

# Women's Employment Status and Family Responsibility in Japan: Focusing on the Breadwinner Role

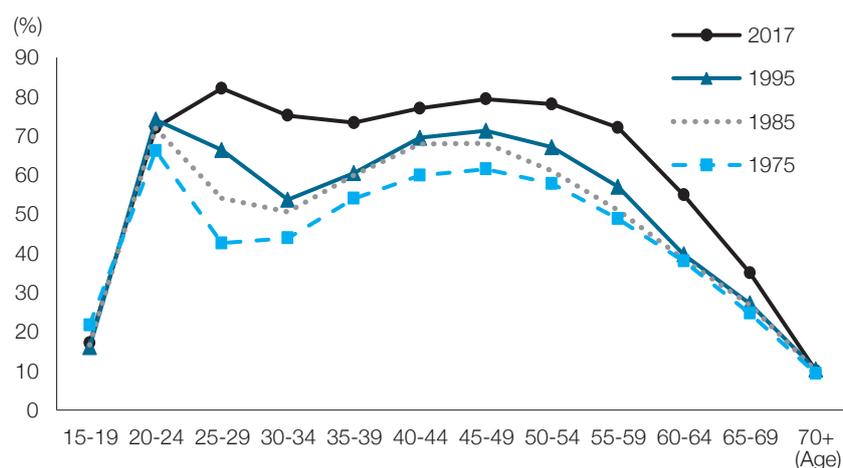
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## I. Introduction

Women's labor participation in Japan has been gradually expanding, although it is often said that this country sustains strong gender roles. The so called "M-shaped curve" has been seen for decades since the Equal Employment Opportunity Act was legislated in 1985 (enforced in 1986), although its bottom has been rising, as shown in Figure 1. This means there are still married women who become full-time housewives or part-time workers.<sup>1</sup>

Previous researches explained such married women's employment status in terms of caring in family life (Imada 1991; Maeda 1998). Actually, many mothers are still quitting their jobs for childbirth (Imada 1996; Imada and Ikeda 2007; Higuchi 2007; Ikeda 2012, 2013, 2014). To address this matter, the Japanese government has promoted policies on supporting job continuation and career development of women after childbirth. The Child Care Leave Act put in force in 1992 obliged employers to provide child care leave if their employees request leave in order to avoid job-leaving. This Act is now the Child Care and Family Care Leave



Source: Statistics Bureau, "Labor Force Survey."

Figure 1. Rate of women's labor force participation by age

1. Married female regular employees with full-time open-ended contracts have not been increasing as much as non-regular employees such as part-time workers while the rate of women's labor participation has risen (JILPT 2018).

Act<sup>2</sup> legislated in 1995, and the latest amended Act put in force in 2017 enable employees to extend child care leave before their child becomes 2 years of age if they are not able to return to their job due to a shortage of nursery care and so on.

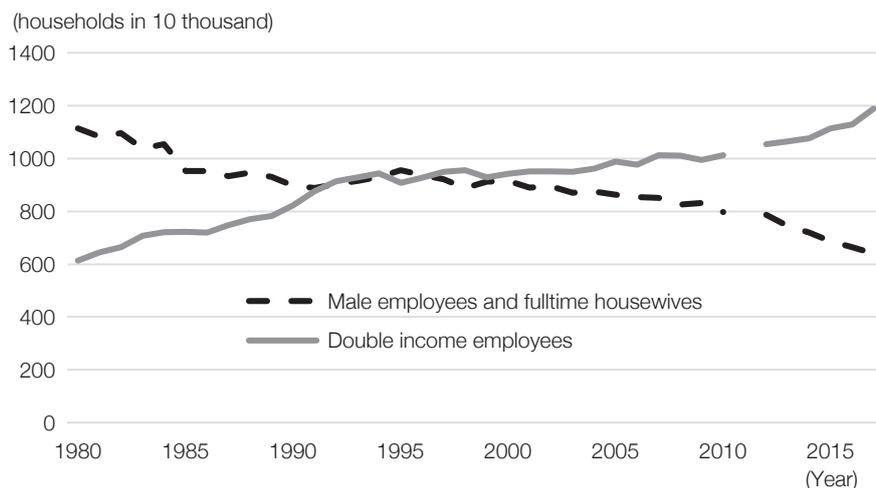
It is often said that expanding long-term child care leave has the risk of being disadvantageous for career development (Zhou 2016). To expand the scope of women's work in terms of economic measures, the Japanese government legislated the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace, which was enforced in 2016. However, some researches point out that female workers are less eager for promotion to manager positions than male workers (Kawaguchi 2012). To encourage female workers and increase the number of female managers in the workplace, it is often said that working hours should be more flexible and overtime working should be reduced (Takami 2018). Such discussions focusing on leave and working hours assume that women cannot work enough and need time to take care of their family members.

