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# Three policy perspectives on Japanese female employment

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## Abstract

With a detailed historical analysis of postwar Japanese female employment, this article presents three underlying policy perspectives that shape the fact that women have less chance for high-quality employment despite the rising labor force participation rate. The three assumptions of women's role in policy-making are as follows: (1) women as housewives—dependent on males, do not earn a living salary and are thus marginalized in the labor market; (2) women as individuals pursuing gender equality should be treated without discrimination in the workplace; and (3) women as key drivers for economic growth can contribute to the solution to labor shortages. The postwar history of Japanese female employment is full of interaction among these three policy perspectives. Generally, it passes through phases of the dominance of the housewife perspective, the reformation from the equality perspective and the counterattack from the housewife perspective, as well as the mainstreaming of the economic actor perspective.

**Keywords:** Female employment, Policy perspectives, Japan, History

## Introduction

Women's participation in the labor market has always been an important indicator for measuring their economic status within a country. Recent years have witnessed a rise in Japanese women's participation in the labor market, with the employment rate among women aged 15–64 increasing from 60.2% in 2011 to 71.3% in 2021. Although the labor force participation rate for Japanese women is good, the situation of female employment is far from optimistic, as their jobs are mostly unstable or low wage. How shall we understand the gap between the quantity and quality of Japanese female employment in a country well known for its unique employment institutions and division of gender roles? Does the Japanese government attempt to maintain the previous pattern of gender division or promote the dual-worker model? Answering these questions requires us to investigate the postwar history of Japanese female employment.

This article will start with a summary of the characteristics of female employment in different welfare arrangements based on welfare regime theory. The following is a discussion of three important policy perspectives on female employment. By illustrating how the different assumptions about the role of women might influence female employment,

this section sets a theoretical foundation for the historical analysis followed. The historical review of postwar Japanese female employment shows how the three policy perspectives come into various social policies concerning female employment. By highlighting the interaction between government and enterprises, this article enriches the description of female employment in the static welfare state framework.

### **Female employment in light of welfare regimes**

Employment, closely related to indicators for classifying welfare regimes such as de-commodification and the formation of the working class, has always been a core topic of the study of welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990). Jobs are important to laborers not only in the sense that they provide a major source of income but also because they are part of the eligibility requirements for welfare in some countries. In the form of employment, laborers are connected to the social insurance system established by the state on the one hand and enjoy welfare offered by employers on the other hand. The traditional analysis of welfare states assumes laborers as male and rarely touches female employment. Females, seen as family members, are mostly included in the analysis of family. Lewis (1992) notes that the structuring of welfare regimes builds on the division of gender roles and that females are an important source of family welfare provision. As the female employment rate continues to rise, female contribution extends beyond home care. As such, academic studies, more than welfare state research, should seriously focus on questions such as the following: How does the traditional labor market that used to be established for males incorporate female laborers? How does the state react to the rapid increase in female employment? How do women balance work and family?

### **Female employment models in different types of welfare regimes**

According to welfare state theory, the state, the market and the family are the three main providers of social welfare. Esping-Andersen (1990) presents a typology of European welfare states based on de-commodification and social stratification, which is conservative, liberal and social democratic. The three types of welfare regimes not only differ in the subject and level of welfare provision but also affect women's careers in varying ways. In social democratic regimes, welfare is mainly provided by collective care outside the family, which tends to favor female labor market participation and reduce the gender pay gap. In conservative welfare states, welfare provision is usually confined to certain occupations or specific enterprises. When men are the main breadwinners, this arrangement reinforces the gender division since housewives have to rely on their husband for social welfare. The liberal framework of welfare provision leaves welfare provision to the market where women need to work for economic benefits, thereby having a higher proportion of women laborers.

### **Japanese female employment model in the literature**

There is an extensive literature on the Japanese employment model. However, these studies usually assume laborers as males in large corporations and rarely include middle and small-sized enterprises or female groups (Aoki 1988; Nitta 1995; Yamada 2000). Those involving women in their studies tend to treat women as lacking working preferences and exclude them from the employment routine. Similarly, when Esping-Andersen (1997) defined the Japanese welfare regime as a hybrid of the liberal-residual and

conservative-corporatist models, his definition was based on data from the 1990s when Japan's welfare provision system mainly relied on enterprises, but the attainment of welfare was closed with enterprise membership, more precisely, male employment in large enterprises. Emiko Ochiai (2019) paralleled the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker family model with the Keynesian welfare state, Fordist production system and mass consumption society as components of the social system in the twentieth century. However, regarding female employment, both Japanese employment studies and welfare regime research lack a historical perspective. Moreover, it is a simplistic practice to label female employment as marginalized in the production sphere. In fact, Japanese female employment is a multifaceted historical process, reflecting complex and profound changes in policy goals and social values.

