

# *Multinational firms as emissaries of decent work: worker responses to progressive HRM in a foreign retailer in Japan*

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**Multinational Firms as Emissaries of Decent Work:  
Worker Responses to Progressive HRM in a Foreign Retailer in Japan**

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## Multinational Firms as Emissaries of Decent Work:

### Worker Responses to Progressive HRM in a Foreign Retailer in Japan

#### 1. Introduction- MNEs and decent work

How MNEs are implicated in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (henceforth SDGs) remains debatable and debated. The “strong”, positive case emphatically argues that SDGs simply “cannot be achieved” without contributions from MNEs (van Zalten and van Tulder, 2018), some commentators even arguing that they stand out “among all the actors involved [...] due to their significant economic and technological power, as well as their organisational capacity and unity of intent, unlike civil society and its governors, which often have different needs and less organisation” (Celone *et al.*, 2022, p.508). While “global challenges” and SDGs may be new conceptual frames, whether MNEs do harm or good for the local stakeholders across their multiple sites is a long-standing contention. In both mainstream and critical international business studies, whether MNE practices align with the dominant practices in given institutional contexts or can remain distinct and exert an impact remains a key line of inquiry (E.g. Brookes *et al.*, 2017).

Employment practices figure prominently in discussions of the impact of MNEs around the world. Critical perspectives have long held that multinational employers’ “strategic” choice of overseas activity deliberately seeks weak labour protection and hence involves a “race to the bottom” of labour standards (Olney, 2013). MNEs have been argued to often infringe human rights, facilitating “the abnormal accumulation of wealth by companies’ CEOs, top managers and shareholders” (Giuliani, 2018, pp. 221), whilst leaving an “indecent labour footprint” in subsidiary locations, especially in developing economies (García-Alaminos *et al.*, 2021). Elevating working conditions, especially for lower-skilled workers, is not

commonly associated with MNEs. Evidence suggests that the widely asserted wage premium by MNEs is at best variable and often nonexistent in highly regulated environments (Blanas *et al.*, 2019) and the gender wage gap is even wider in developing economy host country sites than in home countries (Van der Straaten *et al.*, 2020). Such observations stand in stark contrast with the popular globalist narratives that portray MNEs as creators of jobs and introducers of contemporary management practices, as well as with the corporate “presentation of self” by MNEs in their tireless CSR efforts. Overall, research into MNEs and job quality remains surprisingly scarce.

Job quality also happens to be a rather buried issue within the SDGs. Although many SDGs are implicitly predicated on and are meant to enable the creation and improvement of jobs, SDG 8 is the only one where work is specifically mentioned. The goal to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (United Nations 2022) subsumes the pursuit of high-quality jobs under the priority on economic growth, framing them as inseparable. Aligned with this, the extensive discussions on the definition and measurement of “decent work” almost exclusively deal with national comparisons of macro-economic indicators about labour markets (E.g. Ghai, 2003; Bescond *et al.*, 2003; Duffy *et al.*, 2017). The recommendations for addressing the “decent work deficit” in developing economies are mainly pitched at national governments and international policy organizations (Pereira *et al.*, 2019). Firm-level practices are not typically in focus in discussions of the SDG on decent work.

The definition offered by the most prominent interlocutor in the decent work debates, the International Labour Organization (2023), is more multi-layered than most, placing both subjective and material worker experiences at its centre:

“Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”

Operationalized, this can translate into a wide range of indicators that include the existence of employment opportunities, stability and security of work, adequate earnings and productive work, decent working time, combining work, family and personal time, worker representation and equal opportunity and treatment in employment, and further others (ILO, 2009).

Alternative proposals combine and regroup a range of indicators (Eg. Duffy *et al.*, 2017), demonstrating the variability in how we can interpret and research decent work. Part of the interpretive space offered by the concept prompts the incorporation of different levels of analysis into our effort to gain a well-rounded account. The emphasis in extant treatments on macro-level, quantitative data is well merited in the sense that the provision of high-quality employment for all is a core policy and civic engagement goal that can be tracked at the level of labour markets. We contend however that the debate needs to be expansive, bringing in firms, including MNEs, as actors who may be playing a positive or negative role in the provision of decent work at the organizational level. We further believe that research should also engage with developed economies where decent work remains elusive and underachieved for large segments of the workforce. Bundling decent work with economic growth in SDG 8 obliquely frames it as primarily a goal for developing economies. Yet this is an increasingly critical and urgent goal across all economic contexts as precarity in

employment has increased for various groups in advanced economies, too. Decent work is a truly global challenge.

We aim to contribute to a better understanding of the MNE-decent work relationship by pursuing some of these suggested directions through a study of a retail MNE adopting “progressive” employment practices promising greater equality and higher pay, thereby elevating quality of jobs above the dominant norms in the sector, in a coordinated market economy host country context, Japan. We draw on data from a questionnaire survey with workers across the company sites and face-to-face interviews in two stores to note the workers’ perception of the changes and discuss the possible factors informing their resultant experiences. The research context of Japan is characterized by segmented and unequal employment conditions (Sato et al., 2001), a growing prevalence of inferior part-time contracts (Matsunaga, 2012) and heavy and persistent gender inequalities (Yamaguchi, 2019). In the retail sector job quality and gender equality remain particularly wanting in Japan, as is often the case globally. Our study asks: can a foreign MNE offer better conditions than domestic employers and act as an emissary of “decent work”, providing not merely a “relief route” (Bozkurt, 2012), but significantly changing the work experience for disadvantaged workers and even setting an example for other employers? What are the constraints on the agency of an MNE in such an effort of institutional entrepreneurship, and what do we learn from this case in terms of how an MNE may contribute towards the achievement of SDGs?

