Column

How Women Bear the Brunt of COVID-19's Damages on Work (Continued): The Gender Gap in Employment Recovery

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I. Introduction

My previous column "How Women Bear the Brunt of COVID-19's Damages on Work,"[1] reports that women are experiencing larger reductions in work hours and more temporary leave ("furlough") than males as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of late September, the time I wrote it, nursery schools, elementary schools, and junior high schools have reopened throughout the country and restrictions on economic activity have been relaxed. We were even beginning to gradually see signs of a recovery in the employment market as a whole.[2] Even so, the recovery in female employment has been sluggish. While the number of male employees already increased in July, the number of female employees continued to decline. A continuing high rate of furlough and sluggishness in the recovery of working hours are particularly conspicuous for child-rearing females.

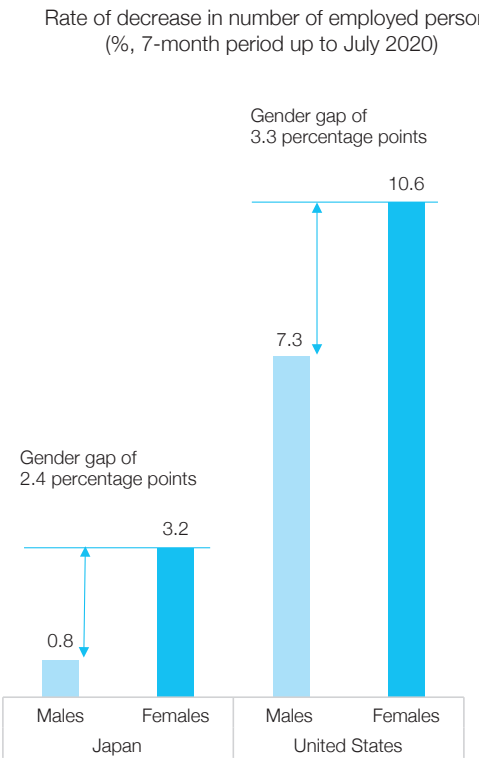
II. "She-cession," The female employment crisis

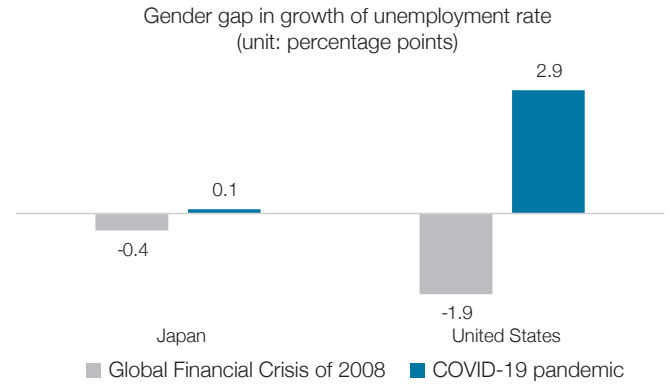
Some economists call the current stagnant economy and sudden loss of employment that were sparked by the novel coronavirus infectious disease (COVID-19) a "she-cession." "She-cession" is a word coined to describe a phenomenon in which employment losses associated with a recession tend to be concentrated among women rather than men.

In a typical recession, it is often the case that employment losses appear mainly among men.[3] For example, when the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009 struck, external demand plummeted as a result of the global recession, and employment adjustments were mainly made in the manufacturing sector, which employs many men. In the case of the current COVID-19 pandemic, however, it is mainly the service industries—which include accommodations/eating and drinking establishments as well as daily living and entertainment—that are suffering catastrophic damage. These are industries that employ many women.[4] Consequently, decreases in female employment are more conspicuous than they are during ordinary recessions.

Moreover, unlike ordinary recessions, this one is characteristic in that many women are refraining from working on their own. More women than men were being forced to "choose between job and family" as their housework load increases amid fewer opportunities to eat out and as nursery, elementary, and junior high schools temporarily close. Because constraints on employment are occurring in the form of such increased housework and child-rearing duties, the "added worker effect"—in other words, the phenomenon whereby women increase their employment to compensate for losses in their husbands' income—that is typically observed during ordinary male-centered recessions, is less likely to appear.