### **Different policy perspectives on female employment**

Different policies on female employment are driven by different ideas of how people view women's role in the family and society. The varying assumptions about the family and the role of women in policy-making will have different impacts on female employment. This section will provide an analysis of three policy perspectives: women as housewives, women pursuing gender equality and women as key drivers of economic growth and their corresponding institutional arrangements.

#### **Women as housewives**

This policy perspective stems from the male breadwinner/female homemaker family model established in the Golden Era of the postwar decades. The model builds itself on a division of labor in which the husband spends most of his time working, while the wife takes on most of the responsibility for doing housework and bringing up children (Lewis 1992). In such a gendered arrangement, women, as a family member, do not participate in public life independently, whose life is secured by the state or the enterprise but through male family members. This family paradigm prevailed in many industrial countries in the postwar period when women usually left their jobs after marriage or childbirth and returned to the workforce once their children go to school. Therefore, the curve of the female labor force participation rate by age resembles the letter M, which implies that women being full-time housewives after becoming mothers has been a widely accepted institutional arrangement instead of purely individual choices. Mies (1986) labels this phenomenon the "housewifization," the process in which women mainly engage in reproductive work in the private sphere and do not work with men as they did in agricultural societies. Certainly, the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model in its full sense does not exist in any country. While middle-class women might be able to leave the labor market and depend on their husbands, working-class women mostly participate in the workforce for a living.

#### **Women pursuing gender equality**

After the Second World War, many western countries experienced a period of significant economic growth. In those years, most workers in the labor force were men. However, from the 1970s, women began to participate in the workforce with great enthusiasm, which not only increased the employment rate but also fueled massive gender equality

campaigns in the workplace. In the recruitment, evaluation and promotion processes, women were usually offered low-paying and less important jobs or even rejected for reasons such as “lack of continuity because of marriage and childbirth”, “less committed to work than men” and so on, a typical practice of statistical discrimination. Therefore, equal opportunity for employment, equal pay for equal work and independent economic sources, together with participation in the public sphere, became a core appeal for gender equality with respect to employment.

Improving women’s status has long been one of the important agendas of the United Nations. In 1946, The Commission on the Status of Women was established to monitor the situation of women and to promote women’s rights. In 1972, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1975 as International Women’s Year. That year, the first UN world conference on women was held in Mexico City, and the UN further designated the decade from 1976 to 1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women. In 1980, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was signed in the Copenhagen middle-decade review conference. Later, the signatory states made domestic laws accordingly to eliminate discrimination against women in the labor market.

#### **Women as key drivers of economic growth**

This perspective treats women laborers as key drivers for economic growth, emphasizing women as potential human resources in economic development. Kathy Matsui first applied it to Japan in “Womenomics: Buy the Female Economy” in 1999. Matsui is a former vice chair and chief Japanese strategist for the global investment bank Goldman Sachs, having great influence on the womenomics of the Abe administration (Abe 2013). In 2019, Matsui and her colleagues updated the womenomics report to version 5.0. In the latest report, they reiterate that their argument regarding the need for greater gender diversity is not social or cultural but rather a simple economic one. In view of the three key determinants of economic growth—labor, capital, and productivity—Japan’s situation can be summarized as “population is shrinking, capital is finite, and productivity gains will take time”. Therefore, how to boost the female labor participation rate is crucial in solving Japan’s chronic labor shortage problem.

#### **Positioning female employment from three policy perspectives**

This section introduces three important policy perspectives on female employment. The perspective of women as housewives follows a traditional gender division of labor and does not take women as standard laborers. The policy goal of promoting female employment is to ensure women’s family responsibilities to maximize family welfare. Female employment is seen as a choice above basic living needs, incomes from which are also taken as dispensable, at best a supplement. The perspective of women pursuing gender equality reflects a resistance to economic dependence, emphasizing that women have equal power with men in all fields. In regard to employment, it insists that sexual discrimination should be eliminated in recruitment, management, promotion and all other stages to satisfy women’s needs for self-actualization. The perspective of women as key drivers for economic growth is centered around economic development. Women’s importance is embodied in their potential contribution to the economy. Improving the female labor force participation rate is thus the primary task from this perspective. The

**Table 1** Three different policy perspectives on female employment

	The role of woman	Macro policy	Attitudes toward female employment	Gender equality
Male breadwinner/ female care-giver	Home maker	Full employment of male	Negative	Unequal
Gender equality	Free and equal citizen	Gender equality in employment	Positive	Equal
Economic growth driver	Labor force	Maximization of labor supply	Positive	Indifferent

above three perspectives constitute the basic assumptions of related social policies and interact with each other through the history of Japanese female employment. The next section will illustrate how these three perspectives act on policy practice by reviewing related social policies in different historical stages (Table 1).

## The evolution of social policy concerning Japanese female employment

### Japanese female employment in the postwar period

In the early postwar period, the whole Japanese society was in dire need of change. The massive urbanization and industrialization in the 1950s led Japan into a period that was later often described as miraculous. From 1955 to 1973, Japan's gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an average rate of 9.1% per year. In this High-Growth Era, Japan went through rapid industrialization and consequently a great transformation of lifestyle. Many rural men and women went to the city for jobs and later made a home in the city. This exactly responded to the needs of large enterprises to absorb young labor to expand production in the rising tide of economic development.

