

WHAT INCREASING CONTINUATION OF WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT MEANS FOR GENDER ROLES IN JAPAN

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Due to the fact that women traditionally retired from the labor market at the time of childbirth in Japan, they were disadvantaged in firms that emphasized *lifetime* employment. Using an interview survey of 26 men and women from two large companies, this study investigates the causes driving the increase in the number of women who continue working throughout their child-rearing years and its implications for gender relations in Japan. The data suggest that companies take measures to support work-family balance, and women continue to work using them. Inspired by role models in their workplace, more women commit to having a career, resulting in the majority of men and women planning their future lives based on the assumption that both spouses will be working. While women's stronger commitment to employment is generally believed to be associated with the dismantling of traditional gender relations, the study's findings show that in Japan, the more companies promote work-family balance and the more women rely on such support, the more men seem to be exempt from doing the work at home. In other words, Japanese women's stronger commitment to work is accompanied by a surprisingly stronger fixation on their traditional mothering and housewife roles.

Keywords: gender roles, gender relations, employment continuation, Japan

1. Introduction

Perhaps nothing epitomized women's employment in Japan more, for a long period of time, than the M-curved graph, with two peaks, depicting the female labor force participation rate by age group, unlike the trapezoid-shaped figure for men (Figure 1). The first peak indicated the time when many women graduated

from school and obtained their first job, primarily as full-time, regular workers. The second one occurred when women re-entered the labor market in middle age, often as part-time, non-regular workers. The dip in the labor force participation rate indicating women's withdrawal from the labor market, due to childbirth and child-rearing, was in between the two peaks. Women's temporary retirement penalized them heavily in their re-entrance to Japanese companies, many of which insisted on *lifetime* employment and seniority pay. Under this system, workers can enjoy benefits such as pay raises, twice-a-year bonus payments, paid training, paid vacations, and entitlement to social security coverage on the condition that they continue working as full-time, regular employees in the same company. The emphasis on lifetime employment resulted in a slack market for mid-career hiring, especially in large companies; once a worker exited the internal labor market, their chances for career advancement became limited.

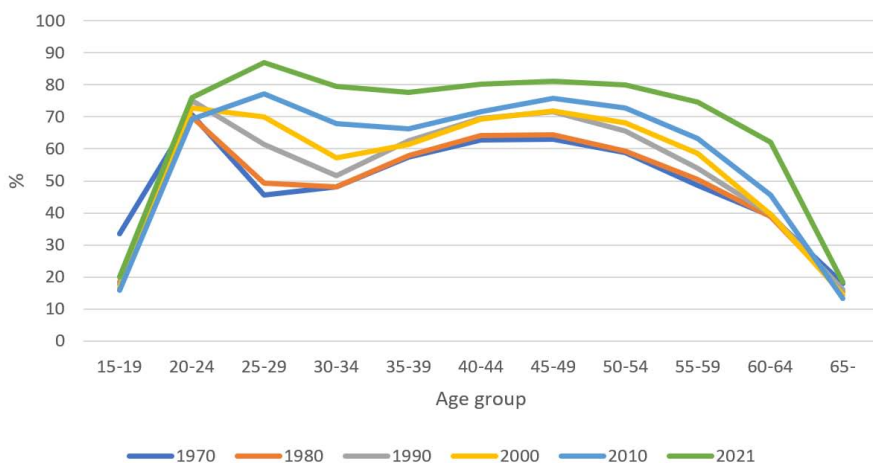


Figure 1: Trend in female labor force participation rate by age group

(Source: *Sômushō* 2022)

The unfavorable terms of employment suffered by part-time, non-regular workers in Japan have been documented by a number of researchers (Osawa 1993; Yazawa, Kunihiro, and Tendo 2003; Kanbayashi 2017). Osawa (1993) argued that Japanese female part-time employees did not necessarily work shorter hours and can only be defined by their inferior work status. In 2021, 37 % of employees worked as non-regular staff: among them, 68 % were women (*Sômushō* 2021). There is considerable gender pay gap for full-time workers in Japan, with women receiving only 78 % of what men do, this being the third largest among surveyed countries

by OECD in 2021. The gap between full-time and part-time workers is even larger, however, with part-time workers receiving only 60 % of what full-time workers did on an hourly basis in 2019, compared to 74 %, 83 % and 91 % respectively in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and France in 2018 (Rōdō Seisaku Kenkyū Kenshū Kikō 2022). The low pay of part-time workers is reflected in the small contribution Japanese wives typically make to household income. According to a joint survey by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) and The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (*Rōdō Seisaku Kenkyū Kenshū Kikō*), wives working as regular employees contributed 42.7 % of the family budget while those working as non-regular employees contributed only 23.8 % in 2019 (Shu 2020). Japanese wives' earnings have often been regarded as supplementary money, which led some researchers to argue that families in Japan have yet to shift to a dual-earning model where a husband and wife share breadwinning responsibilities (Tsutsui 2015; Sangu 2018).

Women's employment outlook will improve in Japan if the existing gap in working conditions between full-time and part-time workers narrows. The government made, for instance, incremental adjustments to extend social security coverage to part-time workers, although the aim was not only to benefit women but to also increase the number of contributors in rapidly aging Japanese society. Strengthening mid-career hire will also help women, many of whom retire temporarily for childbirth. Individual women can advance their career prospects by opting not to quit but to continue working and remain within the advantageous internal labor market throughout their family-raising life stage. This is the reason why women's employment continuation has been an intense focus of scholarly attention in Japan.

One of the earliest signs of a change in patterns of women's labor participation was reported by Nagase (2014), who measured the rate of employment continuation after the first childbirth using *The Longitudinal Survey of Adults in the 21st Century* conducted by Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (*Kōsei Rōdōshō*) in 2014. Beginning in 2007, a significant rise in the employment continuation rate was observed, regardless of company size. According to Nagase (2014), a possible reason is the enhancement of childcare leave allowances in 2007 and 2010. Nomura (2017) also found that approximately 70 % of female regular employees continued in their jobs after childbirth, and in large companies, the overwhelming majority of women did not leave their jobs.

