



Womenomics



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The Impacts of Japanese-Style Employment Systems on Women

By Akari Yoshida

A lot of the issues concerning gender equality in Japan are strongly influenced by the Japanese style of employment. This paper explains the impact that the Japanese-style employment has had on women and outlines proposals how to reform the system. It is divided into three sections. The first section describes the defining characteristics of the Japanese-style employment, while the second section links common gender issues such as the employment rate, insecurity of tenure, gender pay gap, and the low number of women in leadership roles to this system. The third and last section identifies policy implications and proposals to address these.

The Male-Breadwinner Model: A Brief Overview

Japan's rapid industrialization after World War II contributed to the growth and expansion of the country's unique employment system (Saito, 2013, p. 4). The

Japanese employment system is characterized by lifetime employment and a seniority-based wage system for employee retention. It has no contract expiry and requires long working hours and nonnegotiable job transfers in exchange for stable employment and skills training.

Along with this set of Japanese-style employment practices, the strict division of labor within the family was also established—men worked long hours outside the home, while women were full-time housewives, shouldering both household and childcare duties (Yoshizaki, 2018, p. 36). The gender-based labor segmentation in both public (work) and private (family) spheres gave rise to the “male breadwinner model” (Shuto, 2013, p. 153).

The *male-breadwinner model* eliminated women in the workplace. It was a natural consequence for women to quit their jobs after marriage (Zhou, 2019, p. 40). It was common for companies to require married women to retire. Some companies even set different retirement ages for women and men (30 years old for women compared to 55 years old for men) (Omori, 2016, p. 3). The retirement age for women was fixed around the time that they get married. It was generally accepted that after marriage, women would quit their careers and focus on managing their households and raising their families.

The employment model also created a gender gap in job duties. Male employees were assigned to work in jobs with heavy responsibility, while women were assigned to administrative support jobs, even if they were full-time employees. Companies did not invest in training women workers (so-called “female office worker model”) (Wang, 2017, p. 39) because once they get married, it is assumed that housework and childcare will interfere with their ability to work. In short, in the Japanese employment system, which is characterized by lifetime employment, women were excluded.

Economic fluctuations also highlighted the temporary nature of women employment. When the Japanese economy was in the doldrums in the 1960s, firms began to hire temporary workers to reduce labor costs. The situation created an opportunity for housewives to reenter the workforce as contract workers. However, job insecurity remained as a concern because of the supplementary nature of this type of employment. It was considered natural to terminate their employment when the need for them ceased (Yoshizaki, 2018, p. 36). While the male nonworking population varies regardless of the economy’s condition, the female nonworking population clearly expands during economic downturns.

Housewives engaged in part-time work served as an employment adjustment valve, protecting the tenure of full-time male employees (Zhou, 2019, p. 30). Wives in nonregular employment are put into poorly paid, volunteer-like work because their husbands are supposed to be financially guaranteeing their livelihood through their salaries. This *wife-attached male-worker model* provided a justification for companies to demand longer hours from their male employees because the company is paying both his and his wife’s wages through his salary, family allowance, and other compensatory incentives.

The male-breadwinner model was further entrenched in the 1980s by a combination of government fiscal and social policies. A tax-deduction scheme for the household head was introduced, provided that the spouse’s salary is equal to or less than 1.03

million JPY (around 9,000 USD). The spouse is taxed, and the deduction for the head of the household is reduced if the spouse's salary exceeds the amount. In most cases, the husband is the head of the household, so it falls on the wife to adjust her income to not exceed the set upper limit. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's (MHLW) 2011 survey of part-time workers, more than 60% of respondents said that the reason for adjusting their employment was that they would have to pay tax if their income exceeded 1.03 million JPY. In the same survey, the distribution of the annual income of spouses shows that the annual income of female nonregular employees peaks at around 1 million JPY (Adachi & Kaneda, 2016, p. 15).

