
Career Interruption of Japanese Women: Why Is It So Hard to Balance Work and Childcare?

Yanfei Zhou

The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training

Many Japanese women temporarily leave their jobs during the childrearing phase. In this paper, the author summarizes the present situation and causes of this interruption of work by Japanese women in the childrearing phase, mainly by re-aggregating the results of the “National Survey of Households with Children” conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training in 2012. This analysis revealed that 62% of all women in the childrearing phase, and of these, 56% of those with a university degree or higher educational background, are classified in “interruption type” career courses. The regular employee ratio of women in “interruption type” employment is 36 percentage points lower than those in “(job) continuation type” employment, and their average annual incomes are also only about half. Around 60% of women in the childrearing phase think it ideal to continue working after childbirth, exposing a wide gap between ideals and realities when it comes to balancing work with childcare. Possible factors behind the expansion of job interruption in the childrearing phase to women from higher educational backgrounds include the fact that the gender-specific role expectations placed on women (responsibility for housework and childcare) remain as high as ever, and that job interruption is influenced by male-centered Japanese-style employment practices.

I. Introduction

In Japan, many capable women choose to remove themselves from employment. According to a recent survey (Hewlett et al. 2011), 74% of female university graduates in Japan have experienced periods away from work. Many of these are women in the childrearing phase. As of 2010, in two-parent households with children under 18 years of age, 47% of the wives were full-time housewives (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics Bureau, “2010 Census”). Many of these women, despite having both ability and strong educational backgrounds, spend their whole lives in housework, childcare and low-paid part-time work, without ever having the opportunity to be active in the labor market. In the “National Survey of Households with Children” (NSHC) conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) in November 2011, one 36-year-old full-time housewife with a university degree (and two children aged 6 and 3) described her dilemma as follows in her free statement (JILPT 2012):

“Without help from parents or other kinds of support, I feel that it would be very difficult to work full time at the same time as raising a child. Even if we want to work, we give up, because it is impossible to combine work with childcare. Another problem is that, once we leave a job, it isn’t so easy to go back under the same conditions

* This paper is an expanded and amended version of Zhou (2013a, 2013b).

as before. I wish the labor market could be more fluid and flexible.”

One study estimates that this waste of female human resources reduces Japan’s potential GDP by as much as 15% (Matsui et al. 2010). Meanwhile, at the FY2012 IMF-World Bank Annual Meeting in Tokyo, IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde memorably remarked that “Women could actually save Japan” if more of them were in the job market. Quite a few foreign researchers also point out that women’s participation in the labor market could not only be the salvation of Japan’s ailing economy, but could even be a “secret weapon” for confronting the problem of population aging in Japan.¹

What proportion of Japanese women in the childrearing phase is affected by this interruption of careers? How does such an interruption in the childrearing phase affect their lifelong careers? Why has career interruption in the childrearing phase become so established among Japanese women? While searching for answers to questions like this, the present situation and causes of career interruption by Japanese women in the childrearing phase will be outlined below, based on the re-aggregated results of the “National Survey of Households with Children” (NSHC 2012) conducted by JILPT in November 2012.

II. Outline of NSHC 2012

The survey targeted 4,000 Japanese households with children under the age of 18, divided equally between two-parent households and lone-parent households (2,000 households each). The sample of target households was chosen by stratified two-stage random sampling. These households were visited individually by professional investigators, who distributed and later collected questionnaires (the visit and questionnaire distribution method). The investigators requested that the person answering the questionnaire should be the mother (wife) in possible case. Responses were essentially supposed to reflect the situation as of November 1, 2012 (the survey base date).

The valid sample count was 2,201 collected questionnaires (valid response rate 56%). Of these, 1,456 valid responses were collected from married mothers and 621 from single mothers. For details of the survey method and results, see JILPT (2013a).

