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

What is the Challenge after Reforming the Long-term Care Leave System?

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This time, we discuss long-term care for elderly or disabled family members, as this has become a hot issue for both male and female workers. Presenting the background and outline of policy developments in Japan, we argue problems of combining work with long-term family care, which are inherently different from those of childrearing in terms of whether the person in need of care needs to be accompanied by someone all the time. This article focuses mainly on nursing care for elderly family members, rather than that for disabled family members, in consideration with aging population and low birth rate in Japan.

I. Introduction

Japan is the world's most aging society and its elderly population in need of care is expected to increase even more rapidly as the post-war baby boomers reach the age of 75 (Figure 1). The Japanese government views this trend as a problem considering that an increasing number of people giving up work to take care of their elderly parents may restrict the available workforce and threaten the nation's economic growth. To avoid such a situation, the government has begun working on providing support for workers to balance work and care for their parents.

There has been a noticeable increase in male employees leaving work to take care of their parents. Currently, the number of male and female workers who leave their jobs to provide family care is around 100,000 a year, of which men account for 10 to 20%. This fact indicates the possibility that the number of full-time male employees leaving their jobs will increase, resulting in a reduction of

the core workforce, and employers are becoming more and more concerned about this. In fact, recently cases are often seen in which employers and managers leave their positions in order to provide long-term care for their parents. There are also women in managerial positions leaving jobs for the same reason, sacrificing many years of service in their careers. Losing these female employees would be a significant setback to employers, as there are more women in important positions than before backed by recent government policies to promote more opportunities for women in the labor market.



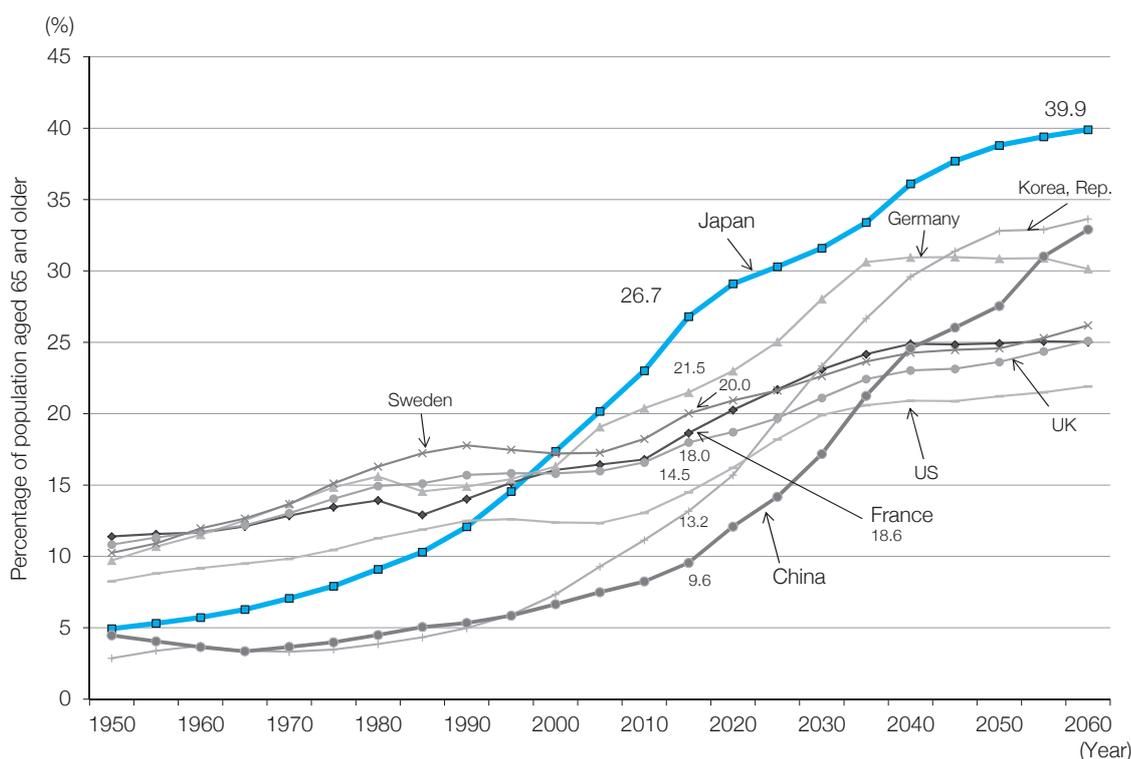
In this context, the amendment to the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act¹ was enforced in 2016, which significantly changed the support systems for workers who need to care for frail elderly family members. Section II presents the outline of the amended Act and Sections III and IV discuss further problems regarding combining work and family care from a new perspective.

II. Legal support systems for combining work and long-term family care

The 2016 amendment to the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act has reformed the long-term leave system and ensured flexible working arrangements for family care (Figure 2).