The introduction of the "Japanese welfare society" government policy further strengthened the male-breadwinner model. This social policy put a premium on the family, highlighting women's role as the main providers of welfare. Tax and pension incentives were given to women who worked part time but took on the main responsibility of doing housework and childcare, taking care of her husband, caring for elderly parents, etc. In addition, a stronger male-breadwinner model was created by raising the limit of spouse exemption¹ in the tax system, introducing a special exemption for spouses,² and creating a third insured person³ in the national pension system. (Shuto, 2013, p. 154)

The decline of the male-breadwinner model began in the early 1990s with the collapse of the bubble economy. A combination of stagnating incomes, rapid population aging, and declining birthrate caused the decrease in the working population (Zhou, 2019, p. 42). Companies responded to the changing economic and demographic conditions by expanding nonregular employment while suppressing wages. Average worker income continued to regress, with the average income in 2010 dropping to the level last seen in the 1970s.

The Koizumi administration in the early 2000s, with its strong neoliberal aspirations, made shifting away from the male-dominated model a basic policy of the Cabinet. The government policy implied that the shift away from male-dominated economy was compatible with market-oriented thinking. However, the Koizumi administration failed to implement a specific policy to address these issues. Further, the welfare system was already failing, and the number of unmarried people and birthrates were also declining (Shuto, 2013, p. 155).

Persisting and Recurring Issues of Japanese Women in the Workforce

1. If the taxpayer has a deductible spouse under the Income Tax Act, a certain amount of income deduction is available.

2. Even if your spouse has an income of over 480,000 JPY (around 4,000 USD) per year and is not eligible for the spouse deduction, you may be able to receive a certain amount of income deduction depending on the amount of your spouse's income.

3. Among the members of the national pension, spouses aged between 20 and 60 (people with an annual income of less than 1.3 million JPY, around 11,000 USD) who are dependent on the second insured person, who is a member of the welfare-pension and mutual-aid association, are called "third insured person." The spouse's employee pension-plan or mutual-aid association pays the premiums, so the third insured person does not have to pay the premiums.

Although the male-breadwinner model is in decline with the number of dual-earner families currently exceeding that of single-income households, the gender gap persists. This section looks at the main issues that women in the workplace face.

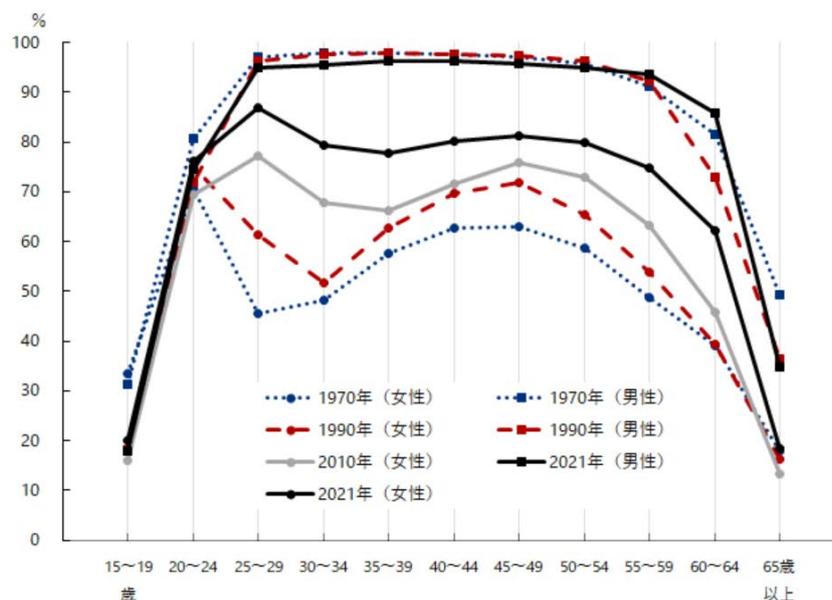
Female employment-participation rate

The female employment rate is still lower compared to the male employment rate. In 2020, the employment rate among 15–64 years old in Japan is at 70.6% for women and 83.4% for men (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2020).

In the recent years, male and female postgraduation employment rates are at similar levels (MHLW, 2021). However, Figure 1 shows that the gender gap starts from age 25–29 years old and becomes larger when women reach 30–39 years old. The *M* curb shows women leaving the labor market when they get married and/or give birth and come back after their children start going to elementary school or middle school.

Figure 1.