Looking at employment statistics published by international organizations,[5] it is apparent that the "she-cession" is not limited to Japan, as it is an internationally-shared phenomenon that is progressing in countries around the world (Figure





		Unemployment rate (%)		Gender gap (Females - Males)
		Males	Females	
Global Financial Crisis of 2008				
Starting month	Aug. 2008	4.2	3.9	
Ending month	Jun. 2009	5.5	4.8	
Amount of increase		1.3	0.9	**-0.4**
COVID-19 pandemic				
Starting month	Feb. 2020	2.6	2.2	
Most recent month	Jul. 2020	3.0	2.7	
Amount of increase		0.4	0.5	**0.1**

Source: Prepared based on *Labour Force Survey* for Japan and ILO databases for the United States (raw data are published values of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). U.S. unemployment rate values are the results of aggregation based on Alon, et al. (2020).

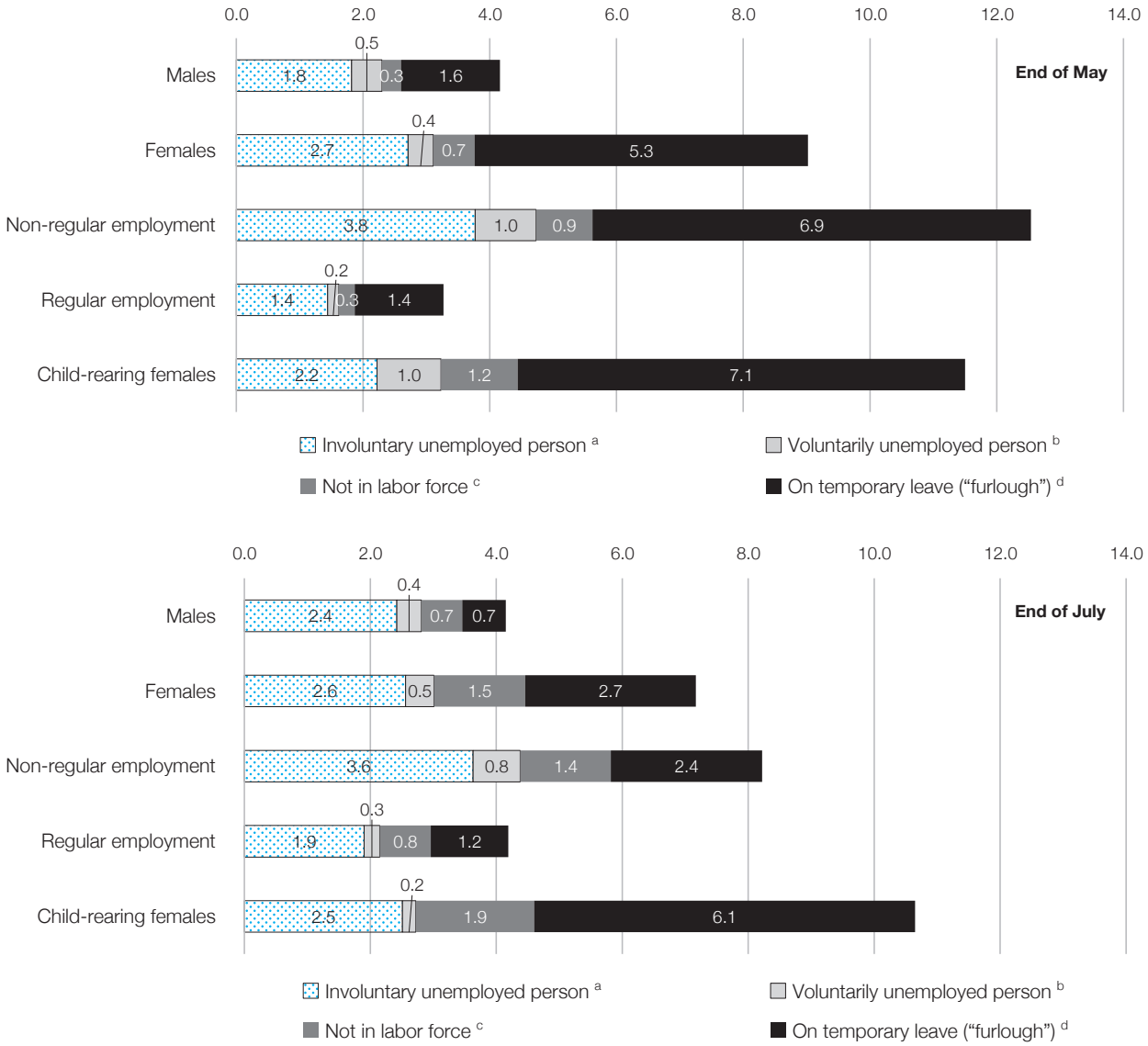
Figure 1. Changes in the number of employed persons and the unemployment rate before and after the COVID-19 pandemic by sex