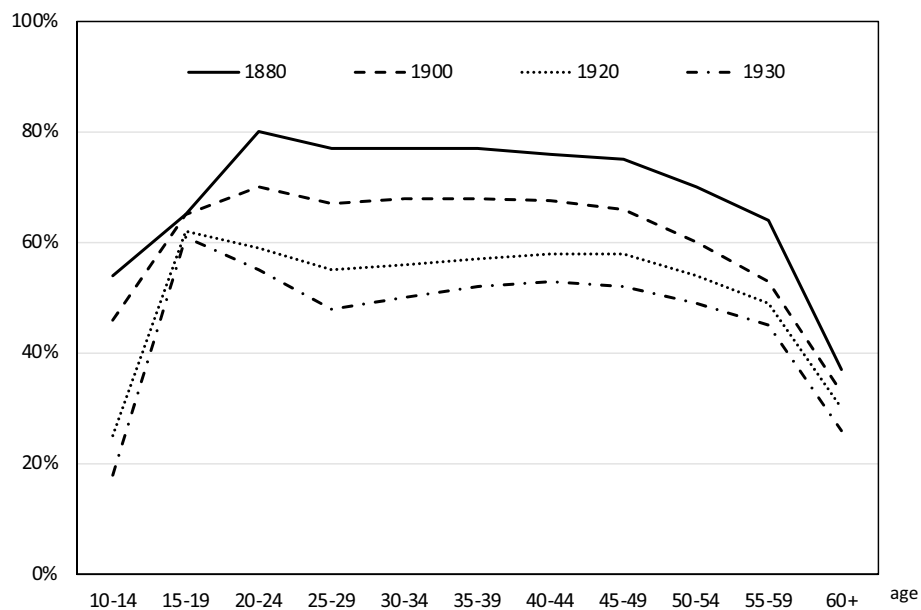
### Gender division of labor in enterprises

After long and unremitting efforts of labor unions, a Densan Wage System in which labor unions dominate wage setting was established. The Densan wage is based on the "seikatsukyu" thought, highlighting the satisfaction of the basic living needs of laborers and their families by taking into account the age of laborers, the number of family members, the increase over time and so on. The "seikatsukyu" thought originated from the New System of Hardwork (勤労新体制確立要綱) during the war-time period. To mobilize as many laborers for the State, work was portrayed as a citizen's responsibility and honor to the Empire, and one should dedicate to the Empire's cause with great enthusiasm. In return, the State will treat different categories of workers equally and guarantee an income for basic livelihood. As a result, the divide between blue-collar and white-collar workers diminished, and people began to organize labor unions within enterprises instead of around occupations or industries. Furthermore, the wage gap between blue-collar and white-collar workers gradually closed. This was later summarized as an important feature of Japanese-style employment by an expert in the history of the Japanese labor economy, Dore (1973), in his work *British Factory, Japanese Factory*. Japanese-style employment practices took shape in the 1960s, and three pillars—lifetime employment, seniority wages and in-house labor unions—were taken as the key to the Japanese economic miracle by the OECD in 1973 (OECD 1973).

However, the above personnel system does not apply to women, as it presupposes males as standard workers. In the High Growth Era, women would be hired by enterprises after graduation but soon were asked to resign if they entered into marriage. In Japanese, there is a particular word, “kotobukitaisha”, to describe the situation in which women quit their jobs because of marriage. This practice agreed with the traditional custom that young women need to serve as housekeeping apprentices in another family in agricultural society and continue to the present day in many large corporations. A woman in the publishing industry recalled her job interview in the 1960s when she received the offer mainly because of the promise of leaving the job after marriage. Those who continue working after marriage usually face intense social pressures. Even if women can work, they are given a secondary role in the enterprise, as women are regarded as naturally inclined to such auxiliary work as photocopying material, visitor reception and pantry cleaning.

**Housewifization**

The impact of housewifization cannot be neglected either. Vogel (2013), in his seminal work *Japan’s New Middle Class*, described the rise of a new middle class in the 1960s—the salaried man and his wife as a housewife. In regard to the gender division of labor in Japan, housewifization and the male-breadwinner model are the two most mentioned features. However, these are essential items of industrial society. When agriculture was the leading productive sector, it was common to have women as laborers. Moreover, the gender division of labor was not so strict that the workforce in a small family could be fully utilized. Therefore, the female employment rate by age group at that time presents a trapezoidal distribution (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** Japanese Female Employment Rate by Age Group (1880–1930). Data Source: Umemura Mataji (ed.) 1988. *Long-Term Economic Statistic 2 Labor* Toyo Economic Press. Cited from Tsuji Hirokazu, Nagashima Junko, Ishizuki Shizue (eds.) *Japanese History of Female Labor: From Ancient Times to Modern Times*. Tokyo: Bensei Press