Labor-force participation rate by age group 1970, 1990, 2010, 2021



Note. Curbed graphs are women

Source: Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) (2022)

Marriage and pregnancy are the primary reasons why women drop out of the labor force. In a 2015 survey, 29% of women who quit their jobs because of pregnancy did so spontaneously, while others were forcibly dismissed and left without an option. The same survey found out that more than a quarter of women (25.5%) wanted to continue working but quit their jobs because of the difficulty of combining childcare and nursing (JILPT, 2017, p. 105).

The low participation of men in household chores and childcare is the primary reason why many women leave the workforce when they get married and/or become pregnant. According to a 2018 research conducted by the National Institute

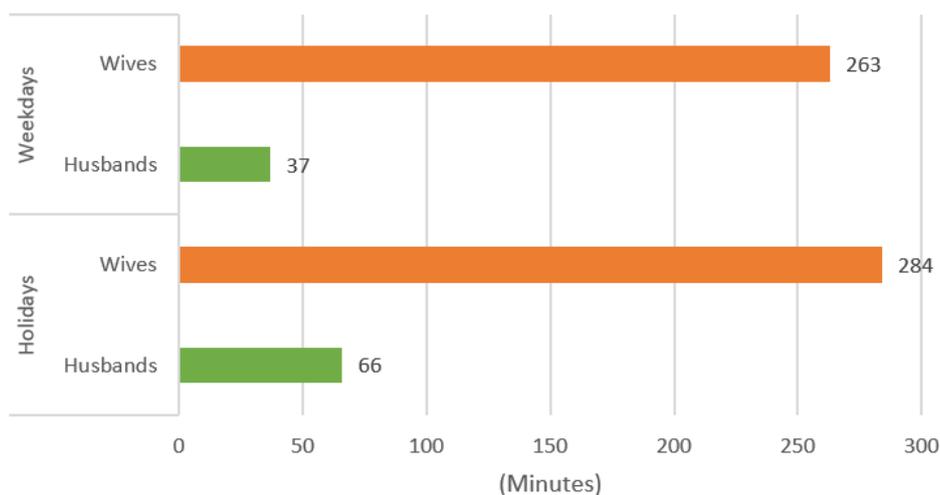
of Population and Social Security Research regarding housework time for husbands and wives, husbands spend 37 min while wives spend 263 min (4 hr 23 min) on weekdays, and husbands spend 66 min (1 hr 6 min) while wives spend 284 min (4 hr 44 min) on weekends. In other words, there is a seven-fold difference in the amount of time husbands and wives spend doing housework on weekdays and a four-fold difference on weekends (Figure 2).

The house-chores and childcare time-division rate is the lowest among the 33 countries surveyed, with Japan as the only country that has a husband-participation-rate of under 20% (GESIS, 2012). The low participation rate of Japanese men in house chores and childcare is related to the long-held gendered ideas on labor. Although more than half of men and women surveyed disagreed with the idea that the “husband should work outside while the wife should keep the house,” the figure is quite low compared to other countries (see Figure 3). Although the international comparative survey is several years old, recent domestic data indicate that no dramatic changes have occurred since then (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2018).

The reasons for this state of institutional inertia are multiple and complex. There is no incentive to change the gender division of labor, primarily because both social and economic systems reward this conservative setup. For example, the tax deductions are larger for households with full-time housewives. Instituting tax reforms is also difficult because Japanese politics is dominated by elderly men who benefit most from these tax deductions.

Figure 2.