1. Reform of the family care leave system

The reform of the family care leave system



Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/policy/care-welfare/care-welfare-elderly/dl/ltcisj_e.pdf.
 Note: Sources: For Japan, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Population Census; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, "Population Projections for Japan (January 2012 estimate): Medium-Fertility & Medium-Mortality Assumption" (figures as of Oct. 1 of each year). For other countries, United Nations, World Population Prospects 2010.

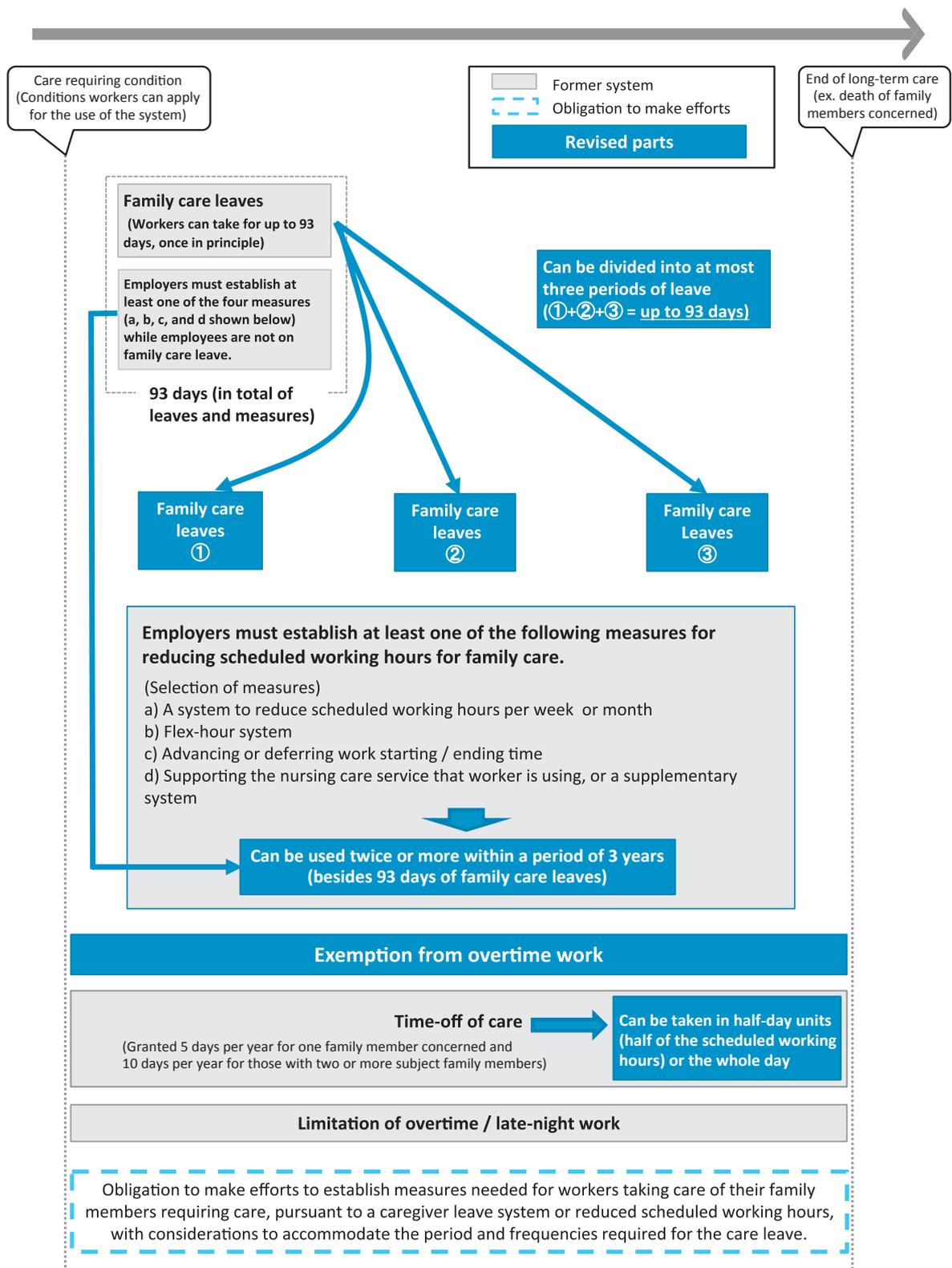
Figure 1. Changes in percentage of the population over age 65

enabled working carers to divide 93 days of leave into at most three periods of leave, while the total days of leave provided remains 93 days. Unlike the childcare leave system, the aim of the family care leave system is not for the workers to spend time caring for their family members directly but for the workers to take time to make arrangements (such as consulting with other family members, taking procedure to use public care services, or renovating their home into a barrier-free residence) so that the workers can combine work with family care. The new "divisible" family care leave system assumes that if care lasts for many years, carers will need to rearrange in use of the public care services, type of care to provide, or the facilities to stay, particularly in the middle and terminal phases of long-term elderly care. In a typical elderly care in Japan, the provision of care begins at home, and in the middle phase of care, it often becomes necessary to transfer a person

under care to a care facility and then move them to a hospital in the terminal phase. The recent legislative amendment recognises that at these transitional period working carers need to take leave to seek suitable care services and facilities or hospitals and that the divisible leave is effective if working carers can divide the leave into separate terms each time they need to make such arrangements. These arrangements make it possible for carers to combine work and care obligations effectively.

