

## TOMODACHI Women's Empowerment Program 2025 Participants

**Name:** Rio Iwanami  
**Affiliation:** Chuo University, Department of Global Management  
**Hometown:** Nagano



In the future, I would like to contribute to regional revitalization by promoting the appeal of Japanese industry to the world through supporting the overseas expansion of Japanese companies and attracting foreign companies. To achieve this goal, I feel it is necessary to take the lead and engage those around me. However, there are few female leaders around me at present, and I do not have any specific role models.

Additionally, while I see women thriving on platforms like YouTube, the focus often remains on their current achievements rather than the journey they took to get there. I wanted to learn more about how they acquired leadership skills, the challenges they faced, and how they overcame them. That's why I decided to join this program, where working women serve as mentors in one-on-one sessions. I hope to gain insights from the real-world perspectives of women in the workforce, learning about what they value in their careers and the qualities needed to be a leader. Through this program, I aim to become a role model for women who aspire to become leaders in the future. By engaging in dialogue with mentors who are active in society, I want to learn about leadership, establish my own vision of leadership, and re-examine my career development and direction. Additionally, by participating in a community where women aspiring to leadership gather, I hope to broaden my horizons by exposure to diverse perspectives and goals.

I saw the notification of acceptance for this program late at night, and I couldn't help but let out a cry of joy and surprise. During the interview, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to speak English well, so I'm incredibly surprised that I was selected. I've always thought it would be fun to be involved in various projects as a leader, but I never quite had a chance to learn leadership skills on my own. Now that I've been selected, I'm determined to give it my all and strive to gain as much knowledge as possible through this program. Through this valuable opportunity, I want to develop my strengths as a leader, overcome my weaknesses, and learn what it means to be a leader from the mentors who are actively contributing to society. I also look forward to interacting with other participants, gaining diverse perspectives, and applying these insights to my personal growth. As my seminar begins in September at university, I aim to put what I learn into practice in those settings as well. I will approach this program with sincerity, never forgetting my gratitude for being selected, and strive to learn as much as possible so that I can one day support others in the same way.

**Name:** Hina Koeda  
**Affiliation:** Hokkai-Gakuen University, Department of Law  
**Hometown:** Hokkaido



I applied to the TOMODACHI Women's Empowerment Program because I want to examine Japan's gender gap through an international lens and discover practical remedies. After my parents divorced, my mother and I joined the nearly 50 percent of single-parent households that live in poverty, and I became acutely aware of the wage gulf between women and men.

Since high school I have prioritized first-hand evidence: I interned for a city councillor and drafted policy proposals, visited women's shelters and rehabilitation programs for domestic-violence offenders to interview frontline staff, and led seminar projects that analysed inequality. A domestic exchange at Hosei University allowed me to study family law and gender theory, where exposure to diverse viewpoints helped me recognise my own unconscious bias.

Although I have travelled abroad only as a tourist, this will be my first trip undertaken purely for learning. My spoken English is still modest, yet I practise daily so I can ask incisive questions and take part in discussions on-site. I intend to apply the insights and international network gained through the programme to launch a project that raises women's quality of life and helps close Japan's gender gap.

When the acceptance notice arrived my hands literally shook. On paper I had conveyed my passion, but in the interview my limited English left ideas unspoken. Frustrated, I practised speaking every day until the result was announced. Telling the news to the family and friends who had encouraged me through those drills was pure joy. Their support—and the panel's confidence—ignited a stronger resolve: I will exceed expectations. Before departure I will intensify my English training, prepare targeted questions, and craft short presentations so I can contribute from day one. On site I will actively seek dialogue, build networks, and absorb knowledge that cannot be gained at a distance.

Everything I learn will be brought back to Japan and translated into concrete action, beginning with sharing methods and contacts with local women's-support groups. I carry the responsibility of this selection with gratitude and will honour it through measurable results.

**Name:** Chinatsu Otani  
**Affiliation:** Hosei University, Department of Sociology  
**Hometown:** Shiga



I applied for this program with the desire to develop both the ability to recognize the issues that hinder women's advancement in society and gender equality, and the leadership skills to involve others in creating solutions. In Japan, I believe many gender-related issues are structurally embedded in social systems. As a result, even when inequality exists, it is often accepted as “normal,” making it difficult for people to recognize it as a problem in the first place. Through this program, I hope to cultivate the power of awareness—the ability to properly identify such issues as issues.