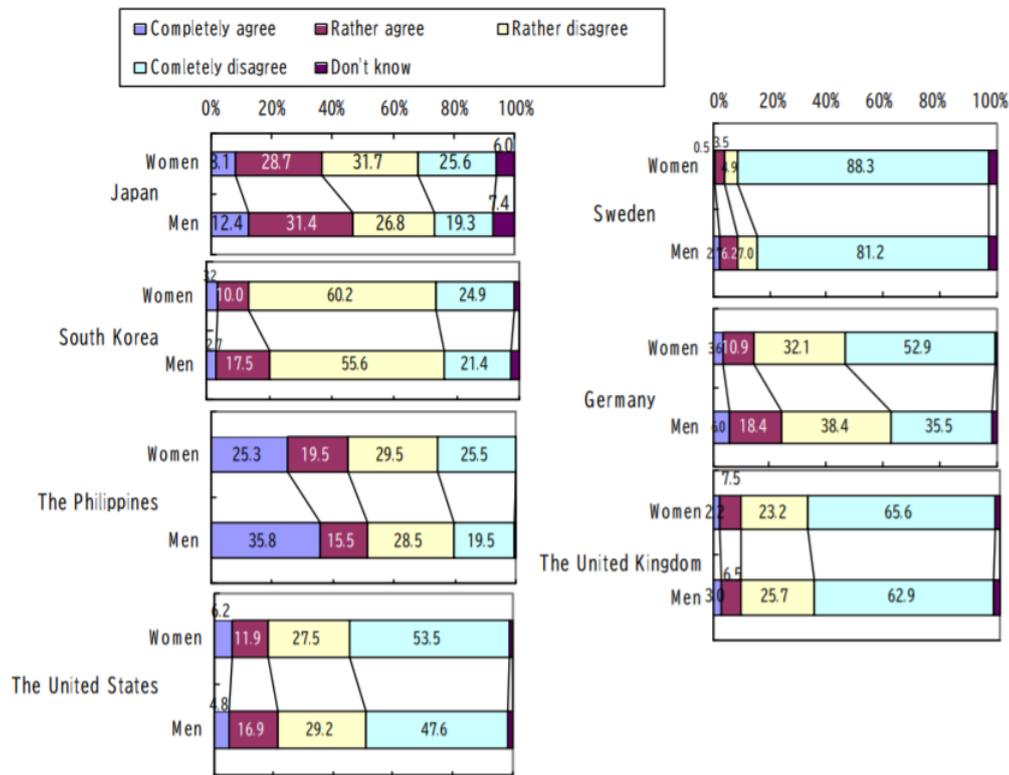
Average time spent by husbands and wives on housework



Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2018)

Figure 3.

Awareness of traditional gender roles ("A husband should work outside, while a wife should be full-time homemaker")



(Note) There data were collected from the Cabinet Office, "International Comparative Survey on Gender Equality" (2002 edition) and "Opinion Survey on Gender Equality" (July 2002).

Source: Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office (2003)

High number of women in nonregular, lower paid work

Even though, the women employment rate has surpassed that of the United States and some European countries (Goldman Sachs, 2019), more than half of women in the workforce are in nonregular employment, compared to only 20% of men. These women who are in part-time positions are often married. They do not start out as temporary workers, rather they become one after they drop out of full-time employment after marriage or pregnancy.

Nonregular workers often have lower salaries, less stable jobs, and low career-building prospects compared to regular workers. In addition, women are also paid less compared to men. Japan has a 23.5% gender wage gap, the second biggest gap among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Low number of women in leadership roles

The percentage of women in management positions is low. While the employment rate of women is above the OECD average, it is significantly lower than other countries when it comes to the percentage of women in management positions (see Figure 4).

Companies included in the survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare survey in 2013 cited three factors for the lack of or low number of women in managerial positions. First, they assert that “there are no women with the necessary knowledge, experience and judgment” that can fill in the position. Second, they argue that “although there are women who have the potential to be in managerial positions in the future, none of them currently have the years of service required to be in managerial positions.” And lastly, companies argue that women “leave the workforce before they become managers.” These factors do not justify the low number of women managers. Instead, these factors highlight the gender-related barriers that women oftentimes fail to overcome to land leadership roles in the workplace.

Figure 4.

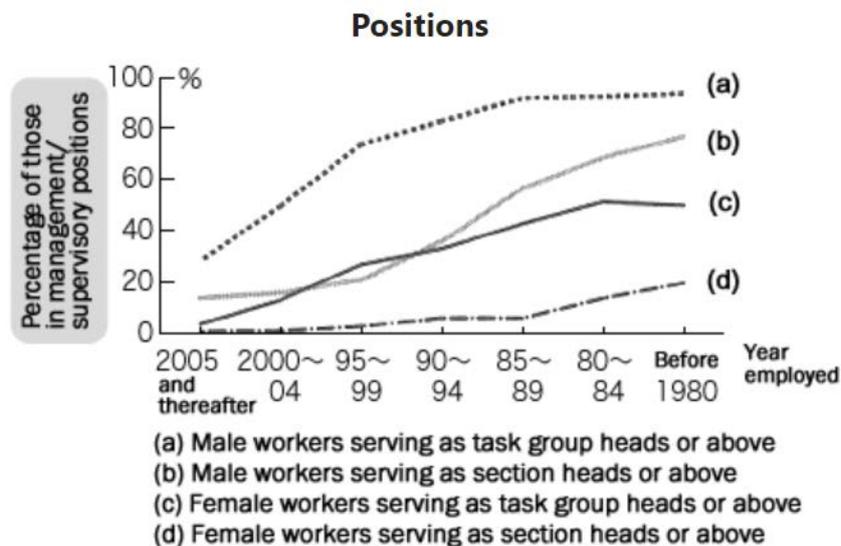
Employment ratio and ratio of woman manager (2019)