## **2. The Japanese employment system and the institutional entrepreneurship of foreign-MNEs**

To frame our empirical study and make sense of our findings, we draw upon insights from the three bodies of literature - comparative institutionalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 1999), institutional entrepreneurship (Dorado, 2005), and micropolitics in MNEs (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2006). First, we characterize Japan institutionally and historically as a national employment system. Then we introduce the concept of institutional entrepreneurship and provide further contextual information about foreign-owned MNEs in Japan. Finally we note the lack of research on the micro-politics of MNE activity inside the country to date.

### ***Japanese employment in transition***

Through the decades of the crisis of Fordist models in advanced Western capitalist economies, Japan was widely seen as a distinctive alternative in the “canonical” (Blyth, 2003) Varieties of Capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001) and the divergent capitalisms (Whitley, 1999) frameworks. Japan’s factory regime (Dore, 1990), production systems (Kraftcik, 1988) and corporate governance (Jackson and Moerke, 2015) were the focus of scholarly interest, while its employment system received just as much attention from practitioners wishing to emulate Japanese MNEs’ successes (Schein, 1981; Buckley and Mirza, 1985).

Such fascination ebbed quickly from the 1990s onwards with the downturn of Japan’s economy, and over the past four decades there has been extensive discussion about how the previous main pillars of the country’s employment system, especially life-long employment and seniority-based pay, have been eroding (Ono, 2010; Hamaaki *et al.*, 2012). Notably,



these privileges of the traditional model applied mostly to workers in professional / managerial roles, overwhelmingly male heads-of-household (Brinton, 1993), who constituted the “core” workforce. While recent research finds that the erosion in the conditions of work for these workers may be limited, negative changes have been clearer for other groups in the labour market, for example young workers (Kambayashi and Kato, 2016). The non-regular employees who constitute the peripheral workforce with lower pay, fewer benefits and less security have swelled in ranks, coming to constitute around 38 percent of the entire workforce by the middle of the last decade (Osawa and Kingston, 2015; Gordon, 2017). The earthquake/nuclear accident of 2011 only intensified this growing “social precarity” (Allison, 2012), with lasting effects. While the proportion of men in non-regular jobs more than doubled between the 1980s and 2000s, the increasingly precarious workforce in these jobs is still overwhelmingly comprised of women.

The late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s eight years in office had a highly publicized drive for greater gender equality under the “womenomics” agenda (MacNaughton, 2015). This indeed succeeded in increasing women’s labour force participation from 64% in 2012 to 73% in 2019 (Davis, 2022) but despite such gains, women’s disproportionate levels of employment in non-regular, quite literally second-class jobs, particularly in the service sector, have remained obstinate (Genna, 2021).

### ***Foreign MNEs in Japan as institutional entrepreneurs:***

There has been a vast volume of literature on MNEs introducing new practices to different host country locations in relation to Japan: almost all of which is about Japanese MNEs operating overseas. Though not extensive as the “Japanization” research half a century ago, recent scholarship has continued to note how Japanese firms transfer new practices to host

country locations (Eg Gamble, 2010), or have even broader impact on local institutions (Wrana and Diez, 2016). We find the concept of institutional entrepreneurship helpful in capturing such capacity of MNEs. Hardy and Maguire (2017) argue that to make a variation in an institutional context, there should be motivation as well as an opportunity for a potential institutional entrepreneur. Contradiction between practices from different institutional logics can be an important motivator to make a variation (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Hardy and Maguire, 2017). We argue that an MNE can be motivated to make a variation in a host country when it sees significant contradiction between what is regarded as appropriate practice in its HQ or global networks and a local practice in a host country (Cantwell, Dunning, and Lundan, 2010). At the same time, local institutional actors may be promoting changes in practices due to increasing pressures from a contradiction between their conventional practices and emerging challenges brought about by those practices in their institutional environment (Fortwengel and Jackson, 2016). We see that such a context can present a distinct opportunity for an MNE when it has the experience and capabilities to implement new practices and especially where local competitors lack them. However, responses from local audiences could be mixed as the very nature of existing local institutional context which, being in the process of change, may present constraints as well as opportunities. This might be pronounced in highly structured, and sometimes even rigid, institutional arrangements (Streeck, 2009; Streeck and Thelen, 2009), which continue to be key characteristics of coordinated market economies (Hall and Soskice, 2001) or “collaborative business systems” (Whitley, 1999) such as Japan. Most studies of MNEs’ impact on coordinated market economies have focused on how hard they promote a transition to shareholder value models (Eg Almond *et al.*, 2003). Like others in this category the Japanese system continues to be both impacted by such pressures for change whilst remaining distinctive and in many key aspects resilient (Jacoby, 2018).

Nevertheless MNEs can introduce new management practices, including employment practices, even where these may not in the first glance be aligned with the institutional and cultural contexts of host countries (Geary and Aguzzoli, 2016), with intentional or negotiated hybridity being the outcome of the interaction of strategy and micropolitics (Gamble, 2010; Chung *et al.*, 2014).

