

"The kanji 'start' is made of the radicals 'woman' and 'kitchen' because a woman's day started in the kitchen." This is a folk legend my elementary school teacher told my class, and it stuck with me for the next decade. Despite this legend being inaccurate, I carried its message with me. It caused me to question the roles each gender is assigned in society, and how those roles are perceived in Japan.

Gender roles may be biologically inevitable; however, when taken too far, it becomes gender inequality. For example, there are still some companies in Japan that don't hire as many women because they might become pregnant and take maternity leave. Gender based job discrimination like this is how economic inequality between genders continues. The World Economic Forum annually publishes a report called the "gender gap index". This measures gender equality in education, business, and other categories, for the 146 participating countries. Japan was ranked 118th out of 146. Whereas, New Zealand, which is also a small, mountainous island country, was 4th. I was curious why it ranked so much higher so, I decided to do an exchange to a high school in New Zealand to see for myself.

In New Zealand I interviewed teachers about how they experience gender differences in their workplace. Many of the teachers commented on how teaching has always been considered a woman's job, and that those biases are continuing. This shows that even countries which are considered equal in gender also have gender roles. This gave me a theory. That the perception of women as academic and leading role models led students in New Zealand to internalize how capable both genders can be.

While I was there, I also learned about Māori culture, the indigenous people's culture of New Zealand. In Māori culture there are roles in society which are played by specific genders; however, nobody perceives that one is more valuable than the other. As Māori culture is being revived now after years of oppression, this mindset is coming back. In Japan, housework, which is considered a woman's job, is often looked down upon because it does not make money. But how do you put a price on running a household? How do you put a price on raising children? Not everything can be reduced to money. I came to realize that the inequality between genders in Japan does not come from having a gender role, but instead comes from people having the mindset of one job being more or less important than another. Something so simple, yet it took me a journey across the earth to realize it.

To raise the value of all roles means changing an entire mindset. Is it easy? No, but it is possible. The realization of this requires us to have a good understanding of present-day Japanese society and to question it. Because questioning how gender roles are perceived in Japan sparked my interest in gender studies; pushed me to do research; and brought me to this stage. I hope my speech will spark something within you, so that you can share it with others. The first step for a better society is to change the mindset of those shaping it. And that 'starts' now