

The Elsevier Foundation

2025 Partnerships

Envisioning Futures

Riken



Location

Japan



Target group

Early-career women scientists



Budget

\$40,000 a year (2022-2024) and no-cost extension 2025



SDGs

SDG5 (target 5.5)

Synopsis

Map the journeys of distinguished senior Japanese women scientists through targeted interviews exploring challenges and leadership best practices in a country with persistently low numbers of women researchers and research leaders.

Program description

Over the past few years, the percentage of female researchers in Japan has risen from 16.9% to 22% according to Elsevier's 2020 and 2024 Gender Reports. While this is encouraging, it remains low compared to the global average of 41% women researchers. At RIKEN, the largest scientific research institute in Japan, the ratio of female researchers in leadership positions is 9%, a far cry from the global standard. In 2025, the Japanese government postponed its goal of reaching 30% women in leadership positions to 2030 citing the need to better understand the underlying causes for the continued slow progress.

“Envisioning Futures” interviewed Japanese women research leaders, exploring how they overcame challenges throughout their careers. By sharing this hard-won, critical experience, RIKEN hopes to accelerate the growth of Japanese women in leadership positions, raising awareness about intersectional diversity, supporting career progression and offering policy makers guidance for effective interventions.

The RIKEN interviews, together with national data, were published in the “[Envisioning Futures: Women's Leadership and Gender Equity in Japanese Research](#)” report, which is being translated into Japanese. The report blends data-driven analysis with compelling personal narratives, offering a timely roadmap for institutional change and a call to action for the advancement of women in science and innovation.



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Advancing human progress together

Goals

- Capture leadership and management behaviors through interviews with distinguished women scientists.
- Increase the visibility of women research leaders in Japan and the challenges they encounter.
- Address the underrepresentation of women researchers in Japan by accelerating the development of female researchers through leadership training.

Activities and milestones

- 9 interviews conducted with Japanese women scientists. All interviews are available on RIKEN's website in both [Japanese](#) and [English](#).
- Presented the “Envisioning Futures: Women’s Leadership and Gender Equity in Japanese Research” report at a panel discussion during World Expo 2025 in Osaka, hosted by the Netherlands Pavilion. The event, titled “Common Ground: How Collaboration and Inclusion Drive Innovation in Science”, featured panelists Dr. Reiko Mazuka (RIKEN Center for Brain Science), Dr. Yoshie Otake (RIKEN Center for Advanced Photonics), Dr. Yoko SHIMPUKU (Hiroshima University), Domiziana Francescon (Elsevier Foundation), and was moderated by Mia Yamakawa Lewis (Elsevier).
- Presentation of the initiative at the Japan Society for Research Policy and Innovation Management Conference on November 9, 2025.

“True progress in science depends on inclusion, resilience and collective action. By embracing diverse career paths and recognizing a broader range of achievements, we can build a research ecosystem where all voices are heard and innovation flourishes”

Dr. Yuko Harayama

Secretary General, Global Partnership on AI (GPAI);
Former Executive Director, International Affairs, RIKEN
and Former Member, The Elsevier Foundation Board

“Envisioning Futures: Women’s Leadership and Gender Equity in Japanese Research” report



Key highlights:

- **Significant gender gap:** As of March 31, 2024, women make up 22% of active researchers in Japan, well below the global average of 41%.
- **Leadership disparity:** Women hold an even smaller share of senior positions, with only 16% of scientific publication authorships and 17% of patent applications by women.
- **Nonlinear pathways:** Many women research leaders have advanced through flexible, opportunity-driven careers, reframing interruptions as sources of resilience and growth.
- **People-centered leadership:** Interviewees describe fostering lab cultures built on empowerment, collaboration and psychological safety – creating “communities of belonging”.
- **Mentorship and networks:** Access to mentors and professional networks emerges as a vital driver of career progression and confidence-building for women in research.
- **Cultural barriers:** Persistent challenges include unconscious bias, unequal evaluation, cultural norms, and limited institutional support for work-life balance.
- **Progress and gaps:** Japan’s ambitious government targets for women’s participation and leadership remain challenging, with incremental progress highlighting the need for continued vigilance and sustained action.
- **Rethinking success metrics:** Advocacy to broaden assessment criteria beyond publication metrics and patents to include societal impact, interdisciplinarity, mentorship and science communication.