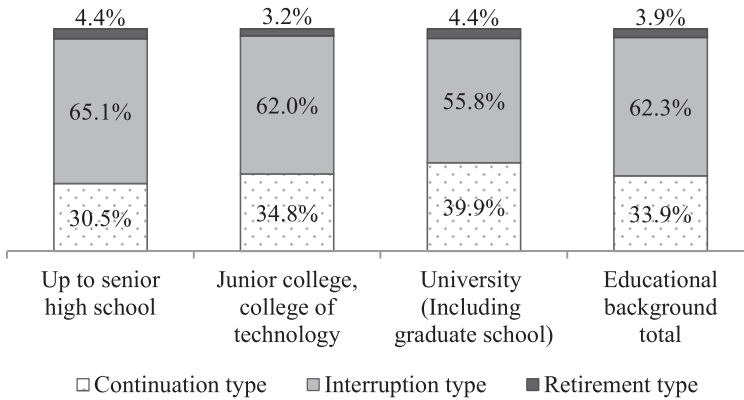
III. Present Situation

1. Career Interruption in the Childrearing Phase Has Spread to Highly Educated Women

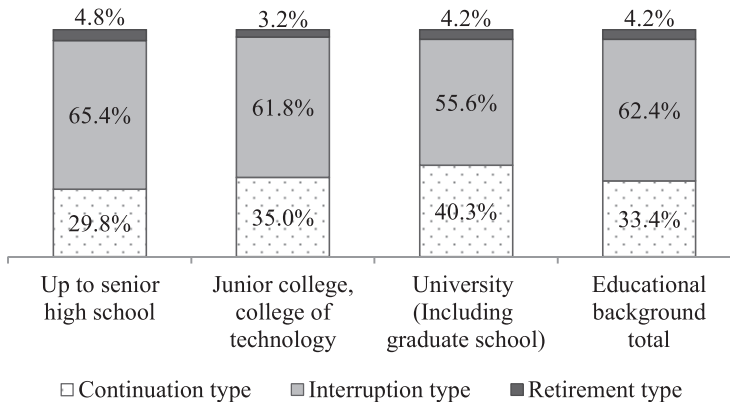
In many countries after the war (such as the USA, the UK and Scandinavian countries), a trend toward higher educational backgrounds has progressed in tandem with the

¹ Ian Bremmer and Susan Shwab (2012) “Japan’s Secret Demographic Weapon,” Project Syndicate (<http://www.project-syndicate.org>) Oct. 15, 2012 (accessed March 13, 2013).

(1) Married/single women aged 30s–40s



(2) Married women aged 30s–40s



Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012* (figures after adjustment for oversampling of lone-parent households).

Note: Continuation type: Have generally continued working since graduating from last school, and are currently in employment; Interruption type: Temporarily left employment, but are now employed again or wish to return to work in future; Retirement type: Currently out of work, and have no intention or capacity to return to work in future.

Figure 1. Vocational Career Courses of Women with Children (2012)

acceleration of women’s advancement in the workplace (Osawa and Tanaka 1989; Osawa 1993). The phenomenon of career interruption in the childrearing phase expanding from women with lower educational backgrounds to those with higher educational backgrounds is unique to Japan. According to empirical analysis by Higuchi and Hayami (1984), while the labor force participation rate of (white) American women has increased markedly as educational levels have risen, there is less evidence of this effect in Japan, where it is not statistically significant.

If we divide the vocational career courses of childrearing women into three categories, namely (i) the “continuation type” who have generally continued working, (ii) the “interruption type” who temporarily left employment but have returned or wish to return to work in future, and (iii) the “retirement type” who have already withdrawn from the labor market, we find that the “interruption type” accounts for more than 60% of the total (Figure 1). Even among women from higher educational backgrounds, i.e. those graduating from 4-year university or postgraduate courses, the ratio of the “interruption type” is 56% of the total. Career interruption in the childrearing phase has clearly spread even among women from higher educational backgrounds.

2. Pronounced Employment Disparity Caused by Career Interruption

Japan has a strong custom of recruiting regular employees based on a unique system of “collective hiring of new graduates” that is not seen in other countries²; the market for mid-career hiring of regular employees is said to be underdeveloped compared to western countries. In the majority of cases, re-employment after career interruption involves low-paid part-time work (JILPT 2012).³ As a result, job interruption in the childrearing phase has a major impact on women’s wages (Osawa 1993). According to estimates by Kawaguchi (2008), the “marriage penalty” in the broad sense (including career interruption for marriage) is around 8%, while the “childbirth penalty” in the broad sense is around 4%. The fact that the childbirth penalty is largely caused by interruption of employment due to childbirth is a characteristic of Japan that is not seen in overseas research, as Kawaguchi (2008) points out.

NSHC 2012 also confirms that a pronounced employment disparity has arisen between women who interrupted their careers in the childrearing phase (the “interruption type”) and those who did not (the “continuation type”) (Table 1). Compared to “interruption type” workers, “continuation type” workers include a higher ratio of regular employees (56% vs. 20%), and more of them work for large corporations (35% vs. 20%). Moreover, the average annual income of “continuation type” workers is 1.9 times that of “interruption type” workers.

So, do “continuation type” workers, in return for their status as regular employees and higher incomes, have to put up with longer commuting times or employment in unsocial hours? According to the survey results, the answer is “No.” The average commute of “continuation type” workers (one-way) is around 30 minutes, and only 23% of them responded

² Collective hiring of new graduates is a system whereby employers recruit human resources (new graduates) who have only just graduated from education and have no experience of working as regular employees, and hire them collectively as workers upon graduation. This uniquely Japanese hiring practice is said to have spread and become established during the early 20th century.

³ The wage gap between full-time and part-time workers is more pronounced in Japan than in other developed nations. Taking the hourly wage of full-time workers as 100, the wage paid to part-time workers is 56.9 in Japan (2012), 70.7 in the UK, 79.3 in Germany, and 74.3 in France (JILPT 2014, 177).