Indeed, the trend for an increasing number of women to stay employed upon childbirth can be confirmed in the national fertility survey conducted by National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (*Kokuritsu Shakai Hoshō Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūsho*). Until 2004, approximately 60 % of wives quit work at the time of first childbirth: this ratio had remained unchanged for almost 20 years. In the

past 10 years, however, there has been a drastic increase in the number of wives who continued in employment. In the years between 2015 and 2019, only 30 % of wives quit work and the remaining 70 % continued working (Figure 2). In addition, between 1985 and 2004, about a quarter to a third of wives were already full-time home-makers before becoming pregnant with their first child. In contrast, only 17 % of wives who gave birth in the years between 2015 and 2019 had been unemployed before pregnancy (Kokuritsu Shakai Hoshō Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūsho 2021). The *2017 Whitepaper on Female Labor* by Kōsei Rōdōshō acknowledged that the dip in the middle of the M-shaped curve, depicting female labor force participation rate by age group, was becoming shallower (Figure 1).

In the context of lifetime employment in Japan, the fact that more women are now choosing to continue employment without interruption and stay within the internal labor market amounts to a major transformation with potentially large implications for society. This study makes a novel contribution to the literature by using microdata to examine the reasons for women's employment behavioral change, especially whether it is accompanied by a modification in the traditional household division of labor between husbands and wives, with a shift in couples' attitudes toward sharing the breadwinning role.

Since the Japanese government began emphasizing women's participation in the labor market as part of its growth strategy in 2015, systems supporting work-family balance have been adopted, expanded and made more serviceable, especially in large companies. Since women have long struggled to combine work and family, parental support measures may be seen as meager in Japan. For some years, however, the country has had one of the most generous parental leave laws among developed nations. Workers are entitled to take up to 12 months of paid childcare leave. During the leave, the government will pay 67 % of earnings for the first six months, and 50 % for the next six. The employees are further exempt from paying income tax and social insurance contributions; thus, the net benefit comes to approximate 80 % of their basic salary.

In recent years, the number of women who take childcare leave increased rapidly. Back in the late 1980s, only 23 % of women who continued working after the first childbirth took leave (Kokuritsu Shakai Hoshō Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūsho 2021). The proportion is almost reversed now, with 79 % opting for leave (Figure 2). While both fathers and mothers are entitled to take childcare leave, the utilization rate by fathers remains low. It was 14.0 % in 2021, with only an incremental increase of 1.3 % from the year before (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2021). The government is trying to encourage more fathers to take leave and has recently created "postnatal dad childcare leave" of up to four weeks, which allows not only postpartum mothers but also their spouses to take leave immediately after childbirth.

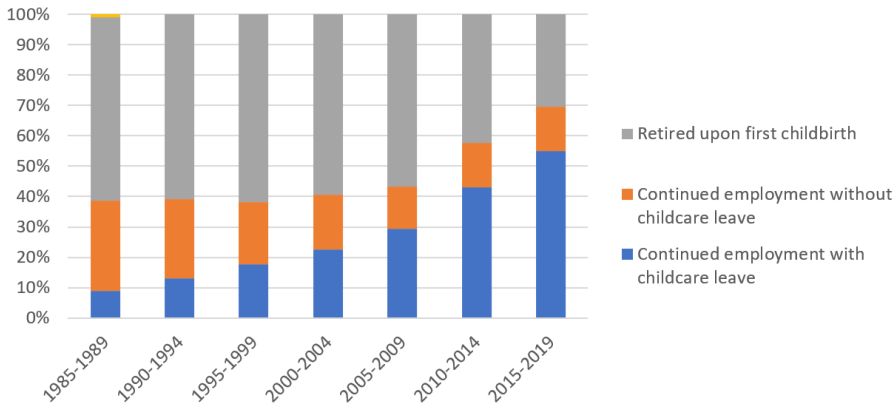


Figure 2: Proportion of wives who continued to work at the time of the first childbirth
(Source: Kokuritsu Shakai Hoshō Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūsho 2021)

In addition to the leave, the revised Childcare and Family Care Leave Act of 2009 stipulated that employers must provide the option for parents with a child less than three years old to work shorter hours, that is, six hours a day. Those that work for reduced hours by utilizing this system are regular employees firmly placed within the internal labor market, and should not be confused with so-called part-time workers located outside of it. Regular employees on reduced hours can revert at any time to a full-time schedule, while part-time workers cannot.

The study has found an increasing number of women continuing to work by using these parental support systems for new parents and becoming role models for other women. As women become more committed to employment continuation, they and their partners plan their lives based on this dual income. Although companies provide various kinds of support to encourage women to continue working, by doing so, they inadvertently emphasize the female employees' mothering roles, leading to the fixation of such roles on to the female gender. Indeed, it was pointed out during the interviews that women's utilization of the childcare leave system or shorter working hours resulted in the allotment of childcare and household duties to the wives and the release of husbands from such chores. Japanese women's new commitment to work does not necessarily bring about the weakening of the traditional division of labor between the two sexes, but rather an entrenchment of gender structures in society. I therefore argue that while more Japanese men and women are planning their future lives based on the assumption that both spouses will be working, the women's stronger commitment to work is accompanied by a surprisingly stronger fixation on their traditional mothering and housewife roles.

The remaining discussion in the chapter is organized as follows. The next section discusses research on gender roles in Japan. I then describe, in section three, an interview survey of 26 men and women from two large companies, aimed at understanding why women increasingly opt to stay employed in the internal labor market. In section four, I examine how parenting and breadwinning roles are viewed and the extent to which they are shared among couples. I specifically focus on how the traditional gendered division of labor is changing, yet what patterns remain unchanged, as well as their implications for gender relations in contemporary Japan. Section five concludes the chapter.

2. Research on gender roles in Japan

Traditional gender-role attitudes are often believed to be one of the strongest impediments to the attainment of gender equality in Japanese society. Certain scholars argue, however, that supporters of traditional gender roles are not necessarily against gender equality. They maintain that the traditional perception of gender roles can be compatible with the belief in the equality of men and women and in the value of women's work lives.