It is increasingly recognized that the variability of worker experiences needs to be taken into account in the study of dissemination of seemingly out-of-synch HR practices into subsidiaries. For example, Ma and Trigo (2012) have compared employee perceptions of HR practices and noted the variation between MNEs from different home countries in China while Zhu *et. al* (2013) have highlighted a lack of alignment between managers' and shopfloor workers' perceptions of the importance and benefits of specific HR practices. Such research highlights that not only is the relationship between home countries, sector dynamics and HR policies a highly variable bundle, but also that the reception and indeed the perception of new management practices by workers is highly contingent and relational. This is in line with agreement with recent theorizing on "good work" (Williams *et al.*, 2020) that considers both the material and the subjective dimensions of the work experience in ascertaining job quality. It also builds on and pushes further on the key insight of the micro-political approach in the study of MNEs, which recognizes the need to understand "conflicts that emerge when powerful actors with different goals, interests and identities interact with each other" (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2006), by noting how workers across the board and mid-level managers are also parties in these politics.

To date there has been scant attention paid to the relationship between foreign MNEs operating in Japan and nudges towards shifting employment practices in the country, but the

small body of work in this vein suggests these firms merit more consideration in terms of their potential to act as institutional entrepreneurs, especially in terms of women's employment. Olcott (2009)'s work on Japanese firms acquired by Western MNEs has observed the pressure to shift to shareholder value-led governance, but also the significant opportunities for women in managerial progression. Bozkurt (2012), in her study of the subsidiary of a large American retail MNE argued that foreign-MNEs in Japan often provided "relief routes" for women in managerial careers, even though such routes did not necessarily match the career security afforded to men by domestic firms (Bozkurt and Honda-Howard, 2013) and at times the foreign MNEs proved more to be "fickle opportunists" than precipitators of institutional change (Bozkurt, 2013). Other studies have similarly evidenced that foreign-MNEs have over time continued to stand out as offering more decent work opportunities to women in Japan (Olcott and Oliver, 2014; Pudelko and Tenzer, 2023).

Drawing on the above insights, we proceed to inquire whether (even) in institutionally resilient / impermeable contexts MNEs may find "social spaces" for "strategizing" (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2009) that enable them to become institutional entrepreneurs, and, under certain circumstances, act as "emissaries" of decent work, improving upon local levels of job quality, particularly for underprivileged groups of workers. Our methods and findings are as described next.

### **3. Research context and methodology**

The foreign retail MNE our empirical discussion pertains to is based in Europe and operated eight stores in Japan at the time of study including initial discussions, from 2014 to 2016. The retail sector offers particularly important ground for investigating the possibilities for decent work. It creates about one in ten jobs in most advanced economies, and is defined typically

by low wage, low status employment, decreasing opportunity for permanent and full-time positions, and heavily feminized workforces (Grugulis and Bozkurt, 2011). Nevertheless, retail jobs in some countries, while not “terrific”, can be “better in significant ways” (Carre and Tilly, 2017, pp.3). If MNEs are not necessarily involved in the degradation of job quality but can also be providers of decent work, the implications would be significant, the rapid globalization of major MNEs (Coe and Wrigley, 2009) has rendered them increasing important global employers. While on the whole there is considerable global convergence around high levels of non-standardization, there remains substantial variation in firm practices, at least partially due to a country-of-origin effect and a host country effect (Almond, 2011; Ferner, 1997; Geppert et al., 2014; Quintanilla and Ferner, 2003). Dickmann observes that where a country-of-origin effect is “successfully” retained in the HR practices of an MNE the outcome of such transfer may be positive or negative (Dickmann, 2003), and similar, broadly standardized practices may yield different outcomes in different institutional environments.

We track in particular a Human Resources (hence HR) initiative the MNE in the study launched which did away with the dominant and persistent practice in Japanese retail, of a dual labour market approach with a clear distinction between regular, career track vs. non-regular, non-career track and temporary workers. Previously, these two main groups of workers experienced very different levels of job quality. The core, regular workers enjoyed permanent contracts, higher hourly wages, and clearer career progression pathways. The non-regular, secondary group of workers, received lower hourly wages, were employed on a string of time-restricted six-monthly contracts and were not clearly offered a career progression pathway into management roles. This was despite typically carrying out the exact same tasks and working as many and sometimes even more hours per week as the regular

workers. The former group had a much higher proportion of university educated, often younger males, while women including many “older” workers over the age of 40 comprised the majority in the latter.

The MNE applied some global HR standards for head office executive staff, but did not implement these on shopfloor staff, who were divided into the different groups per the prevalent practice and tradition in Japan. The change initiative was instigated by the local executive team and especially the Director of HR, a woman in her mid-40s who had risen through the MNE’s ranks in Japan, first managing store level HR and then being recruited to the executive function. The main thrust of the initiative was described as “equal pay for equal work”, but the initiative also involved a change to working hours and especially the minimum on these, as detailed below.