Table 1. Comparison of Working Conditions: “Continuation Type” vs. “Interruption Type”

	(A) Continuation type	(B) Interruption type	Disparity (A-B)
Average annual income (including tax, x10,000 yen)	280.9	151.3	129.6 (85.7%)
Of which, average annual income of regular employees	394.0	281.0	113.0 (40.2%)
Regular employees	56.0%	20.1%	35.9 Percentage Point
Work for large corporations	34.7%	20.3%	14.4 Percentage Point
Regular employees of large corporations	27.3%	4.9%	22.3 Percentage Point
Ratio of night work or early morning work	23.4%	18.1%	5.3 Percentage Point
Average commuting time (one-way, minutes)	24.6	18.3	6.3
Of which, average commuting time of regular employees	29.7	24.0	5.7

Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012* (figures after adjustment for oversampling of lone-parent households).

Note: The aggregation is aimed at childrearing women in employment. “Large corporations” here refers to companies or public bodies with at least 300 employees. The definitions of the “continuation type” and the “interruption type” are the same as in Figure 1.

that they work at night or early in the morning—almost the same as “interruption type” workers (Table 1). This suggests a scenario whereby women who work under favorable working hour conditions tend to remain in the labor market as “continuation type” workers.

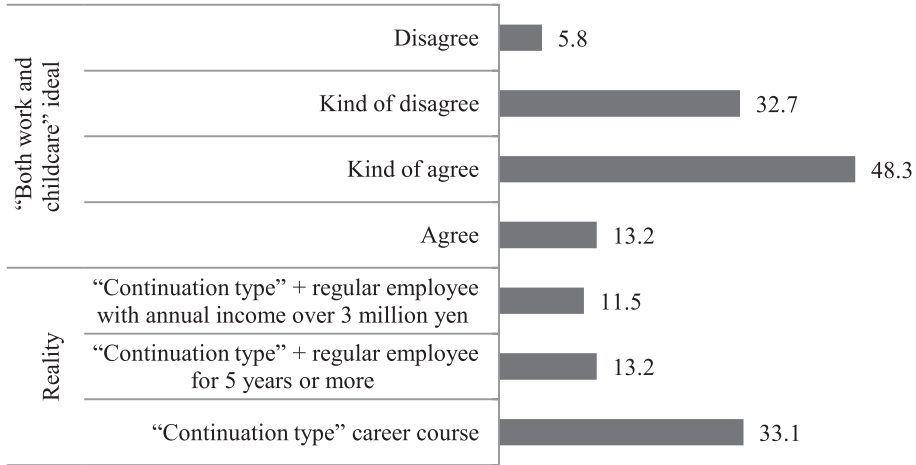
3. Balancing Work and Childcare: The Gap between Ideals and Reality

Do Japanese women opt for career interruption of their own accord? Actually, about 60% of childrearing women state that they “Agree” or “Kind of agree” with the working lifestyle of “women continuing to work even after having children” (Figure 2). In other words, the majority of Japanese women appear to see balancing work and childcare as the ideal image.

In reality, however, only one in three childrearing women practices the “continuation type” career course seen as ideal by many women. In particular, only 13% of women continue working as regular employees for more than 5 years. And only about 10% earn annual incomes above 3 million yen, seen as the dividing line for economic independence.

4. Reasons for Quitting Jobs as Regular Employees

Career interruption in the childrearing phase often starts by quitting one’s first job as a regular employee. Under the custom of “collective hiring of new graduates,” the majority



Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012* (figures after adjustment for oversampling of lone-parent households).

Note: This aggregation targets childrearing women aged 30 and over. Those in their 20s, with fewer years since graduating from education, have been removed from the aggregation as their working lifestyles are too fluid.

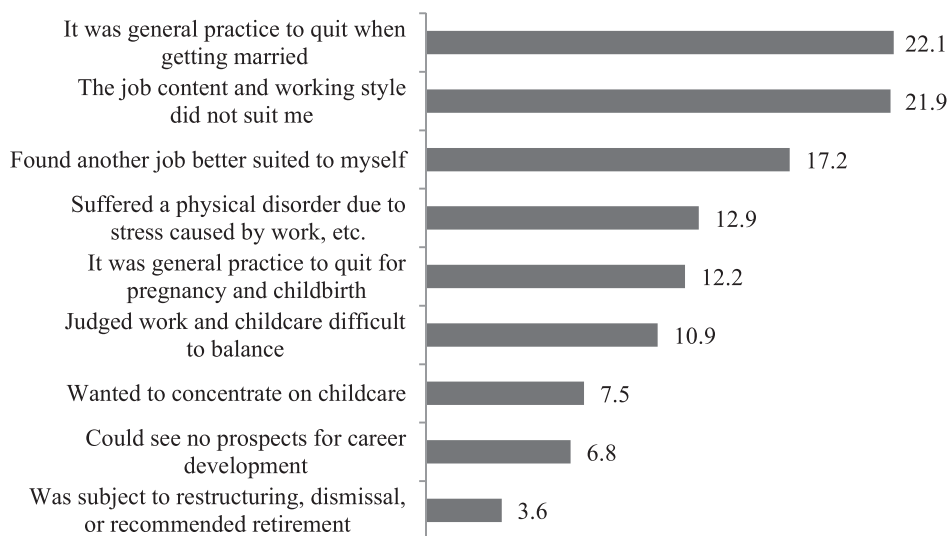
Figure 2. The Ratio of Women Who See “Balancing Work and Childcare” as Ideal and the Ratio of Women Who Achieve It (%)

of women are given opportunities to work as regular employees upon graduating from their final educational institution. According to NSHC 2012, 76% of childrearing women classified in the “interruption type” had first been employed as regular employees. So why did these women relinquish the opportunity for employment as regular employees having once obtained it?