**Fig. 2** Japanese female employment rate by age group (1956–1974). Data Source: Created by the author based on data from the Basic Survey of Employment Composition by the Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

Housewifization in Japanese society emerged as early as the Taisho Era (1921–1926) in middle-class families. After the Second World War, the housewife model began to prevail among ordinary people (Ochiai 2019), with new trends in mass consumer culture and urbanization. An increasing number of women withdrew from the labor market after marriage. In 1970, the M-shaped curve was very obvious, with the bottom at 44.9% in the 25-to-29 age group. This number was even lower, at 41.4% in 1975. Indeed, the impact of housewifization is far greater than that of marginalization in the workplace before marriage, as mentioned above. Because Japanese-style employment does not welcome returning employees, when women want to go back to work, they usually can only find unstable jobs, such as part-time work. Additionally, due to the emphasis on family responsibility in child rearing, out-of-home childcare does not develop. Women undertake most parenting responsibilities when children are young, leading to even limited participation in the labor market (Fig. 2).

#### ***The increase in female part-time workers***

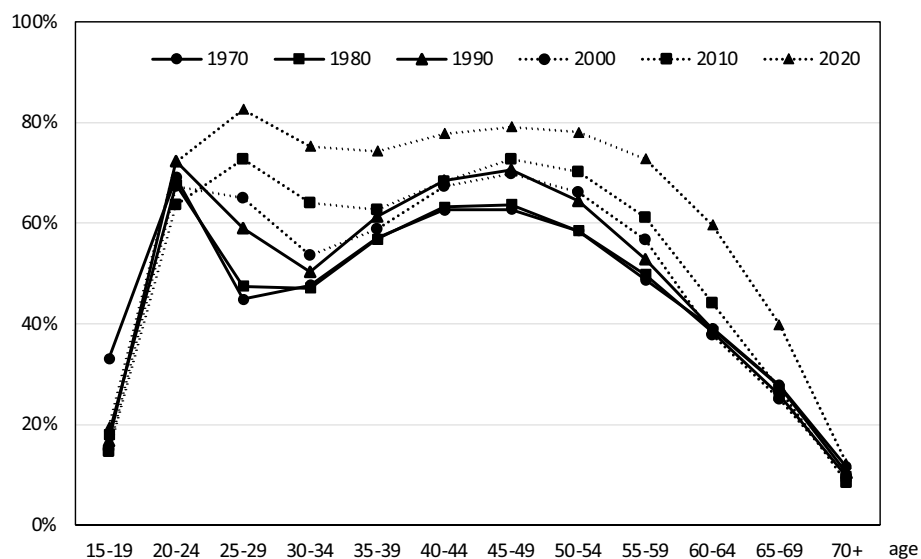
Part-time work first appeared in the recruitment advertisement of the Daimaru Department Store on September 19, 1954. It was described as a fashionable employment form only for women, through which women and married women could pass their leisure time in a recreational and self-fulfilling way. It was once called into question whether the wage from part-time work could sustain a living. However, given that the advertisement was targeted at women, whose income was not seen as a living wage but as extra revenue, the criticism about low income did not evoke controversy at that time.

The Report of Policy Symposium convened by Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi (the Ohira Report) expounded Japan's development plan in the 1980s. Since Japan had caught up with developed economies in Europe and the US, it was time to reposition itself and devote more effort to spiritual and cultural development (Ochiai 2019). Instead of



following the example of America and Europe, Japan should play through its unique cultural advantages. In terms of employment security, the Ohira Report emphasized the superiority of Japanese-style employment. Different from the American system, in which employees might be easily abandoned when a production adjustment is needed, the Japanese system, which is based on the relationship between people, usually does not fire employees, as the latter are seen as enterprise members with a sense of belonging. While alienated workers in American and European organizations might feel unvalued in the workplace and have to pursue the meaning of life outside the enterprise, thanks to the clever combination of lifetime employment and the seniority wage system, Japanese workers enjoy a reassuring competitive atmosphere resulting from the important feature of Japanese culture—group solidarity—and give the organization even more vitality. Concerning the employment of females and elderly people, the volume “Consolidating family foundation” in the Ohira Report designed an ideal lifestyle for women (Gordon 2018). After the childrearing period, less-burdened married women can participate in voluntary activities, develop hobbies and interests, and take part-time jobs. Here, part-time jobs are seen as a parallel to volunteer work and hobbies that serve to fulfill individual cultural needs instead of a means of obtaining incomes.