Once in motion the change initiative received extensive attention from within the sector, general public and government circles, including from then-Premier Abe’s office, for delivering on the policy agenda at the time of increasing and improving women’s employment. The Director of HR was invited to meetings with government officials, including individually with the Minister of Labour (Health and Welfare) and then as part of a larger delegation with the Prime Minister. The MNE was represented on the expert committee for the Ministry along with five others to help draw up guidelines for the Japanese government’s gender equality policies in labour law. Both internally and externally the initiative was presented as a highly progressive one that would both objectively and subjectively improve the employment experiences of workers, especially of the women and younger workers who would no longer be non-regular employees.

The initiative moved around 2000 workers out of a total of around 3400 to new contracts. They were employed in eight stores, a customer support unit, a distribution centre and the head office. The MNEs' number of stores has subsequently risen to 12 in 2023, and the standardized, single-contract type employment is still in practice, still under the "Equal Pay for Equal Work" motto.

We collected both quantitative and qualitative data on the worker experiences of the change initiative. An online, self-administered survey was conducted two months after the completion of the contractual changes that were carried out over a six-month period in 2014. It needed to be completed by workers in their own time and on their own devices, since in order to communicate the independent nature of the study a web platform was used and this was not accessible through the company computers during work hours. The response rate was around 7.7%, with 261 responses from a workforce of around 3,400, demonstrating the general problem with low survey responses in Japan (Inaba, 2007). 58 responses were from managers, those who had others reporting to them, 195 were from non-managers and there were eight missing responses. Of the 205 respondents who indicated their gender, 81 were male and 124 were female. Over 20% of the respondents chose not to indicate if they had previously been on a permanent or temporary contract, and therefore whether they individually experienced a contract change, which unfortunately made it impossible to study the experiences of these two groups separately and in comparison with one another. We therefore only reflect on the *overall* response and interpret that in light of the executive expectations of the worker response as a whole.

The survey included questions on the perception of the initiative as decent work, following the insight that worker perception is separate from objective changes (Kalleberg and Vaisey,

2005), and about job satisfaction (Spector, 1997). Both of these we would expect to have increased significantly if the promises of the initiative, of greater equality in pay and status, were realized. Respondents were asked about their perception of the overall benefit of the changes, and separately of pay and job security. They were also asked about how much they supported the initiative. A series of questions related to outcome variables including psychological contract fulfillment, employee commitment and motivation, individual performance, and labour turnover intentions were also included, as well as a write-in section for open-ended comments on the initiative.

In Spring 2016, a year following the completion of the change, 13 interviews were carried out at the MNE's Japan head office and at two stores in the Tokyo metropolitan area, the ones with the highest and lowest scores in the first company worker satisfaction survey after the change initiative. Interviews were conducted in each store with the store managers, HR managers and three workers, as listed in Table 1.

**[TABLE 1 HERE]**

The original plans for a subsequent, second survey and a further round of interviews in relevant MNE sites were first postponed due to personal circumstances of the key contacts involving family health issues, then rendered unfeasible through the departure of the Director of HR after being headhunted by the Tokyo head office of a UK-based service sector MNE, following her high-level exposure around the change initiative in our study. Final efforts to revisit the company were abandoned completely during the Covid-19 pandemic.



## 4. Findings

### *The Initiative and Executive Rationale*

First, we note how the change initiative was brought about: this was very much through the personal push of the Director of HR, as corroborated by multiple interviewees. She attributed her career trajectory, of having worked in Japan's national broadcaster but found her career progress stalled and started working for a foreign MNE, as made possible through the opportunities she had been able to seize with "foreign employers". She was highly critical of traditional, dominant working patterns in Japan, which she found to impede work-life balance due to the long working hours and hence women's ability to remain in work. She also expressed frustration with not being able to develop potential managerial staff from among the MNE's non-regular workforce. Taken together, these experiences informed her desire to implement changes, which she had to formulate, advocate and champion herself. The change initiative was not mandated from the global head office in Europe, rather, it was the result of concerted effort by her and her small team to seek first strategic, then substantial financial backing from "corporate", through multiple meetings, site visits, and the presentation of a business case including details on costs, which increased considerably. The effort also included fact-finding and legal process clarification, as the local government offices had little information and support available for the mass contract change in question.

There were two core pillars to the initiative: the change of all part-time / temporary contracts to indefinite, that is permanent, contracts, and the elimination of wage and status differences in contracts for all shopfloor workers carrying out the same tasks. By completion, the percentage of workers on permanent contracts had risen from around 40-45% to 99%, a first for a retailer in Japan. The responsibilities and hourly wages of workers previously split into regular vs. non-regular groups, the latter mostly on temporary contracts, were also equalized.

A global system of grading for each position was established and each grade assigned a salary range with some discretionary leeway. The hourly wage for former non-regular staff was raised by around 30%.

The new contracts also standardized working hours, reducing the options for part-timers from three brackets, of 12-19, 20-29 or 20-39 hours per week, to two, requiring 12-24 or 25-38 hours of work per week, with full-timers on 39 hours per week and more. Previously, the majority of contracts had been in the 12-19 hours range. Overall, the changes meant more hours per week for many part-timers, at higher wages, absorbing the expected, though slight, headcount reduction.

There was a lot of emphasis on “confirming duties and required abilities” in the move from temporary positions to permanent ones, with several months of manager-worker interviews asserting the expectations for higher levels of engagement the change entailed. The group and one-to-one sessions aimed both to explain the detail of the changes and had a performance assessment function. Detailed meetings were necessary in order for individual workers to gain clarity on how the new hours and wages would impact their household financial status and the subsequent tax implications. The integration was seen by executives to be not only contractual but also “cultural”.