This paper, however, focuses on another aspect of family responsibility. The gender division in modern nuclear families involves two primary responsibilities: one is the caring role including the housework role, and the other is the breadwinner role. In the context of increasing women's employment, caring roles including housework have become an issue to be shared with husbands (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Married female workers' labor participation, however, does not always mean that women come to undertake the same economic role as their husband in their household. Some previous research conjectures that female workers are still secondary earners (Hakim 2000). In sum, women's commitment to employment might have a relation to their breadwinner role in family life. In particular, the ideology of ideal gender roles may be deeply rooted even if the actual economic role of women has changed under tight household conditions.

## II. Married women's labor participation in Japan

In the 1980s, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Act was legislated, it was normal for women to leave their jobs and become full-time housewives after marriage or childbirth, although many women returned to the labor market after childrearing.

As Figure 2 shows, the majority of households used to include full-time housewives compared to double



Sources: Statistics Bureau, "Labor Force Special Survey" 1985–2001 and "Labor Force Survey" 2002–2017.

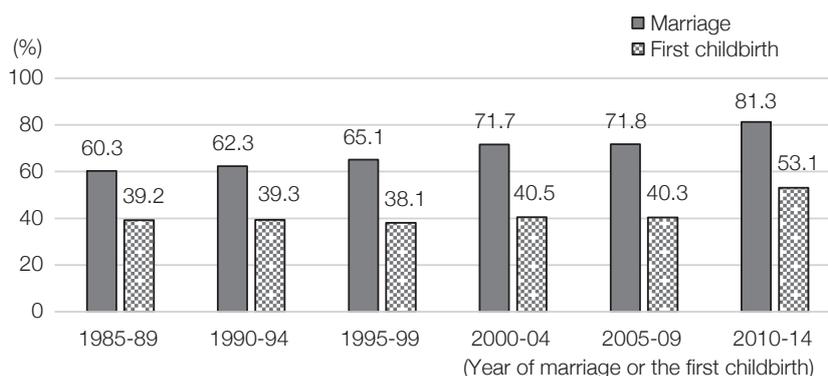
Figure 2. Number of households with full-time housewives and double income employees

2. The regulation of long-term leave for long-term care for family members was added into the Child Care Leave Act. Although long-term care is also a typical caring role for women, male carers are increasing in the context of smaller families and the aging population (Tsudome and Saito 2007).

income employees. In this situation, it was common among employers to separate male workers as the key labor force under long-term employment practice and female workers as a temporary labor force. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act prohibited such sexism in human resource management, and the Act protected female workers from employer’s penalties due to family responsibilities. Since the Act was put in force in 1986, the rate of labor participation among married women has been rising (Imada 1996). Households with full-time housewives are decreasing and double income employee households are increasing. As a result, double income employees now exceed households with full-time housewives (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2018).

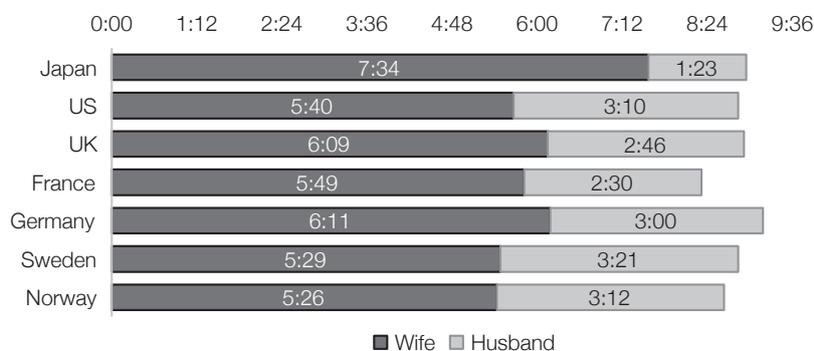
However, there are still married women who leave their jobs among the latest cohort under the Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act (Figure 3), and some women change their working style from full-time to part-time. It is not very common for married Japanese women to continuously develop their careers through their lifetime.

