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Combining Work and Family Care in Japan (Part I):

## Why do Women Leave Jobs at the Stage of Childbirth?

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This is a series of two articles on the topic of the work-family balance from the viewpoint of working hours in Japan in recent years, providing an outline of the main reasons workers leave jobs due to family responsibilities of childbirth and childrearing (Part I) and elderly care (Part II) based on statistical data and labor policy trends. Childbirth and childrearing are regarded as the most influential factor in women's job leaving. This article introduces the background and reasons why Japanese women leave jobs at the stage of childbirth. It also takes up the matter of Japanese male workers' childrearing and discuss their expanding role in childrearing in recent years.

### I. Change in the M-shaped curve of women's employment rates and policy response

In February 2017, much attention was paid to the news that the "M-shaped curve" of Japanese women's employment rates by age had almost vanished after more than three decades since the Equal Employment Opportunity Act<sup>1</sup> was enforced in 1986. Is this the result of governmental measures to support women's job continuation such as childcare leave?

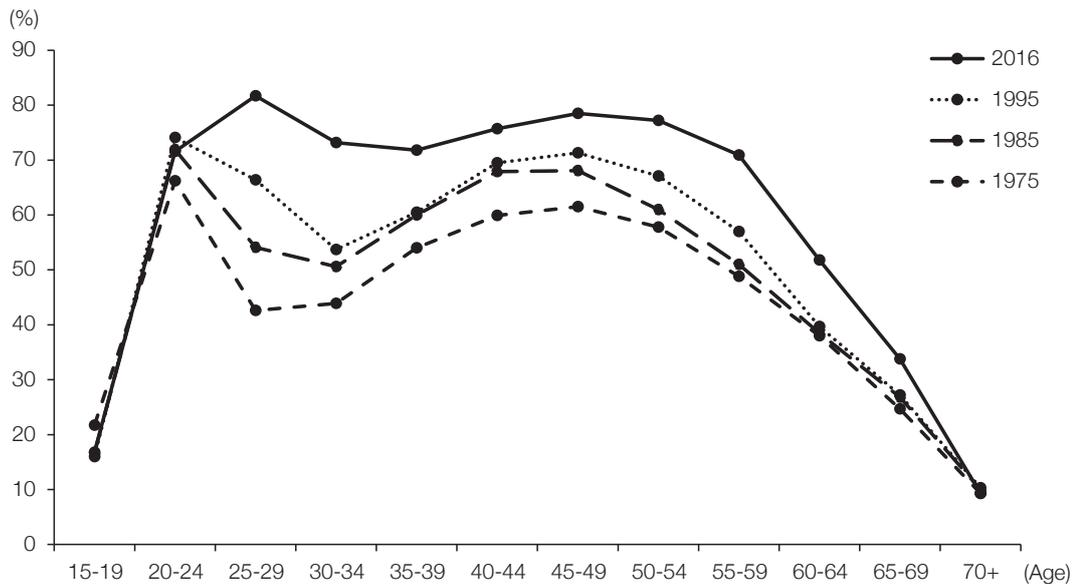
Japanese women's labor participation rate by age plotted as an M-shaped curve for decades, although its bottom has been rising (Figure 1). Let us take a closer look at the bottom curve by women's life events during the age bracket of 25–34 by breaking them up into marriage, childbirth, and childrearing, as they have been long considered to be a chain of life events in Japan and the keys when it comes to examining women's job continuity. The drop in the labor participation rate among women at

this age bracket is due to marriage and childbirth. Leaving jobs for marriage has been decreasing since enforcement of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, which prohibits the tradition of Japanese



companies' dictating that women resign for marriage and childbirth. Worthy of attention here is that, if we focus on the period after childbirth, the job continuity rate was not increasing. In 1991, the Childcare Leave Act<sup>2</sup> was established and obligated employers to give employees long-term leave, like parental leave in Europe, to take care of children under one year old upon employees' request. There were many academic papers at that time reporting that the child care leave system had positive impacts on women's job continuation. However, the rate of job continuity after childbirth did not rise after all in the 1990s. It was the period of a long-term depression after the collapse of the economic bubble, in which Japanese employers were not interested in retention of their employees, rather they were considering how they could reduce employees in a managerial crisis. The rise of the bottom of M-shaped curve of Japanese women as a whole through the 1990s was not exactly the effect of governmental measures such as childcare leave but was in consequence of an increase in the number of working women with no children.

Having viewed this situation problematic in terms of the declining birth rate, Japanese government started to emphasize general reforms of



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, *Labour Force Survey*.  
 Note: Labour force (Employed persons + Unemployed persons) / Population aged 15 and over × 100

Figure 1. Japanese women's labor participation rate by age

working styles including the expansion of working parents' support systems at the beginning of the 21st century as women's crucial reason for avoiding childbirth was regarded as the conflict between work and childcare at that time. The Next Generation Act<sup>3</sup> was enforced in 2005, obligating private companies with over 300 employees to formulate action plans to support employees' childbirth and childrearing. This was well timed to coincide with an expansion of women's employment as the economic climate recovered gradually in the mid-2000s. Employers were increasingly interested in retaining female employees so as to economize on human resource costs in downsized organizations. In fact, the rate of women's job continuation after childbirth began to rise gradually after 2000.