Part-time work literally means a form of non-full-time employment. However, in Japan, it has not a matter of working hours. Part-time workers usually work as long as full-time workers. As Japanese labor law researcher Hamaguchi Keiichiro (2016) notes, nonregular employment in Japan is set up for particular social groups. Different types of nonregular jobs have different target groups. In this period, part-time work was so occupied by married women that the Japanese government let the Bureau of Women and Youth investigate the situation of part-time workers. That women mostly work part-time was to adapt to the lifestyle in the context of housewifization. Since women were widely considered supplementary earners, they were usually offered minimum wages and



**Fig. 3** Japanese female employment by age group (1970–2020). Data source: Created by the author based on long-term time series data from the Labor Force Survey by the Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan



deprived of social insurance when working part-time. For employers, because part-time workers are cheap and can work flexible hours, they have become indispensable workforces, especially in service industries (Honda 2001). However, this does not change the fact that women are regarded as auxiliary laborers and their value is depreciated (Fig. 3).

### **Promotion of gender equality policies and setbacks in enterprise reforms**

#### ***Legislation removing barriers to female employment: equal employment opportunity law***

After Japan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1980, Japan created a domestic law accordingly—Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL)—which has been Japan's major legal framework for implementing gender equality in private companies until now. This law prohibited discrimination against women in vocational training, fringe benefits, retirement and dismissal. As the first comprehensive law on protecting women's rights, it was large progress. However, with regard to recruitment, promotion and job assignment, it only urged employers to "endeavor" to treat women equally with men and did not have any binding force. Before the enactment of EEOL, Article (4) of the Labor Standard Act provided the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women. However, after a revision in 1997, the guideline of EEOL broke the rule by claiming men and women are under different employment categories, leading to ambiguous criteria for judging differential treatment and ultimately harming women's rights (Mitsunari et al. 2019).

#### ***The establishment of four counter-effective institutions***

***Dual career ladder system launched by large corporations*** The implementation of EEOL means that the practice of assigning jobs by gender violates the law. Therefore, Japanese enterprises headed by large corporations launched a dual career ladder system to avert possible risks. This system differentiates job positions into two types: comprehensive and general. People placed in comprehensive positions participate in core business, such as making important decisions, drafting business plans and liaising with customers. For future promotion, they are also needed to rotate among different posts. In contrast, employees in general positions often follow a fixed work routine without many challenges. They are paid less and have less chance for promotion. On the surface, this new classification has nothing to do with gender. However, in reality, because comprehensive positions usually require laborers to transfer among different locations, they are mostly given to men. According to a 2008 survey by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, in enterprises adopting a dual career ladder system, women accounted for only 6% in comprehensive positions, in sharp contrast to 77.9% in general positions. This figure was as high as 90% in large corporations over 5000 people. In the same type of survey in 2014, the situation seemed better, but the proportion of women in comprehensive positions was still only 9.1%. In this way, the dual career ladder system facilitates indirect discrimination that appears neutral to both sexes but indeed has an unfair effect on women. The United Nation once exhorted the Japanese government in the early 2000s to revise relevant provisions in EEOL and correct the part involving indirect discrimination in the dual career ladder system.

*Worker dispatch act* For a long period after the Second World War, private job placement services were prohibited by the Employment Security Act. In 1986, immediately after EEOL, however, the enactment of the Worker Dispatch Act legalized temporary agency firms by allowing dispatching for no more than three years in 13 occupations. The 13 occupations listed on the positive list included office equipment operator, translator, stenographer, and stewardess, in which women were concentrated. The 1980s witnessed a rise in the employment of women with advanced degrees. Many educated women who aim for long-term professional careers took dispatch work as a good chance to improve skills and accumulate experiences. It was expected that dispatch work could help them eliminate subordination and marginalization in the workplace. However, as the legal restrictions on occupations were removed bit by bit, the professionalism that dispatch work represents was significantly reduced. Instead, dispatch work had gradually turned into a form of employment that enterprises could take labor whenever needed in an uncertain prospect to save personnel costs.

*Pension reform for female dependents* Almost the same time as EEOL, the Japanese government implemented a pension reform for male workers' spouses. Under the Japanese pension system, there are three categories of applicants. While beneficiaries No. 1 are primarily self-employees and students, mainly participating in the national pension scheme, beneficiaries No. 2 are enterprise employees or civil servants, involved in both the national pension scheme and employees' pension insurance plan. The 1985 pension reform added a category of No. 3 beneficiaries. This is the only group that can enjoy the pension without prior deposits. As the spouse of the No. 2 beneficiary, women can receive annuity benefits without paying insurance fees when their annual income is under 1.3 million yen. In 2010, the number of No. 3 beneficiaries joining employees' pension insurance plans reached 10 million. The No. 3 beneficiary system made it possible for women, as spouses of enterprise employees, to have a decent pension even without a job. This not only guarantees a stable income for housewives when they get old but also consolidates the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker family model

*Tax reform* In the 1986 tax reform, Japan set up a tax threshold of ¥1,030,000, the annual income level below which no tax is paid. More specifically, this ¥1,030,000 package includes ¥650,000—a taxation reduction for wages and ¥380,000—the basic taxation deduction that every taxpayer can enjoy.<sup>1</sup> In a system that takes family as the unit of taxation, a married person can claim a spousal deduction if his or her spouse earns an annual income of less than ¥1,030,000. If the female laborer earns more than that amount, not only her own income but also her husband's spousal deduction might suffer loss. Such an income threshold has had a great impact on nonregular employment among Japanese females. Data from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare show that 22.4% of female part-time workers consciously control their individual incomes under ¥1,030,000 to keep the family in a low tax bracket.<sup>2</sup>