The reason for quitting most commonly given by women whose first job was in regular employment but who had interrupted their careers is that “It was general practice to quit when getting married” (22%) (Figure 3). If these are combined with those who cited “It was general practice to quit for pregnancy and childbirth” (12%) as the reason, we find that one in three respondents quit their jobs for marriage, pregnancy or childbirth, in line with (social or corporate) “custom.” Besides these, respondents who replied that they “Judged work and childcare difficult to balance” (11%) and “Wanted to concentrate on childcare” (8%) accounted for just under 20% of the total.

5. Reasons for Currently Being out of Work

According to NSHC 2012, around 80% of mothers who are currently not in employment state that they “Want to work right away” or “Want to work sometime soon.” When asked the reason for not being in employment, many women who are full-time housewives despite wanting to work cite reasons “related to children” (“Want to concentrate on



Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012* (figures after adjustment for oversampling of lone-parent households).

- Notes: 1. The aggregation is aimed at “interruption type” women whose first job was in regular employment. Multiple response up to a maximum of three (total response rate 133%).
2. Results related to reasons with an applicable ratio of less than 5% (excluding restructuring reasons) have been omitted.

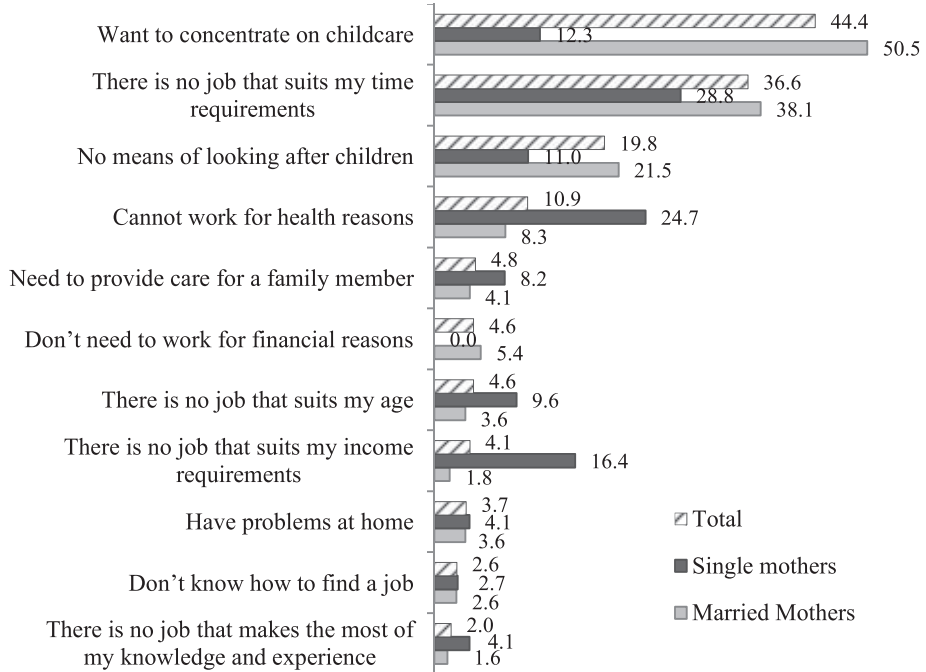
Figure 3. Reasons for Quitting First Job as a Regular Employee by “Interruption Type” Women (%)

childcare,” “No means of looking after children”), or reasons related to “Mismatch of labor supply and demand” (“There is no job that suits my time requirements,” “There is no job that suits my age,” “There is no job that suits my income requirements,” “There is no job that makes the most of my knowledge and experience”) (Figure 4).

As the reason for being out of work, 44% of non-working mothers (married mothers 51%, single mothers 12%) say they “Want to concentrate on childcare.” Those responding with “No means of looking after children” account for 20% of the total (married mothers 22%, single mothers 11%). And 59% of all respondents cite one of these reasons “related to children.”

Many mothers also give “Mismatch of labor supply and demand” as their reason for being out of work. “There is no job that suits my time requirements” is cited by 37% of non-working mothers (married mothers 38%, single mothers 29%) as the reason for being out of work. If this is combined with “There is no job that suits my age,” “There is no job that suits my income requirements” and “There is no job that makes the most of my knowledge and experience,” 41% of non-working mothers point to “Mismatch of labor supply and demand” as their reason for being out of work.

Meanwhile, reasons that were conspicuous among single mothers but not among



Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012* (totals are figures after adjustment for oversampling of lone-parent households).

Notes: 1. The figures result from aggregation of data from mothers who are currently out of work but responded that they “Want to work right away” or “Want to work sometime soon.”
 2. Multiple response up to a maximum of two (total response rate 141%).