1). In the case of Japan, the number of female employees fell by 3.2% (870,000 persons) in the seven months between the end of 2019 until July 2020. This rate of decrease was 2.4 percentage points higher than that for male employees (0.8% decrease during the same period). Even if we look at changes in the unemployment rate before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate rose 0.4 percentage points for males but 0.5 percentage points for women, meaning that the female employment rate rose +0.1 percentage points higher. The male-female difference at the time of the Global Financial Crisis was −0.4 percentage points, with the degree of unemployment rate deterioration being smaller for women.

A country experiencing an even more conspicuous "she-cession" than Japan is the United States. In the U.S., the rate of employment decrease and rate of unemployment increase are 3.3 percentage points and 2.9 percentage points larger, respectively, for women than men. Thus, female employment is worsening more seriously than in Japan.[6] Possible reasons for why Japan's "she-cession" has been milder than the U.S.'s are smaller numbers of new COVID-19 cases and COVID-19 fatalities as well as the relatively speedy full reopening of nursery, elementary, and junior high schools in early June, 2020.

III. The high furlough rate and advancing labor force withdrawal among women

At the end of May 2020, JILPT conducted a survey that targeted 4,307 employees of private enterprises (aged between 20 and 64 years) who were employed as of April 1, 2020. JILPT then conducted a follow-up survey in early August that year.[7] According to these surveys, a distinct gender gap remained in terms of the percentages of people



Source: Aggregated by the author from JILPT, "Survey on the Impact that Spreading Novel Coronavirus Infection has on Work and Daily Life" (conducted at the end of May and the first week of August 2020).
Notes: 1. At both time points, the aggregated respondents are 4,307 employees who worked at private enterprises on April 1, 2020. Of them, 3,753 are respondents to both the May and August surveys.
2. a=Dismissed, had employment terminated, or became unemployed due to bankruptcy. b=Not working but engaged in job-hunting activity (excluding a). c=Not working and not engaged in job-hunting activity. d=Employed but worked zero hours.
3. A "child-rearing woman" is a woman who is rearing a child under the age of 18.

Figure 2. Percentages of persons employed by private enterprises who became unemployed or went on temporary leave ("furlough") (%, end of May 2020 vs. end of July 2020)

unemployed or on furlough even at the end of July, when the pandemic situation began settling down somewhat. The surveys also found that the recovery in employment among female employees who are raising children under the age of eighteen is sluggish (Figure 2, Appendix 1).

Specifically, the percentages of people on furlough are decreasing for both males and females and both regular and non-regular employees (from 1.6% to 0.7% for men, 5.3% to 2.7% for women), reflecting the restarting of economic activities. Nonetheless, conspicuous gaps remain between

males and females and between regular and non-regular employees. The rate of persons on furlough for females is 3.9 times higher than that of males at the end of July, and no improvement in the gender gap is seen in comparison with the end of May 2020 (3.3 times). The percentage of child-rearing females on furlough also remains high at 6.1%, although it has improved slightly since the end of May 2020.

Additionally, trends moving toward unemployment (people who were not working but were looking for a job) and withdrawal from the labor force (people who were not even looking for a job) are conspicuous in comparison with May. The percentage of unemployed people rose from 2.3% to 2.8% for males and remains at 3.1% for women. The percentage of "withdrawing from the labor force" rises from 0.3% to 0.7% for males and from 0.7% to 1.5% for women. In the case of child-rearing females, a decrease in the percentage on furlough (1.0-point decrease) is offset by an increase in the percentage withdrawing from the labor force (0.7-point increase).