In this period, female employment was influenced by forces in opposite directions. On the one hand, pushed by the CEDAW of the UN, Japan established EEOL, which

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<sup>1</sup> The ratio 65:38 was later changed to 55:48 in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Data source: General Survey on Part-Time Workers (2006) conducted by Japanese Ministry of Labour and Welfare.

marked the beginning of the law-based promotion of gender equality in the workforce. On the other hand, factors holding back female employment appeared in enterprise, tax and pension institutions. The enterprises resisted by substituting gender division with the divide between comprehensive and general positions to sustain the traditional employment model. Because there was no overall framework to integrate policies of different sectoral departments with respective solutions, tax and pension systems actually reformed themselves to adapt with the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker family model. The implementation of EEOL thereby had not achieved the expected effects.

### **Deregulation of the labor market in the 1990s and the breakout of the financial crisis in the 2000s**

#### ***The expansion of nonregular employment***

Before the 1980s, the total number and share of nonregular employees among Japan's labor force was quite stable. However, in 1980, the number of nonregular employees increased very quickly, especially women workers. The rapid expansion of nonregular employment in this period could be attributed to the boom of the tertiary industry. More importantly, it was closely related to the transformation of the Japanese employment style. Moving away from the conventional system based on long-term employment, Japan began to reduce living guarantees and vocational training for some employees. In May 1995, the Japan Business Federation proposed an employment portfolio system in "Japanese Business in New Age: Challenges, Directions and Action Plan". This system classified laborers into three types: long-term reserves, highly specialized workers, and flexible workers, corresponding to regular, fixed-term contracts or dispatch, and part-time employees. By combining different types of employees, enterprises were able to drastically lower personnel costs.

Similar changes that support nonregular employment occurred in labor-related laws in parallel. In 1996, the Dispatch Act was extended to cover 26 occupations. In 1999, the method of regulating occupation types was changed from positive listing to negative listing. Apart from construction workers, port transport workers, security guards, lawyers and accountants, restrictions on all other occupations were removed. In 2004, the one-year limit on workers dispatching for manufacturing occupations was finally lifted. In the same period, the Labor Standards Law also underwent a series of revisions to facilitate the hiring of workers under fixed-term contracts. In 1999, the revisions expanded the duration of fixed-term contracts from one to three years in select occupations such as those requiring specialized skills or knowledge and for workers aged 60 and over. In 2003, additional revisions increased the duration of fixed-term contracts to three years for all people. For jobs requiring specialized skills or older workers, the maximum duration of the contract further increased to five years.

Despite the instability of nonregular employment, reflection on the working style under Fordism during this period made people care more about the problems of ignoring personal life, such as death by overwork and enterprise warriors. Indeed, nonregular employment was once regarded as a postmodern form of employment and popular among young people (Kosugi 2003). Great hope was placed on nonregular employment that could allow people to decide the pace of life and not to bind themselves to particular enterprises for life.

### ***Adjustment after the financial crisis***

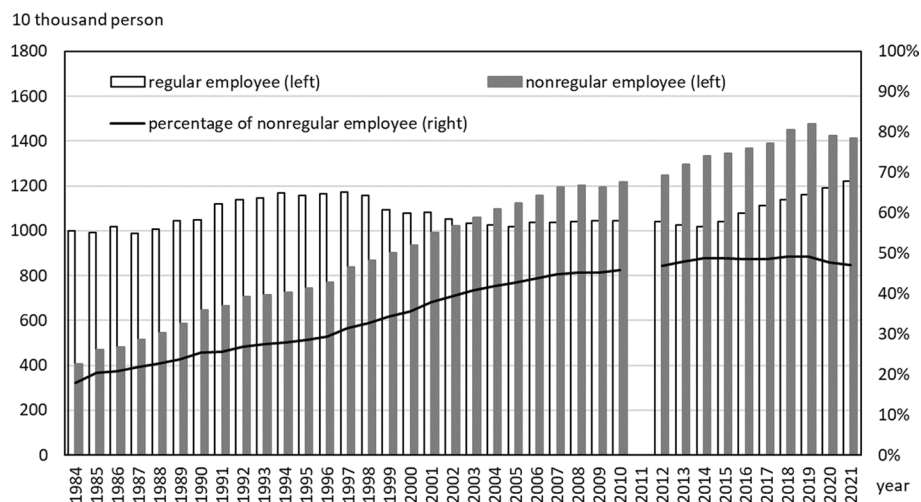
Until the breakout of the financial crisis in 2008, the image of nonregular workers was students earning pocket money, young people pursuing hobbies and working temporarily and married women working part time to supplement family income. One thing that the above groups have in common was that they did not rely on nonregular jobs for a living but worked to support household finance. However, as nonregular employment was scaling up, nonregular workers were extended to men groups, including young college graduates and those who depended on nonregular jobs for a living. Despite the fluctuations in economy, the proportion of both male and female nonregular workers continued to rise in the 2000s. Due to the fundamental transformation of the employment model within enterprises, the group of precarious workers expanded. Even men who used to be able to gain stable jobs fell into that group working part-time or for a fixed duration. The problem of nonregular employment was thereby elevated from a labor issue of women to an important topic of the whole country.

