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SJCC Scholarship Midterm Report

The first part of my Japan Journey

Nina Matti

Inhalt

1. Introduction

I would like to start this report by talking about my connection with Japan, and my motivation to undertake this journey: unlike some of my fellow scholarship recipients, I do not have any Japanese heritage, but I have been fascinated by Japan since I was a little girl. I grew up in Switzerland watching anime during primary school and moving on to reading Manga during all my teenage years, the themes of my reading material maturing alongside me. I have grown up wondering what it might be like living in this culture that seemed so familiar yet at the same time foreign and mysterious to me.

After finishing high school, I finally got my chance: my parents gave me the opportunity to spend half a year in Tokyo in a language school before starting university in Switzerland. I arrived in Tokyo with barely a word of Japanese, but I ended up spending 6 wonderful months at my language school and with my host family. At the end of my stay, however, I realized that I had gotten nowhere near to where I wanted to be in terms of language progress as well as my familiarity with Japanese culture.

During my university years and my first forays into working life, I'd always kept this idea in the back of my head that I would one day go back to Japan to work there for a couple of years. While still at university, I started helping with the organization of a Japanese culture event in Switzerland, the JapAniManga Night, and it was through this event that I first learned about the SJCC scholarship program. I decided to apply for the scholarship at the end of 2016, and after two interviews, I was extremely happy to get confirmation in early 2017 that I would indeed be able to benefit from this wonderful opportunity. Due to my circumstances with work, however, and in order to give myself time to prepare and save up some more money, I decided to start the second season of my Japan experience one year later, in January 2018. At this point, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to the SJCC in general and Martin Stricker in particular for granting me this opportunity and supporting me with great understanding and flexibility. Many thanks as well to the countless SJCC members and supporters here in Japan for keeping up a network of contacts that organizes countless interesting and enriching events.

This report will have two main parts – one part will describe my experience during this first half of my journey, whereas the other will focus more in-depth on topics that have touched me personally during my time here and have made a deep impression on how I see Japan: Japanese work attitude, the Japanese interpretation of work life balance and gender inequality.

2. Part I - Personal experience

The preparation before my departure and my first year in Japan can be summed up as follows:

Preparation

- Support for finding a suitable language school and all student visa preparation: GoGoNihon
- Looking for internship/job opportunities and deciding where to live locally during the summer before my departure
- Saving money

My first year in Japan

- Language School (1 year): ARC Academy Japanese Language School (near Ichigaya, Tokyo)
- Part-time job at M-industry Japan for the first half of the year
- Interim part-time work as a game tester for ZigZaGames.Inc
- Job hunting for a full-time job in Japan from the second half of the first year
- Changing student visa status to working visa at the end of the first year

2.1. Preparation

After getting confirmation that I was going to be able to participate in the program in early 2017 and subsequent planning of logistics, I set my start date to January 2018. At the same time, I decided to travel to Japan in the summer of 2017 for about a month, to do some local research and lay the groundwork to clear up some of the organizational details and make some vital decisions for my long-term stay. I do not have any relatives in Japan, but my sister decided that she would also come to Japan and live with me, so I knew that we could figure things out together. That summer I met with a couple of people who would potentially be interested in hiring me as an intern or similar for the second part of my scholarship journey. Amongst others, I was lucky to get into contact with the person in charge of Migros Japan (M-industry), who was interested in hiring me, starting out in the capacity of part-time worker. Me and my sister had been wondering if we should start our stay in Tokyo or Kyoto, but this job opportunity meant that I would definitely start in Tokyo, since I was going to be able to work there. We looked at a couple of areas in Tokyo at that point but couldn't decide on where we would want to live yet.

Back in Switzerland, I contacted GoGoNihon for some input as to what I should do to apply for a student visa. Much to my surprise, they handled everything for me – I was able to apply to a Language School through them, and they also handled almost the entire procedure of applying for a visa! For anyone who isn't one hundred percent sure of what to do or what is needed for a visa, I absolutely recommend going through GoGoNihon, their services are amazing! Also, it is better to start sooner rather than later, since the procedure does take some time.