Previous researches in Japan explain such behavior in terms of the burden of housework and caring (Nishimura 2009). In fact, there is an obvious gender gap in housework and caring (childrearing and other caring for family), which is larger than such gaps in Western countries (Figure 4). To reduce this gender gap and empower female workers, the Japanese government promotes fathers’ commitment to childrearing through



Source: National Institute of Population and Security Research, “Birth Trend Survey.”

Figure 3. Changes in women’s job continuation after marriage and first childbirth



Sources: Statistics Bureau of Japan, “Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities,” 2016. The Bureau of Labor Statistics of the US, “American Time Use Survey,” 2016. Eurostat, “How European Spend Their Time Everyday Life of Women and Men,” 2014.

Figure 4. International comparison of time spent for housework and caring (Couples with children under 6 years old)

encouraging fathers to take childcare leave at the start point of childrearing.<sup>3</sup> In the context of family studies, husbands' commitment to housework is explained by gender ideology, relative resources, and time constraints (Shelton and John 1996). Especially in terms of time constraints, many researches point out that consistently long working hours is a crucial factor preventing fathers from childrearing in the context of overtime work as a component of work for male workers (Ikeda 2010).

### III. The breadwinner role between husbands and wives

It is widely known that Catherine Hakim has explained married women's vocational behavior in terms of preferences after the equal employment revolution (Hakim 2000). It is true that there are some women who prefer housework to a vocation, but other women who prefer a vocation to housework are not willing to undertake the breadwinner role, which is a typical gender role of husbands. The breadwinner ideology might restrict women's labor participation as wives might regard themselves as workers who do not have to insist on employment opportunities to earn income while they expect their husbands to be the breadwinner. I will show the results of my original data analysis on this issue in Japan hereinafter.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 indicates that more than half of those who prefer a vocation to housework ("Only vocation" or

Table 1. Ideal breadwinner role between husband and wife -By ideal role between vocation and housework-

	Only husband	Mainly husband	Equal role	Mainly wife	Only wife	DK	N	X <sup>2</sup>
Preference between vocation and housework								
Only vocation without housework	<b>35.0%</b>	<b>20.0%</b>	30.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15.0%	20	388.144**
Mainly vocation with housework	<b>34.4%</b>	<b>34.4%</b>	24.6%	0.0%	1.6%	4.9%	61	
Both vocation and housework	<b>29.5%</b>	<b>43.1%</b>	20.4%	0.3%	0.5%	6.3%	383	
Mainly housework with vocation	53.6%	37.4%	6.0%	0.4%	0.0%	2.6%	532	
Only housework without vocation	78.4%	14.9%	2.0%	0.7%	0.0%	4.1%	148	
Others	38.9%	20.4%	18.5%	0.0%	1.9%	20.4%	54	
Don't Know	30.0%	20.9%	6.4%	0.0%	0.0%	42.7%	110	
Total	45.6%	34.0%	11.5%	0.3%	0.3%	8.3%	1,308	

Source: "Survey on Work-life Balance and Careers," JILPT 2015.

Notes: 1. Only husband: Sustaining the household by husband's income only.

Mainly husband: Husband sustains the household mainly although wife's income also sustains the household.

Equal role: Both husband and wife take equal role to sustain the household.

Mainly wife: Wife sustains the household mainly although husband's income also sustains the household.

Only wife: Sustaining the household by wife's income only.

2. \*\*:  $p < .01$ .