In 2008, a large number of dispatch workers were fired because of the sudden economic crisis. Later, their rally at Tokyo Hibiya Park aroused wide public concern. People began to realize that nonregular employment could no longer be integrated into Japanese-style employment routines and the social system of male breadwinners/female homemakers, as an increasing number of single and married people relied on nonregular jobs for a living and were profoundly affected by their unsteady jobs. The ensuing problems, such as the widening gap of wealth and social inequity, have also received substantial scholarly attention (Sato 2000; Tachibanaki 1998). To relieve these problems, after the financial crisis, Japan adjusted related laws and regulations. For instance, labor protection was added to the Work Dispatch Act, which was used to relax labor control in the past. Similar contents could also be found in the 2007 Part-time Employment Act.

### ***Increasing female nonregular workers, decreasing male incomes and the trend toward a conservative gender division of labor***

According to the Labor Force Survey conducted by the Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, between 1995 and 2013, the number of women in the workforce was quite stable, approximately 26 million. However, during the same period, the number of female nonregular workers grew drastically and exceeded that of regular workers in 2003 (Fig. 4).

Nevertheless, in this period, not only were women facing the risk of instability and low income, but men's labor market also changed greatly. An increasing number of men became nonregular workers, and male workers in general suffered a wage decline. After the peak of 4.088 million yen in 1995, the annual income of males exhibited a fluctuating downward trend overall, with 3.912 million yen in 2013 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2020). Affected by pay stagnation and job insecurity, both men and women were more inclined to agree with the traditional gender division. That women regained admiration for housewives provided a compelling portrait of the intensified stratification within the female group. With the female employment rate drifting higher, the shift to gender conservatism also reflected a complex reality of the gap between belief and action.



**Fig. 4** The number of regular and nonregular employees among Japanese women. Data Source: Created by the author based on data from the Labor Force Survey by the Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

According to Ronald Inglehart (2016), a society will experience a shift from materialist to postmaterialist values, from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety toward a heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression and quality life, including gender equality, when it reaches a certain level of affluence. However, this is not a unidirectional change as observed in Japanese's notions of gender roles. According to Ojima (2000), both men and women were adhering less to traditional gender norms in the years between 1972 and 1995. However, a perceptible change occurred in approximately 2000. With the latest data, Nagase and Taromaru (2016) found that the year 2003 marked a reversal in both genders, although there was an obvious trend in gender role norms from 1973 to 2003.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this result was verified in all age groups. A survey conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2012 showed that the number of supporters of the male breadwinner/female-homemaker model exceeded that of objectors. In particular, it is worth noting that the increase in supporters was the first since 1979, which reflected a time lag between the change in values and socioeconomic dynamics.

#### Female employment after 2010

##### *Call for female and senior employment under labor shortage*

Since the 2010s, Japan has been facing a serious challenge in filling the labor gap for economic development due to the acute shortage in the 15–64 working-age population in the context of rapidly aging and dwindling populations. Different from other developed economies, Japan has been taking a very cautious approach toward labor immigration, except for highly skilled talent and specialized nursery staff. In fact, to control the number of foreign laborers, the Abe Administration, in its second term, began to formulate policies to promote female and senior employment. The Japan Revitalization Strategy and Act on the Promotion of Female Participation and Career Advancement in the Workplace were announced in 2013 and 2015, respectively. To

<sup>3</sup> Gender norms includes attitudes toward men's participation in household chores, women's employment, and surname after marriage.

improve the female employment rate, the Japanese government presented the following measures: adding nursery resources to satisfy childcare needs, changing the corporate culture of working overtime to facilitate women and the elderly to participate in the workforce, and eliminating the unreasonable pay gap between nonregular and regular employees. As a result, the employment rates for all age groups have significantly increased, especially those in the 25–39 and 60–64 age groups, whose numbers reached the highest since 1959 (Employment Environment and Equality Bureau, Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2021). The M-shaped curve basically disappeared, and the proportion of women who would like to return to work after giving birth also increased (Ochiai 2019).

However, researchers have raised questions regarding whether the Abe Cabinet's policy could give full play to women's talent in the public sphere. Sechiyama (2014) noted that the key topics that hold women back from their full potential, such as different family names for men and women, tax reduction for spouses and No.3 beneficiary system were still untouched. In addition, Miura Mari (2015) drew attention to the expanding gap within the female group under the dual influence of neoliberalism and state familialism. To avoid women being treated as a policy instrument for achieving economic growth in the context of below-replacement fertility, women should take a more active role in policy-making.

