

Japan's Married Stay-at-Home Mothers in Poverty

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I. New arising poverty issues of stay-at-home mothers

In the post-World War II high economic growth decades, nearly 90% of Japanese people considered themselves to be in the middle-class rather than at the extremes of the income distribution. Most male workers, both white-collar and blue-collar, were economically secure under the Japanese long-term employment system. Filled with a feeling of economic security, families with a working father and a stay-at-home mother (hereafter “SAHM families”) were predominant in the 1970s to 1980s. It was estimated that 80 to 90% of married women chose to leave the labor force when getting married or giving birth.

Since the collapse of bubble economy in the early 1990s, however, the situation of identification with the middle class and stay-at-home mothers has changed dramatically. Surveys now show that Japanese people are less likely to consider themselves middle class. SAHM families are gradually becoming a minority. One of the obvious turning points occurred in 1997. According to the Labor Force Survey by the Bureau of Statistics, working-wife families outnumbered non-working-wife families for the first time. In 2016, just one-third (37%) of married women were non-working, down from 65% in 1980.¹

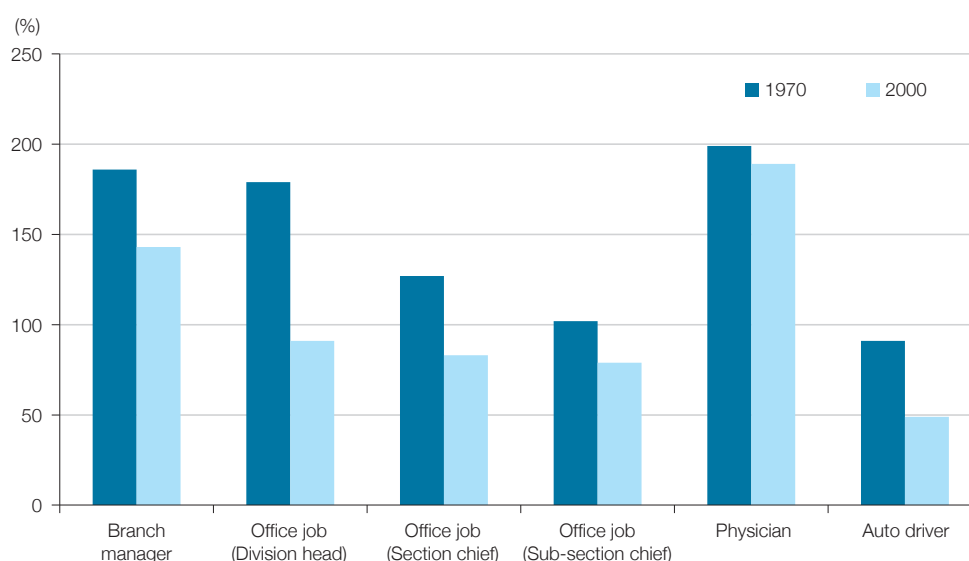
For a long time after these changes, stay-at-home mothers have been perceived as no longer being a dominant style of Japanese families, but as a symbol of wealthy families. Recent studies by Ohtake (2001) and Kohara (2007), however, cast doubt on the assumption that SAHM families in Japan were dominantly composed of married women with high-income spouses. A national survey conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) in 2011 also reveals that only a small proportion (18%) of SAHM families were earning 8 million yen or more, which is said to be high-income. In contrast, one in eight married stay-at-home mothers were living in households with an income below the poverty line (JILPT, 2012).

By analyzing household data from four rounds of a nationwide survey, this paper tries to tackle the newly arising poverty issues concerning stay-at-home mothers in Japan. Specifically, we first estimate the population size of poor stay-at-home mothers in recent years. We then explore the social backgrounds and mechanisms that drive these married women to continue to not work despite being in poverty. Finally, we discuss approaches to tackle these issues.

II. Background: The changed environment and unchanged family stereotypes

Japan's employment structure and economy have changed fundamentally since the 1990s. Manufacturing industries have hollowed out. Low-paid service jobs, such as elderly care, retail, and temporary work, have increased. Middle-class incomes slowed in the 1970s and have substantially declined over the past two

1. JILPT eds. *Quick Guide for Long-Term Labor Statistics by Graphs*, 2017, Figure 12, <http://www.jil.go.jp/kokunai/statistics/timeseries/html/g0212.html> (accessed on 02/15/2018).