3. This campaign is named the Ikumen Project. The rate of fathers taking child care leave has been rising since the campaign started in 2010 according to the Basic Survey on Gender Equality in Employment Management, Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

4. The data is from the Survey on Work-life Balance and Careers conducted by JILPT. The outline of the data is as follows: Its scope was nationwide 6,000 males and females between 30 and 54 years of age and their spouses. Survey period was between August and October in 2015. Survey method was placement method. Response rate was 44.6% (2,660 respondents and 1,398 spouses). The analysis in this paper focuses on female respondents (For details, see JILPT 2017).

“Mainly vocation”) expect their husband to be the main breadwinner in their ideal role, although their rate of “Equal role” is higher than those who relatively prefer housework to a vocation. In Japan, the majority of work-centered women, to use Hakim’s term, might commit to their vocation not for economic independence, but for other non-economic reasons. The majority of those who stress both a vocation and housework also expect their husband to be the main breadwinner. In sum, in Japan, to increase women’s commitment to work does not always mean increasing the number of women who undertake an equal economic role with their husband.

In terms of human capital, the majority of highly educated women also expect their husbands to be the main breadwinner, as shown at the top of Table 2. This result is consistent with Hakim’s argument that highly educated women do not always pursue higher positions in the labor market, but rather in the marriage market to search for a good spouse. Furthermore, the middle of the table shows that a majority of those who obtain a larger income than their husband at the time of marriage have the same expectations of economic roles. This means that Japanese women tend to be secondary earners even if they are capable of sustaining the household with their own income. In fact, there are married women who sustain their household as much as their husband, but many of them might not be willing to undertake that economic role. About 70% of women who undertake an equal breadwinner role with their husband in actual family life hope for their husband to be the main breadwinner as their ideal (see the bottom of the table).

The Japanese government empowered women after the Equal Employment Opportunity Act was legislated in 1980. Highly educated women and those with high incomes have been gradually increasing, although there is still an obvious gender gap with respect to education and income (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2018). The Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace enforced in 2016 aims to correct gender segregation as an economic measure. However, the ideology of economic gender roles in the household might barely change even if the gender gap in superficial employment opportunities were reduced. It is natural that a gender pay gap would remain in Japan if women continued to expect that their

Table 2. Ideal breadwinner role between husband and wife -By educational background, relative income at marriage, and present actual breadwinning role-

	Only husband	Mainly husband	Equal role	Mainly wife	Only wife	DK	N	X <sup>2</sup>
Total	45.7%	33.9%	11.5%	0.3%	0.3%	8.2%	1311	
Education								
High school	50.1%	32.9%	6.5%	0.4%	0.2%	10.0%	511	41.017**
Junior college	45.9%	33.5%	12.1%	0.4%	0.4%	7.8%	529	
College or graduate school	<b>36.9%</b>	<b>36.9%</b>	19.9%	0.0%	0.4%	5.9%	271	
Relative income at marriage								
More than husband	<b>42.4%</b>	<b>30.3%</b>	21.2%	1.0%	1.0%	4.0%	99	41.759**
Equal to husband	<b>37.2%</b>	<b>39.1%</b>	18.6%	0.6%	0.6%	3.8%	156	
Less than husband	54.7%	32.1%	7.4%	0.3%	0.3%	5.2%	728	
Present actual breadwinner role								
Only husband	63.9%	28.2%	2.2%	0.0%	0.3%	5.4%	316	347.380**
Mainly husband	53.5%	39.3%	3.8%	0.3%	0.0%	3.1%	318	
Equal role	<b>32.9%</b>	<b>28.9%</b>	36.2%	0.0%	0.7%	1.3%	149	
Mainly wife	11.8%	17.6%	35.3%	11.8%	0.0%	23.5%	17	
Only wife	10.0%	30.0%	40.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	10	

Source: “Survey on Work-life Balance and Careers,” JILPT 2015.

Note: \*\*:  $p < .01$ .

husband would obtain enough income to sustain their household.

#### IV. Women's employment status and the ideal breadwinner role

The Japanese government has focused on the role of providing care to family in order to promote women's labor participation and career development. Recent policies focus on the husband's commitment to housework and childrearing to support the career development of the wife. However, there is a possibility that the ideology of the male breadwinner would obstruct a woman's commitment to work. If this is true, we should correct this ideology to empower female workers.

