

Article

Poverty and Income Polarization of Married Stay-at-home Mothers in Japan

Part I: Historical Perspectives of Japanese Full-time Housewives

Yanfei Zhou

Introduction

According to a national survey conducted by JILPT in 2011, 12% of Japanese families with a working father and a stay-at-home mother (hereafter “SAHM families”) are living with an income below the poverty line, which is defined as half of the median household income. Put differently, it is estimated that as many as half a million married stay-at-home mothers were living in poverty. On the other hand, for families where the wife works full-time or part-time, their poverty rates are only 4% and 9%, respectively (data source: JILPT “National Survey of Households with Children [NSHC],” 2011. See the box below).

The above finding provides a fact contradicting the stereotypical image that full-time housewives are predominantly married women with high-income husbands. Why do so many women in low-income households choose to be a full-time housewife when even a minimum-wage job would considerably alleviate the family’s economic hardship? Do they choose to be full-time housewives of their own accord, to meet the needs and expectations of their families, or just because they have failed to find work? Are those full-time housewives in

poor households essentially willing to work or not?

Thus far the issue of poverty among full-time housewives in Japan has been hardly ever surveyed or studied, and little is known about it. Using the original survey data noted above, we will explore the above questions in a series of two articles, of which this is the first.¹ Specifically, we will try to tackle this problem by investigating Japanese society’s underlying cultural norms and social systems that tend to drive women into the role of a full-time housewife. This article as Part I discusses the origin of the “full-time housewife” paradigm in Japan and the living conditions of SAHM families in poverty. Part II will use the survey data to explore reasons for being a full-time housewife and discuss the existing social systems that induce women to stay at home despite poverty.



I. Origin of the full-time housewife paradigm

The United States began to recover from the Great Depression after the New Deal was introduced in the 1930s, and more married women began to



What is JILPT “National Survey of Households with Children (NSHC)”?

NSHC is a periodic survey with a uniform sampling method and questionnaire design, which has been conducted since 2011. In each survey year (2011, 2012, 2014 and 2016), 4,000 households that are rearing children below the age of 18 (2,000 two-parent households and 2,000 one-parent households) were selected from the Basic Resident Register using the stratified two-stage random sampling method. Survey specialists visit a household to deliver and collect questionnaires. Parents of children, with the mother given top priority, are requested to be questionnaire respondents. The valid sample size was around 2,200 in each survey year (valid response rate: 54–56%). For details, see *Japan Labor Review* 12, No. 2, 2015.

stay home to be responsible for housework and child care. In Japan, this model began to become prevalent in the 1960s, when the “income-doubling plan” went into effect. In a survey on married women’s work status conducted in 1969 by the Ministry of Labour (now the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare), between 80% and 90% of working women left their jobs when they got married (52%) or had children (32%), which means that most married women in Japan experienced being a full-time housewife at least temporarily. During the postwar period of strong economic growth (1955–1973), the typical Japanese family changed rapidly from one where both the husband and wife worked to a working husband and a full-time housewife. The main reasons for this change include (i) the development of a status identity of “all Japanese belong to the middle class,” (ii) people increasingly living and working in separate places, (iii) replacement of the model of a conventional family with three or more generations with the nuclear family model and decreased cooperation among family members, and (iv) housework and child-rearing increasingly being carried out at home rather than in the community.

Regarding the first of these factors, after World War II, one of the policies of the occupying Allied Powers was to dismantle the powerful conglomerates known as *zaibatsu*. Japan experienced rapid economic growth after these structural changes in the economy, and developed into a “middle-class society.” The Japanese economy continued to grow at an average rate of more than 10% per year during the 18 years from 1955 through 1973. In 1968, Japan’s gross national product (GNP) surpassed that of West Germany, making Japan the world’s second-largest economic superpower. In terms of wages, an entire family could be supported by the salary of the husband, for example, a taxi driver or a security guard. In the 1970s, this resulted in approximately 90% of Japanese people viewing themselves as “middle class” (according to the Cabinet Office Annual Public Opinion Survey on the Life of the People). The population of Japan at that time was approximately 100 million, so the phrase *ichi-oku so churyu shakai* (“society of 100 million middle-class

Column

Origin of the “Full-Time Housewife” Model

It is said that the word *shufu* (housewife) first came into widespread use in Japan during the 1910s. At that time, few married women worked and earned wages outside the home. Women who worked were mostly engaged in agriculture, or trade such as a family business. After World War II, there was an increase in the number of housewives exclusively engaged in home-based housekeeping and child-rearing. This was when the term *senryo shufu* (full-time housewife) came to be used to distinguish them from a housewife who worked to help support the household.