While waiting for my visa to come through, we looked at different options for accommodation. In the end, we decided to book a small room in a shared apartment through Sakura House for the first month, and then look for a permanent solution once we were there. I contacted several Japanese housing agencies about two months before we arrived in Japan, and they all told me that the Japanese housing market is extremely reactive/short-timed, and that it would be better to look for an apartment once we were in Japan and would be able to react immediately if we found what we were looking for. In

December, having received my visa, gotten confirmation for our January accommodation and booked our flights, I closed all my bank accounts apart from one which I would be able to use from Japan as well. I was ready.

2.2. Arriving in Japan – the first month

We arrived in Japan on the 3rd of January, and my school was scheduled to start a few days later. The first week, I spent all of my time outside school with administrative dealings – I registered myself as a resident at the Shinjuku City Ward with my temporary Sakura House address, I applied for a My Number (a unique number that gets assigned to every resident in Japan) at the same place and I went through the administrative process for getting my insurance card. People will warn you that you need to prepare yourself for a long wait if you go to a ward office to get administrative dealings in order – and they are right. Waiting times at the Shinjuku ward office will be up to two hours depending on what you apply for. Bring something to entertain yourself. Once I was registered as a resident and had my Zairyuu Card (Residence Card) which was now effectively my Japanese ID and also had my Japanese address on it, I was able to take on the next step of challenges: I did extensive research and registered for a long-term phone contract; finally armed with my own Japanese phone number, I then went to sign up at Shinsei Bank for a Japanese bank account.

Shinsei Bank

Unlike some of the bigger banks such as Mitsubishi, Mizuho or Sumitomo, Shinsei Bank accepts foreigners with student residence status in Japan as bank account applicants. However, you do need a Japanese phone number to register. Some of the drawbacks are that what you can get as a foreign student is only a very basic account without debit or credit card; it will allow you to withdraw and deposit money from any ATM (some will charge you) with your cash card, and most companies will accept it as the account they pay your salary to. However, Shinsei is not a widely recognized bank in Japan, so many shops and services, such as a monthly gym subscription, will generally not accept payment by a Shinsei cash card (unless you are willing to undergo a lot of formalities). There is the possibility of online banking even with a simple account, but it is a very basic service. With some administrative work, we were able to arrange that our monthly rent would be deducted directly from the Shinsei account, but I had to go to one of the Shinsei branch offices in person to do so. Every month, you can make up to three money transfers without charge via online banking, though only within Japan. Transferring money outside of Japan or receiving money from outside of Japan is a bit more complicated and needs administrative steps, signatures or your personalized signature stamp (Hanko). If you do not have a Japanese passport and are here on a student visa, my advice is to start with Shinsei while you are still a student, and once you start working you can change to one of the more widely accepted banks.

Apartment Hunting

Once I had my Resident Card, a Japanese phone number and a Japanese bank account, I was ready to start hunting for our perfect apartment. We contacted about 5 different agencies and proceeded to visit around 25 apartments within the first three weeks until we finally found our perfect match - it was conveniently located within Shinjuku ward, which meant that we would not have to change wards within Tokyo. We were able to move in a week later, and as soon as we signed our contract, we went to the Shinjuku ward office to change the address on our Residence cards. By law, you are required to register your new address at the ward office within 3 weeks of moving to a new house. In

Japan, much like in Switzerland, house owners generally want to see a salary that is at least three times as high as your rent. As neither of us had a full-time job yet at that time, we were very lucky to meet an agent who was ready to trust us even without these securities, though normally that is not the case.

2.3. My first year in Tokyo

My sister was lucky to find a job in Tokyo within a couple of weeks of intense job hunting. I for my part started going to school from January. Once or twice a week I would work at M-industry Japan for an afternoon. The first 6 months went by quickly, and I was anticipating to finish school in June and start working full-time somewhere around July or August – but when June drew close, I was told that unfortunately they would not be able to employ me full-time at M-industry this year. After some consideration I renewed my school contract for 6 more months to be able to stay on my student visa and started looking for another employment opportunity over the summer while continuing my Japanese language classes.