Yamato (1995, 117–120) finds, for example, that some Japanese mothers are willing to take care of their home and family because they value motherly love. For these women, upholding the mothering norm co-exists with supporting gender equality. She further notes that the attainment of higher education often functions to weaken beliefs in assigning gender roles, other than the mothering norm. Rather, it is the woman's stable employment and her contribution to the family income that give rise to contesting the mothering norm and the belief that women have an aptitude for care work. Nishimura (2001, 147–148) also points out the existence of a good parenting norm, which encourages women's commitment to parenting and to becoming the primary caretaker regardless of whether they are generally for or against gender equality.

A similar finding is reported for Western mothers who would like fathers to take part in childcare and support them, but who often do not want to give up entirely the sense of control that comes from being the primary parent. Family researchers have referred to mothers' unwillingness to give up their traditional sphere of influence as "maternal gate-keeping." Lengersdorf and Meuser (2016, 153), for example, argue that German mothers are often not aware of their gatekeeping, or of the negative consequences it might have on fathers' participation. They describe how mothers fall into the role of the primary caregiver unintentionally and thereby reinforce a gendered division of labor.

Extending Yamato and Nishimura's contentions to men's attitudes toward gender roles, Ogasawara (2019) maintains that while many Japanese men may not

voice apparent opposition to women working, they tend to insist on their bread-winning roles and their wives' homemaking roles. She calls the male counterpart to the mothering norm the work norm, which often leads men to regard work as their main sphere of activity and to express a desire to excel in the world of work. Because of the work norm, Ogasawara sees that there are only two daunting options available to Japanese fathers who wish to share parenting. One is to become a super dad and participate in childcare without slowing their pace of work. The other is to compromise work or career to make time for parenting. Due to the prevalence of the work norm in society, men who choose this solution typically suffer from the feeling of being overtaken by their colleagues.

The little time Japanese fathers typically spend in childcare and household chores has been recorded in various surveys. For example, in 2016, mothers with children under the age of six spent, on average, 7 hours and 34 minutes, while fathers spend one hour and 23 minutes (Sōmushō 2016). In contrast, comparative international data compiled by Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, (*Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Kyoku*, 2020) indicate that fathers in Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom and France spent, respectively, 3 hours and 21 minutes, 3 hours and 7 minutes, 2 hours and 46 minutes, and 2.5 hours.

Numerous studies examine the reasons why Japanese fathers do little domestically. These focus mainly on the time constraints men face due to long work hours, the negotiating power they gain vis-à-vis their wives owing to their larger income, and the ideology designating the home as women's sphere, or a combination of the three (e.g., Inaba 1998; Matsuda 2000; Nagai 2004; Yamato, Onode, and Kiwaki 2008; Ishii-Kuntz 2013). In contrast, only a small number of studies look into the sharing of provider responsibilities. Indeed, while the Japanese expressions *kaji buntan* (a division of household chores) or *ikuji buntan* (a division of childcare) are widespread not only among academics but also in the media and everyday vocabulary, there is no equivalent term for the division of breadwinning roles.

In one of the few studies that analyze the sharing of provider roles among working couples, Ogasawara (2005) points out that the employment of a full-time working wife had different meanings for different couples, and that the working wife was not always seen as contributing to the family budget. In more than one-third of 30 dual-income married couples, who were raising children and continued working full-time after graduation, the wife had no intention of sharing responsibility for maintaining the family's livelihood. For example, some wives took out a relatively small amount of loans in their own name, even when their income was equivalent to that of their husbands to have the freedom to quit work at any time. Others stated that they were "doing a job they enjoyed" rather than working for income and would "quit if they lost interest in the job." A considerable

number of husbands indicated that it did not matter to them whether their wife worked and that they saw the employment as being for the wife—for example, “she likes working” or “it is better for her mental health if she works”—rather than contributing to the family budget. Additionally, there were husbands who were not concerned about the degree of the contribution of their wives, despite preferring to share responsibility for the family. In other words, these husbands had a desire to mentally share responsibility for maintaining the family’s livelihood with their wives but did not strongly demand the actual splitting of family accounts. It is possible that they did not ask for a shared family budget because they were unsure if their wives would continue working in the future.

Ogasawara’s 2005 study was conducted before the recent expansion of women’s continued employment. It would be interesting to know, therefore, whether or not a husband and a wife’s attitudes toward a wife’s employment have changed, what are their interpretations of the meanings attached to a wife’s continued employment, and how they regard the money she brings home. In addition, we would like to know to what extent a woman’s stable employment and her contribution to family income result in a weakening of the mothering norm as argued by Yamato. The present study is meant as a first step in answering these questions.

3. Material and methods

The dataset used for the study is based on interviews conducted at two major companies in 2017. Of the companies, Company X is a manufacturer with its headquarters in Osaka, while Company Y is a financial institution headquartered in Tokyo. The personnel departments of these two companies were asked to select employees as subjects for the interviews. The selection included male and female employees in a relatively young group (i.e., mid-twenties to thirties) and a middle-aged group (forties to mid-fifties). A total of 26 employees were interviewed. In Company X, the respondents totaled 14 employees: five female and two male employees in both the young and middle-aged groups. There were 12 respondents from Company Y: five female and two male employees in the young group and three female and two male employees in the middle-aged group (see Table one in Appendix A).

About one month prior to the interviews, a preliminary questionnaire was distributed to the respondents to obtain information about all job transfers within the company and any changes in their families. Responses were received via email. The preliminary survey helped researchers prepare for the face-to-face interviews and informed them beforehand about the questions to be highlighted for a particular respondent. It was also hoped that filling out the questionnaire before the interview might help respondents recall their memories better.

Four researchers conducted the interviews with the help of three assistants. At least one researcher and one assistant participated in an interview, and members were purposely altered each time to maximize the sharing. The interviews were conducted in an office provided by the companies and lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. The questions focused on the background of joining the company; work-related events experienced after joining; family events experienced since joining; changes in their views of employment as a result of those experiences; involvement in housework, child rearing, nursing care, etc.; relationship with spouse, parents, and children; views of division of labor with spouse; and vision of their own career and life in the future. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Attitudes toward employment continuation among female employees

Although employment without interruption has led to advantageous work conditions in Japan, only a small number of women in the past were able to continue working. One of the questions we had, therefore, was what the initial plans female respondents had upon joining the company. From the interviews, we found that not all female respondents initially had an intention of continuing to work for a considerable time. The ratio of women who felt they would work for a long time, to those who joined the company without any such notion, was 5:5 and 5:3 for Company X and Company Y, respectively. Additionally, a comparison of the young and middle-aged groups did not reveal a clear tendency for women in the young group to have a stronger desire to continue employment.