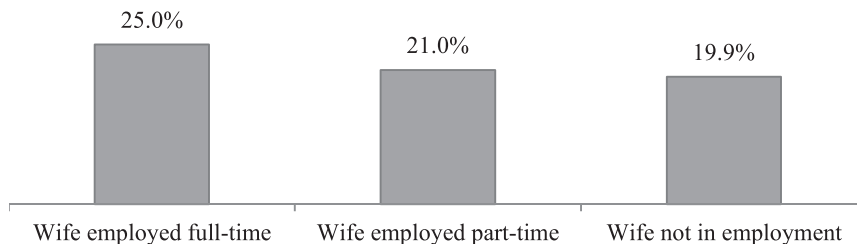
Figure 4. Main Reasons for Being out of Work Even Though Wishing to Work (%)

married mothers included “Cannot work for health reasons” (25%), “There is no job that suits my income requirements” (16%) and “There is no job that suits my age” (10%). Given the very high employment rate of single mothers (85%), this reveals that there are compelling reasons why non-working single mothers cannot work.

IV. Cultural Factors behind Career Interruption

1. Gender-Specific Role Expectations of Women

In Japan, women’s workplace advancement has progressed since the war, but a Confucian culture remains as strongly rooted in the national consciousness as ever; the tendency to accept gender-specific role divisions between men and women could be described as stronger than in other developed nations. Women are subject to particularly high role expectations when it comes to household chores like cooking, cleaning, and raising children. According to the “National Survey on Family 2013” by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 45% of women with spouses agreed with the idea that “After



Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012*.

Note: Results of responses by married mothers. “Employed full-time” means working at least 40 hours a week.

Figure 5. Husband’s Share of Housework and Childcare

marriage, husbands should work away from home and wives should devote themselves to housework.”

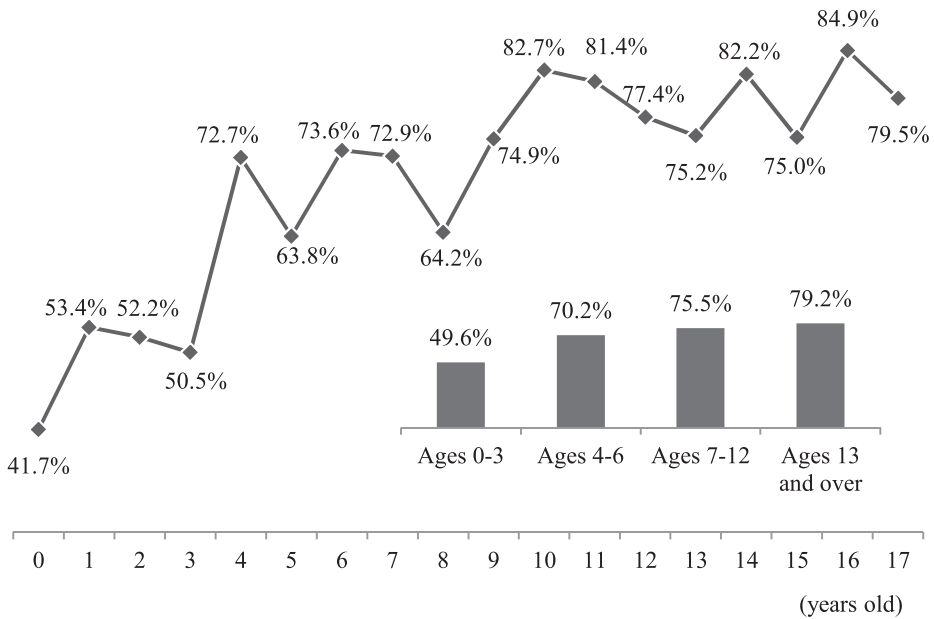
The household responsibility expected of women does not change in accordance with their working situation. Wives were divided into three groups depending on their employment status (“Employed full-time,” “Employed part-time” and “Not in employment”), and the husband’s share of housework and childcare was investigated in each case. The result was that, even if the wife is employed full-time, the husband’s share of housework and childcare is still 25% (Figure 5). In other words, the present situation is that women’s household duties do not diminish very much even when they are in employment.

According to the same “National Survey on Family 2013,” 77% of women with a spouse responded that “Mothers should not work but should concentrate on childcare until their child is about three years old.” NSHC 2012 also confirms that the labor force participation rate of childrearing women is closely linked to the age of the youngest child (Figure 6).

For example, the employment rates of mothers with children aged 0, 1, 2 and 3 are 42%, 53%, 52% and 51% respectively—in other words, all around 50%. But when the youngest child reaches the age of 4, the rate increases to 73%. By the time the youngest child is in the upper years of elementary school (ages 10–12), the employment rate of mothers has risen to the 80% range. An influencing factor behind the markedly low labor force participation rate among mothers with pre-school children (particularly infants aged 0–3) is thought to be the “myth of the first three years”—the belief that a child’s future development will be adversely affected if not raised by his or her own mother until the age of three.

2. Gender-Based Job Segmentation

When Japanese women choose a job, they often tend to choose “female occupations” like customer services or sales. Companies, too, assign women to general clerical work,



Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012* (figures after adjustment for oversampling of lone-parent households).