2. Ensuring flexible working hours for family care

Shorter working hours systems for supporting childcare are very popular in Japan. In contrast, when it comes to long-term caring for elderly family members, such systems are not effective in terms of preventing workers quitting jobs. Rather, it is relieving caring workers of their obligation to work overtime would be more effective.



Source: Author, based on Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/policy/children/work-family/dl/160802-01e.pdf>.

Figure 2. Revision of work-and-family care balance support system (enforced on January 1, 2017)
(Workers can use the system above for each family member concerned in a state requiring long-term care)

The amended act has established a rule that carers are not obliged to work overtime until the need for care ends. It has also extended the period of flexible working arrangements such as shorter working hours and flextime working hours, from three months to three years. Exemption from overtime and flexible working arrangements are designed to support the daily care even when public home care services are available, because it is recognized that these services address only part of the care recipient's needs and that their family members still play a major role in providing care that cannot be outsourced. These changes make the necessary caregiving arrangements easier for carers such as day service drop-offs and pickups, providing meals, changing clothes and other daily nursing assistance the elderly require.

Exemption from overtime is crucial for maintaining a daily routine in which work and care can be combined successfully. It is especially important in Japan where workers are generally expected to regularly work overtime. In order to keep caregiving employees from quitting jobs, employers need to relieve them of overtime work or, alternatively, introduce their own systems and provide the employees financial allowances or supplementations that enable working carers to purchase professional care services in order to work as usual.

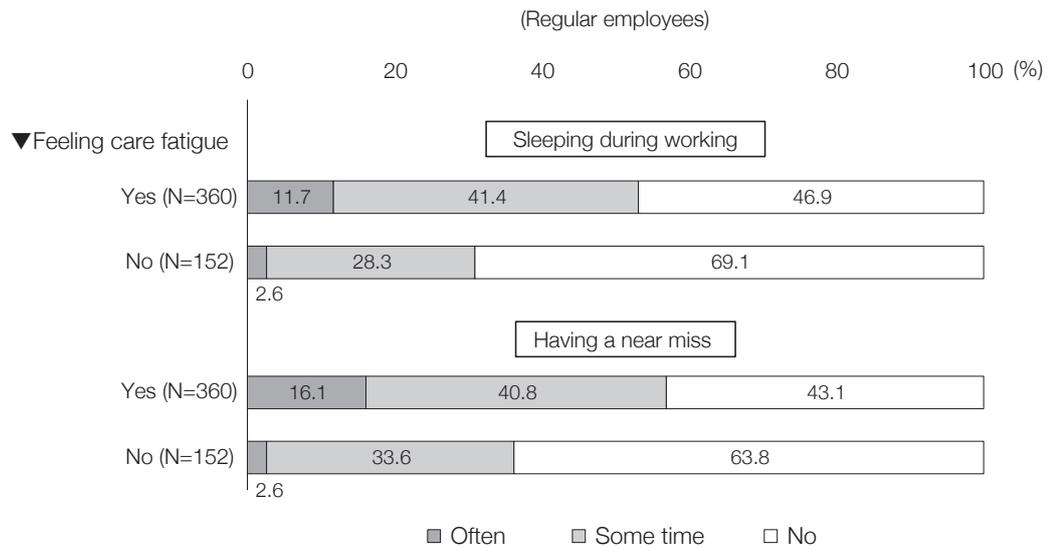
3. Policy stance and evidence regarding the amended act

The new scheme aims to address working carers' needs over several years. The original family care leave system, when introduced in 1995, was aimed to ensure workers mainly to make various arrangements at the point when needs first arise so that working carers can provide family care while combining work and care, not addressing their support when care needs become daily and over a long period of time. In short, Japan has recognized that conventional family care leave system was insufficient to fully satisfy subsequent care needs and that it needs to enhance support systems to respond to changing care needs across the entire

period of care requiring time, from beginning to end.