#### ***Employment difficulty and unemployment among women since COVID-19***

Too high a proportion of nonregular workers, low-quality employment, and unstable jobs have long been the main problems of female employment that trouble the Japanese government. The Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality promulgated in 2015 included certain goals of improving the quality of female employment, especially setting the proportion for female entrepreneurs, senior officers, middle and senior managers, as well as national public servants, local civil servants, policewomen and firefighters.

As Fig. 4 shows, the numbers of both regular and nonregular workers among women have grown since 2013. From January 2013 to January 2020 (before the breakout of COVID-19), the number of female regular workers increased by 11.53%, from 10.58 million to 11.8 million. The same figures for female nonregular workers were 18.71%, 12.45 million and 14.78 million. This reflected an important trend that the share of nonregular workers among women might no longer increase rapidly but tend to stabilize.

However, the unexpected pandemic hit the Japanese economy hard. Compared with men laborers, women, with more people working in carting and lodging industries and as nonregular workers, are more likely to be suspended from work or even laid off for cost-saving purposes. In the meantime, the closure of nurseries, kindergartens and schools has become one of the pull factors that drive women away from work. Women with underage children face a higher risk of dismissal or pay cuts (Zhou 2021).

## Conclusion

Female employment policies are highly influenced by how people perceive women's role in the family and society. Based on an analysis of three policy perspectives—women as housewives, women pursuing gender equality and women as key drivers of economic growth—this article reviews the historical development of Japanese female employment since the 1950s, especially how the interaction between policies and enterprises might influence women's participation in the labor market.

The main conclusions are as follows:

First, despite an increasing elevation in legal status, women's employment has long been facing stubborn resistance from enterprises. The attack and defense between the government and enterprises was fierce. As the concept of gender quality was introduced to Japan in the 1980s, the Japanese government established EEOL at the institutional level, prohibiting enterprises from marginalizing women laborers, but the male breadwinner/female homemaker model was still powerful in the workplace. Japanese enterprises took various measures to counter the effects of the law. For example, the law needed equal pay for equal work between genders, but enterprises responded with a dual career ladder system to create a de facto gender difference. Through active lobbying, enterprises successfully had loose government regulations on the labor market. The deregulation of dispatch work from the 1980s and other labor laws in the 2000s has actually restricted job opportunities for many women who have to choose unstable non-regular work.

Second, the conflicts between different policy perspectives shape the fact that female employment increases in number quickly but lags in key measures of quality. On the one hand, the increasing female labor force participation rate can be attributed to the effect of policies following the ideas of gender equality and women as important laborers. That the employment rate for women aged 25–40 in the 1980s continued to rise, making a gentler and flatter M curve, is an especially vivid example. On the other hand, many related policies reinforce the model of women as housewives and hinder high-quality female employment. Obviously, the No. 3 beneficiary system and housewife taxation deduction contributed to the decision of many women to work part-time so that they could take care of the family at the same time. Since 2010, although Abe's womenomics policies have reversed the proposition of women as housewives, women are still being placed in lower paid and less prestigious positions, such as waitresses, elder care workers, nurses and saleswomen. There are no human capital enhancement plans for women, not to mention the promotion of gender equality. With an increasing number of women entering into low-skilled, low-paying jobs, the dominance of men over women in the labor market persists.

Existing research tends to approach Japanese female employment in two ways. One way is to start with the characteristics of Japanese employment, highlighting its uniqueness from an international comparative perspective. However, because of women's marginal position in the labor market, female employment is not well represented in related research. The other way is to discuss the women's role in family and work and how they contribute to social welfare provision. This welfare state perspective emphasizes gender division and holds a relatively rigid view toward female employment. This article draws attention to policy perspectives on female employment and their change throughout



history. This approach allows us to observe the change in the macro-policy environment imposed on female employment, as well as the conflicts between different policies in the same historical period. To understand female employment change in a country, it is important to determine the meaning behind the numbers, such as employment rate and income level, which requires a thorough analysis of different policy perspectives and their assumptions about women's role and female employment.

This article presents a Japanese case, but its lessons are far-reaching. Improving female employment is a comprehensive policy area that requires, first, the coordination between laws and policies of different fields and, further, their effective combination. Idea transformation within society is critical since the quality of female employment cannot be truly improved without the cooperation of enterprises and support from their own family.

#### Abbreviations

CEDAW	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
EEOL	Equal Employment Opportunity Law
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN	United Nations

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#### Author contributions

GY designed the research, wrote the draft and edited the paper; YY contributed to the analysis of Japanese female employment from the 2000s; YX wrote the English version and contributed to paper editing and revision.

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#### Availability of data and materials

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#### Declarations

##### Competing interests

The authors declare that we have no competing interests.

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