Source: Original data cited from the Household Survey conducted by the Bureau of Statistics and Private Companies Payment Survey by Professions conducted by the National Personnel Authority.

Figure 1. Average payment of typical male jobs as a percentage of average real living expenses of urban working families in 1970 and 2000

decades.² The demise of the bubble economy triggered a deep recession, and unprecedented rapid population aging continues to limit the future growth of national income.

In the decades just after World War II, and particularly in the golden era of 1955 to 1973, the Japanese economic miracle produced many good jobs for less-educated workers. As typified by manual manufacturing jobs, well-paid and secure middle-class jobs were abundant. Thanks to the rapid expansion of GDP and strong unions, a wide range of male-dominated occupations enabled stay-at-home mothers to have an affordable lifestyle.

In recent years, however, many of the good jobs that used to be available for less-educated or less-skilled male workers have been diminishing. More and more male workers fail to earn enough in their paychecks to support a whole family. Figure 1 demonstrates the average payment of typical male jobs as a percentage of average family living expenses in 1970 and in 2000. In 1970, not only elite jobs (branch manager or physician), but also ordinary salaried jobs such as sub-section chief (*kakari-cho*) of office jobs could support an average family with their own paychecks. Even auto drivers, a typical blue-collar occupation, were earning 90% of the family living expenses. In 2000, by contrast, only the two elite jobs are able to fully cover living expenses.

On the other hand, male-centered Japanese-style workplace practices are unchanged. In return for job security and relatively good payment, regular workers must provide a “flexible” working schedule that suits the company’s convenience, which typically includes long work hours, unscheduled overtime, and business trips as well as frequent relocations (Yashiro, 2009). These family-unfriendly workplace practices are essentially founded on a model of SAHM families, in which the wife is supposed to fit in with the husband’s schedule and take care of all housework and childcare duties (Kawaguchi, 2008).

Accordingly, traditional gender role divisions have also been maintained. It is well-known that the time spent on housework and childcare by Japanese husbands is at the lowest level on a global basis. For example, Tsuya *et al.* (2012) show that hours spent on household tasks by wives are roughly 10 to 15 times that of husbands. As women undertake the majority of household tasks, they simply cannot work “flexibly” according

2. U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, *2015 Economic Report of the President*: 35.

to company demands as men have done. In many cases, married women will find it hard to maintain a balance between their own careers and household tasks. Most women are then sorted into a “career interruption course:” staying at home when they give birth to children and start childcare, then re-entry into the labor force when childcare duties lighten (Zhou, 2015a).

Due to the weakening earning power of husbands and the enrichment of public childcare supports for working mothers, stay-at-home mothers’ non-working period has shortened and their labor re-entry has accelerated in recent years. Nevertheless, most re-entry women still need to take responsibility for household tasks and have to engage in low-paid part-time work. Therefore, although working-wife households have outnumbered non-working-wife households since 1997, it seems that the stereotyped model of SAHM families is essentially intact. In consequence, we see an increasing number of low-income families with a traditional male breadwinner and a stay-at-home mother.

III. Understanding poverty problems of stay-at-home mothers

Based upon four waves of the National Survey of Households with Children (NSHC) conducted by JILPT in 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2016,³ the section below explains new evidence regarding the poverty issues of stay-at-home mothers.

Stay-at-Home Mothers in Poverty as a Persistent Social Phenomenon

Stay-at-home mothers are now much more likely than working mothers to be living in poverty. According to NSHC 2011, 12% of stay-at-home mothers live in poverty, compared with 7% of regular worker mothers and 11% of part-time-worker mothers (Table 1). The estimated number of poor stay-at-home mothers is up to 500,000, which is almost the same as the number of poor single mothers (Zhou, 2015b).

Along with economic recovery and the improved job market in subsequent years, the poverty rate of stay-at-home mothers fell to some extent. In 2016, for example, which was a year of obvious excess demand for labor, the poverty rate of stay-at-home mothers fell to nearly half of its peak value. Despite this, the absolute number of poor stay-at-home mothers is of a magnitude that cannot be ignored. Even worse is that many stay-at-home mothers failed to move out of poverty even when they started taking on a part-time job, which we can infer from the inverse uptick in the poverty rate of part-time-worker mothers.