Therefore, the framework of support is now designed to allow workers to combine long-term leave and flexible working arrangements, which is similar to that for childrearing support. However, it is not desirable to use this support system for family care in the same way as the support for childrearing is intended. Childrearing is a time-consuming responsibility, as infants cannot be left alone at home, whereas this is less applicable to care for the elderly, depending on the case. This is because there are many cases in elderly care that care receivers can stay at home by themselves for a short period of time during the carer's absence as they are matured adults as a person even in the case of heavily dependent, bed-ridden patients. Furthermore, in the sense of the well-known way of thinking and attitude in family caregiving (but not so well infiltrated in Japanese society), it is important for family carers and their family members in need of care to put a proper distance and respect each other in order to keep them healthy mentally in the long-term care contrary to that intimacy between parents and infants is stressed in the context of childcare. For the reasons set forth above, carers can and should make time to go to work. Additionally, in terms of service infrastructure, there is no official data suggesting there is a waiting list for home care services for the elderly, while there is a serious shortage of nurseries for children. This also indicates that family carers for the elderly should be able to go to work easier compared to parents of infants.

This understanding is apparent in the relationship between the support policies and employment turnover. In the context of elderly care, a longer-term leave system longer than the period of three months (93 days), as stipulated by law, is unlikely to reduce turnover. Rather, it would seem to be more effective if the 93-day term could be broken down. Also, in terms of flexible working arrangements, exemption from overtime is more effective than shorter working hours. These arrangements would help employees manage work and caregiving relatively well. It must be noted that, in the context of elderly care, an increasing number of people are breadwinners as



Source: Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT), "Survey on Combining Work and Care" (2014).

Note: Analysis on regular employees who started long-term family care after April 2000.

Figure 3. Influence of care fatigue on daily work (by yes or no of feeling physical fatigue or mental stress from long-term family care)

well as carers, such as unmarried employees taking care of elderly parents or married ones looking after their spouse in need of care. For these people, a system based on the no-work no-pay principle would offer very little no matter how extensive the terms were, as their income would diminish eventually. In this sense, again, it is better if the system offers working carers more flexibility to be able to receive the necessary support when needed.

III. Working carers' presenteeism

This being said, it is premature to think that being able to work will solve the problem. There is another problem in that, even if employees could come into work, physical and mental fatigue from caregiving would build up and hinder their work performance. This problem often manifests outside the workplace in Japan, in the form of family carers becoming abusive at home or committing suicide. It would be unreasonable to assume that people in such a state of health can perform normally at work. Ultimately, they are highly likely to leave their jobs as their health deteriorates to the point where they can no longer come to work. It is usually not a quick process in which they decide to resign when they

feel exhausted. They spend some time struggling to make things work, but the adverse effects of lack of sleep begin to manifest at work, in the form of not concentrating enough or falling asleep during work hours and failing to fulfill the targets and so on.

Recently, the concept of *presenteeism*, in which focuses on reduction of productivity, has been attracting attention in the context of health care in work places in contrast to the traditional concept of *absenteeism*, which means reduction of productivity by employees' absence from the workplace due to sick or injury. Presenteeism problematizes the reduction of productivity while working in a worsened health condition. We can say that the negative influences on daily work due to care-providing fatigue are a kind of presenteeism, while problems in workplaces due to workers taking long-term family care leave, time-off, or arranging working hours flexibly for family care are workers' absences, which could be said to be similar problem to absenteeism for employers.

Here, we must recognize that, from the viewpoint of corporate administrators, the physical and mental state of the employee is not always apparent. In terms of the time of care that causes fatigue, average

employees who provide elderly care are more likely to feel tired or stressed if they perform care outside working hours, for instance in the evening, during the night, or in the early morning. In other words, it is more probable that people become fatigued when they are on a regular working schedule without having to take family care leave or flexible working arrangements. These people may be unable to perform as expected even if they seem to have come to work as usual.

There is another point. The vast majority of employees do not inform their employer of the fact that they need to look after a family member at home. They seldom take leave, ask for alternative arrangements, or discuss their issues with their employer. In the meantime, their situations become exacerbated without the employer's knowledge. This is an implicit problem in support policies for workers in the context of elderly care as opposed to childcare.

IV. Uniqueness of long-term family care

People may think that childcare and long-term elderly care have common problems in the workplace under the name of the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act because each contain long-term leave, time off, and flexible working arrangements. This is partly true, but we must focus on differences between them to construct effective support systems

for long-term family care. Long-term family care has unique problems such as presenteeism that cannot be reduced through time management between work and providing care. Although job leaving for long-term family care is a hot issue among government and companies, more serious problems might be hidden among working carers who do not leave their jobs.

Note

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

Reference

Ikeda, Shingou. 2017. "Family Care Leave and Job Quitting Due to Caregiving: Focus on the Need for Long-term Leave." *Japan Labor Review* 14, no. 1. https://www.jil.go.jp/english/JLR/documents/2017/JLR53_ikeda.pdf.

For argument on combining work and childcare in Japan, see Part I "Why do Women Leave Jobs at the Stage of Childbirth?" *Japan Labor Issues*, vol.3, no.14 (May 2019).

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