Moreover, I believe this program will offer the opportunity to meet a diverse group of people who are passionate about women's empowerment and who each bring their own perspectives and interests. By engaging with ideas and values different from my own, and by carefully examining the nuances in those differences, I hope to continuously evolve my thinking and become someone who can work on the frontlines of gender issues in the future.

When I received the notification of my acceptance, I felt both joy and gratitude at the opportunity to meet others who share my passion for addressing gender issues, and gratitude for being given the chance to learn deeply through this program. At the same time, I also became keenly aware of the challenges ahead—such as the difficulty of discussing complex social issues in English, and my own lack of sufficient knowledge about gender issues, which I am reminded of every day through the news and other sources. This has strengthened my determination to engage more seriously in my studies. I hope to be able to clearly express my thoughts and values on gender issues—including subtle nuances—not only in Japanese but also in English. I am very much looking forward to the many encounters this program will offer: not only with other participants, but also with new perspectives and values that may emerge through dialogue and shared experiences.

I am committed to deepening my learning so that I can make the most of this program and grow into someone who can truly contribute to building a better and more equitable society.

**Name:** Laina Sasaki  
**Affiliation:** Keio University, Faculty of Policy Management  
**Hometown:** Kanagawa



One day in our class at high school, we discussed gender inequality. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) Report 2023, Japan ranked 125th out of 146 countries. What was remarkable about reports was the fact that Japan's ranking had not improved, unlike in other countries. I was shocked by the data and saddened by the facts, but very few people in the class showed interest, though my school is for females only. It doesn't make sense, does it? Are we taking gender inequality as our own issues? In addition, I was the president of the student council of a female's school and often have a chance to interact with the other schools, but I had never met female president in coeducational school. That's when I realized that we need to educate ourselves more on gender equality in Japan to take responsibility for our future and shaping our future. In this program, I will have the opportunity to hear a lot from Japanese women leaders who will support me as mentor. I will also gain global perspectives on gender equality in my first overseas challenges. My goal is to grow into a flexible in order to take a leadership to create society in which everyone can thrive regardless of gender.

I am honored and excited to have an opportunity to join this program, because it allows me to hear the real voices of Japanese women leaders and gain a global perspective on gender equality. I believe education is one of the most effective ways to address gender inequality, particularly young generation thought it remains a deeply rooted issue in Japan. I have an experience organizing a project called "Get to Know Each Other – Male and Female" by cooperating other male school to promote open dialog and mutual understanding about gender. Over 80 students joined and this event was successful. After the event, some friends came up to me and said, "I thought I knew about the boys, but I actually didn't." This feedback reminded me of the importance of education and fostering mutual understanding. Organizing event and making friend of different gender could play a small role of reducing misunderstanding of different gender. I strongly believe that each of us can tackle gender equality by getting to know each other. I would like to be a female leader who promote gender equality in Japan by participating this program.

**Name:** Haruna Sasaki

**Affiliation:**

Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Department of English Studies

**Hometown:** Oita



In the future, I want to be a person who makes society better and help shape Japan's future while considering relationships with other countries.

However, there are still few women working in decision-making positions in Japan today. I believe that I first need to understand how female leadership works in Japan and how to adapt it to Japanese society in order to change this situation. When I took some classes in my university, I became aware that there were very few female politicians in Japan. Also, I met many people with various backgrounds when I worked as a reserve in the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force. I saw gender imbalance in there such as few women participants, different trainings based on gender, and few senior female officers. From these experiences, I strongly feel that making changes is challenging but we can change the situation if more women take leadership positions at the top of the organization. I am eager to gain valuable knowledge and skills to promote women's leadership through mentoring and training programs in the United States. I can better understand how to apply effective leadership in Japan by learning from successful leaders and exchanging ideas with other participants. I look forward to making a community with people who share the same goals and to being inspired by mentors. I want to take the first step toward becoming a change maker who creates positive change for gender equality and society.

I am honored to have been selected as a member of TOMODACHI Women's Empowerment Program. When I received the email, I could not believe that I was selected. I had been thinking that I would not have been chosen while waiting for the result. I was so surprised, and I did not feel real. It took some time to understand what just happened. After I calmed down, I told the news with my parents by message. As soon as they saw it, they sent me back a shocked and surprised stamp. They did not anticipate me to be selected either. And they said to me to do my best. I am grateful for this opportunity. I believe joining this program is one of my turning points in my life. I made my mind to cherish every experience, every person I meet, and every piece of knowledge I gain. I feel that this opportunity is rare and may never come again. This is why I want to spend time so I will not regret. I will work on this program with enthusiasm and responsibility. Through this program, I am eager to grow and become someone who contributes to making a better society in Japan in the future.