Figure 6. Labor Force Participation Rates of All Mothers by Age of Youngest Child (%)

customer service and other job types with low levels of speciality, in anticipation of an early turnover by female employees, while assigning more men to specialized, management, or core operations. As a result, there is a very high level of gender-based job segregation in Japan.

Table 2 compares female ratios in Japan, USA and China in terms of job classifications. Although a degree of gender-based job segregation can be seen in all three countries, the level of this segregation in Japan far exceeds that in China, and is also high compared to the USA. For example, the ratio of women among “Vehicle and machine operators,” a classically male occupation, is 3% in Japan but 7% and 14% in China and the USA, respectively. Other male occupations like “Construction and civil engineering,” “Machine repair and maintenance” and “Policing and firefighting” also have a markedly low female ratio compared to China and the USA.

A similar tendency toward segregation can also be seen in female occupations. The female ratio in the classic female occupations of “Healthcare and medical services” is as high as 94% in Japan, but only 61% and 87% in the USA, revealing that Japan has the highest concentration of female workers here. Many occupations in which women are concentrated—not only “Healthcare and medical services” but also “Hospitality and service,” “Product sales,” “General clerical” and others—are jobs that do not require special skills, in which companies can easily find replacement workers.

When it comes to “specialized occupations” that require special skills and are not so

Table 2. Gender-Based Job Segregation: Japan vs. China and USA

	Japan	China	USA
Job segregation index	44.1	22.0	39.5
Female ratio of male occupations (%)			
(A) Construction and civil engineering	1.9	12.3	2.6
(B) Machine repair and maintenance	2.4	10.9	4.0
(C) Vehicle and machine operators	2.6	7.0	13.9
(D) Policing and firefighting	5.8	10.0	24.1
Female ratio of female occupations (%)			
(E) Healthcare and medical services	93.8	60.6	87.1
(F) Hospitality and service	68.4	55.8	77.3
(G) Product sales	62.6	53.5	49.8
(H) General clerical	58.9	41.4	72.8
Female ratio of specialized occupations (%)			
(I) Management occupations	14.4	25.1	39.1
(J) Economy, finance and management	12.1	65.3	54.9
(K) Researchers and engineers	9.0	38.5	25.9
(L) Legal professionals	15.3	33.5	50.8

Source: Compiled by the author from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics Bureau, *2010 Census*, National Bureau of Statistics of China, *6th Census Data 2010* and US Census Bureau, *2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*.

Note: Job segregation index = $\sum \{ | Pf - Pm | \} / 2$

Where Pf = The ratio of women employed in each occupation to all women in employment (%)

Pm = The ratio of men employed in each occupation to all men in employment (%).

easily replaceable, conversely, Japan’s female ratio is the lowest of all three countries. The female ratio of employees in “Economy, finance and management” is 12% in Japan but 65% in China and 55% in the USA, revealing that, if anything, women are in the ascendancy in these countries as far as specialized jobs are concerned. A similar picture is found in “Researchers and engineers” occupations, where Japan’s female ratio is less than 10%, lagging far behind 39% in China and 26% in the USA. Japanese women have also made little headway, in comparison to China and the USA, in other specialized occupations like “Management occupations” and “Legal professionals.”

3. The Impact of Cultural Factors on Women’s Employment

A culture related to gender-specific role division is said to have a large impact on women’s employment. Generally, the female employment rate is high in cultures and social environments where gender-specific role division is relatively minor (Scandinavian countries, USA, China, etc.), but is conversely low in cultural spheres like Japan, Turkey and Italy, where the emphasis is on women’s household roles (OECD 2011).

It is also possible that culture and customs can transcend national frontiers to have a marked impact on an individual’s choice of employment. In the USA, for example, Fernandez (2007) conducted a study of married women between the ages of 30 and 40, consisting

of 2nd generation immigrants born of parents from 25 countries other than the USA. The results revealed that their daily working hours increased by up to 0.87 hours (equivalent to 8%) for every single-unit increase in standard deviation of the female labor participation rate in their parents' countries of origin.

It has also been pointed out that culture and customs related to gender-specific role division have an "Echo Effect," which changes the behavior not only of the current generation but also of future ones. According to Fernandez, Fogli and Olivetti (2004), males raised by working mothers are 32 percentage points more likely to marry women in employment. Also, in US states where the population ratio of working mothers increased anomalously due to large-scale population movement after the war, women in subsequent new cohort generations have maintained a relatively high employment rate.

Japan's culture related to gender-specific role division has been formed slowly over a long period of time. Partly due to the "Echo Effect," the emphasis on home roles for Japanese women has shown a slightly decreasing trend in recent years compared to the past,⁴ but it still remains at a high level in comparison to western countries.

V. Institutional Factors behind Career Interruption

1. Under-Utilization of Childcare Support Systems

In Japan, there is certainly no paucity of systems that support childcare. Besides a well-developed system of childbirth and childcare leave, homogeneous and high-quality nursery services are also provided.