Source: Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (2020)

Figure 5.

Gender inequality in the proportion of those in managerial/supervisory positions (2009)



Source: Yamaguchi (2014).

Yamaguchi (2014) asserts that in Japan, gender plays a bigger role compared to educational background and other factors in determining whether a person can get a managerial position. Kato et al. (cited in Yamaguchi, 2014) found that longer working hours and performance evaluation results are skewed against women. Long working hours do not increase promotion rates for men but have a significant impact on promotion rates for women. This implies that for women, long working hours are a requirement for management positions. But women are constrained from working long hours by the longer and largely disproportionate amount of time that they must devote to housework and childcare compared to their male counterparts. In addition, the heavy burden of housework and childcare often lead most women to either deprioritize their careers or give this up entirely.

However, *pull factors* such as marriage, childbirth, and childcare are not the only factors affecting women's ability to rise to leadership positions. Osawa (in Sugiura, 2012, p. 112) pointed out that 35% of women without children have also temporarily or completely left the labor market. A 2011 survey comparing Japan and the United States found that Japanese women resigned from their jobs due to so-called push factors, such as dissatisfaction with their jobs and dead ends. Osawa conjectures that the push factor for women quitting the labor force is due to a dissatisfaction with their jobs. The dissatisfaction may stem from the fact that companies do not assign important jobs to female employees based on the assumption that they will quit soon. In addition, since women are not entrusted with high-responsibility positions, capacity-building opportunities that will build their "necessary knowledge, experience, and judgement" are either unavailable or withheld from them. So women's performance is often evaluated lower compared to their male peers. Further, women are also placed in positions with lower opportunities for promotion regardless of their performance. These elements perpetuate the cycle where high performance-evaluation results increase the promotion rate for men but not for women.

The lack of women leaders in the corporate sector is also mirrored in the political sphere. The current percentage of women in leadership positions is only 10.1% for members of the House of Representatives (2019).

Gender bias, including the perception that “politics is for men,” is a major reason why there are few female politicians. Women politicians’ winning rate is lower than that of male politicians because the public do not vote for them with the bias. Women also do not consider politics to be a viable career option because they fear that they cannot balance their activities as a politician with housework and childcare.

Aside from these perceptions, the barriers to entry for women who are interested in politics are too high. Local assemblies are the primary entry point for Japanese politicians. However, these are often characterized as “old boys’ clubs,” where female politicians are often discriminated against and sexually harassed. In instances where female politicians rise above these circumstances, they often pose additional barriers to other aspiring female politicians. Since there are so few women politicians, women politicians gain a privileged position, and some do not want to increase the number of potential rivals.

On July 17, 2020, considering that the current situation is far from the target, the Japanese government announced giving up their 202030 policy (by 2020, 30%) which set the goal to have 30% of women in leadership positions by 2020. The government declared that this goal is “impossible” to achieve in 2020 and postponed the fulfillment date of its target to “as early as possible by 2030.”

In 2020, there are only 11.8% of women in management positions (data from MHLW, 2018). The reasons behind this low rate of female managers is greatly influenced by the view of gender roles that “women are responsible for housework and childcare.” In a survey conducted by a private company in 2021, 81.1% of respondents cited the reason of low female managers rates as “an atmosphere that makes it difficult to continue in management after marriage or childbirth.” In addition to that, various other discrimination against women, such as the gender wage gap, and the lack of experience in responsible work based on the company's assumption that women will quit after childbirth, etc., affect the low ratio of women in managerial positions.