In late September I interviewed with a small PR company located in the center of Tokyo, and after two more interviews, I was offered a full-time employee (正社員) position starting around the end of the year. With my future company, I started gathering the necessary materials for the visa change procedure, which was quite a lengthy process. My company is very small, and this was the first time they were going through the process of sponsoring a visa for an employee, so we had to figure out things together. Months passed, and it was December when I finally submitted all my documents and my visa change application at the immigration bureau in Tokyo. After having spent my obligatory two hours in the waiting area, I left with a ticket that would serve as proof th at I had submitted my visa change application. I had heard horror stories about how long a visa can take to come through, but in my case, it only took about two weeks. After another visit at the immigration bureau to get my visa, I went back to my company to discuss when I should start working. They were very flexible, and I decided that I would postpone my starting date in order to be able to have some time to travel through Japan before I start working. I started working in the middle of February 2019, a bit more than a year after I had arrived in Tokyo. Thus began the second part of my Japan Journey, which I will cover in more detail in my final report.

Japan through winter, spring, summer and fall 2018

3. Part II – Work-life balance and gender equality in Japan

Japan, like any other country, has its positive and negative sides. During my life in Japan, I have not only experienced countless awe-inspiring moments, but also inevitably encountered some of the country's more controversial issues. For the second part of this report, I would like to focus on two topics. Amongst other things, I have had the chance to get a glimpse into three different Japanese companies now. From that perspective, I would like to address the controversial topics of the Japanese attitude towards work as well as gender (in)equality in Japan. Having worked for a Japanese company, I have experienced first-hand how truly different the Japanese work culture is from what I am used to in Switzerland. Even though I technically knew about these differences, experiencing them myself was harsh. I have also heard countless work-related stories and experiences from my female coworkers that have made me realize what women have to deal with on a daily basis while job hunting in Japan or in a Japanese work environment, which is one of the reasons why I started doing research and wanted to find out more about this issue, and ultimately chose to address this topic in my report. I will start with the general concept of work-life balance here in Japan.

3.1. Work-life balance, national holidays, and vacation days in Japan

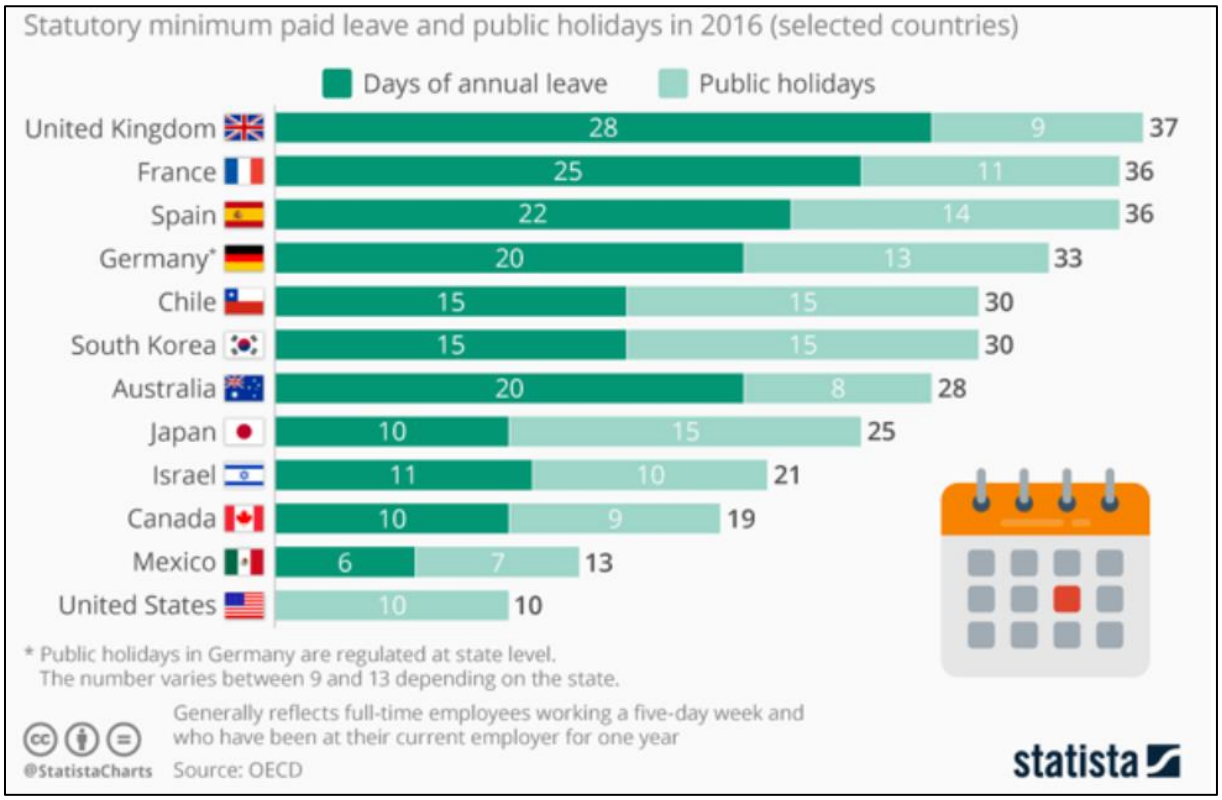
The number of Japanese work holidays are known to be low compared to many European countries: while European countries have an average of 21 to 28 days of paid annual leave, the Japanese average is 10 days of unpaid annual leave during the first year at a new job (each consecutive year of employment, one more day of paid vacation will be added to the available total up to a maximum of 20 days total). What's more, the company culture in Japan prevents many people from actually making use of all of their vacation days; on average, Japanese use at most half of their unpaid holiday, which is about 5 days a year, some people opting to not take any vacation at all.[1] Reasons given for this are prevalently that they want to save their paid leave in case they fall ill (because sick days count as paid leave in many Japanese companies) or that their colleagues don't take more vacation either, so they do not want to seem like slacking off. It is now the year 2020 but keeping up a good appearance is as important as ever in Japan. Many people also want to avoid burdening their colleagues by taking vacation days which would result in more work for their coworkers, and since so few people do take their holidays, it has even more stigma attached to it.