Of public support systems that promote the workplace advancement of women in the childrearing phase, the most basic are the systems of childbirth and childcare leave. In Japan, employers are legally bound to provide paid leave for 6 weeks before and 8 weeks after childbirth. On top of this, employees covered by employment insurance who have worked for at least one year are entitled to take childcare leave until their child reaches the age of 1 (or, if meeting certain conditions, 18 months). During the period of statutory childbirth leave, 67% of the pre-leave wage is paid. In the case of childcare leave, 67% of the wage is paid for the first 180 days, then 50% for the remainder of the leave. The length of Japan's statutory childbirth and childcare leave, and the adequacy of income compensation provided, are not inferior to those of other developed nations.⁵

⁴ For example, the ratio of women with spouses who agreed with the idea that "After marriage, husbands should work away from home and wives should devote themselves to housework" fell from 54% in 1998 to 45% in 2013. Meanwhile, the ratio agreeing that "Mothers should not work but should concentrate on childcare until their child is about three years old" decreased from 91% in 1998 to 84% in 2003, 87% in 2008 and 77% in 2013 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, "National Survey on Family" [each year]).

⁵ In 41 developed nations surveyed by ILO (2014), the average length of leave available to mothers as a combination of statutory childbirth leave and childcare leave (including unpaid leave) is 1.4 years (72 weeks), with a median value of 1 year (52 weeks).

Nurseries are indispensable to the workplace advancement of women in the childrearing phase. In Japan, nurseries are regarded as an element of child welfare, and both the national government and local authorities have invested significant amounts of taxpayers' money in setting up authorized nurseries known as Licensed Daycare Centers. This system, moreover, provides considerable convenience for its users. Firstly, the majority of nurseries admit infants from the age of 0, allowing parents to return to work early if they so desire. Secondly, the fees for use (nursery fees) are kept very low overall compared to the actual running costs ("low fees"), and these fees are adjusted up or down depending on the parents' income level ("ability-to-pay principle"). This makes them easy to use, even for women in low income brackets (Zhou, Oishi, Ueda 2003). Moreover, the standards for nursery establishment are strictly regulated by the "Child Welfare Act," and the childcare content by "Nursery Childcare Guidelines," ensuring the provision of a homogeneous, high-quality service.

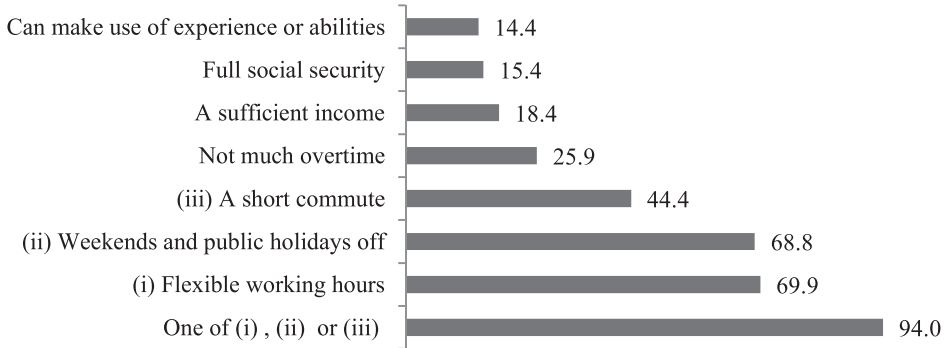
The problem is that many mothers do not enjoy the benefits of such childcare support systems. For while 89% of female regular employees (or 81% of those on fixed term contracts)⁶ now utilize the childcare leave system (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, "Basic Survey of Gender Equality in Employment Management 2011"), the rate of use by childrearing women as a whole is only about 20% (JILPT 2013b). This is because the system is not available to full-time housewives, the self-employed, or those engaged in agriculture, forestry or fisheries, while it is often beyond the reach of part-time workers as well.⁷

Another factor hindering the workplace advancement of women in the childrearing phase is the underdevelopment or shortage of nursery facilities, particularly in large cities like Tokyo and Osaka (Zhou 2012). Although both the number of nurseries and their admission capacity has increased year by year since the Child Welfare Act took effect in 1948, the supply of nursery places has still not caught up with demand. According to a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 23,000 children were on the waiting list for Licensed Daycare Centers as of April 2013,⁸ and although this represents a slight improvement on 33,000 in 2000, it remains at a high level. When raising a preschool child, ample nursery services can be obtained under the ability-to-pay principle if the child can be

⁶ These figures do not include working women who quit their jobs before childbirth, either in the denominator or in the numerator.

⁷ According to global statistics published by ILO (2014), the application rate of statutory childbirth leave among female employees is only 41%, while the rate of receiving compensation during childbirth leave is less than 30% (28%). The need to apply childbirth and childcare leave systems to non-typical workers and the enhance childbirth and childcare support systems for full-time housewives appear to be global issues.

⁸ Equivalent to 1% of the number of children enrolled in Licensed Daycare Centers during the same period (2.22 million). Besides these, the "latent waiting list" of children not counted in the waiting list because their parents have not applied for nursery places is estimated to be on a scale at least ten times greater than this (Zhou and Oishi 2005).



Source: Re-aggregated by the author from the *National Survey of Households with Children 2012* (figures after adjustment for oversampling of lone-parent households).