At the time of the interview, however, almost all women were planning their lives on the premise that they would continue working. Ms. D of Company X felt that she and her husband would both work after marriage, but did not recall ever talking to her husband about her quitting or not quitting. Similarly, Ms. S of Company Y said, "I did not think about quitting when I became pregnant," the women's intention to continue working was not shaken, even after childbirth. One needs to be careful here, however, as the interview subjects were "successful cases" selected by their personnel departments, meaning that employees who did quit were excluded from the survey. As discussed below, however, these female employees' attitudes toward employment continuation contrast with those of female workers from a similar survey conducted ten years earlier.

Many women with the intention to continue working were also identified in a study, conducted by Ogasawara in 2005,¹ on how dual-income couples viewed employment. There were indications, however, that even if women could continue working at the time of that study, they were unsure about the future. Therefore, many married couples covered the essential parts of their family budget with the husband's income while using the wife's income for savings and leisure activities. In other words, couples were prepared for the loss of the wife's income at any time. In contrast, in the current survey, there was an expectation that women would continue to work. To some degree, it has become possible for women to anticipate that they could continue working until retirement age should they desire to do so, particularly in large companies that are forward-looking in terms of supporting female employees, such as those covered in this survey.

As noted earlier, Nagase (2014) considered the enhancement of childcare leave allowances in 2007 and 2010 to be a factor behind women's increasing employment continuation. Indeed, this study also found that female employees were encouraged to continue employment by a company system that supported a balance between life events (e.g., housework, child rearing, long-term care) and career. What seemed to be equally if not more important than good systems in place was, however, the presence of older female employees who had continued to work using these systems. Ms. V of Company Y, who was single at the time of the interview, felt that it would be possible to continue working even if she had a family because "the company's system is very good, and when I see older colleagues [continue working], I think I can do it too." Ms. I of Company X, who originally planned to quit a few years after marriage, explained: "Around that time, I noticed several women around me and in the same workplace who still worked after giving birth. So, I thought, well, I could do that. My workplace needed me, and I began thinking that it would be natural for me to continue working as long as it did not become too difficult."

These female respondents' remarks suggest that when a sufficient number of women continue working by utilizing family support systems, a woman is able to find a role model near her to emulate. The rapid expansion of women's continued employment, witnessed recently in Japan, may be due to the fact that a tipping point has been reached with enough women in the workplace providing role models for younger women, resulting in increased opportunities for women to see other women around them achieving the balance between home and work.

¹ Both studies involved interviews with women with relatively high academic background who have continued to work. However, these studies were not conducted for comparative purposes and would not serve as strict control samples. The chapter aims to provide an exploratory discussion, and its content and findings are expected to be supported by a larger sampling.

4.2 Attitudes toward parenting roles

4.2.1 Gendered utilization of systems supporting work-family balance

In this subsection, I review how the interviewed couples attempted to balance work and family, focusing on the difference between the use of family support systems among husbands and wives. Among the ten female employees working in Company X, seven were mothers. Four of them had two children and two had one. While three of the four male employees of Company X were married to stay-at-home wives, one man had a wife who continued working after childbirth. We collected information regarding the circumstances of dual-income couples after the birth of 11 children. For all 11 children, the wife took childcare leave. In most cases, the leave ended in a year or a little less than a year, with the shortest leave lasting about six months. None of the husbands took parental leave.

Additionally, a shorter working hours system for childcare was utilized for five children, for periods ranging from half a year to three years. While working hours were not reduced for the remaining six children, all-purpose flexible or discretionary working hours sometimes seemed to replace shorter working hours designed specifically for childcare. Again, it was only the women who worked shorter hours for childcare; none of the men reported officially reducing their working hours.

Among the eight female employees working in Company Y, seven were mothers. Four had two children and three had one. As all four male employees were married to stay-at-home wives, the number of childcare cases analyzed was 11, all children of female interviewees. Childcare leave was taken for ten children, including one that was taken at the time of the interview. The length of leave was longer than that taken by women in Company X, particularly for the firstborn, spanning from one to three years. In contrast, mothers tended to be on shorter leave for the second child, including two cases where they resumed working while the baby was under the age of one year. Similar to Company X, no fathers in Company Y had taken paternal leave. Additionally, shorter working hours for childcare were utilized for three children for a duration of two years, one year and eight months. Only mothers worked for shorter hours.²

² The comparison between Company X and Company Y reveals that in Company X, there was a tendency for mothers to take shorter childcare leave and resume working on shorter hours. For example, Ms. B of Company X returned to the workplace when her baby was not yet six months old, as it would become difficult to find a place for her child in a daycare center infamous for its long waiting list if she waited past the beginning of the business year in April. Additionally, in her words, "a shorter gap will be less harmful to my career." Moreover, the economic support provided by the company to make an early return possible was also a decisive factor. Thus, the findings in this chapter indicate that shorter working hours for childcare may function as a substitute for complete leave. Although the shorter working hours were utilized less than leaves, women tended to take shorter leave for the second child when they

Notably, the interviews revealed that paternity leave was often not regarded as a viable option for couples, as all the mothers in the survey but one took childcare leave, whereas none of the fathers did.³ Similarly, many mothers worked shorter hours for childcare, but none of the fathers took the benefit of reduced working hours. Ms. S of Company Y explained: "For my husband to take childcare leave was never considered a choice that we could make. Fathers may have the right institutionally, but I honestly think it is difficult for them to take paternity leave, and I am sure my husband would also have said so, if I had made such a suggestion to him."

Similarly, Ms. I of Company X thought that her husband worked in a company where "men actively involved in parenting were disdained," and that her husband believed childcare leave to be something only women should take. Moreover, she herself could not picture men taking childcare leave and therefore, did not wish her husband to take it.

The data suggest that Ms. B of Company X was an exception in suggesting childcare leave to her husband. She recalled the conversation she had with her husband: "I encouraged him to take paternity leave many times. There was no man in his company who had taken it, and so I said you could be the first, but, in the end, it was not possible. Now, I am already asking him to take paternity leave for our second child. I know how difficult it is for my husband to take it. There are not many men in our company who had taken it either."

