
Womenomics: How Female Undergraduates See Their Place in the Workforce

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Introduction

Against the background of a rapidly ageing society and with a working-age population which according to projections will shrink to about 55 million in 2050 (the same level of working population at the end of WW2), Japan needs to change its ways and consider the issue of the underused female potential more seriously. “Abenomics will not succeed without womenomics”, said Prime Minister Abe, addressing a women’s forum this year (Fifield, 2014). Coined by Kathy Matsui, a Goldman Sachs Managing Director in 1999, “womenomics” is a word which emphasizes the contribution of women to the top echelons of the society. Back in the 1990s, some people like Matsui started to foresee the immense intellectual potential of Japanese women and pleaded for a more active female involvement in the workforce. Later on, in 2013, in a speech given at the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, Prime Minister Abe pointed out that it is a matter of great urgency to create a comfortable working environment for women, and to increase their participation in work and society. He initiated an ambitious plan according to which, by the year of 2020, 30 percent of leadership posts will be held by women (*Japan Times*, Nov. 22nd 2014). This may seem an unrealistic goal for a country which at present can only “boast” a 6.6 percent ratio of female management in 3,873 companies.¹

In the previous paper (Averianova, 2014) it was shown that a wider inclusion of women in economic life is perceived worldwide as one of the major ways to mediate labor shortage in aging countries. It is common knowledge that girls and women are still not allowed to fulfill their full potential as participants in the labor force—not just in the developing world, but in rich countries too.

For Japan this problem is particularly serious: only 48.5% of women participate in the labor, Japan’s women labor force participation rate being one of the lowest among OECD (*Catalyst*, 2012). According to The Global Gender Gap Report on 2013 released by the World Economic Forum, Japan also occupies the 79th position in the world ranking regarding women’s involvement in workforce. In the *Economist’s* index, which measured the best and worst places to be a working woman among industrialized nations, Japan is at the bottom of the index by the number of jobs, number of women in senior managerial positions and the pay gap (*The Glass-Ceiling Index*, 2014). Although The Law on Securing Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment of 1985 guarantees in principle equal pay for men and women, there are large disparities in earnings between men and women, which are second only to Korea, and considerably larger than OECD countries such as United States, United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia, Denmark, and France (Figure 1).

1 Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare Statistics (*Japan Times*, Nov. 22nd 2014).

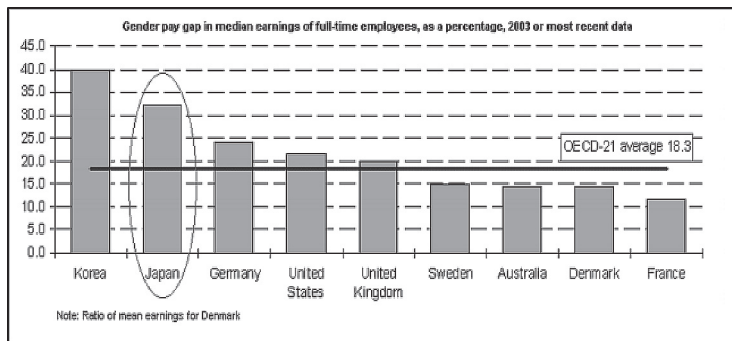


Figure 1. Gender pay gap (Source: OECD Family Database, 2007)

Moreover, over a seven-year period (2006–2013) there is almost no improvement in the women’s participation in employment, and the percentage of political empowerment is almost negligible (Figure 2).

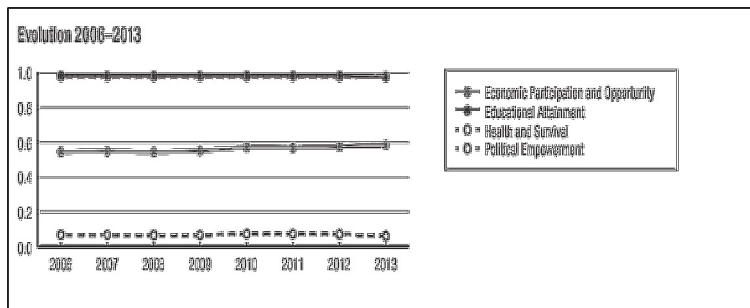


Figure 2. Evolution of Gender Gap Index between 2006–2013 (Source: World Economic Forum Report on 2013)

What are the main factors which hamper a more active and numerous involvement of Japanese women in full time employment?