Japan does have about 15 national holidays scattered throughout the year, all of which are generally observed – should a national holiday fall on a Saturday or Sunday, any ordinary company will observe the holiday on the Monday following that weekend, and people will get that day off. This is one of the unique ways in which the Japanese can take a day off without feeling bad about it, since it is ok to take a holiday if the whole country gets to do the same. One of the downsides of this kind of holiday allocation is that everyone has their days off at the same time, which leads to needless overcrowding of popular travel destinations. During golden week, that famous time during spring where three national holidays are grouped together very closely so many people have a whole week off from work, it is almost impossible to find good travel accommodation and transport options if you don't book many months in advance, and popular travel spots have to deal with enormous overcrowding.

[1] https://www.nippon.com/en/column/g00506/japanese-workers-struggle-to-take-time-off.html; https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-trends/Japanese-workers-take-only-half-their-paid-vacation-survey-finds

Everybody ends up spending more money due to high demand, and wherever you go, you will wait a substantial amount longer.

No matter how you look at it, it is not an efficient solution to make the whole country travel at the same time. However, due to Japanese culture and customs, this is in fact one of the only ways that Japanese people do take days off work. Of course, a national holiday is just one day, and leads to nothing more but a prolonged three-day weekend. In that amount of time, it is possible to spend some time with the family, or go and visit your parents in another part of the country, as is often the case with many Japanese working in a city like Tokyo or Osaka, or people who work for a big Japanese corporation and get reassigned to a new work location every few years. But it is not very likely that one will travel abroad or get a significant amount of rest in such a short time.



Average holidays per country[2]

Zangyou (残業), black companies and Karoshi

Overtime work, or zangyou (残業) in Japanese – a word that will sound familiar to anyone that has ever worked in Japan for a prolonged duration of time. For a long time, overtime work has been expected in Japanese work culture, and going home before your boss leaves was unheard of. In the last two decades things have changed, but in many companies working longer than your normal work hours is still seen as honorable instead of detrimental to a good work-life balance. In 2019, the government officially capped the maximum of overtime hours per month at 45, but there is still a loophole in the law that allows companies to set their own limit if enough of their employees contractually agree to it. There is also a wide-spread habit for companies to include a certain amount

[2] https://www.statista.com/chart/15005/statutory-minimum-paid-leave-and-public-holidays/

of overtime hours in the base salary, which means that employees who work overtime within a certain defined number of hours do not get paid anything for these extra hours; they effectively work for free.

Black companies, or black kigyou (ブラック企業) as they are called here in Japan, are a phenomenon that has started to rise to awareness in Japan around 2002, at that time mainly describing working conditions in companies within the IT field. It describes companies that have inhumane working conditions including too many hours of overtime.