In Japan, the paradigm of the full-time housewife was formed after World War II in a relatively short period of time. However, the cultural and ideological basis for its acceptance was already in place before the Meiji Era (1868–1912). The Meiji government dismantled the feudal system of the Edo Period (1603–1868) and created the modern industrial Japanese state, but a patriarchal view of the family rooted in samurai values remained widely prevalent in society. This saw a woman’s ideal role as being to “marry, support her husband, and bear and raise a male heir.” Rather than trying to change this, the Meiji government reinforced education to turn women into good wives and mothers. This was an aspect of the national policy to increase productivity, promote new industries, enrich the nation, and strengthen the military (Fujii 1995).

The traditional household (*ie*) system under the former Constitution was changed after World War II, and gender equality as well as equal rights and responsibilities in marriage were recognized in the new Constitution. Nonetheless, traditional thinking on gender roles persisted and grew even stronger as a social norm, and also formed the basis of women’s education (Kanamori and Kitamura 1986).

The old-fashioned, patriarchal samurai ideology of men’s and women’s roles as distinct and clearly ordained dates from the Edo Period and earlier. It essentially remained unchanged through the Meiji Restoration, Taisho liberalism, World War II-era totalitarianism, and postwar democratization, and it endures to this day. As a result, the perception among Japanese people that women and men play fundamentally different roles is extremely strong compared to other developed nations.

people”) came to be widely used.

The second point is that the transformation of Japan’s industrial structure led to an increasing separation between the workplace and residence, which also played an important role in establishing the full-time housewife model. The percentage of Japanese workers in agriculture, forestry, or self-employment was 60% in 1953, but this fell to 40% in 1970 and 30% in 1990.² In the era when agricultural

work and self-employment predominated, the home was the center of both work and private life. People who were capable of working were mobilized as laborers, so the need to divide work duties into men's and women's roles did not arise. When the site of work activities shifted outside the home (to a "workplace"), workers were away from home most of the day. This made it impossible to take care of children and perform household chores alongside work, as it was in the era of self-employment and agricultural labor. In other words, the separation of the workplace and residence made it necessary to separate the duties of going out to work and staying home to perform housework and child-rearing.

The third factor is that the advance of urbanization and the nuclear family increasingly weakened the model of cooperation among family members. Until the 1970s, a fairly high percentage of families in Japan (about 15%) had three generations living together, but this gradually fell to about 10% in 2005 (according to the National Census). Due to urbanization, young people who moved from rural areas to cities increasingly lived away from their parents, which made it difficult for women to obtain support from older (female) family members with childcare and housework. This promoted the division of roles by gender in which married women perform housework and child care at home.

With the fourth factor, the narrowing of income disparities and changes in women's labor force participation made it difficult to procure housework and childcare services from outside the family. Maids and housekeepers had accounted for a large portion of the female working population before World War II, but these occupations disappeared as the income gap narrowed and women began to work in companies. Moreover, the shortage of daycare centers or kindergartens meant that many women with young children were required to stay at home and become full-time housewives. According to the Ministry of Labour (now the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare), during the 1970s, when the full-time housewife model was at its peak, only one out of two applicants for daycare centers or kindergartens were able to secure a placement. Due

to the four factors outlined above, the period of rapid economic growth was the "golden age" of the full-time housewife in Japan.

II. "Silent" partners

Japan's stunning economic growth during the postwar period was primarily driven by male *moretsu shain* (hardworking company employee) householders in urban areas. However, it seems valid to say that the economic boom was critically, if less obviously, supported by full-time housewives. They were the "silent" partners (behind-the-scenes supporters) of their husbands, working stoically without pay, who took responsibility not only for childcare and housework, but also for caring for their husbands and elderly family members as well as watching over local school and community activities while the men were on the front lines of the economic boom.

Also, in the 1960s, it was often the case that American full-time housewives completely withdrew from the labor market. In contrast, it was common in Japan for full-time housewives to leave the workplace temporarily for childbirth and childcare, and go back to work part-time at relatively unskilled jobs once their children were old enough. A significant percentage of women still did this even at the height of the full-time housewife model, when 80% to 90% of women with work experience became full-time housewives for some length of time after marriage or childbirth. Married women as a percentage of female employees accounted for only 21% in 1955, but this figure grew to 51% in 1975 and 59% in 1985, alongside the growth of households with full-time housewives.³

Housewives working part-time acted as an "adjustment valve" protecting the lifetime employment of male regular employees during recessions. For example, before the second oil crisis (1973–1979), the monthly average female employment rate (population) during the recession was 1.1 percentage point (300,000 persons) lower than during the period of economic expansion. When the economy became weaker, some part-time housewife employees were shut out of the labor

market, and many returned to being “full-time housewives.”