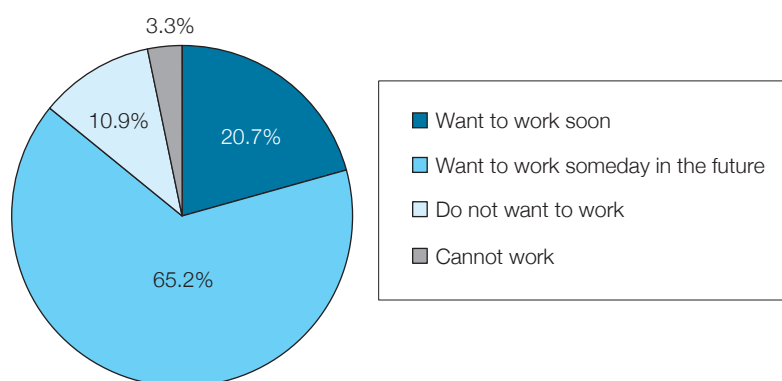
Table 1. Poverty rates of childrearing households by mother’s work status, 2011-2016

	Poverty rate (%)				*Jobs-to-applicants ratio for part-time workers
	All	Regular worker	Part-time worker, etc.	Non-working	
2011	11.1	7.6	11.9	12.7	0.89
2012	7.5	3.9	7.9	10.1	1.08
2014	7.3	3.7	6.1	11.8	1.38
2016	6.0	2.4	8.5	5.6	1.70

Source: JILPT (2017: 19); MHLW, Annual Average of Job Replacements for Ordinary Occupations 2011-2016.

Note: The poverty rate is defined as the ratio of the households whose disposable household income (family size adjusted) falls below the poverty line, taken as half the median household income of the total population. Japan’s poverty line in 2012 and 2015 was 1.22 million yen for single-person households, and 2.44 million yen for four-person households.

3. See Appendix for details of JILPT’s NSHC.



Source: Statistics obtained using the pooled data of JILPT's National Survey of Households with Children (NSHC) 2011-2016.

Figure 2. Work intentions of poor stay-at-home mothers

Therefore, economic recovery itself will not cure the poverty problem of stay-at-home mothers. Rooted in Japanese society as a persistent social phenomenon, poor stay-at-home mothers are weakly responsive to labor market conditions. Figure 2 shows that merely 20% of poor stay-at-home mothers indicated that they wanted to work soon. The remaining about 80% intended to continue to stay at home no matter how desperately the economy wanted their labor participation.

The Discrepancy between Self-Awareness and the Facts

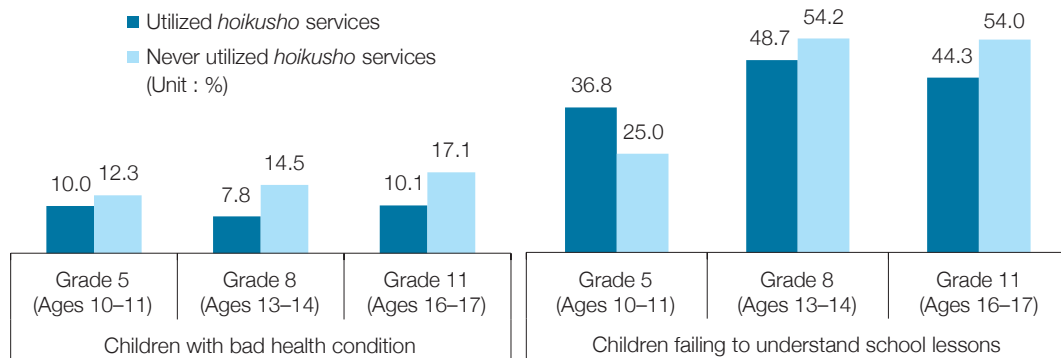
Many mothers in low-income families choose to stay at home for the sake of the children. According to NSHC 2012, 48% of non-working mothers and 56% of fathers agreed that having a working mother would negatively impact preschool-age children. Moreover, 62% of non-working mothers agreed that their parenting would be harmed if they re-entered the labor force soon.