Sadly, the Japanese language has a word for the concept of death by overworking: Karoshi (過労死) means overwork death, and it is shockingly present in Japanese everyday life. This includes work-related deaths such as heart attacks as well as work-related suicides.[3]

Comparison to Switzerland

When it comes to vacation days in Switzerland, all employees are entitled to at least 20 days (four weeks) of holiday a year on top of public holidays, which makes Switzerland about average for holiday entitlement in Europe, but due to most Swiss companies pushing their employees to actually use their vacation days, the average Swiss person takes a lot more vacation days a year than an average Japanese worker. On top of this, some Swiss companies offer more generous holiday allowance than the statutory. According to the Swiss statistics office, in 2019, full-time employees aged 20 to 49 had an average of 4.9 weeks of holiday, compared with 5.4 weeks for 15-19-year-olds and 5.6 weeks for those aged 50-64. Holidays have continued to increase over the past 20 years[4].

In terms of public holidays, only August 1st (Swiss National Day) is observed in all cantons. Other public holidays vary from canton to canton, though most also observe Christmas Day, New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday and Ascension Day. However, if a public holiday falls on a weekend then it is just tough luck – unlike in Japan, the day off doesn't carry over to the next week.

By law, the maximum a Swiss company can ask someone to work is 45 hours a week (apart from some manual jobs which allow 50). According to the Swiss statistics office in 2019 the average was 41 hours and 2 minutes for full-time employees[5]. Compared to Japan, which has many legal loopholes as well as an ingrained overwork mentality that allows companies to demand paid or unpaid overtime from their employees, Swiss working time standards are much more humane.

Workers in Switzerland are generally considered to have a good work/life balance. According to the OECD's Better Life survey the share of employees in Switzerland working very long hours is lower than the OECD average[6]. Additionally, Swiss cities are regularly ranked as having among the best quality of life in the world.

3.2. Gender equality

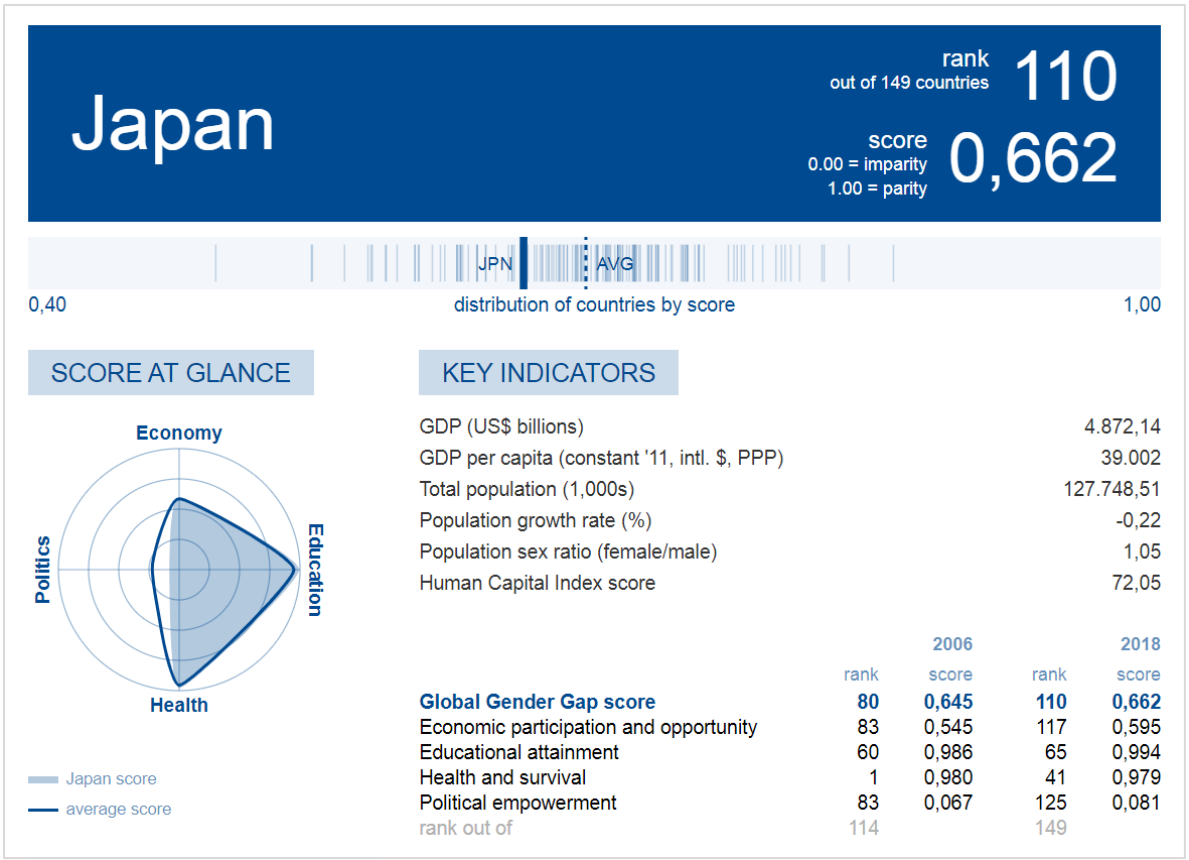
The percentage of women occupying high positions at work has always been low in Japan compared to other top tier economic nations. When taking office, Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