III. The full-time housewife model still exists

Many readers may be surprised to learn that Japan is still a country with a large number of full-time housewives. Many people think that the golden age of full-time housewives has ended, and that Japan has transitioned to being a society of dual-income households. The special survey of the *Labour Force Survey*, conducted by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, is often cited in support of this. According to this survey, households where both the husband and wife work (dual-income households) had already outnumbered those with a full-time housewife by 1997. As of 2016, the percentage of single-income households with an employed husband and a full-time housewife had fallen to 37%, which was 28 points lower than 1980.

Certainly, there is the impression that the number of dual-income households in Japan has significantly increased. However, with a slight change in the point of view, the same data can be used to show that the full-time housewife model persists. As described above, there have been many working women in Japan who left the labor force either when they married or when had children and then returned to work at part-time jobs. The presumption has been that their main activities are still housework and childcare, and that they work for short working hours or limited periods of time to supplement household income. If we look at the National Census while applying a broader definition of “full-time housewives,” including women who work but for whom work is not their primary activity, the total amounts to 63% of the married female working-age population (aged 15 to 64). This exceeds the number of women in genuine dual-income households, where both spouses are primarily engaged in employment. In other words, only about one in three married women are actually pursuing a career.

As the data indicate, it is a serious misconception to think that the dual-income household model has replaced the full-time housewife model in Japan.

It remains a common pattern for working women to leave full-time employment due to marriage, pregnancy or childbirth and take on responsibility for housework, childcare and supporting a working husband. Even today, most women in this group who rejoin the labor force once their children are old enough still participate as part-time workers and continue to be largely engaged in home-based duties.

IV. Men’s declining earnings to maintain the full-time “housewife” model

However, in recent years, there has been a significant decrease in the number of male householders who can earn the income necessary to maintain a middle-class lifestyle in a single-earner household. In the 1970s and 1980s, for a wide range of occupations including blue-collar workers, it was possible to enjoy a middle-class standard of living with only the income of a single male earner. Now this is difficult to attain even for men in white-collar professional occupations.

As of 2015, average monthly living expenses for a four-person household consisting of a married couple and two children are about 310,000 yen (about US\$2,800). Given standard living expenses plus fixed expenditures such as taxes and social insurance premiums (with savings assumed to be zero), the husband needs to earn at least 4.76 million yen (about US\$42,500) a year to support the household. In other words, if the husband works for 2,000 hours a year (equivalent to the average working hours of regular employees), his earnings must be equal to at least 2,380 yen (US\$ 21) per hour to maintain an average lifestyle.⁴

However, a recent national survey indicates that only 40% of male householders meet this income standard (Table 1). The situation is even more severe among relatively young age groups. Among male householders, only 1 in 5 men in their 20s and 1 in 3 in their 30s have the earning ability to support the “full-time housewife” model. Highly educated men (who have completed a four-year university degree or graduate school) who are regular employees have a certain advantage in terms of income, but still only about half of this group are able to meet the

Table 1. Wages of married male householders (2013–2015)

	N	Sample size (Composition ratio, %)	Average wage per hour (yen)	(wage > 2,380 yen) share (%)
Total	1,572	(100.0)	2,990	43.2
Ages: 20–29	86	(5.5)	2,134	19.8
30–39	353	(22.5)	2,806	33.1
40–49	449	(28.6)	3,026	44.8
50+	684	(43.5)	3,169	50.3
Highest level of education completed: Lower secondary school/Upper secondary school	682	(43.4)	2,733	35.9
Junior college/ <i>Kosen</i> -national colleges of technology/Specialized training college	273	(17.4)	2,710	37.4
University/Graduate school (Humanities)	353	(22.5)	3,356	51.8
University/Graduate school (Science)	242	(15.4)	3,527	57.4
Other/Unknown	22	(1.4)	2,674	45.5
Non-regular employees	414	(26.3)	2,415	28.7
Regular employees	1,158	(73.7)	3,196	48.4
Occupation 1 Professional and Technical	296	(18.8)	3,052	52.4
Occupation 2 Managers	166	(10.6)	4,144	76.5
Occupation 3 Clerical Work	196	(12.5)	3,015	52.0
Occupation 4 Sales and Marketing	200	(12.7)	3,287	37.0
Occupation 5 Craft, Engineering and Manufacturing	377	(24.0)	2,897	35.0
Occupation 6 Transport and Information and Communications	103	(6.6)	2,448	28.2
Occupation 7 Public safety and Security	35	(2.2)	2,562	51.4
Occupation 8 Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries	40	(2.5)	1,802	15.0
Occupation 9 Services	116	(7.4)	1,875	19.0
Occupation 10 Others	30	(1.9)	2,829	30.0

Source: Calculated by the author based on the Yu-cho Foundation “Survey of Households and Savings,” 2013 and 2015.