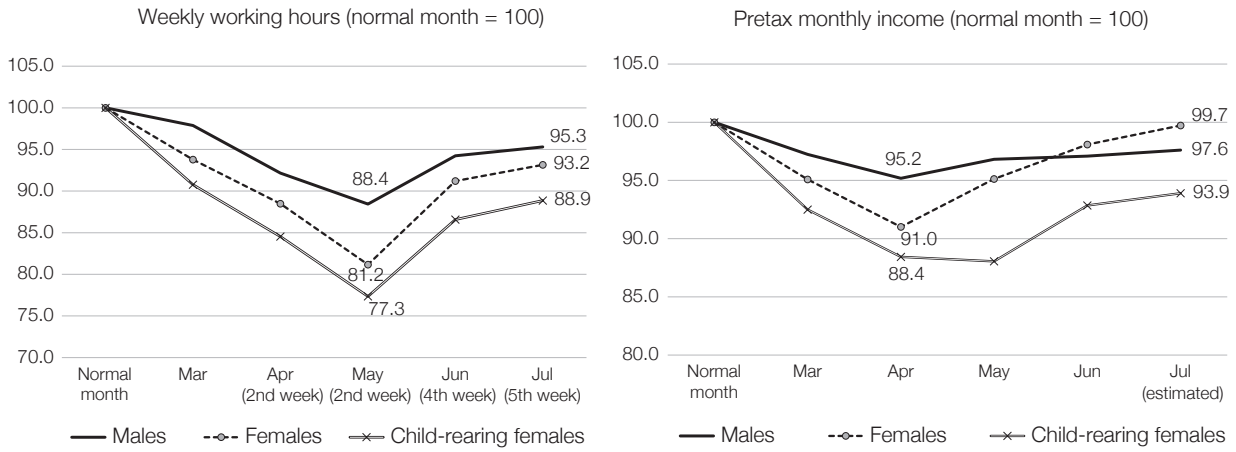
IV. Sluggish recovery in hours worked and wages among child-rearing females

The surveys also reveal conspicuous slowness in terms of recovery in hours worked and wages for child-rearing females. Figure 3 and Table 1 show changes in the hours worked and income of people who continued working between March and the end of July, 2020. For men, the weekly average hours worked fall to 88.4% of the normal month in the second week of May but recovers to 95.3% in the last week of July. For women, on the other hand, the average is just 93.2% of the normal month in the last week of July, in part because April-May fall was much larger for women than for men.

It is clear that pretax monthly income recovered for both males and females beginning in June, 2020. Looking at average monthly income for July (estimated amount), income is recovering to roughly the same level as the normal month for all females as a whole. Monthly income for males is also recovering to a 2.4% decrease in comparison with the normal month (July estimate).

On the other hand, an area where a conspicuously sluggish recovery is seen is the employment situation of child-rearing females. In comparison with the normal month, the June-July hours worked of child-rearing females decrease by 12.3% and their monthly income decreases by 6.6%. At the end of July, the hours worked of child-rearing females stand at just 88.9% of the normal month and wages stand at 93.9%. It is apparent that recovery in the employment situation of child-rearing females is poor in comparison with males, of course, but also with females as a whole.

The remarkable deterioration in the employment



Source: Same as Figure 2. Prepared based on the aggregated results of Table 1.

Figure 3. Changes in hours worked and monthly income (March to July 2020; normal month = 100)

Table 1. Changes in weekly hours worked and pretax monthly income (March to July 2020; average values)

	Total		Males		Females		Non-regular employment		Regular employment		Child-rearing females	
	Hours worked	Monthly income (10,000 yen)	Hours worked	Monthly income (10,000 yen	Hours worked	Monthly income (10,000 yen)	Hours worked	Monthly income (10,000 yen)	Hours worked	Monthly income (10,000 yen)	Hours worked	Monthly income (10,000 yen)
Normal month	39.2	24.4	43.3	30.6	34.3	17.0	29.4	13.4	44.0	29.9	30.8	15.0
March	37.8	23.5	42.3	29.8	32.1	16.1	27.4	12.4	42.8	29.2	28.0	13.8
April	35.6	22.9	39.9	29.2	30.3	15.4	25.2	11.6	40.6	28.6	26.1	13.2
May	33.5	23.5	38.3	29.7	27.8	16.1	22.7	12.3	38.9	29.0	23.8	13.2
June	36.4	23.7	40.8	29.8	31.2	16.6	26.4	12.9	41.4	29.2	26.7	13.9
July	37.0	24.0	41.2	29.9	31.9	16.9	27.3	13.2	41.8	29.3	27.4	14.1
Rate of change (Apr-May average against normal month, %)	**–9.1**	**–4.5**	**–7.2**	**–3.6**	**–12.2**	**–6.3**	**–14.6**	**–9.5**	**–7.4**	**–3.4**	**–15.8**	**–10.3**
Rate of change (Jun-Jul average against normal month, %)	**–6.4**	**–2.2**	**–5.2**	**–2.6**	**–7.8**	**–1.1**	**–8.5**	**–2.4**	**–5.6**	**–2.3**	**–12.3**	**–6.6**
n	4,179	3,791	2,262	2,054	1,917	1,737	1,388	1,262	2,791	2,529	459	417

Source: Same as Figure 2.