Regression analysis was conducted to verify the hypothesis that women's ideal economic roles in the household restrict their employment status. The results are shown in Table 3. Two explained variables were set. The first explained variable is whether or not women are employed, and the second analysis is to reveal the factor dividing employment type (regular employee or non-regular employee) among employed women. The explanatory variable is *ideal breadwinner role*, and the control variables are age, educational background, age of the youngest children, and married or single. As shown in Figure 1, the rate of labor force participation differs by age. Educational background is an index of human capital. The age of the youngest children is a well-known factor restricting women's labor participation in terms of caring, and whether married or not is index of the actual condition of the household.

Table 3. Restricting factors of women's employment status (logistic regression analysis)

	Employment (=1)/ Not employed (=0)			Regular employee (=1)/ Non-regular employee (=0)		
	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)
Age (BM: 30-34)						
35-39	.471	.254	1.602	.211	.277	1.235
40-44	.380	.253	1.463	.409	.271	1.505
45-49	.134	.275	1.144	.710	.289	2.034*
50-54	-.183	.274	.833	.278	.295	1.321
Education (BM: High school)						
Junior college	.259	.162	1.295	.991	.178	2.694**
College or graduate school	.155	.201	1.167	.902	.224	2.465**
Married (Yes=1, No=0)	-.983	.207	.374**	-1.073	.192	.342**
Age of the youngest children (BM: No children)						
Under 6 years old	-.712	.247	.491**	.664	.288	1.942*
6-12 years old	-.143	.248	.867	-.408	.274	.665
12+ years old	.569	.207	1.766**	-.302	.210	.739
<b>Ideal breadwinner role (BM: Only husband)</b>						
<b>Mainly husband</b>	<b>.115</b>	<b>.158</b>	<b>1.122</b>	<b>.508</b>	<b>.174</b>	<b>1.662**</b>
<b>Equal role</b>	<b>1.572</b>	<b>.385</b>	<b>4.817**</b>	<b>1.778</b>	<b>.277</b>	<b>5.918**</b>
<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>-.430</b>	<b>.279</b>	<b>.650</b>	<b>.217</b>	<b>.300</b>	<b>1.242</b>
Constant	1.551	.263	4.717**	-.916	.270	.400**
Chi-square	107.342**			166.471**		
Degree of freedom	13			13		
N	1,211			835		

Source: "Survey on Work-life Balance and Careers," JILPT 2015.

Notes: 1. "Mainly wife" and "Wife only" are eliminated due to too small sample size.

2. \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*:  $p < .05$ .

Looking at the results of the first analysis (employment/not employed), we see that the age of the youngest children shows a significant effect. This means women do not tend to work when their youngest children are under 6 years old, but they tend to restart work if their children become 12 years of age or more. This is consistent with previous research.

Furthermore, *ideal breadwinner role* shows a significant effect. This means women who hope for an equal economic role with their husband in the household tend to work more than those who expect their husband to be the only breadwinner. The state of married or not shows a significant effect, which is consistent with Figure 3. This means women who have a husband to be a breadwinner tend to leave their jobs. These results imply that the caring and breadwinner roles are mutually independent, and that the ideology of economic roles and the actual condition of the household are mutually independent in women's family life.

Looking at the results of the second analysis on type of employment, the effects of the control variables except marriage are different from the first analysis. The significant effect of educational background stands for employability for regular employees. The effect of the age of the youngest children (under 6 years old) might be the effect of childcare leave and flexible working arrangements based on the Child and Family Care Leave Act, which is popular among regular employees. In these senses, the results of the analysis are consistent with previous research. *Ideal breadwinner role* also shows a significant effect. This means that those who would like to contribute to the household even if their husband is the main breadwinner tend to select regular employee status, in addition to those who hope for an equal economic role. Conversely, those who expect their husband to be the only breadwinner tend to select non-regular employment.

Table 4 focuses on married women. The significant effect of *ideal breadwinner role* is shown to be almost the same as in Table 3. We can say that it is effective to have an ideology of an equal economic role with the husband in order to raise the labor participation of married women. Furthermore, to increase the number of female regular employees, having the will to contribute to the household is important.