Policy Reforms and Their Impact

The policies intended to address the issues that women in the workplace struggle with are related to breaking the Japanese-style of employment: (1) policies that aim to reduce work hours and encourage men to take a more active role in care work, (2) policies that seek to abolish the seniority system, and (3) policies that establish equal pay for equal work. These policies have been formalized in the Basic Plan for Gender Equality that was formulated in 2000. The plan is reviewed every five years and is in its fifth iteration in 2020. On paper, the government stresses that it recognizes the glaring gender gap in the workplace, but whether the policies that it has implemented is enforceable or effective remains to be seen.

Reducing work hours and encouraging men’s active role in care work

Recent *work-style reforms* have been implemented in attempts to reduce working hours and to prevent death from overwork (*karoshi*). Although working hours are

decreasing annually, Japan still has one of the longest working hours compared to other OECD countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

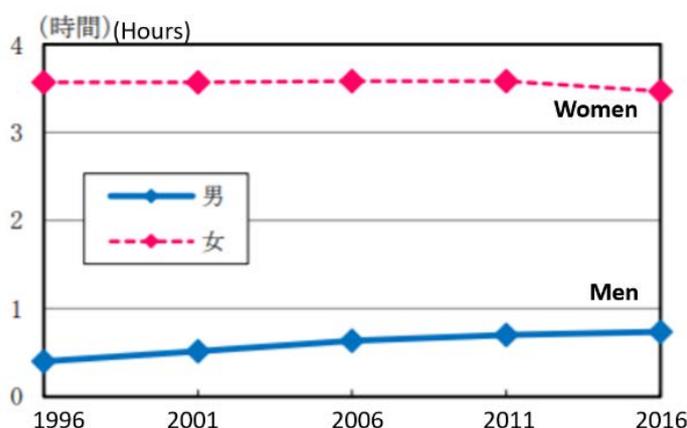
The Labour Standards Act was amended in 2019 to establish a maximum overtime rule. From April 2019, overtime was capped at 45 hours per month and 360 hours per year, and employers who break the overtime limit will be subjected to a penalty of up to six months' imprisonment or a fine of up to 300,000 JPY (around 2,500 USD). Large companies (with 301 or more employees depending on the industry) and small- and medium-sized enterprises (with less than 300 employees) were also targeted. In addition, companies that violate the Labour Standards Law will be publicly shamed by having their names and the details of their violations published on the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's website.

Although the explicit goal of these work-style reforms is to encourage work-life balance (and largely prevent extreme effects of overwork such as grave illnesses and death), the implicit goal is to nudge more men to be more involved in their households and take up a larger share of the housework and childcare. Research suggests that there is a correlation between the length of working hours and men's participation in childcare and housework. Working fathers (respondents' average working hours at 47 hours a week) spend an average of 6.2 hours a week on housework, compared to only 4.8 hours for those who work 60 hours or more a week. They also spend an average of 9.3 hours a week on childcare, compared to only 7.1 hours for those who work 60 hours or more a week.

Between 2006 and 2016, men's household-related time (housework, caring for family, childcare, shopping) increased by 6 minutes per day (or an increase of 36.5 hours per year) over a 10-year period (MHLW, 2016). Although women's time spent on housework has decreased by 10 minutes per day over the same period, a significant gap persists (see Figure 6).

Figure 6.

Changes in time related to housework by gender per week 1996–2016



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications - Statistics Bureau (2016).

Housework, childcare, and nursing care are largely seen as women's roles. The gendered division of labor is rooted in underlying social norms as previously explained. The government tried implementing policies that promote men's

participation in child rearing. For example, Japan ranks second (only behind South Korea) in having the longest childcare-leave period and largest number of benefits.