Although Japan has a long history of providing affordable good-quality childcare services called *hoikusho* services to dual-earner families (Zhou et al., 2003), many poor stay-at-home mothers never think of utilizing them. A shortage of *hoikusho* services in some urban areas might be a reason for this, but the most prominent reason is that in their minds, childrearing by the parents themselves is in the best interest of the children, no matter how difficult their economic conditions are.

A survey of children's outcomes, however, tells a very different story. Figure 3 compares the outcomes for school-age children in poor families due to the experience of *hoikusho* utilization, using the Livelihood Survey of School-Age Children conducted by Tokyo Prefecture in 2016. Since only dual-earner families are eligible for using *hoikusho*, children raised by stay-at-home mothers generally have no experience of *hoikusho* utilization. Compared with children who never experienced *hoikusho*, we find that their counterparts tend to have a better health condition and more desirable school performance. The outcomes gap between the two groups widens as children grow older, with children in grade 11 (ages 16 to 17) reaping the biggest gains for *hoikusho* utilization. Note that we observe no correlation between *hoikusho* utilization and children's outcomes for children of non-poor families.

Put differently, for poor families, the mother working outside the home accompanied by *hoikusho* utilization seems to improve children's development from a medium- to long-term perspective. Although many mothers consider it to be for the children's sake, staying at home is in fact imposing a negative impact on children in the long term.⁴

4. Similar results are obtained by Shintaro Yamaguchi of Tokyo University and his colleagues. By analyzing governmental longitudinal



Source: Abe and Zhou (2018).

Figure 3. Outcomes for school-age children in poor families due to childcare service (*hoikusho*) utilization

IV. Implications: Encouraging women to make choices on a long-term basis

Failing to recognize the long-term effect of using *hoikusho* services is certainly not the only reason for being a poor stay-at-home mother. Zhou (2015b) finds that stay-at-home mothers are much more likely than working mothers to be women with high housework productivity (for example, taking care of several young children simultaneously) or women with a low prospective market wage (such as less education, and having little work experience).

A typical case of a poor stay-at-home mother is a woman who thinks or behaves on a short-term individual basis. In the short term, it seems to be more satisfactory if mothers can take care of children by themselves. Also in the short term, it seems optimal to be a stay-at-home mother when the available jobs have low wages and childcare costs are high.

In the long term, however, their behavior lacks rationality. In the long term, the mother's choice of working outside the home and using *hoikusho* services is a better choice for the development of the children. In the long term, they could have earned a much larger amount of lifetime earnings if they had not left the labor force for such a long period. The value of a stay-at-home mother's housework and childcare activities might surpass her value in the market for several years, but the difference definitely does not compensate for the huge earnings loss in the long term.⁵

To tackle the poverty problem of stay-at-home mothers, we must introduce mechanisms that will channel Japanese women to make optimal choices on a long-term basis. Delivering free vouchers for *hoikusho* services for low-income families without cumbersome screening, providing correct and accessible information to young women about lifetime earnings for various career paths, and reforming male-centered workplace practices so that household tasks can be shared equally between husbands and wives are some straightforward approaches to realize the goal.

Appendix: What is the JILPT's NSHC?

JILPT's National Survey of Households with Children (NSHC) is a periodic survey with a uniform sampling method and questionnaire design, which has been conducted since 2011. In each survey year, 4,000

data, they find that childcare improves language development among boys and reduces aggression and symptoms of ADHD among the children of disadvantaged families. For details, see the following website: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2932875.

5. Tachibana Akira, in his book *Full-time Homemakers are Losing 200 Million Yen* (Magazine House, 2017) calculated a huge earnings loss incurred by Japanese women having a long period of career interruption.

households that are rearing children below the age of 18 were selected from the Basic Resident Register using the stratified two-stage random sampling method.

Survey specialists visit each household to deliver and collect questionnaires. Parents of children, with the mother given top priority, are requested to be questionnaire respondents. The valid response rates are kept at a constant rate of around 55%. For details of the survey design and results of each survey, see JILPT 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2017.

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