[3] https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/12/23/national/social-issues/overwork-deaths-put-spotlight-japans-black-companies/#.XWX8WS4zbb0
[4] https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/work-income/employment-working-hours/working-time/holiday-leave.html
[5] https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/work-income/employment-working-hours/working-time/actual-hours-worked.html
[6] http://www.oecd.org/sdd/47918063.pdf

vowed to support working women, and to create conditions that would allow women to have better career chances and to be able to more easily return to the workforce after having had children in order to fuel economic growth.

Now, over a decade later, women's percentage in managerial positions has increased slightly but is still very low in comparison to international standards. At the same time, general inequalities in work conditions for women have not improved significantly. Most women will still have to accept employment on a temporary contract basis whereas their equally qualified male counterparts will benefit from full-time employee (正社員) contracts which come with many bonuses as well as job security. Many Japanese companies still insist that it is only reasonable to give women this unfavorable treatment since they anticipate that women will marry, leave the company and have children after a few years of working.[7]

Japan is still extremely behind in issues of gender equality, occupying the 110th place (out of 149 selected nations) in terms of gender equity in the latest gender report published by the world economic forum. Their score has risen slightly compared to 2006, but it seems a lot of countries have redoubled their effort on these issues, which resulted in Japan's rank drop from 80th to an abysmal 110th, placing them way below average. [8]



[7] https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a04601/japanese-women-face-tough-reality-in-work-and-marriage.html

[8] https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018

In the economy as whole, but especially in politics, women in high positions are still shockingly absent. Former Prime Minister Abe, after a reshuffling of his cabinet in 2018[9], had only one woman in his cabinet whereas there were three before, which further reduced the already minimal female representation in high political positions in Japan.

Another recent example is the scandal that surrounded a well-known Japanese university, Tokyo Medical University. In 2018, word spread that for decades, the university had taken measures to keep the percentage of women attending the university to very low levels. The computer-based point system would only let female applicants get a maximum of 80 points even if they answered all questions correctly, whereas men could get a maximum of 100 points.[10] Once this practice became known publicly, the scandal led to investigations into other medical institutes, and revealed many other medical institutions where similarly unfair systems with clear gender bias were in place.

The reasoning behind this practice was that women would marry, have children and stop working, so having more women study medicine would lead to a shortage of doctors. This kind of biased thinking is unfortunately still very prevalent in today's Japanese society. A strong hierarchical structure means that the people in power today are old men born in an era where women were not seen as equals, and a staunchly upheld top-down structure means that changes happen reluctantly and very slowly, if at all. Fortunately, in the case of Tokyo Medical University, the pressure caused by this scandal was strong enough that change did happen. The first female university president was elected, and the exam practice was reformed. One year later, after the first entrance exams under this new system, the percentage of women who passed was slightly higher than the percentage of their male counterparts, rising from an incredibly low 2.9% under the old rigged system to slightly over 20%.