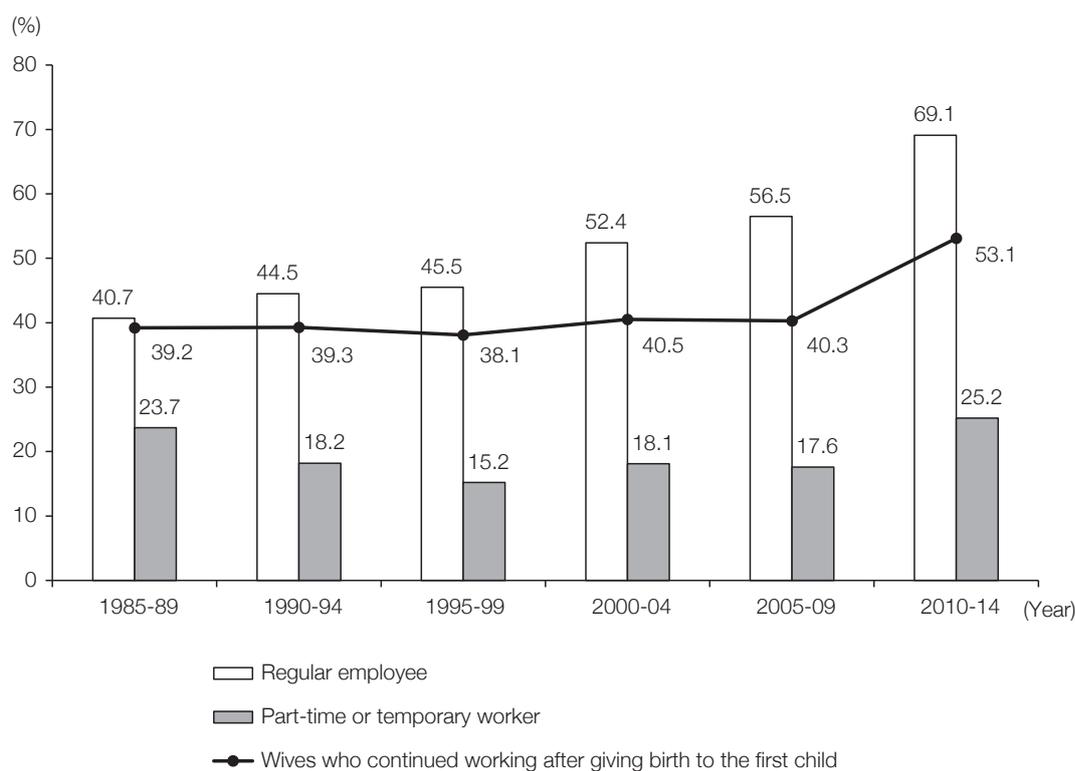
## II. Diversification of the female labor force

The legally mandated childcare leave system in Japan is restricted to employees in open-ended employment contracts, as its purpose is to enable employees to continue their jobs at the same companies after childbirth. Fixed-term contract employees such as temporary workers and

dispatched workers are therefore excluded from the legally mandated childcare leave system. Many fixed-term contract employees who are employed continuously through renewal of contracts are eligible for childcare leave, but in reality, few of them take childcare leave. Most of them generally leave their jobs before childbirth.

As for regular employees (full-time workers in open-ended employment contracts), the rate of women's job continuity after childbirth has begun to rise (Figure 2). The large companies to which the Next Generation Act applies took measures to expand support for their employees' childbirth and childrearing as these employees are expected to hold managerial positions in the future. The Act later expanded the range of obligation to formulate action plans to include companies with over 100 employees. As a result, regular employees' rate of returning to jobs after the first childbirth rose to about 70%, while that of non-regular employees is still 25%, according to the latest research by National Institute of Social Security and Population in Japan.

There is the situation where female regular employees are viewed as promising human resources



Source: Author, based on National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR), The 15th Japanese National Fertility Survey in 2015 ([http://www.ipss.go.jp/ps-doukou/e/doukou15/Nfs15R\\_summary\\_eng.pdf](http://www.ipss.go.jp/ps-doukou/e/doukou15/Nfs15R_summary_eng.pdf)).

Notes: 1. The figures shown are for first-marriage couples with the first child aged 1 or older and below 15.

2. Percentage of wives who continued working shows the percentage of wives who continued working after giving birth (including those who used childcare leave systems) among wives who were already working at the time of marriage or pregnancy.

3. "Regular employee" and "Part-time or temporary worker" expresses that they were working in the employment status before getting pregnant with the first child.