Barriers That Hold Women Back

Tradition

Japanese culture and tradition has divided participation in work across genders since pre-Meiji times: holding a full-time job and being the breadwinner of the household (*daikokubashira*) is almost exclusively a masculine duty, whereas motherhood is the expression of femininity (Charlebois, 2014). Moreover, motherhood is considered something that cannot be done part-time; mothers and wives must dedicate their time and energy to their families around the clock, being what in Japanese was called after WW2, *senryo shufu*, or “professional housewife” (Vogel & Vogel, 2013). Kyoko Inoue compares family with a tree, in which the wife represents the roots, which nurture and ensure stability from under the ground, and the husband being the branches, that grow above the ground.

Men and women are equal and have equal rights, but I believe that they have different responsibilities within a home. The woman has responsibilities as a housewife within her home, and the man has his responsibilities as a man... if we compare marriage with a tree, the wife is the roots that hold the tree below the ground, and the husband is the branches above ground (Inoue, 1991, p. 241).

The woman’s mission is be a “good wife, wise mother” (*ryousai kembo*), to nurture and care, to protect and soothe. Full-time, stay at home motherhood is not only considered the social norm; mothers themselves derive their sense of accomplishment and pride from their relationship with their children. Suzanne Vogel discusses the special relationship between the Japanese mother and her children, from the vantage point of the concept of *amae* or “skinship”, and points out that this relationship is “their greatest satisfaction, their purpose in life (*ikigai*)” (ibid., p. 13).

The expectation that women become full time housewives and mothers after marriage may be one of the factors that have inhibited Japanese women’s career development (Allison, 1991). Nevertheless, after WWII, women have looked for ways to negotiate family and work. The M-shaped curve of female employment (Figure 3) shows that Japanese women start to work in their twenties, after which they get married, quit their jobs to become full time housewives, and then re-enter workforce when their children go to school (Charlebois, 2014).

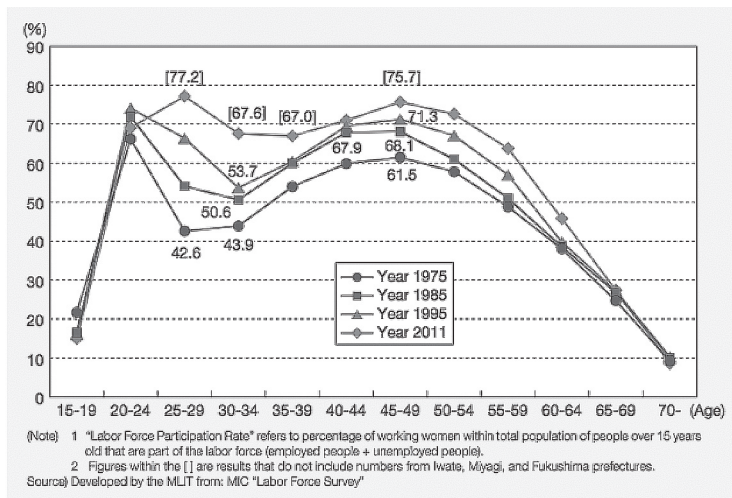


Figure 3. Labor force participation rate (Source: MLIT White Paper, 2012)

As shown in Figure 3 above, during 1970s most women stopped working around age 25, whereas in recent years they tend to continue working well into their thirties, with fewer women to quit their jobs in 2011.

Even if women start working after finishing school and during and after college, most of them do not perceive it as a career, which requires relatively high personal commitment and which is traditionally assumed as hazardous for marriage and motherhood (White et al., 1992). They merely hold a job, a temporary one, for that matter, as women’s labor participation rate drops for the age group of 35–39 years old, indicating that women tend to leave labor force when they get married or give birth to a child (*Catalyst*, 2012). The pattern is well established in the Japanese society, where the traditional, highly conservative, from our point of view, treatment of women and their place in life, is deeply embedded in labor distribution.

“Nowhere are the traditional values and the new institutions ... wedded so incompatibly and thus so fruitfully as in Japan,” wrote American journalist Jonathan Rauch in 1992 (Rauch, 1992). The observations he made twenty-four years ago still ring true today: one of the mundane secrets of the strength of the Japanese economic system is the strong families that take good care of children (p. 110) and marriage is seen as an investment, not as consumption to be thrown away as it gets old. As a result, children are the social investment, never left to chance in Japan, compared to the United States, where half of the children

will experience a family breakup before their sixteenth birthday (*ibid.*, p. 158). This does not necessarily guarantee their blissful growing up or comprehensive development, but it provides legitimate social sanction for women to switch to the role of housewife after children being born.