Comparison to Switzerland

While Switzerland has one of the strongest economies in the world with one of the highest life expectancies, the country falls behind on metrics related to gender equality. In Switzerland, women were allowed to vote in parts of Switzerland for the first time in 1971 with the last canton allowing women to vote as late as 1991 (as a comparison, in the U.S., women were given the right to vote in 1919, and in Japan, due to U.S. influence after the war, women received the right to vote in 1947). Today, women in Switzerland still earn approximately 20% less than men. Switzerland went from being the eight-best country in the world for gender equality in 2015[11] to the 20th by 2018, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2018[12].

3.3. Japan's outlook into the future

Former Prime Minister Abe's "Womenomics" and "Women will shine" slogans are terms referring to an effort to finally push Japan's patriarchal society into a 21st century in which immediate availability of information through the internet and global online communities are reshaping and homogenizing international standards through ease of comparison when it comes to Human Rights and gender

[9] https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/10/03/national/politics-diplomacy/abes-latest-cabinet-reshuffle-casts-doubt-womenomics-policy/#.XZCYQFUzbb1

[10] https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/21/national/women-pass-scandal-hit-tokyo-medical-universitys-entrance-exam-higher-rate-men/#.XZCbulUzbb1

[11] https://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/economies/#economy=CHE

[12] http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/data-explorer/#economy=CHE

equality. The term “Women will shine” was first used in Shinzo Abe’s address to the general assembly of the United Nations in 2013[13].

However, over the years the former Prime Minister has been widely criticized for only having used this message as a campaign slogan and in reality doing the opposite, with a very limited number of women holding positions in his cabinet. The newly appointed Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga continues his predecessor’s line, appointing only two women to his cabinet in 2020.

Japan is losing more and more competitive ground due to a lack of flexibility and innovative spirit that the Japanese culture has trouble teaching to the next generation hand in hand with the traditional rigidity and importance of rules, and the taboo of questioning the status quo or your superiors, no matter what happens.

However, I have hope that this will change with younger generations. One of the clients my company works with is Primo Toys, an English company whose main product is a little robot toy that doubles as a teaching tool for basic coding used for kids. For my work, I would sometimes attend events and seminars for teachers from kindergarten to primary school and help with introducing our product there. The last few seminars I attended had speakers from all kinds of backgrounds such as arts, sports or music, but their talking points overlapped in a few places. One of the most interesting points many of the speakers touched upon was the progression of automation and AI, and the resulting change in the type of jobs that would be available for future generations. This was a topic of great concern to all speakers, and the conclusion was similar for all of them: in order to stay competitive in the future job market, children’s education would have to focus much more on creativity and flexibility instead of learning things by heart, or learning to obey rules without questioning them. Due to almost all higher-up posts that determine what a school’s budget will be spent on still being occupied by old conservative men, these young speakers talked of struggles to get their point across, and of the many hardships in initiating changes in the way young children in Japanese schools are taught. But by listening to these speakers, it was apparent to me that change is coming, even if the momentum still seems cripplingly slow. The Japanese general curriculum that all Japanese schools must follow will officially include programming classes in primary schools starting next year. These topics cannot be ignored forever, and there is a new, young generation of Japanese that has grown up with a broader sense of the world than generations before them thanks to the Internet. They are now entering and starting to rise in the ranks of the Japanese workforce, and they will change and shape the way Japan’s future generations think over the next decade. It is an exciting time to be in Japan.

[13] https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201309/26generaldebate_e.html

4. What lies ahead for the next part of my stay in Japan

As detailed in the beginning of this report, I am now working full-time at a Japanese PR company, and plan to stay in Tokyo for at least another year. At the end of 2018, I applied as a volunteer for the Tokyo Olympics; contributing to the Olympics in Tokyo as a volunteer was one of my dreams and goals in coming here in the first place, and I am very excited for that next part of my journey. Me and my sister have both passed the preliminary interview stage in spring 2019 and have been recalled for the first volunteer training sessions at the end of 2019. Due to the rescheduling of the Olympics to 2021, this will be pushed back another year, but I am still very much looking forward to the experience! I will include a detailed description of my volunteer journey and a general take on volunteering in Japan in my final report.

All in all, I have spent a very eventful time in Japan so far. In many ways, it has been a rollercoaster ride with ups and downs, but in the end, I am very happy to have made the decision to come here. I have already learned a lot and hope to continue learning for the reminder of my time here.