Note: Tabulated results for 20- to 64-year-old male (married and employed) householders.

conditions outlined above.

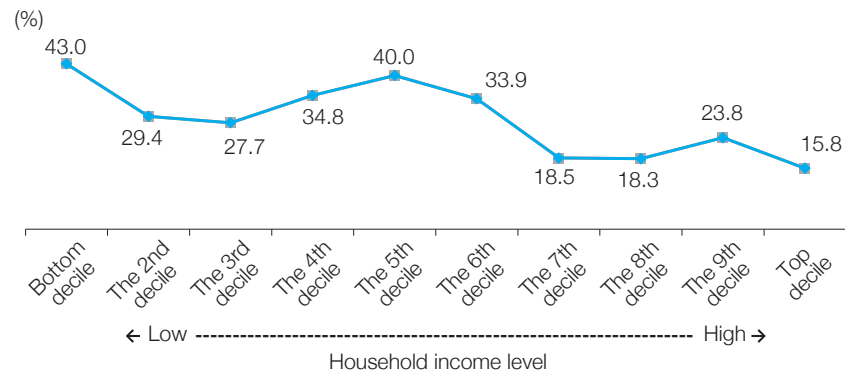
V. Transformation of the full-time housewife into a symbol of poverty

Correlations between income level and the likelihood of being a full-time housewife indicate that the highest percentage is among the lowest rather than the highest income bracket. If we look at households with children by household income level, and include both single- and dual-income households (Figure 1), we find that 43% of wives are staying at home in the bottom decile (the lowest 10% in terms of household income), whereas this rate is only 16% in the top decile. Overall, 28% of households (in which there is a married couple) have a full-time housewife, but this percentage is higher among low-income households and lower among

the high-income group (the top 30% of household income).

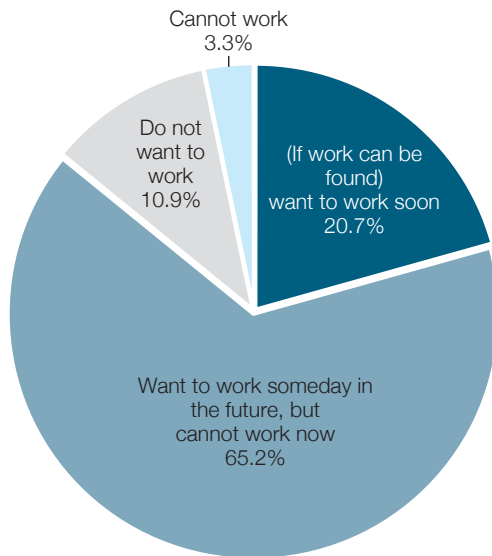
In addition, a significantly higher percentage of full-time housewives in poor households are choosing to stay at home. According to the JILPT survey, about 80% of poor full-time housewives responded that they “do not want to work,” “cannot work,” or “want to work someday in the future, but cannot work now” (Figure 2). An increase in the number of job openings will have little impact on these full-time housewives “by choice.” For these women, getting out of poverty with the help of employment is not an option in the first place.

How can we rationally interpret the behavior of women who choose to be full-time housewives even though they are poor? We will discuss this in the next article in this series.



Source: Calculated by the author based on the JILPT “National Survey of Households with Children,” 2016.
 Note: Households with children were arranged in descending order of income and divided into 10 groups, and the stay-at-home rate of wives was compared in each group.

Figure 1. Stay-at-home rate of married women by household income level (2016)



Source: The author, JILPT “National Survey of Households with Children,” 2011–16.

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

Notes

1. This article draws on material from Yanfei Zhou (2019), *The Full-Time Housewife Crisis* (Shinchosha), with additions and revisions.
2. Calculated by Tsutsui (2016) based on the Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), Historical Data 4 and 5 of the *Labour Force Survey* Historical Data.”

3. Sources: Figures for 1955 are from the Prime Minister’s Office “National Census,” and other figures are from the Statistics Bureau, MIC the *Labour Force Survey*.
4. For details, see Yanfei Zhou, “Analyzing Living Wage in Japan,” (AGI working paper series 2017-15, Asian Growth Research Institute).

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AUTHOR

Yanfei Zhou Senior Researcher, The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT). Research interests: Labor Economics, Social Security and Public Policy. Profile: <https://www.jil.go.jp/english/profile/zhou.html>