**Name:** Manami Sakamoto

**Affiliation:**

Kyushu University, School of Interdisciplinary Science and Innovation

**Hometown:** Fukuoka



I became interested in gender issues when my teacher told me, “You’re a girl, so maybe liberal arts is easier for you.” Since then, I began questioning why opportunities are limited just because of one’s gender. Later, I experienced severe menstrual pain due to dysmenorrhea, which affected my school attendance and almost cost me my chance for a high school recommendation. As I explored this issue, I realized how many people silently struggle with similar difficulties from not being able to afford period products to facing stigma and lack of understanding. Through speech contests, debates, and global programs, I found my voice. These experiences helped me see how individual stories can lead to social change. I applied for the TOMODACHI program because I want to learn from strong women leaders and gain tools to make a real difference in my community. I’m excited to collaborate with peers from different backgrounds, expand my perspective, and turn shared dialogue into action. I believe this program will empower me to speak not just for myself, but for those whose voices often go unheard.

When I received the acceptance email, I felt deeply honored and excited. It meant that my personal struggles and efforts to speak out about gender issues were seen and valued. This opportunity feels like the start of something much bigger, a chance to take what I’ve learned and turn it into meaningful change with others who share the same passion. Being selected also made me reflect on the responsibility that comes with this opportunity. I am not only representing myself, but also the voices and experiences of many people who still face barriers due to gender or menstruation. I want to approach this program with humility and a strong desire to grow. I aim to deepen my understanding, ask critical questions, and learn from everyone I meet. This program is not just a milestone, but a foundation for future action. I hope to return from the U.S. with new insights and connections that will guide me as I continue my journey toward education, policy change, and eventually working with organizations like UN Women to support gender equity on a global scale.

**Name:** Ayane Sekino

**Affiliation:**

Nagoya City University, Department of Informatics and Media Design

**Hometown:** Aichi



My future goal is to become a game director who improves the opportunity gap and makes people around the world smile by creating games. One of the big factors in the opportunity gap is gender inequality. According to CEDEC, the percentage of women in the game industry is only 13%. This data also illustrates how important it is to be a leader in this field. Therefore, I applied to this program because I would like to tackle this problem by using the media's power of building people's values. I have participated in lots of activities in different fields, then I realized that we do not have female leaders and role models as many as males. Moreover, there are many moments when it seems hard to take on leadership. These are happening not only to me, but also many people in Japan may have experienced them. However, being a leader does not only mean leading people, but also means supporting people by enhancing their abilities. "Leadership" has not only one aspect. That is why I would like to develop the skill of supporting others while growing in this program, and I am going to do more to reduce gender inequality and be someone's female role model.

I have wanted to participate in programs of the TOMODACHI Initiative, so it is a huge honor to be selected. I thought that my passion for tackling gender inequality through game creating could be unique, so for my passion to be accepted also means a lot to me, and I was deeply moved. It was unbelievable when I got the notice. However, at the same time, I decided to take the responsibility of being selected seriously and participate in this program by taking a firm stance. I believe that I am going to get a wide variety of leadership skills and broaden my horizons by trying to improve by learning from others — mentors and mentees who have the same passion. However, I do not want to use these irreplaceable relationships and precious experiences only for myself, but I would like to learn actively to the fullest in order to give back to others and grow each other to the next level.

**Name:** Rie Sekiya  
**Affiliation:** Hosei University, Faculty of Social Sociology  
**Hometown:** Tokyo



The reason why I applied to this program was that I thought there are still barriers to women's advancement in society. While aspiring to become a journalist and engaging in various activities, I was struck by the words of a female TV director who said, "To get a project approved, you must first convince the male executives." I felt this barrier acutely. In my own experience, when working as a cram school instructor, out of seven colleagues including myself, I was the only woman. Despite being of the same generation, I repeatedly heard comments like "I want my wife to stay at home" and "Women get preferential treatment just by being charming." I want to create a society where women can build careers on equal footing with men not because they are women, but as individual human beings, and where our voices are properly heard. Through this program, I am very much looking forward to hearing diverse perspectives and listening to the voices of women who have built careers and are working on the front lines. I want to ensure that what we learn here doesn't remain confined within our group, but that I will broadly disseminate and apply these learnings in my future work as a journalist.