One of the female respondents did not ask her husband to take childcare leave because she believed that his company limited the benefit to women only. She was not aware that childcare leave was a legal right guaranteed by the government for both parents. Some women pointed out that while, in the beginning, they did not object to taking childcare leave, they became aware of the problem afterward. For example, Ms. P of Company Y, who had taken two leaves consecutively for two children for a duration of approximately three years, emphasized the enormous difficulty she faced upon resuming work because she spent the days on leave as if she were a stay-at-home mother and did not ask for her husband's help. She explained, "It was so hard to change my husband's attitude, how should I say, his

had gained more experience. Therefore, as people become more accustomed to balancing work and family, the combination of shorter leave and shorter working hours is expected to become the preferred strategy.

- ³ Ms. O of Company Y, a mother of two children, had neither taken leave nor shorter working hours for childcare while both systems were already in place. At the time of the interview, she had the oldest children among the respondents, aged 24 and 21. She gave the following reasons for not using them: she had enjoyed her job and expected to return to the same post if she resumed work quickly, her husband's income had been unstable, and she was able to place her children in a good daycare center where they could stay until nine o'clock in the evening. In addition, as this was more than 20 years ago, there might have been fewer employees using these systems than now.

sensitivity, his feelings toward helping me with childcare and housework." She said she often quarreled with her husband.

Similar opinions were expressed concerning shorter working hours for childcare. Ms. I of Company X thought, for example, that her husband had a half-hearted attitude toward childcare and housework because her working shorter hours supported the traditional gendered division of labor for her husband. She said, "I began to see that when a mother resumes work after childcare leave on shorter hours, there is a harmful effect. There is a tendency to think it is natural that she does more than him at home because she works fewer hours." One of the couples decided against utilizing shorter working hours for childcare explicitly to avoid this problem. Mr. K of Company X, a father of a two-year-old child, was married to a colleague. His wife took childcare leave and returned to work when the child turned a year old. Immediately upon resuming work, his wife started on a full-time basis because, as he explained, "if she worked shorter hours, it was expected that I would not do much childcare or housework, but if she worked full-time, we would both contribute to housework. We would have to. So, it was decided that both of us will work full-time." Mr. K and his wife seemed to strive being on equal terms with each other regarding work and family. Nonetheless, not even they ever considered the option of taking childcare leave for Mr. K. He only remembered not going to work for three or four days after the birth of their child. He never thought about taking paternity leave as, in his company, no men were absent for more than a few days.

4.2.2 Taking children to and from daycare centers

In this subsection, I analyze how couples share daily childcare and housework, paying particular attention to those who take children to and from daycare centers.⁴ This is because, even as working from home is slowly on the rise, the time to take children to and from daycare centers can determine the amount of time a worker spends in the office and thereby puts limits on the way they work. Apart from one respondent currently on maternity leave, all parents used daycare centers to continue working after childbirth. Table two in Appendix two shows the division of labor for this task.

⁴ As the majority of respondents in the survey were women, there is a danger of overestimating the contribution to childcare and housework made by wives and underestimating the contribution made by husbands. However, this study analyzes the chores involving taking children to and from daycare centers and performing accompanying tasks, such as preparing dinner for children after picking them up. Since the person responsible for these chores is usually decided beforehand, the room for ambiguity is relatively small and the risk of overestimation and underestimation is reduced to a minimum.

Traditionally, many Japanese companies have adopted a culture of long working hours, thus making working from evening to night more convenient for an employee, as compared to one or two hours they can add at most to regular office hours in the morning. Thus, in a typical Japanese workplace, the one who is responsible for picking up children in the evening faces a far more stringent limit on the work schedule than the one who delivers the children in the morning. Table two shows that few husbands assume the responsibility for picking up children in the evening. Instead, this task is borne primarily by wives, sometimes with the help of others, such as grandparents. In a few cases, the grandparent(s) did the majority of the work, whereas the husbands' contributions were smaller than not only their wives' but also the grandparent(s)'. The only exception to the rule was Ms. O of Company Y, who declared having taken turns picking up children with her husband. Ms. O used a daycare center that remained open exceptionally late into the night until nine p.m. In addition, the fact that her husband's income was unstable, making her the primary breadwinner of the family, seemed to be reflected in this uncommon arrangement.

Ms. Q of Company Y had depended completely in the past on her and her husband's parents for picking up her child. She consequently began assuming the responsibility herself, and until her child turned three years old, the child was picked up by either her or her parents. She was able to leave the office on schedule almost every day thanks to her considerate boss and colleagues. When she was promoted to manager, however, her husband began to take turns picking up their child, showing an understanding that, with greater responsibility, it was no longer advisable for his wife to leave the office earlier than her colleagues.

Ms. I of Company X, despite asking repeatedly for help from her husband, was responsible for taking their children to and from the daycare center every day. However, after the introduction of regular office hours at her husband's workplace, which forbade employees to work overtime, he began picking up their children once a week. In contrast, Ms. C of Company X was able to obtain her husband's support without promotion or a new working hour rule. Her husband went to the office at ten o'clock every morning so that he could have the time to deliver the child to a daycare center, and picked up the child at least once a week. This kind of helpful husband was decidedly a minority among the interviewees, although it should be noted that Ms. C picked up the child four days a week.

The difficulty faced by the wives in obtaining their husbands' help was vividly expressed by Ms. P of Company Y. She stated the following: "I have to ask him long beforehand so that he can schedule his work accordingly. If I know something is coming up, I ask him about one month in advance, and if he is able to do it, he schedules his work so he can pick up our children."

Ms. B of Company X narrated the bitter experience of having to rush to a day-care center: "I was very busy about two weeks ago. I wanted to do more work at the office, but I had to leave. As I was hurrying to the daycare center, I became extremely sad. Why was I in such a hurry? My husband can work overtime on any day for as long as he wants to, while I have to rush to a daycare center." Ms. B was overwhelmed especially by the difference between her having to rush to meet her daycare center deadline and her husband who could stay in the office as long as necessary.