Notes: 1. The aggregated respondents are 4,179 people (including persons on temporary leave ["furlough"]) who keeps working at private enterprises between March 1 and the end of July, 2020. However, the number of hours worked provided for March pertains to 3,128 people who were "respondents to the April, May, and August surveys," and the numbers of hours worked provided for the normal month and April-May and for monthly income for the normal month and "March-May" pertain to 3,639 "respondents to both the May and August surveys."

2. The numbers of hours worked provided for each month refer to the average hours worked for the entirety of March, second week of April, second week of May, fourth week of June, and last week of July, respectively. Monthly incomes for July are estimated amounts.

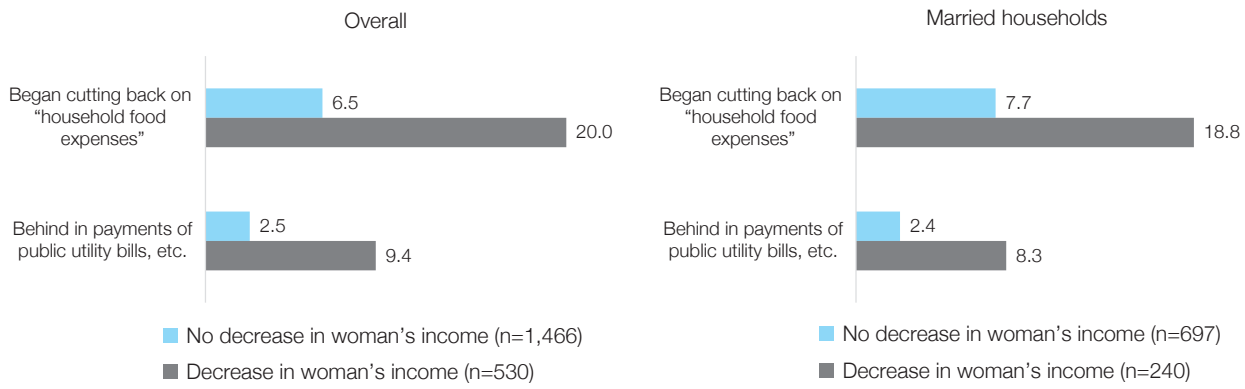
3. Hours worked and pretax monthly income are roughly calculated based on 12 classes. However, hours worked of 60 or more hours are considered to be 60 hours and pretax monthly income of 500,000 yen or more is considered to be 500,000 yen; the median of each class is used for the others.

situation of women, and particularly child-rearing females, remains the same even when such factors as the type of employment, industrial category, and size of enterprise are taken into account (Appendix 2). Incidentally, the degree to which the furlough rate and hours worked worsen in the case of "having a minor child" is apparent in the statistical analysis provided in Appendix 2. What is striking, however, is that the effects of "having a minor child" do not appear in the employment situation of men but only in that of women. From the analysis's results, it can be seen that the increased burden of housework and child-rearing that was brought by the pandemic are concentrated on the female side.

V. 20% of households with lower female income are cutting back on food expenses

In many Japanese households, males (husbands) are the breadwinner and the females (wives) provide a supplementary labor force. Accordingly, there is a tendency to see the impact of reduced female labor on households as being limited so long as male employment is maintained. However, if we take a new look at the makeup of current household income, we see that this view is greatly mistaken.