Figure 2. Proportion of wives who continued working after giving birth to the first child and their employment status before getting pregnant with the first child

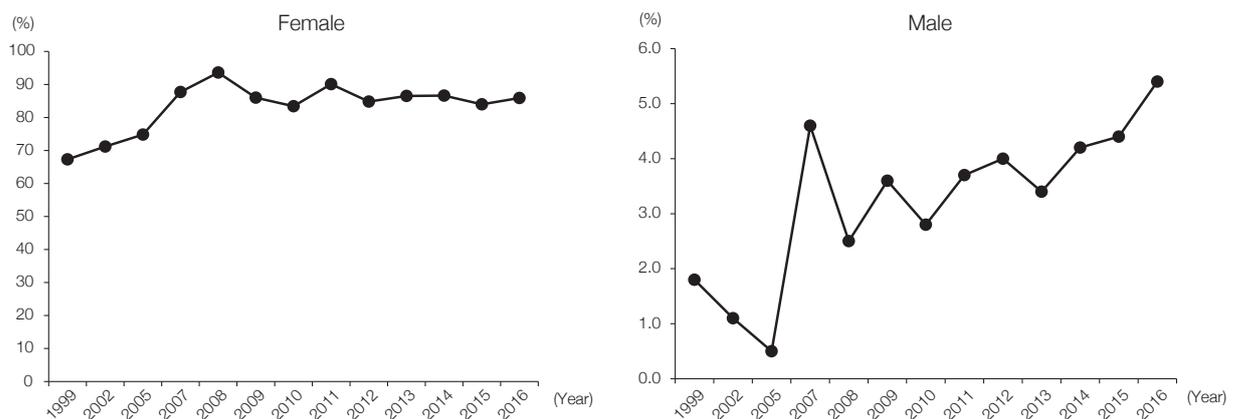
and receive support to combine work and childcare, whereas female non-regular employee face severe instability of employment during pregnancy and childbirth periods. This is an important issue to discuss concerning not only the gender gap but also equality of employment opportunities among women. To address this situation, the 2016 amendment of the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act<sup>4</sup> broadened the range of application of long-term leave for family responsibility. Furthermore, the government is now attempting to correct pay gap between regular and non-regular employees under the slogan of "equal pay for equal work."

A decrease in labor force population in the world's most aged country has gradually caused

employers to take an interest in diversification of the workforce, making greater use of human resources such as women, older workers, and immigrants. In some industries, retaining non-regular employees and developing their skills are crucial matters for company management. In this sense, career development of all female workers is a vital issue in contemporary Japan.

### III. Mothers' dilemmas and fathers' long working hours

Historically, Japanese women have participated in the job market in several ways, including not only full-time employment but also self-employment and as independent contractors. The history of childcare



Source: The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), “Basic Survey on Gender Equality in Employment Management.”

Figure 3. Rate of taking childcare leave (by survey year)

leave began in the 1960s, and the first regulation governing it appeared in the Working Women Welfare Act established in 1972. However, women have always faced dilemmas in balancing paid employment and domestic work. Many women bear the entire burden of housework even if they are full-time employees.

Fathers’ commitment to childcare became an issue in the late 1990s in the context of the declining birthrate. In the 2000s, the government began to emphasize the issue of fathers’ taking childcare leave. The Act on Child Care and Family Care Leave was amended in 2009 to expand fathers’ childcare leave, and a government campaign aided the popularization of the word *ikumens*, which means “fathers who play an active role in childcare.” As a consequence of such measures, the rate of men’s taking childcare leave is rising but still low (Figure 3).

The rate of daily commitment to domestic work of fathers with children under six years old is also low. It is often said that long working hours are the most crucial factor preventing fathers from participating in childcare. The working hours of male workers in their 30s are remarkably long, while this corresponds to the period when many fathers have young children. Another problem is that working into the evening, even if not late into the night, is not compatible with taking care of children

as daycare centers generally close before evening. It is therefore important to promote flexible working hours that enable fathers to finish work and pick up their children at daycare centers on time.

#### IV. Supporting all workers in changing working styles

When measures to combine work and childcare first began in the 1990s, the Japanese government focused on expansion of support systems for working mothers, such as childcare leave. It is now focusing on reforming work styles, including among male workers. It is believed that if the working hours of regular full-time workers become shorter or more flexible, it will benefit working mothers and fathers as well as workers with other private responsibilities. Now that family care of the elderly has become a common concern among all categories of workers — male and female, married and single, older workers and younger ones—reflecting the aging of Japanese society, work-life balance is a universal issue among the government, employers, and employees in Japan.

#### Notes

1. Act on Securing, Etc. of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment.
2. Act on Childcare Leave and Other Measures for the Welfare of Workers Caring for Children or Other Family Members.
3. Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-

Generation Children.

4. Act on Childcare Leave, Caregiver Leave, and Other Measures for the Welfare of Workers Caring for Children or Other Family Members.

#### Reference

JILPT (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training). 2012. *Shussan/ikuji to shugyo keizoku: Rodoryoku no ryudoka to yorugata shakai e no taio o* [Childbirth/childcare and job continuity: Addressing job mobility and 24-hour society]. JILPT Research Report no.150. Tokyo: JILPT. <https://www.jil.go.jp/english/reports/documents/jilpt-research/no.150.pdf>.

There will be five articles to discuss Japanese working hours in this series: Shingou Ikeda argues work-family balance in two (this issue and June issue) focusing on workers' leave from work for childcare and elderly care; and Tomohiro Takami will review Japanese long working hours in a series of three starting from July issue.

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