Note: Aggregation targeting mothers currently not in employment. Multiple response up to a maximum of three.

Figure 7. Conditions Prioritized When Taking a Job (%)

admitted to a Licensed Daycare Centers. If not, the mother inevitably has no choice but to leave work, or use expensive unlicensed nursery facilities, private babysitting services, or home-based childcare by relatives.

2. Male-Centered Japanese-Style Employment Practices

Japanese-style employment practices are modeled on the image of the male worker married to a full-time housewife. In return for lifelong employment and seniority-based pay from their companies, male workers provide a “flexible” style of working that suits the companies’ convenience, including long working hours, unscheduled overtime, holiday work, business trips and transfers (Yashiro 2009). This allows companies to make effective use of a limited number of regular employees and keep hiring and firing to a minimum. What makes this style of working by men possible is the culture of gender-specific role division, whereby women take care of all housework and childcare duties (Kawaguchi 2008).

Conversely, as women undertake the majority of housework and childcare, they cannot work “flexibly” in accordance with companies’ demands. A look at the conditions prioritized when childrearing women take up jobs shows that working hours are given far greater importance than income or making use of abilities (Figure 7). “Flexible working hours” (70%), “Weekends and public holidays off” (69%) and “A short commute” (44%) are chosen as priority conditions related to working hours when women take up employment.

Thus, as they are subject to considerable constraints in terms of working hours, women cannot provide companies with a “flexible” working style, and therefore tend to be excluded from core operations and management candidacy. Many mothers who return to work after taking childcare leave are said to be placed on the “Mommy track” (work earmarked for mothers), given jobs where they cannot use their knowledge or experience, and

trapped in positions where they have no prospect of promotion (Zhou 2014). As a result, despite taking childcare leave (with the intention of returning), women who interrupt their careers have no future at work. According to NSHC 2012, 26% of those who take childcare leave are classified in “interruption type” career courses.

VI. To Overcome Career Interruption in the Childrearing Phase

Many Japanese women in the childrearing phase come from higher educational backgrounds. As of 2011, 53% of Japanese women aged 25–49 had an educational background of graduation from junior college, university or higher, more than 20 percentage points above the equivalent US figure (32%) (JILPT 2013b). Normally, therefore, one would expect Japanese women with higher educational backgrounds to have fewer problems than their American counterparts when choosing workplace advancement. In reality, however, Japanese women in the childrearing phase have a lower employment rate than those in the USA. This is because career courses involving temporary interruption in the childrearing phase became established among Japanese women in the period between the era of high-level economic growth and the first half of the 1990’s, when the “economic bubble” burst.

In Japan, with its strong custom of recruiting regular employees through “collective hiring of new graduates,” career interruption in the childrearing phase has a significantly negative effect on women’s lifelong careers. Re-employment after career interruption is biased toward job types in the “4Cs (Caring, Cleaning, Cooking, Cashier)” and part-time employment with less than 35 hours a week; it overwhelmingly involves work of low “quality,” including low hourly pay and a lack of work motivation. As a result, career interruption of women in the childrearing phase causes a massive decrease in lifelong income for the child-rearing household, and signifies a profound waste of human capital for society at large.

In Japan, the culture of gender-specific role division is expected to diminish in future, but it is still seen as difficult for women to free themselves from their relatively heavy responsibility for housework and childcare. Even in Scandinavian countries, where gender-specific role divisions are not prominent, women generally bear greater responsibility than men when it comes to housework and childcare. If a heavier household responsibility than men is presumed to be imposed on women, their choices of occupation and job type will be particularly important. If women could take up occupations and jobs where discretionary working hour systems, flextime work, working at home and other flexible working hour have been introduced, and OJT, personnel selection and promotions are evaluated on the outcome of their work rather than the length of working hours, or their work at specific times (such as night or holidays), it should be easier for them to continue working in the childrearing phase.

According to analysis by Goldin (2014), there is a smaller “penalty to being a wom-

an” in the technology, science and health industries, making it easier for women to continue working in those industries. Conversely, the business, finance and legal industries impose large constraints on working hours, and thus present significant penalties for women. Women’s workplace advancement in Japan’s technology and science industries lags far behind that in the USA, and it could be seen as an urgent task for sites of education to nurture specialist female personnel for these industries.

Another important thing will be to minimize the negative impact on women’s lifelong careers when career interruption occurs in the childrearing phase. Measures to combat this could conceivably include expanding methods of recruiting regular employees by using “mid-career hiring,” enhancing programs in support of their return to work, and encouraging an early return to work (introduction of a system for reducing income compensation rates during childcare leave in 2014).

Meanwhile, since male-centered Japanese-style employment practices depend on women assuming all housework and childcare, this prerequisite is in the process of collapsing as women in the childrearing phase continue to work. If the number of male workers who can provide a “flexible” style of working to suit their company’s convenience (including long working hours, unscheduled overtime and holiday work) were to decrease, reforms of existing Japanese-style employment practices would also surely become inevitable. Such reforms could be expected to change those practices in a direction that will be more friendly for women.

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