According to a nationwide survey that was conducted by the Yu-Cho Foundation in 2018, wives' income accounts for about 40% of total household income when the wife is a regular employee and about 20% when the wife is a non-regular employee. In the case of households headed by women, such as those headed by those unmarried or divorced, the woman's income from labor accounts for more than 70% of total household income. Thus, when those women experience a decrease in income, their household finances naturally take a major hit.[8]



Source: Same as Figure 2.
Notes: 1. The aggregated respondents are 1,996 female company employees who worked at private enterprises on April 1, 2020.
2. "Decrease in income" indicates a decrease in monthly income of at least 10% in the most recent month compared to the normal month.
3. "Began cutting back" refers to a situation in which the household did not cut back in the normal month but did cut back in the most recent month.
4. "Public utility bills, etc." includes gas, water, electricity, and telephone charges as well as rent, housing loan, and other such obligations.

Figure 4. Degree of pressure on household finances by the occurrence/non-occurrence of decrease in woman's income (%, August Survey)

Additionally, the percentage of households that can cover household expenses for no more than three months because they have no or few financial assets reaches 24%. In other words, roughly one in four working households will run out of living money within six months in the event of unemployment or reduced income. Indeed, decreases in a woman's income could wipe out her household's finances.[9]

In fact, that lower income by women puts pressure on household finances becomes evident from the August survey (Figure 4). Among households in which the woman's income fell by at least 10%, one in five are cutting back on food expenses and just under 10% are behind in paying their public utility bills, etc. The percentages of such households that are cutting back on food expenses or delinquent in paying bills are two to four times higher than the same percentages of households in which the woman's income was not greatly reduced.

From April to June 2020, compensation of employees fell 3.7% compared to the previous term (a decrease of about 2.6 trillion yen in terms of monetary amount). This was the largest drop ever recorded. There is a high possibility that, as household consumption slows, decreasing female employment is helping to worsen the situation. It can be said that restoring female employment holds the key to Japan's economic recovery, both in terms of saving the households of people in need and breaking the negative spiral of decreased income and consumption.

VI. Challenges in restoring female employment

The problem is that restoring women's employment is not easy to achieve with respect to policy. I initially believed that the employment situation of child-rearing females would improve rapidly when nursery, elementary, and junior high schools were reopened. However, the facts went against my prediction.

One possible reason is that the increased child-rearing burden brought by the pandemic has not returned to its previous level but instead continues even now. Specifically, nursery, elementary, and junior high schools shortened their hours for some time after reopening as a means of preventing cluster infections. Another possible reason is that mothers could not return to their original work hours due to delays in the start of after-school childcare and extracurricular activities.

Another challenge revealed by the August survey is that teleworking (including various forms of work from home) has not firmly taken root (Table 2). The

Table 2. Percentage of people working from home/teleworking at least one day per week (%)

	Normal month before the pandemic			2nd week of May (before lifting of the state of emergency declaration)			5th week of July		
	Work from home	Working in usual workplace	Stopped working (zero work hours)	**Work from home**	Working in usual workplace	Stopped working (zero work hours)	**Work from home**	Working in usual workplace	Stopped working (zero work hours)
Total	**9.3**	90.5	0.1	**27.6**	67.9	4.5	**11.5**	85.0	3.6
Males	**11.7**	88.3	0.0	**33.9**	63.8	2.3	**14.9**	83.0	2.1
Females	**6.6**	93.1	0.3	**20.3**	72.7	7.0	**7.5**	87.3	5.2
Non-regular employees	**5.2**	94.5	0.3	**13.4**	76.8	9.8	**4.9**	89.7	5.4
Regular employees	**11.5**	88.5	0.1	**34.9**	63.4	1.7	**14.8**	82.6	2.6
Child-rearing females (For reference)	**6.7**	92.7	0.6	**16.5**	75.0	8.5	**6.5**	85.2	8.4
Low-income earners	**4.4**	95.2	0.4	**8.7**	81.1	10.2	**2.4**	90.8	6.9
High-income earners	**21.4**	78.6	0.0	**64.1**	35.3	0.6	**29.0**	69.9	1.1

Source: Same as Figure 2.
Notes: 1. Results for the normal month and May are from the May survey. Results for July are from the August Survey.
2. Low-income earner: Person whose personal annual labor income in the year prior to the survey was in the bottom 25% bracket. High-income earner: Person whose personal annual labor income in the year prior to the survey was in the top 25% bracket.