Thus, the most prevalent arrangement pattern, which was followed by seven couples, was for the husband to drop off the child(ren) in the morning and for the wife to pick up the child(ren) in the evening with or without the help of the grandparent(s). Among the four couples, it was the wife, however, who delivered and picked up the children almost all the time. According to Yamaguchi (2018), the difference in the overtime hours put in by the men and women is the most influential factor contributing to the difference in the promotion rate between male and female employees in Japanese companies. Since mothers assume the greater responsibility for taking children to daycare centers, and particularly, picking them up in the evening, this puts severe limits on their work hours, thus leading to a negative impact on women's promotion chances.

4.2.3 Sharing or not sharing other childcare and housework

Delivering and picking up children represents only a small part of the childcare and housework that parents have to do. As Ms. T of Company Y eloquently put it: "My husband takes our children to a daycare center every morning. However, from my viewpoint, that is all he does. I prepare breakfast in the morning, I pick up the children in the evening, bathe them, prepare things for their next day, write comments in their daycare notebook, and so on."

While many mothers were required to reconcile their work style with childcare after childbirth, these women often pointed out that their husbands did not change their work style. For example, Ms. P of Company Y said: "He did not change how he worked either after marriage or after childbirth. I understand his needs because I worked that way before marriage. I made adjustments to the situation with less freedom, but he could not change how he worked, and so, in the end, I had to do most things (at home)."

Similarly, Ms. S of Company Y explained: "After we got married, I did the majority of the housework. The only thing that changed after the birth of our child is that my husband takes our child to a daycare center and is now in charge of cleaning the bathtub. He helps clean the house somewhat more during the weekend, but that is about it." After listing a few observable changes in her husband's attitudes

toward domestic work, she added that she could not expect him to contribute more when he did not come home before their child went to bed.

Most mothers admitted that they became irritated and angry, particularly when they were tired, about having had to bear the greater part of childcare and housework. Many of them showed a resigned attitude, however, as Ms. U of Company Y confessed, "It is more of an issue to see my husband become exhausted after I demand him to do more." They seemed to judge that it was better for their own mental health to accept the way things were than to try to rectify them.

Among the majority of mothers who had to change their work style after the birth of their children, Ms. O and Ms. R of Company Y were exceptions, and they did not make many adjustments. Ms. O, as mentioned before, benefited from extended hours at a daycare center and support from her husband for her bread-winning role. Ms. R assumed the responsibility of taking her children to a daycare center in the morning but left the task of picking them up to her parents and a paid volunteer, which enabled her to work as much overtime as she wished to and to participate in other activities after work.

Various surveys on dual-income couples in Japan have pointed out that regardless of a wife's income or hours worked, she bears the greater responsibility for childcare and housework. Additionally, the support provided by grandparent(s) is often indispensable for a couple to continue earning dual incomes (Matsunobu 1995; Nagai and Matsuda 2006; Shintani 1998). This study endorses such findings. Although a greater number of women have continued to work as full-time employees, women still bear the greater burden of parenting and housework. Thus, the traditional gendered division of labor at home remains in place.

The extent to which the mothering norm as described by Yamato (1995) was upheld varied according to the respondents. As noted earlier, some women did not question the norm, being the parent taking parental leave or reducing work hours for childcare. When asked why this was so, they said it never occurred to them that their husbands might take the leave or reduce hours. These women seemed to accept their role as mothers. Others seemed somewhat discontented in having had to make large adjustments to their work life, while their husbands' work schedules remained untouched by the birth of their children. These women recognized the unfairness of the arrangement but seemed ultimately resigned, mainly because their male colleagues similarly did not slow down for childcare. The reason for these women bearing the majority of the childcare burden had consequently less to do with their endorsement of the mothering norm, but more with the work environment they found themselves in; few seemed to know or have heard of a man taking childcare leave, working shorter hours for children, or otherwise slowing the pace of work to take care of their children. These women understood how difficult it was for their husbands to make a request to do so. Ms.

B of Company X was an exception in openly admitting having encouraged her husband to take childcare leave. The attempt ended unsuccessfully, however, and the fact that she knew he would have been the first man to take childcare leave in his office might have led her to back down or attenuate her demand. The findings of the study indicate that a working woman may adopt the mothering role not necessarily because she has internalized the mothering norm but because it is the role society expects of her and not her husband.

4.3 Attitudes toward the shared livelihood

4.3.1 Changing attitudes toward sharing the family's livelihood

In contrast to Ogasawara's (2005) findings, in the current survey, economic considerations ranked high as a reason for continuing work given by female interviewees. Ms. S of Company Y explained, for example, her reason for continuing work: "Rather than saying that I really want to work, it is probably more accurate to say that I would be giving up a lot if I quit." This response suggests a difference in thinking from that of the wives in the 2005 survey, who stated that they would quit their jobs if they lost interest in them. Ms. S candidly said that she had not felt her job to be very interesting, and she was not aiming to gain self-fulfillment through her job. The reason Ms. S gave for continuing to work was, "so I can live, I guess." However, then she asked, "what else is there?" and added, "I suppose it is because I want a place where I can demonstrate my abilities a little." It could be argued that Ms. S's thinking about employment is very similar to that of many men who continue doing a job to fulfill their livelihood responsibility, not because they particularly enjoy it. In the former survey by Ogasawara (2005), women who continued to work were the exception rather than the rule, as maintaining a livelihood was not considered a woman's responsibility. Accordingly, the reasons for continuing work at that time, when doing so involved significant hurdles for women, were non-economic, such as "because working is fun," and "it is better than being stuck in the house." Over the course of ten years, women's continued employment became less unusual than it once was, and prospects that women could continue working have improved, particularly in large companies such as those surveyed that actively support work-life balance. This change seems to be reflected in the women's remarks that they work primarily for economic reasons.