When I received the acceptance notification, I was so overjoyed that I broke down in tears. Throughout my journey, I have encountered countless hurtful comments about women building careers and women's advancement in society. However, I believe this result came precisely because I stayed true to my convictions and continued my research and advocacy without being swayed by others' voices. Knowing this makes me feel as though all my efforts have been rewarded, and my heart is filled with emotion. Most importantly, I am very excited about the opportunity to exchange ideas with fellow participants who share the same aspirations and are fighting the same battles, as well as with professionals who are working on the front lines through this program. I want to properly absorb the stimulating discussions and new insights I will gain here and use them to further refine my own thinking. As a future journalist, I will convey the knowledge I cultivate here as words of encouragement and support for women who are pursuing their dreams with similar determination.



**Name:** Ano Tamekiyo  
**Affiliation:** Osaka University, Department of Human Sciences  
**Hometown:** Hiroshima



I applied to this program because I want to discover my own leadership style and develop the ability to support the growth of those around me. In particular, I am deeply interested in creating environments where children can encounter diverse role models and feel safe to take on new challenges. This stems from my own experience of questioning gender-based expectations that I had previously taken for granted. There was a time when I struggled to take the first step toward what I truly wanted to do. However, meeting mentors and peers who were confidently leading in their own authentic ways had a significant impact on me. They didn't guide me with grand words but simply embodied what was possible. Inspired by their example, I now aspire to become someone who believes in and supports the potential of others. Through this program, I hope to broaden my perspective by learning alongside participants from diverse backgrounds. I see it as a valuable opportunity to reflect on my own leadership and further grow as a person. In the future, I would like to contribute to creating social systems and cultures that naturally include and support those who are often left behind or overlooked.

When I received the news of my selection, I was honored and excited, but I also felt a strong sense of responsibility. Throughout my university life, I have tried to take initiative in various areas, but I often questioned whether my actions truly helped others or brought me closer to my purpose. Being selected for this program felt like a meaningful recognition of the efforts I had made, despite moments of uncertainty. It gave me a renewed sense of motivation and confidence. I am also genuinely looking forward to meeting peers who are striving toward their own goals, as I believe we can learn a great deal from one another. During the program, I want to be honest with myself—neither pretending to be someone I'm not, nor avoiding my weaknesses. I aim to fully engage with each opportunity, approaching it with humility and curiosity. Most importantly, I hope to transform the support and inspiration I've received into something I can pass on. In doing so, I want to become someone who not only climbs, but lifts others as I go—creating a cycle of empowerment that reaches far beyond myself.

**Name:** Miyu Yonashiro

**Affiliation:**

University of the Ryukyus Faculty of Global and Regional Studies

**Hometown:** Okinawa

As the eldest of five siblings, I grew up in a financially disadvantaged family environment, naturally developing a mindset of caring for and supporting others. Having received significant support during my academic pursuits, I have grown increasingly determined to one day be in a position to support others myself. Leaving my hometown to attend university outside my home prefecture provided me with a profound opportunity to reflect on the role of women in Japanese society and my own identity. I have since returned to my hometown through a transfer program and am now considering ways to contribute to my local community. The TOMODACHI Program aligns deeply with my values and goals, and I view it as a valuable opportunity to cultivate leadership skills such as self-awareness, effective communication, and resilience. By engaging with diverse cultures and learning about inclusive societal structures, I aim to support young people, particularly women, in challenging environments to expand their possibilities in the future.



I am deeply honored to have been selected as a participant in the TOMODACHI Women's Empowerment Program 2025. As the reality of this opportunity begins to sink in, I am filled with joy at being chosen, anticipation for the program's start, and a sense of nervous excitement. Being selected has given me great confidence, while also instilling a sense of responsibility. Through this program, I aim to become a true leader who can contribute to society while respecting diversity, by mastering the five leadership skills. In particular, I am confident that the U.S. training will be a valuable opportunity to broaden my international perspective and expand my values and vision for the future. I also look forward to gaining inspiration from interacting with mentors who are already active in society. I will strive to utilize this experience in my future career and work to become a bridge connecting Japan and the world.