teleworking rate, which approached nearly 30% in the second week of May (during the government's state of emergency declaration), suddenly fell to just over 10% in the last week of July. The teleworking ratios of men, regular employees, and high-income earners stayed between 3 and 8 percentage points higher than their pre-pandemic levels. However, the teleworking ratios of women, non-regular employees, and low-income workers returned to near their pre-pandemic levels. Although some see teleworking as a means of improving women's work styles and employment, it appears that firmly establishing teleworking by women in Japanese society will be no simple task.[10]

VII. Seizing the opportunity to rectify the gender gap

The restoration of female employment will be largely influenced by the "vaccine" that is expected to be the key to bringing the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties it brought to an end. If, as the government wants, a vaccine is secured for all Japanese citizens by the middle of the year 2021, it is highly likely that the employment crisis for women will also come to an end within a year. This is because utilizing women is a long-term strategy for industries that are facing structural labor shortages arising from Japan's aging society. This strategy's orientation will not change even amid the pandemic. In this sense, the crisis will eventually end if we are patient enough. Therefore, the steps that should be taken now are the elimination of employment mismatches, measures to address income disparities, and relief measures targeting people in need. Specifically, they should involve support for changes in employment from structurally weak industrial categories that will not survive in the post-COVID-19 world to structurally sound industrial categories, reinforcement of vocational training that makes use of the job-hunting period, and enhancement of livelihood support measures for people in need.

Looking at the medium and long term, the pandemic could provide a good opportunity for rectifying the employment gap between males and females. Given that males are spending more time at home due to the pandemic, it is probable that, to a greater or lesser extent, husbands have more

opportunities to handle housework and child-rearing. If this can be firmly established as a new way of living, the traditional Japanese social norm of "men go to work, women stay home" may change.

As for teleworking, one after another, we are seeing companies take steps toward adopting performance-based pay systems and fully introducing "job description" systems that specify job content and required skills with the aim of establishing work from home/teleworking. Prominent examples include Calbee, Inc., Fujitsu Ltd., and Hitachi, Ltd. And as demands for higher productivity and competition for human resources intensify, it is very likely that SMEs will also have sufficient incentive to pursue teleworking.

The establishment of internal company systems that support teleworking—a way of working that gained momentum amid the pandemic—will be essential to ensuring that it does not end as a transient phenomenon. And the government must provide broad support that includes the provision of funds and know-how as well as the drafting of legal systems to companies that introduce teleworking.

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1. Zhou, Yanfei, "How Women Bear the Brunt of COVID-19's Damages on Work," *Japan Labor Issues*, vol. 5, no. 28, https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2021/028-01.pdf.

2. Nakai, Masayuki, "Keizai Katsudo no Saikai ga Susumu naka de no Koyo Doko: Shingata Koronauirusu no Eikyo ni yoru Josei Hiseiki no Koyo no Gensho ga Kencho" [Employment trends as economic activity resumes: A conspicuous decrease in female non-regular employment attributable to the novel coronavirus, released on September 2, 2020, https://www.jil.go.jp/tokusyu/covid-19/column/020.html (in Japanese).

3. Alon, Titan, Matthias Doepke, Jane Olmstead-Rumsey, and Michele Tertilt, "This Time It's Different: The Role of Women's Employment in a Pandemic Recession," IZA Discussion Paper no. 13562, 2020.

4. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, "Josei Koyo Korona no Gyakufu Shokushu Tenkan e Shien Kyumu" [Female employment COVID-19 headwinds urgent need to support changes in occupation], (September 6, 2020).

5. For details, see OECD, *OECD Employment Outlook 2020: Worker Security and the COVID-19 Crisis* (Paris: OECD, 2020) and ILO Statistics and databases (ILOSTAT), https://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/lang–en/index.htm.

6. Alon, Titan, Matthias Doepke, Jane Olmstead-Rumsey, and Michele Tertilt, "This Time It's Different: The Role of Women's Employment in a Pandemic Recession," IZA Discussion Paper No. 13562, 2020.

7. A total of 3,212 respondents to the May Survey also participated in RENGO-RIAL's 39th Short-Term Survey of Workers in Japan (April 1 to 3, 2020). For details of the May Survey, see the summary of the first aggregation in English, https://www.jil.go.jp/english/special/covid-19/survey/documents/20200610.pdf (or full document released in Japanese, https://www.jil.go.jp/press/documents/20200610.pdf). For details of the August Survey, see the summary of the first aggregation in English, https://www.jil.go.jp/english/special/covid-19/survey/documents/20200826.pdf (or full document released in Japanese, https://www.jil.go.jp/press/documents/20200826.pdf).