The executive rationale for the change was narrated and presented both in person by cascaded levels of management and in the information materials, booklets and general communication channels. Accordingly, equality promoted through the “equal pay for equal work” principle was also good for business as it would boost worker

motivation, where Japan repeatedly had the lowest scores in the MNE's global annual workforce surveys.

The Director of HR noted that "it should be win-win" to undertake the changes, with "good HR" expected to improve service quality, a particularly important customer expectation in the Japanese market. The bundle of HR practices including the change initiative would both enhance equality in the workplace and also be "good for business" by facilitating the recruitment of high-quality staff and keeping them motivated:

"And of course [...] we had a clear vision. So that people will say, (this) is a high performing, diverse organisation, with highly engaged, motivated, and empowered workers, who are taking opportunity to grow and develop. [...]

We need to emphasise the best work, and to make the employee, or the coworker feel, 'Okay, this is a place I can work', or 'This is a place I really want to work'. [...] And after that, we can go into the customer revolution.

[...] Because once we have the happy co-workers, we can move into the happy customer.

*Director of HR*

Such justification was both necessary but also a resource to obtaining agreement and support from the global head office of the MNE, as the initiative had undisclosed but high labour cost implications as well as demanding corporate resources itself. The effort was led by the Japanese subsidiary rather than being part of a global drive and involved a reverse "translation" of the equality principle as being worthy of support from the home country of the MNE with a reputation for gender egalitarianism. The Japan executive team headed by

the Head of HR requested and spent a week with consultants from the European head office to generate the key themes, including the vocabulary that would make sense for and in the Japanese operations. The general and generic principles of the HR policy were narratively constructed as equality, diversity, inclusion and security. “Equal pay for equal work” was identified as the core motto through this process, in alignment with the global corporate “HR vision”.

### *The Workforce Response*

The survey results provide us both information about worker perceptions, notwithstanding the shortcomings of the data, and through the written comments, some insights into some of the reasoning behind these.

#### **[TABLE 2 HERE]**

In contrast with the empathic executive rationale presented and the highly positive media and government reaction, the workforce response in the survey emerged as much more ambiguous and conditional, with positives and negatives interpreted very much through the variable impact on workers in individual circumstances. Table 2 summarizes the responses in relation to the perception of the overall benefit of the changes, of pay and security, and also shows the overall support for the initiative.

On the perception of overall benefit, where nearly 20% of responses were missing, there was at best very high levels of ambivalence, with a third neither agreeing or disagreeing and twice as many strongly disagreeing as those strongly agreeing. Those seeing an overall benefit and those not were evenly split. The responses were even more negative in the expected benefits

at the family/household level, with nearly one in five respondents strongly disagreeing and the overall balance being clearly negative. Somewhat puzzlingly, however, when the question was reversed, far fewer respondents, under 15%, indicated they expected to “suffer” as a result of the changes.

On the working conditions, too, the respondents were overall more negative than positive. In the questions around pay, where there were far fewer missing responses, it appeared that the wage increases which had already been implemented had not eliminated grievances: 36.7% indicated their pay did not allow them to meet their basic needs and only 19.1% noted that their pay was sufficient for this. Still poorer were the scores for workers’ felt ability to cope with unexpected expenses, only 8.8% saying they could cover these routinely, and a whopping 57.3% saying they could not. Given that higher wages were such a core promise of the initiative in the executive narrative, the worker response showed a disappointing outcome. It remains possible that as the survey was conducted so soon after the new wage structure, the experiences with the new levels of income may not have been consolidated and therefore general self-understanding of financial security not yet adjusted in the everyday experience of workers. Nevertheless, had the pay increases been clearly capable of substantially improving financial returns from work, we would have expected to see a much more positive result.

The survey also revealed high levels of insecurity on the job, with nearly 55% expressing feeling insecure about the future of their jobs, while only around 21% not. On the certainty in being able to keep the current, specific job, 46% disagreed while only 21% agreed.

Interestingly, however, respondents were split evenly between anticipating and not anticipating that they would be asked to leave their job before they would want to, suggesting that the uncertainty around keeping jobs was not so much linked to expectations of being

dismissed but rather to other reasons they may become untenable, or opting to leave. simply to

Stark contrasts are of course common, if not the norm, around corporate change initiatives claimed to improve the worker experience. An interesting finding from the survey was that while such contrasts were revealed around the material aspects of the purported offer of decent work, workers still showed a clear willingness for cooperation and support for the initiative on the whole, with far fewer missing responses and a far more positive score.

Nearly half of the respondents supported the policy change, with only around 15% indicating they did not. The reluctance and a feeling of having been obliged to participate was indicated by just over 17% and rejected by nearly half of participants – most had been willing participants. The survey results far from corroborated the executive narrative of revolutionising retail jobs in Japan but the support underlines that this was also far from a failed attempt.

We also gleaned some, thought partial, insights from the written comments at the end of the survey which were provided by 14 out of the 58 managerial workers and 54 out of the 195 shopfloor workers. We used this distinction here despite it not being a perfect corollary to the groups whose contracts remained the same vs those who moved to new contracts, as the managerial/non-managerial divide was one that was largely the only divide remaining after the changes. The rate of response was again low but favourable in relation to general rates of written-in responses for comparable surveys.