Women interviewees were generally highly committed to continuing to work, and also had strong awareness about the sharing of livelihood responsibilities. Ms. D of Company X remarked, "My husband and I agree on how good it is that both of us work. If only one of us working, our savings would be one-tenth of what they are now. That is the kind of situation we would face, I think." Ms. D pointed out that she had devised a financial plan premised on dual incomes to last until she

reached the age of 90. Similarly, Ms. U of Company Y said, "we are fifty-fifty when it comes to our family budget," adding that she and her husband talk about selling their house "if one of us quits" or "if one of us takes a part-time job and we can no longer pay for necessities." In the past, it was exclusively the wife who would quit a job or change from full-time to part-time work. What makes Ms. U's statement notable is that she said "if one of us quits," without limiting the possibility of such a change to the wife only. In other words, the likelihood of this possibility occurring for the wife was considered to be as low as for the husband. Similarly, Ms. I of Company X, who had a higher income than her husband, thought that "we power the family together" and "I can support us if something happens to [my husband's] company." Moreover, Ms. B of Company X said, "I suppose my husband is like other young people today in that he is not the aggressive type who says, 'I am going to get married and be the breadwinner for my family'. So, I have to work too."

Ms. B's view of today's young men is supported to some degree by the comments made by male interviewees. For example, explaining why he thinks having a dual income is good even after having children, Mr. L of Company X, who is married to a part-time lecturer at a university, said, "having money lets us enjoy a lifestyle that is satisfying for us, so I think it is good that both of us work." Moreover, Mr. L noted that, among his close friends of the same age, only one had a full-time housewife. With regard to dual-earner couples, he said, "I think they have become very common."

Mr. K of Company X had a wife working in the same company. However, they did not exactly meet in the workplace, as they had already been dating when they were job-hunting. They decided to join Company X because it seemed to be a realistic place for them to work as a couple. Since then, he has been sharing housework, child-rearing, and livelihood maintenance with his wife on a fifty-fifty basis. When there was a concern, however, that his wife would give birth prematurely and it crossed his mind that his child might be born with a disability due to premature delivery, he thought, "I'll have to get even more serious about my work." This was because, facing the possibility that his wife might not be able to continue work to care for their disabled child, he became aware of the responsibility of supporting a family alone for the first time since his marriage. Thus, it can be said that until he encountered an emergency (i.e., the threat of his child's premature delivery), he had not thought of himself as the family's principal breadwinner.

4.3.2 Women who are the main livelihood providers

There were two cases in which the wife was the main livelihood provider: Ms. O and Ms. Q of Company Y. In the past when a Japanese couple working in different regions married, it was almost always the woman who quit her job and went to where the man worked. Such a situation was seen in this survey as well, as with

the cases of Mr. M of Company X and Mr. Y and Mr. Z of Company Y. However, in the case of Ms. O, the person who changed vocations and work locations as a result of the marriage was the husband. Ms. O said: "At the beginning, we didn't have any money. We didn't have anything. This is still true today [laughs]. However, even so, I felt like we were fine, probably because I had a job. So, I did not have many financial expectations for my husband. I thought things would be fine if he did a job that he liked."

Unlike Ms. O, Ms. Q married a colleague. Traditionally, when a husband and wife worked at the same company and if one of them were to quit, it would be the wife, which was the case for Mr. M of Company X and Mr. Y and Mr. Z of Company Y. Conversely, in Ms. Q's household, both spouses pursued their careers even after their child was born with the help of their respective parents. Ms. Q described her thoughts when both spouses were promoted to management positions because "both of us were working a lot of overtime hours, and I wondered how long we could continue living like that." Later, when Ms. Q was promoted even higher to senior-level management and took on greater responsibilities, she discussed the matter with her husband. After considering their individual skills, her husband left the company to look for an opportunity in another company with a more flexible working style. At the time of the interview, he was still searching for a job.

Because both Ms. O and Ms. Q were at the age when intensive childcaring was a thing of the past, they were not burdened with the heavy domestic role when we spoke to them. When they were younger, however, they seemed to have borne the majority of childcare and household work, as other women did in the study. In addition, even at the time of the interview, they were not particularly eager to contest the traditional gender division of labor and the work norm for men as discussed by Ogasawara (2019). Ms. Q seemed to think a man should work, as she was apparently uncomfortable that her husband was still unemployed. Ms. O appeared happier with the division of labor with her husband, mainly because he was happy with his work even if he did not earn as much income as she did. She also regarded work as important for him.

5. Conclusions

Macro statistical data show that the number of women who continue to work even after childbirth has been increasing in Japan. Using microdata from a current survey, I was able to confirm that the development of systems that support work-family balance has progressed in some companies and that women continue to work using these systems. Additionally, inspired by role models in their workplace, these women commit to continuing with their jobs, resulting in the new phenomenon that there are now men and women who plan their lives based

on the assumption that both will work. In the survey conducted over a decade ago, many women spoke of continuing to work to become economically independent. However, although statements such as "I want to buy my own things with my own money" and "I think I have to do something for my old age" suggest that women wanted to assume responsibility for their own lives to a certain degree, they were not prepared to support the lives of their husbands and children (Ogasawara 2005).

In contrast, women who participated in the current survey spoke more clearly about their responsibilities for the family budget. Among them were women who spoke of establishing a financial plan based on dual incomes and of having mental readiness to become the family's breadwinner should the husband's company fail. Additionally, some men in dual-earning couples clearly mentioned their reliance on their wives' incomes. This includes a man who said he wanted his wife to continue working to maintain their current standard of living and a man who only became aware that he could be the family's breadwinner when faced with the emergency of premature birth. Further, examples in which the strength of women's economic power has been clearly shown include the Ms. O couple, in which the husband quit his job and moved to his wife's work location and the wife became the main provider of their livelihood, and the Ms. Q couple, in which the husband resigned from the company to avoid a situation in which both spouses would be aiming to advance to senior-level management at the same company.

Survey data also showed, however, that mothers' entry into the workplace is not accompanied by the parallel involvement of fathers at home. Various national surveys confirm the findings of this study that users of systems that support work-family balance, such as childcare leave and shorter working hours, are overwhelmingly women. For example, in 2018, 354,000 women but only 28,000 men took childcare leave and received benefits nationwide (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2019). Moreover, according to Ishizuka (2019), a survey on men's participation in childcare and housework conducted by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation in 2019 found that approximately 70 % of men who did not take childcare leave did not intend to take leave from the beginning, while only 30 % replied that they wanted to take leave but could not. Similarly, 65 % of Japanese fathers with children under the age of six did not spend any time in taking care of them in 2016, while 68 % of them did not do any housework (Sōmushō 2016).