8. Zhou, Yanfei (2020), "Koronashokku de Kawaru Josei no Hataraki-kata: Danjo no Koyo Kakusa Kaisho e no Keiki ni" [How the ways women work are changing amid the coronavirus crisis: Using the crisis as an opportunity to eliminate the gender employment gap], *The Toshi Mondai*, vol. 111, no. 07, 34–39.

9. Zhou, Yanfei, "A Look at Japanese Households Facing Risk of Livelihood Collapse Due to COVID-19" (April 17, 2020), *Japan Labor Issues*, vol. 4, no. 24, July 2020, https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2020/024-02.pdf.

10. See Takami, Tomohiro, "Zaitaku Kinmu ha Dare ni Teichaku shiteiru no ka: 'Kinkyuji' o Heta Henka o Yomu" [For whom has working from home taken root?: Reading changes that occurred through the 'emergency'" (September 16, 2020, available only in Japanese) for the results of a detailed analysis of teleworking.

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https://www.jil.go.jp/english/profile/zhou.html

Appendix 1. Percentages of persons employed by private enterprises who became unemployed or went on temporary leave ("furlough") (%, end of May vs. end of July, 2020)

(As of the end of May 2020: May Survey)

	Total	Males	Females	Non-regular employees	Regular employees	Male without minor child	Male with minor child	Female without minor child	Female with minor child	Single mothers	Females of non-regular employment
Involuntary unemployed person[a]	2.2	1.8	2.7	3.8	1.4	1.9	1.7	2.9	2.2	3.9	3.7
Voluntarily unemployed person[b]	0.4	0.5	0.4	1.0	0.2	0.7	0.0	0.2	1.0	1.0	0.7
Not in labor force[c]	0.5	0.3	0.7	0.9	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.5	1.2	0.0	0.7
Temporary leave ("furlough")[d]	3.3	1.6	5.3	6.9	1.4	1.8	1.0	4.7	7.1	8.7	7.5
Total	6.4	4.2	9.0	12.5	3.3	4.8	2.8	8.2	11.5	13.6	12.6
n	4,307	2,311	1,996	1,459	2,848	1,594	717	1,500	496	103	1,076

(As of the end of July 2020: August Survey)

	Total	Males	Females	Non-regular employees	Regular employees	Male without minor child	Male with minor child	Female without minor child	Female with minor child	Single mothers	Females of non-regular employment
Involuntary unemployed person[a]	2.5	2.4	2.6	3.6	1.9	2.2	2.9	2.6	2.5	1.9	3.4
Voluntarily unemployed person[b]	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.8	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.6
Not in labor force[c]	1.0	0.7	1.5	1.4	0.8	0.6	0.8	1.3	1.9	1.0	1.8
Temporary leave ("furlough")[d]	1.6	0.7	2.7	2.4	1.2	0.9	0.3	1.7	6.1	2.9	2.7
Total	5.6	4.2	7.2	8.2	4.2	4.1	4.3	6.1	10.7	5.7	8.4
n	4,307	2,311	1,996	1,459	2,848	1,597	714	1,517	479	105	1,076

Source: Same as Figure 2.
Note: a=Dismissed, had employment terminated, or became unemployed due to bankruptcy. b=Not working but engaged in job-hunting activity (excluding a). c=Not working and not engaged in job-hunting activity. d=Employed but worked zero hours.

Appendix 2. Effects that sex and child-rearing have on the labor supply

	Percentage who go on temporary leave ("furlough")—probit model			Change in weekly working hours —OLS model		
	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females
Females	0.0122***			−0.600		
	(0.005)			(0.435)		
With minor child	0.0182***	−0.0054	0.0314***	−1.079**	−1.003	−1.440**
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.009)	(0.479)	(0.649)	(0.724)
Other explanatory variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
n	4,307	2,311	1,996	3,753	2,038	1,715

Source: Same as Figure 2.
Notes: 1. Marginal effects (probit model) and coefficient estimates (OLS model) are reported. The figures in parentheses are the standard error.
2. Included in the explanatory variables are size of enterprise, industrial category, type of employment, academic background, marital status, and residence with or near a parent.
3. "Change in weekly working hours" = "average working hours in June-July" minus "working hours in the normal month"
4. *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.