We coded the main themes in the comments and identified seven that were repeated, with the number of incidences as shown in Table 3 and listed below:

**[TABLE 3 HERE]**

- the general principle and the initiative as a whole;
- the “external fit” involving how the contract change interacted with issues such as taxation for household income and time negotiation around family;
- implementation, including the communication from head office and management at various levels as well as the speed of changes;
- the changes to tasks and workloads, including the associated skills and capability demands;
- working hours and shift patterns;
- total income
- fairness and equality, across different groups of workers and especially full-time and part-time

We can make a number of, albeit highly qualified and tentative, observations based on these comments. First, despite very small numbers, we observe a clearly positive response among the managerial staff, with nine 9 out of the 14 making either fully positive comments or both positive and negative comments, and overall registering highly supportive views of the general initiative and its core principles. Their negative comments focused mostly on increased tasks and workload and the fairness of the standardized pay for workers with purportedly different levels of capabilities. Given that these are the workers whose relative advantages were likely eroded through the changes, we think their support is significant.

For the non-managerial staff negative comments dominated, with the most frequently mentioned issue being working hours, as the contract change had now rendered it impossible to work fewer hours. Several respondents claimed that they had colleagues who had had to quit their jobs altogether because of this. Another issue mentioned in relation to hours was how, while hourly wages had gone up, the hours had gone down for some workers, presumably because workers with the lowest hours had to pick up more, and consequently their take home pay had not increased. Several respondents noted that they were aware there had been an economic slowdown at the same time as the launch of the new contracts and the reduction in hours was more a consequence of this than a feature of the policy changes, but overall there was considerable strength of feeling around working hours, including comments on them being too few, too many and/or too fragmented and inconvenient. Standardization had upset many of the workers sufficiently for them to put in a written comment.

Another major issue for the non-managerial workers was with how the policy changes complicated their employment due to undesirable outcomes in relation to factors outside of work. Chief among this was taxation, with housewives and other dependents with a different main breadwinner in the household risking going over the tax-exempt thresholds of income with the new, higher wages. Some of the aforementioned cases of quitting were linked to this. A similar issue involved students whose families would lose household maintenance support if and once they went into in permanent roles. Finally, the issues raised around hours was also linked to how the new working hours were at odds with household dynamics; with having to work more hours and having a more fragmented workload making it impossible to pursue care responsibilities and paid employment at the same time. This was expectedly a very



heavily gendered outcome mainly jeopardizing women, completely at odds with the original promises and intentions of the initiative.

Grievances were also expressed about the fairness and equality of the new contractual arrangements, several comments suggesting that an equal wage for workers with different levels of competence and attitudes towards duties was problematic. The implementation was also critiqued, the most common criticism being about the communication from the top and store level management, especially for the hard sell around the initiative. Finally, it was interesting to note the number of comments that were dismissive or sceptical about the change initiative in principle. Here, in light of the wider survey results suggesting overall support for the initiative, we believe a (self)-selection bias is likely.

### ***Micro-politics on the shopfloor and mid-managerial agency***

The interviews carried out around 16 months after the completion of the survey allowed for a closer understanding of the dynamics of the changes towards “decent work” as implemented in individual stores. Interviews were conducted in two stores in the Tokyo area, six at Store 1, with the lowest worker satisfaction score after the changes and five at Store 2, which had registered the highest score. Interviewees in both stores included the store and human resource managers as well as shopfloor workers in a variety of roles. As the interview participants had been selected by the store contacts, overall positive impressions were expected and we note our insistence on not drawing broad conclusions from the small number of interviews. However these interviews were far-ranging and sufficiently long, lasting over half an hour and

mostly closer to the full hour, conducted in the absence of managers. Interviewees voiced both agreement and disagreement with their employer's policies.

Interviewees shared both some "factuals" about the change initiative as experienced in store and some subjective experiences. Headcount had been reduced in both stores. In the accounts of both managers and workers, the new demand for working more hours figured more prominently than the increased wage rates, regardless of previous type of contract. The most challenging group to retain according to the managers and the most impacted according to the shopfloor workers had been those previously working under 25 hours. With the changes they had to be available more hours, over a wider range of times during the day and week. This impacted both the availability of students whose classes restricted their availability and, in much greater numbers, women with care, especially childcare, responsibilities at home. The initiative that intended to offer decent work especially to women in many instances made it complicated or impossible for them to stay in employment

A second observation from the interviews had to do with the highly variable outcomes of the initiative across stores, in this case both in the Tokyo suburbs and despite a difference in format and location, comparable in terms of customer catchment area and customer profile. The interviews suggested immediately visible and critical differences between the management of the two stores, and especially the experience and response of the store managers with respect to the changes. In Store 1, the store manager had had a rapid rise through the ranks, having had a previous career as a lorry driver, but he had only been in post for a short period at the launch of the initiative and he himself talked about not being quite prepared for implementing this

scale of a project. He had followed the head office instructions – for example provided the legal counsel for workers so that they could interpret and calculate the outcomes for their household – and focused on implementing the new rules. By contrast, the store manager of Store 2 was a woman some twenty years older and who, based on accounts both in the store and in previous head office interviews, had been a strong presence with a very hands-on management style. She had interpreted the requirements of the change scheme proactively, despite meeting with resistance officially:

I explained that work shifts will (be) based on coworkers' life stage in the board meeting. They rejected my idea but I continue my own way.