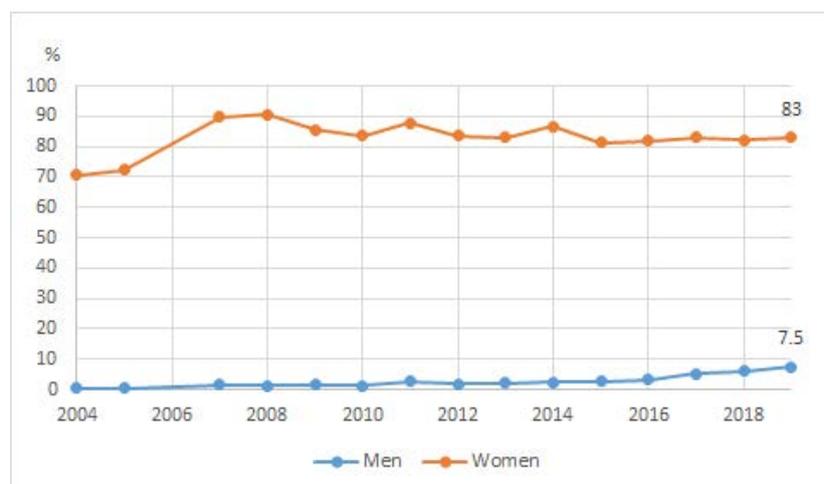
However, a large majority of male employees do not take childcare leave. In 2019, about 83% of women took childcare leave while only 7.5% of men took time off (see Figure 7). In addition, about 90% of female employees who took childcare leave take 6 months or more, while about 80% of male employees who took childcare leave take less than one month (MHLW, 2020).

Men do not take childcare leave partly because of the work culture. Paternity harassment or the improper treatment by bosses and colleagues when a man applies for childcare leave is common. A Japan Federation of Trade Unions survey (2019) found that more than 20% of men who took paternity leave have experienced paternal harassment, such as being refused a promotion or being ordered to relocate. Taking childcare leave is counted against a man's career and prospects for improvement—the opportunity costs are simply too high.

The Childcare and Family Care Leave Act was revised in 2021 to address this. The law requires companies to inform all employees about the maternity leave and childcare leave system and confirm employees' intention to take it. The law also requires companies to publish their paternity-leave take-up rates annually. Although this would encourage companies to be more transparent, the requirement is only applicable to big companies with more than 1,000 employees; small and medium sized companies can opt out of the regulation.

Figure 7.

Percentages of workers taking childcare leave



Note. The 2011 data excludes Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures.

Data: Basic Survey of Gender Equality in Employment Management 2019

Abolishing the seniority system

Losing global competitiveness and the push to secure better human resources are the main reasons of the seniority system's decline. In 2019, the chairman of Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) and the president of Toyota Motor

Corporation, one of Japan's leading global companies, said that it would be difficult to protect lifetime employment. Their declaration marked a turning point because despite global trends, many Japanese companies still practice lifetime employment and its adjunct age-based salary system.

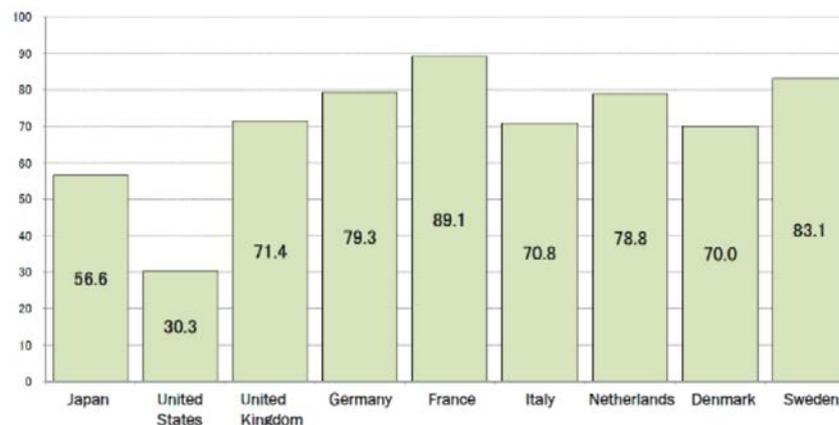
In Japan's seniority system, the longer one has been with the company, the higher one's chances are for promotion, regardless of ability. In other words, even if you have the ability, if you take a leave or leave for childbirth or childcare, there will be a big delay in promotion due to the length of service even after returning to work. Therefore, by making the promotion system based on ability rather than seniority, women who return to work after childbirth or childcare will be able to be promoted according to their ability, regardless of their length of service.

