are undervalued. Finally, power relations refer to the continued dominance of men in top leadership positions and decision-making processes.

In Finland, in connection with androcentrism, one challenge women face is the expectation to embody femininity (Mikkonen, 2022). This is while leadership roles simultaneously demand them to adopt traditionally masculine leadership styles

(Mikkonen, 2022). According to Salin (2020), in Finnish culture stereotypes, men are typically encouraged and expected to be agentic, whereas women are expected to be communal. If these expectations aren't fulfilled, the gender-incongruent behaviour may lead to negative reactions (Salin, 2020). In addition, the agentic traits have typically been connected to leaders (Salin, 2020). According to Salin's (2020) research, the authoritarian traits of leaders are more tolerated by men than by women.

Androcentrism is evident in Japanese workplaces in informal rules that prioritize men's convenience (Flowers, 2025). The expected total availability and presenteeism require employees to prioritize work over family life, attend to after-work socializing and always be present in the workplace (Flowers, 2025). These are male-coded norms that women, especially with children, find difficult to conform to. Women in the workplaces are often rewarded for behaving like men, as they are more likely to get promoted when following these informal rules (Flowers, 2025). Together, these dynamics reinforce androcentrism, as the cultural belief in Japan connects leadership to masculine traits and the ideal worker is male, devoted to his work (Nemoto, 2013).

The division of labour is reflected in the way that tasks "typically" and historically associated with women, such as domestic work, extend into the workplace (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). The interviews that Mikkonen (2022) conducted by interviewing women in managerial positions in Finnish football organisation Suomen Palloliitto in 2019, found that gendered duties such as serving coffee to the media was still offered for women, despite being in managerial position. However, Mikkonen's research only analysed sport organizations in Finland, and therefore, the findings can't be generalized to all Finnish organisations. Additionally, women often work as middle-managers or positions traditionally viewed more supportive, such as human resource management (Mikkonen, 2022). However, women in Finland aren't seen as the main caretakers of the family, although in some cases, women end up doing a lot of the care work (Mikkonen, 2022).

In Japan, the division of labour is seen in differences in the way tasks are distributed between women and men in workplaces. Especially in academia, women have less time, compared to men, to do research, because they are assigned tasks in administration and teaching (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Despite having the same skills, women and men are often assigned to different roles and responsibilities in workplaces (OECD, 2023). Additionally, the expectation that women are the main caretakers of the family and men are those who work (Nemoto, 2013), reflect the division of labour. Women in Japan must often take the role of the main caretaker of the family, often having to take care of both of their parents as well (Aiston & Jung, 2015).

The fact that men continue to dominate in leadership positions in both countries reflects the power relations. The number of women in leadership positions was only 37,7% (Kullas, 2025) and 10,9% in Japan (Nippon, 2024) in 2024. Additionally, in Finland, men dominate, especially in the top-level leadership positions. Furthermore, the dimension is subtly reflected in Finnish organizations, such as bias in decision-making. According to Kohtamäki et al. (2024), men attend to decision-making processes more than their female colleagues at the department level. One aspect of hegemonic masculinity is seen in the underlying norms connecting leadership with masculine agentic traits (Salin, 2022). The same is seen in Japan, as men attend to decision-making processes more than their women colleagues (Aiston & Jung, 2015). The hegemonic masculinity that is part of power relations is also subtly part of Japanese gender roles, as leadership roles have traditionally been connected to masculine traits (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025). Lastly, the taxation in Japan can be seen reflecting the power relations. As stated before, the spouse with higher income, who is usually a man, can claim a spousal exemption (Pianezzi & Inaba, 2025).

Considering the devaluation of feminine in Finland, women in academia face invisibility, being an outsider and carrying marginal positions, as Nikunen (2014) and Sannino and Vainio (2015) state in Kohtamäki et al. (2024) work. These factors have hindered women's career development. Additionally, academic women have experienced

attempts to marginalize or silence them, for example, through the frequent disregard of their viewpoints (Kohtamäki et al., 2024). They add that in academia, hierarchies and culture are reflected in internal rules and symbols that influence how gender is understood. In Japan, the devaluation of feminine is reflected in the fact that women often receive lower ratings and fewer opportunities for career advancement, despite having the same skills as their male colleagues (Yamada, 2023; Sato & Jones, 2019). In addition, in many workplaces in Japan, there is a lack of respect for women colleagues, as men usually don't read their women colleagues' research (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Additionally, according to OECD (2023), the longstanding structural inequalities in Japan reflect the undervaluation of traditionally female-dominated jobs.

Through gender order theory, Japan's barriers can be interpreted as a stronger form of androcentrism. There, the ideal worker is still imagined as someone fully available for work and free from care responsibilities. In Finland, there remain visible subtle assumptions associating leadership with agentic masculine traits, but androcentrism is less explicit. Regarding the division of labour, women in Japan are more often viewed as the main caretakers of the family than in Finland. Consequently, traditional gender roles remain more pronounced, with men associated with paid work and women with care responsibilities. In addition, workplace task distribution in Japan is more unequal, reflecting a stronger division of labour. In both countries, men dominate in leadership positions and in decision-making processes, reflecting existing power relations. However, this is more evident in Japan, where the underrepresentation of women leaders remains significant. Finally, the devaluation of feminine can be observed in both countries, although in Japan it is more deeply embedded in longstanding structural inequalities. In Finland, where gender equality has a stronger institutional foundation, the devaluation of feminine is expressed more subtly, for example, through feelings of isolation and the marginalization of women's perspectives.

5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis by answering the research questions and summarizing the key findings. In addition, it presents suggestions for improving gender equality in both countries as well as the practical and theoretical implications of the findings. It also discusses the limitations of the thesis and offers recommendations for future research.