This was done informally and not following the specific guidelines of the program. Shopfloor staff were all asked to provide names and departments, age of any kids, and if they need to take care of someone especially elderly, and if they were students. Whilst not based on a template from head office, the process had a formalized character and went beyond department managers knowing about individuals' circumstances in their teams. A meeting was held once a week checking everyone's availability. Those with special arrangements had to fill a form or talk directly to the store manager. The effort was intended to especially work around the availability and schedules of women with care responsibilities, and women constituted about 80% of the store's workforce. The store manager claimed it "only work(ed) because we support each other". When asked how she negotiated her implementation plan, which included not quite getting down to the 316 workers from 360 as instructed but to 320, she simply stated: "I am not really negotiating with

them”. Having turned in the highest worker satisfaction scores in the Tokyo region and second overall in the country she seemed confident and was supported by the other interviewees in Store 2.

These store interviews revealed the importance of micro-politics inside the MNE beyond that carried out by subsidiary top executives, all the way down the organizational structure into stores. Equipped with the same information and tools and tasked to implement the same rules with the same resources, two stores had ended up with very varied experiences of decent work by their respective workforces.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

As we debate the role MNEs play, and can also potentially play, in facilitating, or hindering, the provision of decent work globally, our study provides evidence from a rare case of an MNE implementing change in a highly consolidated, coordinated employment system that is often seen as highly resistant to change, even against mounting pressures and despite avowed policy support. Our evidence is not exhaustive but indicative, offering a number of insights that connect with the key bodies of literature we have referenced at the outset.

First, we assert that “decent work” is an increasingly omnipresent global challenge, whether it be accurately contained or captured within the rubric of an SDG or not. It remains elusive, and indeed increasingly at risk across a wide range of labour markets globally, as precarity makes inroads into the organization and experience of work even in countries and employment systems characterized by stability and perhaps rigidity. We recognize and concede the continuing significance of the institutional constraints and opportunities afforded by different varieties of capitalism and national employment systems, which prove to be

resilient and distinctive despite the forces towards convergence in play for numerous decades. For MNEs to act as “emissaries” of decent work, certain combinations of home-host country contexts are more conducive than others. Extensive research has discussed factors empowering MNEs from certain home countries to successfully transfer employment practices, especially a “dominance effect” (Eg. Pudelko and Harzing, 2007), and comparative institutionalists have long recognized that MNEs based in deregulated / liberal market economies tend to prove more open to receipt and uptake of new practices (Edwards et al., 2005; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 2001). For “emissaries” to be greeted and welcomed, gates do not need to be open, but they do need to be possible to unlock.

We also note that regardless of the formal qualities of firm level practices, workers’ ability to benefit from them is closely intertwined with how the permanence of contracts and level of wages are linked to other conditions of work, and especially requirements for working hours. The different elements shaping what we call decent work can at times be opposed or require compromise. In our case, we observed that despite being more formally secure, the requirement of working more hours or more fragmented rotas had meant that while the jobs for previously non-regular workers became less precarious, they also became less flexible and for some, untenable. What was meant to be an egalitarian initiative drove some workers of precisely the kind it intended to support out of their jobs. This also highlights the serious limitations to firm-level practices vis-à-vis external factors, as was the case here with taxation and benefits that particularly drove housewives and students away or, when not, meant that in their perception the changes were not favourable. Our findings hence also alert us to a range of factors whose interaction with individual organizations’ decent work practices shape the perception and experience of work as favourable or unfavourable among workers in different circumstances. These are just as critical to understand for practitioners, given that for profit-

seeking organizations, a business case for increasing financial and other resources to be committed for the provision of decent work must be justifiable across the levels of the organizational hierarchy in order to lead to policy formulation and implementation. In settings like retail where the financial costs of moving away from lower paid temporary staffing arrangements would be borne only by expectations on this being an investment reaping higher worker satisfaction, commitment and service, the way work organization relates to non-work life organization must be thoroughly considered in order to achieve the desired outcomes. A better understanding of these may reveal not only the pessimistic conclusions about the limits to individual firms including MNEs offering decent work but to constructive suggestions about rethinking the relationship between MNEs and local policymakers and governments.

Secondly, notwithstanding the resilience of institutional systems, we also argue that there are spaces for MNEs to act as institutional entrepreneurs, which may in fact be exploited both towards the degradation of work but also in a drive towards decent work. This contention rests on the observation that where either political or popular will come to value job quality as a goal or priority, MNEs that can claim to have higher competence or more experience in providing it may find the opportunity to be lead implementers of new practices. They may be the ones with the motivation and opportunity to pursue a “variation” (Hardy and Maguire, 2017) and be sufficiently embedded and dis-embedded at the same time to claim legitimacy to internal and external audiences.

Thirdly, our study suggests that these first two points are in practice always closely intertwined: where firm-level practices seek improvements on job quality, above and beyond the dominant practices in a given institutional context, the experience of workers will

obviously be shaped by the intersection, alignment and permeability of the two domains. We saw this for example in the way the tax regime in Japan complicated or even reversed the on-surface improvements of higher pay and more working hours in our study. It is instructive that the MNE in our study stuck to the practice, internalizing the initial costs of implementation in terms of both time and finances. Presumably, the particular best practice arrangements for workers can be worked out partially through trial and error, partially through collective learning and partially through institutional change and adaptation in given locations.