Establishing equal pay for equal work

Figure 8 shows that in Japan, the wage of part-time workers is about 40% less than full-time workers. The latest policy in a series of efforts to establish equal pay for equal work was the Work Style Reform Implementation Plan announced in 2017, and a bill related to work style reform was submitted to the Diet in 2018. This bill prohibits unreasonable differences between the treatment, such as basic pay and bonuses, of regular employees and nonregular employees in the same company. The law took effect in April 2020 for large companies and in April 2021 for small and medium-sized companies.

Figure 8.

Wage levels for part-time workers (2016)



Sources: Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, Databook of International Labour Statistics 2016; data for Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom are from 2014, others from 2010

Note. Full time = 100

Source: Tsuru (2016)

Although the principle of equal pay for equal work is enshrined in the law, only guidance from the labor department is given. This guidance appears to be insufficient, considering that a survey of companies, months before the law's implementation, indicated that they are not prepared and, in some cases, are unable

to implement the law⁴ due to increased labor costs and the perception that companies are unable to agree on a standard for classifying equivalent jobs. This bottleneck stems from the discretion of Japanese companies to freely determine their respective working conditions and wage systems. In addition, there are no penalties for noncompliance. Going to court and asking for damages, in most cases, is the employees only course of action against companies' noncompliance.

The law "corrects the unreasonable disparity between regular and non-regular work (balanced treatment)," but it is not "equal pay for work of equal value" (parity of treatment) (Yamada, 2021). For example, a regular employee doing the same job for the same amount of time as a part-time worker and getting a higher salary than a part-time worker is okay because of different assumptions, such as different future career tracks for regular employees and part-time workers. In other words, the law does not require that "if the labor is the same, the same wage is paid." This is due to (1) both wage and treatment disparities and (2) differences in compensation benefits such as commuting and family allowances (Mizumachi, 2019).

Mizumachi (2019) proposes the following policies to rectify the pay disparities: (1) provide benefits and allowances to nonregular workers, (2) provide bonuses and severance pay to nonregular workers, and (3) provide basic pay to nonregular workers. First, benefits such as health check subsidies, commuting allowances, lunch subsidies, and others should be provided to nonregular workers as well. Second, bonuses and severance pay should be given to temporary workers as well. However, this proposal continues to be a divisive issue. In 2020, there two major cases where companies were sued by nonregular employees. In the first case, a part-time worker who worked the same amount of time as full-time workers received no bonus salary. In the second case, a contract-based employee doing the same job as regular employees and had worked for 10 years received no severance pay. In both cases, until the second trial, it was judged as "it is unreasonable for not paying bonus/severance pay," and the lower court said that 60% of the bonus and 25% of the severance pay should be paid for each case. However, when the case reached the Supreme Court, the decision was overturned in both cases. And lastly, the basic pay system should be extended to nonregular workers.

Conclusions

The Japanese-style employment is a "male-centered labor practice," meaning that companies require employees to work long hours and accept company-ordered transfers. This was based on the premise that the employee in the Japanese-style employment does not have to allot their time for care work because there was a person who could take care of all this—the full-time housewife. In other words, women who still often carry out care work are alienated by the Japanese-style

1. A survey of large companies conducted three months before the law came into force showed that 8.2% had already taken action, 34.5% were planning to take action and 10.8% had not. In addition, in a survey conducted on SMEs in January 2021 three months before the enforcement to SMEs, 28% of the companies answered that they had completed equal pay for equal work, and 29% of companies answered that they are considering measures/do not know what to do (NHK, 2021).

employment. In addition, women are ancillary in the company because the assumption that "women will quit after marriage and childbirth" remain.

Currently, Japan has launched some projects aimed at promoting women, such as "202030," with the goal of increasing the percentage of women in management positions to 30% in 2020. However, most of those projects have failed. Projects such as these can be compared to a software. A newly installed software will not properly work if the operating system is not updated. Japan needs to update its operating system—the fundamental part of the society before installing those "software." Reforming the Japanese-style employment is a major step in that update.

The strong Japanese-style employment that has existed for more than half a century can be abolished by (1) reducing work hours, (2) abolishing the seniority system, and (3) establishing equal pay for equal work. These recommendations on the surface are proposals for labor reform, but these are male-centered labor practices, and reforming them will be the basis for promoting the active participation of women.

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Regional Economic Programme Asia (SOPAS)

Coordination: Cristita Marie Perez, Senior Programme Manager

Sakuya Iwakawa, Programme Management Assistant

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