It has been said that part-time non-regular employment is a typical employment type for wives as a supplement to household income. However, the results of the analysis here are not consistent with this. It can be hypothesized that non-regular employment to supplement household income is shown as the effect of the age of the youngest child (age 12 or over). This result means that women with children 12 or more years old tend to work as non-regular employees. It is common for families with children of that age to need educational expenses rather than caring. At that time, mothers begin to undertake a supplemental earner role while continuously taking care of their children. In this sense, the results of this analysis are consistent with previous researches.

## V. Conclusion

Previous discussions on women's work and family responsibility have focused on the caring role of women, but my analysis implies that the economic role is also crucial for women's labor participation. The results of my data analysis are summarized as follows.

The ideology of the male breadwinner is a barrier to women's labor participation. On the other hand, women who have the will to undertake the role of sustaining the household economy tend to work as regular employees even if they have a husband. The economic gender role ideology also has an influence, independent of needs for child care, which previous researches have regarded as an influential restricting factor of women's labor participation. It is, therefore, of course significant to support women to reduce their burden of caring, which recent policies stress; but apart from that, it is also important to encourage women to sustain their household economy by their income in order to further increase women's labor participation.<sup>5</sup>

However, the ideology of the male breadwinner is deeply rooted, even if women have advantageous human

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5. The Japanese government has treated housewives well in the tax system as people who contribute to their family through unpaid caring work for decades. However, we should distinguish the role of caring and earnings for both men and women to undertake both roles in order to eliminate gender gaps in both family life and the workplace as a result.

Table 4. Restricting factors of married women's employment status (Logistic Regression Analysis)

	Employment (=1)/ Not employed (=0)			Regular employee (=1)/ Non-regular employee (=0)		
	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)
Age (BM: 30-34)						
35-39	.762	.301	2.142*	.341	.408	1.407
40-44	.501	.300	1.650	.418	.414	1.519
45-49	.213	.335	1.238	.380	.438	1.462
50-54	.067	.336	1.069	.091	.433	1.096
Education (BM: High school)						
Junior college	.147	.185	1.158	.947	.244	2.579**
College or graduate school	-.067	.224	.936	1.001	.298	2.721**
Age of the youngest children (BM: No children)						
Under 6 years old	-.818	.285	.441**	.340	.354	1.405
6-12 years old	-.337	.288	.714	-.695	.374	.499
12+ years old	.306	.239	1.357	-.630	.291	.533*
<b>Ideal breadwinner role (BM: Only husband)</b>						
<b>Mainly husband</b>	<b>.093</b>	<b>.177</b>	<b>1.097</b>	<b>.972</b>	<b>.234</b>	<b>2.644**</b>
<b>Equal role</b>	<b>1.486</b>	<b>.416</b>	<b>4.420**</b>	<b>2.313</b>	<b>.346</b>	<b>10.109**</b>
<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>-.736</b>	<b>.384</b>	<b>.479</b>	<b>1.272</b>	<b>.534</b>	<b>3.570*</b>
Constant	.676	.329	1.967*	-1.915	.438	.147**
Chi-square		54.691**			115.577**	
Degree of freedom		12			12	
N		810			514	

Source: "Survey on Work-life Balance and Careers," JILPT 2015.

Notes: 1. "Mainly wife" and "Only wife" are eliminated due to too small sample size.

2. \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*:  $p < .05$ .

capital in the labor market compared to their husband.<sup>6</sup> Some women who prefer a vocation to housework expect that their husband will be the main breadwinner, as well as those women who prefer the household to work. Such a gender-based ideology of economic roles must be a critical factor in sustaining gender gaps in both family life and the workplace, because many women expect their husbands to earn higher incomes to be the breadwinner even if they have sufficient ability to develop their careers as much as male workers. In these meanings, the male breadwinner ideology can legitimate gender pay gap and women's lower income.<sup>7</sup> It must be, therefore, important for policy makers to stress women's economic independence in order to correct gender gaps in both family life and the labor market.

6. Brinton (1994) discussed gender gap in human capital development between boys and girls in Japan. This gender bias might have not changed essentially for decades even if highly educated women have been increasing.

7. This gender ideology might legitimate women's poor employment opportunities even if those women faced poverty. Indeed there are not small number of fulltime housewives in poverty in Japan (Zhou 2018).

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