Finally, we note the importance of micropolitics among a range of actors in the “success” or failure of MNE attempts at institutional entrepreneurship towards decent work. We observed this at multiple levels in our study: The change initiative itself was instigated, developed and launched by the local MNE executives, especially the Director of HR. She had led in formulating a plan for improved job quality, drawing out and creating both material and legitimacy resources within the MNE network, including the European home country, to make it happen. She did so by mobilizing and utilizing her “assertive power” (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2009) to pursue a mandate, in her own “interests” but not in the narrow sense of personal career-enhancement; rather, in accordance with her political will that was informed by an egalitarian ethos and a strategic rationale at the same time. Justifying decent work through a business case replicates the vulnerabilities of all arguments for diversity and equality predicated on the business case: the business case is both enabling and constraining in this sense. However, our example provides an illustration of how decent work can emerge as a goal in “micro-political strategizing” (ibid.) in MNEs, rather than a sub-theme in a diffuse corporate social responsibility narrative.

Our study also underscored the significance of micro-political processes in the enactment of institutional entrepreneurship by noting the agency by organizational actors further down the MNE hierarchy. We observed the importance of store managers – basically middle managers in the global MNE division of labour- on the shopfloor in getting the corporate strategy for decent work to actually work for “their” workers, or failing to do so. This observation provides a prompt for us to think about micro-politics in MNEs in relation to the broader research in the sociology of work, on middle-managers resourcefully reinterpreting and translating corporate strategies in practice to protect workers (Eg. Smith, 1990).

The implications of this not only for MNEs but also for those of us who study MNEs are enormous. As Rygh *et al.* (2022) have noted, mainstream IB’s focus on the MNE has been both as object of study and unit of analysis, but these two may in fact be at odds with each other as we try to understand and address global challenges. We need to understand the business case for MNE behaviour towards the achievement of SDGs. Yet in order to understand how MNEs can be a part of the solution to global challenges, including the provision of decent work, it is imperative that we understand worker experiences in the real-life spaces where they take place, as well as the agency for micro-political action by the full range of corporate actors, with as much rigour and care.



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**TABLE 1: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS****Head Office, Store 1 and Store 2**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Unit</b>
1	Female	Country HR Manager	Head Office
2	Male	Country Logistics Manager	Head Office
3	Female	HR Administrator	Store 1
4	Male	Store Manager	Store 1
5	Male	Goods Flow Manager	Store 1
6	Female	Shopfloor Worker- Food	Store 1
7	Female	Shopfloor Worker- Food	Store 1
8	Male	Kitchen Manager	Store 1
9	Female	Store Manager	Store 2
10	Male	HR Manager	Store 2
11	Female	Shopfloor Worker	Store 2
12	Female	Shopfloor Worker	Store 2
13	Female	Shopfloor Worker	Store 2

**TABLE 2: SURVEY RESULTS (%)**

<i>Perception of benefits of the change initiative</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Missing data
I will benefit from the employment policy changes.	11.8	14.1	29.0	19.8	5.7	19.6
My family will benefit from the employment policy changes.	19.1	16.0	24.0	16.0	5.3	19.6
My working conditions will be better because of the employment policy changes.	14.9	16.0	24.8	18.7	5.7	19.9
I will suffer as a result of the employment policy changes.	16.4	20.2	29.4	9.9	4.6	19.5
<b><i>Views on pay</i></b>						
My current salary allows me to cover my basic needs.	13.0	23.7	40.8	19.1	0.0	3.4
My current salary allows me to cover unexpected expenses.	33.6	23.7	27.1	8.8	0.0	6.8
<b><i>Perceived job security</i></b>						
I feel insecure about the future of my job.	5.3	15.6	17.6	33.6	21.0	6.9
I am sure I can keep my job.	23.3	22.9	26.0	14.1	6.9	6.8
<b><i>Support for the change initiative</i></b>						
I support the policy change.	6.9	9.9	19.1	24.0	24.4	15.7
I did not really want to cooperate with the policy change but had to do so.	26.3	22.5	18.3	8.8	8.4	15.7
I am worried about having to leave my job before I would like to.	14.5	22.9	28.2	15.6	11.8	7.0

1–Strongly disagree, 2–Somewhat disagree, 3–Neither agree nor disagree, 4–Somewhat agree, 5–Strongly agree.

**TABLE 3**  
**WRITTEN COMMENTS**  
**SURVEY ON GREAT PLACE TO WORK INITIATIVE**

		<b>Issues Mentioned</b> (All issues mentioned, total may exceed number of respondents)						
<b>Managerial Staff Comments</b> (n=14 out of 58)		General Principle	Taxation, Household, "External Fit"	Implementation (Communication, Speed)	Tasks / Workload	Hours	Total Income	Fairness/ Equality
Positive	5	3		1			1	
Negative	5	1	1	1	3		1	3
Both Positive and Negative	4	4	1	1		1	1	
<b>Non-Managerial Staff Comments</b> (n= 54 out of 195 2 neutral comments)								
Positive	4	4						1
Negative	37	15	12	7	4	15	5	9
Both Positive and Negative	11	8	3	3		4	4	4