5.1 Answer to the main research question

The aim of this thesis was to examine what organizational practices and cultural expectations shape women's leadership opportunities in Finland and Japan. This subchapter answers the main research question about how those organizational practices and cultural expectations shape the barriers and enablers for women's leadership in Finland and Japan.

Finland has more women in managerial positions compared to Japan. In 2024, 37,7% of managerial positions in Finland were held by women (Kullas, 2025), compared to Japan's 10.9% in the same year (Nippon, 2024). However, in both countries, women leaders are still underrepresented. Still, the number of women leaders has increased in both countries in recent years.

Organisational practices in Japan that shape women's leadership opportunities are connected to the fact that traditional gender roles are still persistent in Japanese workplaces (Yamada, 2023). That is reflected, for example, in inequalities in job segregation, the informal rules in workplaces, long working hours and gendered career tracks. In addition, the cultural expectation that women remain responsible for family care influences women's opportunities for career advancement. Therefore, in Japan, barriers are more visible and institutionalised than in Finland, where those remain more subtle through stereotypes, masculine leadership norms and hidden gendered assumptions in organisational life.

5.2 Main barriers and enablers

In Japan, the main barriers are traditional gender roles, informal rules in workplaces, stigma around parental leave, long working hours and expectations for women to take primary responsibility for care work. Because of the care duties, many mothers work part-time and don't have enough time to devote to work. There are also inequalities in job segregation, as women are assigned to different roles despite having the same skills as their male colleagues (OECD, 2023). The main enablers are government equality plans, gradual growth in women's representation, increasing public attention to women's leadership and efforts to improve gender equality in national policies.

In Finland, the main barriers are more subtle, including persistent norms connecting leadership to masculine traits, stereotypes towards women in evaluation, women's concentration in middle-management or supportive roles and career interruptions linked to family leave. There are also expectations about how women leaders should behave and what traits they should have. The main enablers in Finland are the well-established equality legislation, equal parental leave rights, gender-equality awareness, collective agreements and EU-level board representation targets.

5.3 Interpretation through gender order theory

Gender order theory helps show that women's underrepresentation is not only caused by individual choices, but by deeper social and organizational structures. As stated before, all the levels of gender order theory interpreted in this thesis; androcentrism, the devaluation of feminine, the division of labour and power relations were found in both countries. However, as gender equality is less advanced in Japan than in Finland, the dimensions are more pronounced there.

Androcentrism is reflected in both countries in the expectation for leaders to embody masculine traits. In Japan, androcentrism is evident in the informal rules in workplaces, such as expectation of total availability and presenteeism, and women being rewarded

when behaving like men. In Finland, women are expected to embody feminine traits, while in leadership positions embodying masculine agentic traits is the expectation.

The division of labour is seen in Finland in some organizations, where tasks typically and historically associated with women are extended into the workplace. However, regarding that the thesis only examined sport organizations in Finland, which can't be generalized to all organisations. The division of labour is also seen in the way women often work as middle managers or in supportive roles. In Japan, the dimension is reflected in task allocation in workplaces and women being the main caretaker of the family.

Power relations are reflected in both countries as men continue to dominate in leadership positions and attend to decision-making processes more than women. Women are underrepresented, especially in top-management positions in Finland. In both countries, leadership is connected to masculine traits reflecting hegemonic masculinity.

The devaluation of feminine is embedded in structural inequalities in Japan, such as a lack of respect towards women colleagues in workplaces, women receiving lower ratings and fewer opportunities for career advancement. In Finland, the dimension is reflected more subtly through feelings of invisibility and marginalization of women's perspectives.

5.4 Practical and theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, the thesis demonstrates that gender order theory provides a useful framework for comparing barriers to women's leadership across different national contexts. From a practical perspective, the findings illustrate that organisations should also evaluate informal workplace practices, leadership norms, promoting criteria, expectations regarding working hours and assumptions related to caregiving responsibilities. Therefore, organizations shouldn't only focus on formal equality policies but also consider the more invisible expectations.

To make workplaces more equal in Japan, efforts must be made. There is still a need for raising awareness of unconscious biases alongside transparency and fairness in performance evaluation (Yamada, 2023). Because of those unconscious or conscious biases, there is a need for equality in career advancement opportunities (Yamada, 2023).

In Finland, according to Kullas (2025), gender-equality requires structural changes in educational choices, career paths, recruiting, and family leave systems. Because women are underrepresented, especially in the top-management roles, there is a need for creation of pathways for women to enter technical and profit-and-loss roles, as these form the core of top leadership (Kullas, 2025). According to her, the glass ceiling is still persistent, and real gender equality is achieved when the opportunities to enter management positions are the same for women and men. Because women represent a minority as leaders, discrimination can be unnoticed among leaders (Mikkonen, 2022, p. 1012). Therefore, according to Mikkonen (2022), it is important to include both men and women in leading positions, to ensure that the views and opinions of both genders are heard. In addition, Salin's (2020) research suggests that gender bias and gender stereotypes still affect leader evaluations in Finland. Her research found gendering of leadership at a more general level, in the way we think about leadership and successful leaders.

5.5 Limitations and future research

This thesis is based on previous literature and secondary sources, not empirical data. Therefore, it does not directly capture the lived experiences of women leaders in Finland and Japan. Another limitation is that Finland and Japan are treated as national contexts, although organisational practices and gender expectations may vary across industries, companies and regions.

The field of research of women's leadership both in Finland and Japan is rather limited, and it necessitates further research. There is a need for current research, especially from Finnish workplaces and organizations. Future studies could, for example, interweave

women leaders in Finland and Japan. Additionally, research could compare the countries on one sector, such as corporate boards, technology or academia.

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