We conclude that the more sophisticated the company systems that support work-family balance and the more the women who use them, the more men are exempt from doing work at home. The majority of policies that aim to improve work-family balance are by design gender-neutral; facing a decrease in the working-age population, companies are under pressure to introduce such measures to enhance the retention of female workers. Since these systems were assumed to be utilized by women, male workers were inclined to believe that domestic

work should indeed be carried out by women. It is ironic that women's entry into the workforce has been strengthening their traditional mothering and housewife roles.

To support men's roles at home, the Japanese government has begun to consider adopting policies to encourage male government officials to take childcare leave. Measures under consideration include reflecting the ratio of male subordinates on leave in a personnel performance evaluation or promoting male workers to prepare a plan for childcare leave. It is hoped that such policies will reduce the current bias toward women taking childcare leave, which, in theory, men are equally entitled to take. Without the implementation of policies that encourage men's participation in childcare and housework, there is a serious risk that despite women's stronger commitment to the labor market, the rigid gender division will continue to permeate contemporary Japanese families. The chapter concludes, therefore, that while more couples in Japan plan their lives on the assumption of dual income, women's stronger commitment to work is accompanied by a surprisingly stronger fixation on their traditional gender roles.

One of the limitations of this study is that it was conducted in large corporations in Japan's major cities where lifetime employment is most pronounced. The challenges employed women face in small-to-medium-sized companies or in rural areas may be different. Future research will benefit from expanding the scope of the study to assess how the provision and utilization of systems supporting work-family balance may differ according to company size and geography.

In addition, future research should take into account post-COVID working style change. Due to the pandemic caused by the spread of COVID-19, the global labor market was forced to undergo dramatic changes. In Japan, perhaps the greatest change was felt after the declaration of a state of emergency in April 2020 when many companies shifted to working from home. This was likely the first time for many people to experience the new working style, so it is interesting to see how the change influences women's employment and gender roles. Intuitively, one would think that the spread of remote work will give fathers greater opportunities to participate at home and make it easier for mothers to combine work and family. However, preliminary studies suggest that this may not necessarily be the case.

For example, Koreeda (2022) discusses the gender gap observed in time surveys conducted on families with preschool children before (August 2019) and during (June 2021) the pandemic reported by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Citizens and Cultural Affairs. While mothers' time spent on childcare and household chores increased on average by 20 minutes, fathers' contribution stayed the same. Similar research on couples' division of parental and household work reveals that mothers' absolute time spent on childcare and housework expanded with the pandemic, and fathers' share only increased a little (Yokomaku 2020).

Both studies speculate that with the temporary closure of schools, kindergartens, and nurseries, the overwhelming majority of the burden of overseeing children's study and other activities at home as well as preparing and serving lunch for them (and for fathers working at home) fell on women. Further research is necessary to ascertain whether post-COVID working style change finally results in destabilizing traditional gender relations in Japan, or whether it again fails to do so with women's mothering and housewife roles remaining intact.

Acknowledgments

A portion of this chapter is based on an interview survey conducted in two large companies supported by a grant from the Nomura School of Advanced Management. I wish to express my deep gratitude to the two companies and their employees who participated in the survey. I received numerous useful comments and support in all aspects of the research from the survey's fellow researchers, Makiko Nishikawa, Shingo Ikeda, and Yukio Ishizuka, and would like to extend my sincere gratitude to them. Any errors in this chapter are to be attributed to me alone.

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Appendix A.

Table 1: Attributes of interviewees

Company	Employee	Sex	Age	Marital status	Presence of child(ren) and age(s)
Company X	B	Female	26	Married	0
Company X	A	Female	33	Married	None
Company X	D	Female	33	Married	4, 1
Company X	E	Female	33	Single	None
Company X	C	Female	34	Married	1
Company X	I	Female	42	Married	9, 6
Company X	H	Female	46	Married	16, 13
Company X	J	Female	46	Single	None
Company X	G	Female	48	Divorced	19
Company X	F	Female	50	Married	16
Company X	L	Male	31	Married	1
Company X	K	Male	33	Married	2
Company X	N	Male	42	Married	6
Company X	M	Male	52	Married	22, 19
Company Y	V	Female	34	Single	None
Company Y	T	Female	35	Married	6, 2
Company Y	U	Female	36	Married	0
Company Y	S	Female	37	Married	2
Company Y	P	Female	38	Married	6, 4
Company Y	R	Female	41	Married	8, 4
Company Y	Q	Female	46	Married	10
Company Y	O	Female	54	Married	24, 21
Company Y	Z	Male	35	Married	6
Company Y	Y	Male	39	Married	9, 6
Company Y	W	Male	41	Married	13, 10
Company Y	X	Male	45	Married	15, 8

Source: Author

Appendix B.

Table 2: The person responsible for taking child(ren) to and from a daycare center

Family	Age(s) of child(ren)	Person(s) responsible for delivering a child(ren) in the morning	Person(s) responsible for picking up child(ren) in the evening
Family B of Company X	9 mo.	Husband	Wife: 2 days; babysitter: 2 days; grandmother: 1 day
Family C of Company X	1 yr.	Usually husband	Wife: 4 days; husband: 1 day
Family D of Company X	4 yr. & 1 yr.	Husband	Wife
Family F of Company X	16 yr.	Husband	Wife
Family G of Company X	19 yr.	Usually wife	Usually wife
Family H of Company X	16 yr. & 13 yr.	Wife	Wife
Family I of Company X	9 yr. & 6 yr.	Wife	Wife → wife: 4 days; husband: 1 day
Family K of Company X	2 yr.	Husband	Wife
Family O of Company Y	24 yr. & 21 yr.	NA	Husband & wife take turns
Family P of Company Y	6 yr. & 4 yr.	Wife	Wife: 4 days; grandmother: 1 day
Family Q of Company Y	10 yr.	Wife	Grandparents: 5 days; husband & wife share as well
Family R of Company Y	8 yr. & 4 yr.	Wife	Grandparents: 4 days; paid volunteer: 1 day
Family S of Company Y	2 yr.	Husband	Wife
Family T of Company Y	6 yr. & 2 yr.	Husband	Wife: 3 days; grandfather: 2 days

Source: Author