Insufficient career opportunities or motivation

The other side of this “coin” is the perception that women do not invest much into their professional occupation and do not aspire for any career growth, realizing that their working life is short lived. Almost all of them start working after (and during) college; they are typically allowed entry anywhere in the labor market but most often are not taken seriously. Very few of them, as the statistics above show, work *in* the elite, most work *for* the elite, many of them as “office ladies, O. L. s, the ubiquitous, chirpy-cute tea-servers” (Rauch, 1992, p. 66). Most important, though, is that, according to Rauch, women do not perceive it as discrimination – there is nothing unfair about the traditional role distribution: a man’s place is at work, a woman’s – at home. Nevertheless, even when they are willing to work outside home, as Charlebois (2014) points out, the rigors of the Japanese workplace make it difficult for women to balance work and child rearing without compromise. Problems such as the tax system, which is devised for a single breadwinner in the family (Broadbent et al., 2003), the full dedication expected from the employees in exchange for life employment, which include working long hours, the after-hours socializing (*tsukiai*), and so on, can seriously hamper a woman’s chances to a serious career. Moreover, job or no job, women are held responsible for household chores and children’s education (Allison, 1994; Dasgupta, 2009). Although the law guarantees in theory equal opportunities irrespective of gender, the employment system offers little equality in the jobs men and women do. The dual track system of *sougoushoku* (career track jobs) and *ippanshoku* (clerical jobs) is designed to make a clear gender distinction between jobs while keeping up the appearances of equality. Thus men are more likely to take up a career track job, which is more demanding, but better remunerated and offers lifetime employment benefits, while women will take the less grueling jobs, with fixed hours, no transfers, but no life-employment guarantee, lower salary and no chances for promotions. In theory they are free to choose either track; however, for the practical reasons mentioned earlier, few women choose jobs in management (Charlebois, 2014). Moreover, even when they opt for the clerical track, they are still viewed as temporary workers, or “office flowers”, that do repetitive tasks which include making copies, serving tea and so on, only to be replaced with younger ones after a few years (Ogasawara, 1998).

The millennial generation - a ray of hope?

In the United States, a revolution in gender roles has produced a new, millennial generation, men and women of which have developed a new, different set of career aspirations and life values. “Millennial women are no longer bound by outmoded expectations that they be the primary nurturers at home and are freer to make choices based on their own unique strengths, talents and desires” (Friedman, 2013, p. 40). Millennial men have grown up in the families with working mothers, expect their wives to be working too and therefore no longer see themselves as the sole breadwinner. While these trends definitely reflect a huge social progress, they unfortunately result in a growing number of young educated men and women opting out of parenthood, a phenomenon known as “baby bust” (*ibid.*).

The statistics on women labor participation in Japan show that no such paradigm shift has happened in this country. The position of women in family, society and labor seems to remain pretty much the same as described by Rauch twenty years ago. The decisions young Japanese women of the millennial generation are now making about their future life are affected by a constellation of various economic, social, cultural and individual factors. The limited scope of our pilot study does not allow us to explore all of them. Instead, we concentrated on one, pivotal for the current research, issue: women’s perception of the role work/

career and family will play in their future lives and how this role is defined by their family background and perception of the society and workplace as conducive to maintaining work-family balance.

Although Japan still has a long way to go, some Japanese companies have taken individual steps to create a better environment for working mothers. Thus car manufacturer Nissan, under the leadership of CEO Carlos Ghosn, has spearheaded a diversity campaign since 2004, aimed at promoting more women in managerial posts. By creating in-house day care centers, allowing employees to work from home on a fixed number of days to care for a child or aged parent, and lending computers to employees during holidays, Nissan increased the percentage of women in management from 1.6 percent in 2004 to 7.1 percent in 2014, and aims at reaching 10 percent by 2017 (*Japan Times*, November 22nd 2014). Similar initiatives are under way at Mizuho Financial Group Inc., where the focus is on hiring more women in managerial positions, while offering working mothers a flexible environment (rehiring after maternity leave, possibility of relocation without resigning). Another major company, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp. (NTT) offers flexible working hours and favorable policies on maternity leave. They believe that “female empowerment ultimately benefits the company, not women” (ibid.) As a sign that times are changing in this country too, *Japan Times* writer Masami Ito, citing Internal Affairs Minister statistics, points out that in 2013 the number of households where both spouses worked was 10.65 million, surpassing those with only one breadwinner (7.45 million) (ibid.).

Survey

A Rationale for the Survey Instrument

This study was conceived as an exploratory investigation guided by the major research question: “Do Japanese female undergraduates intend to participate in full-time lifelong employment?” Therefore, our inquiry has been built along the above-mentioned lines and intended to address five main conceptual areas: the intention of young women to work after graduation, after getting married; and during and after child-rearing; maternal employment during child-rearing and after children are grown up; perception of gender equality in the workplace; perception of the workplace compatibility with the needs of working mothers; and perception of the changes or actions viewed as necessary to better accommodate the above mentioned needs.

The first area is the intention of women to work after university graduation, as well as after or during marriage and child rearing². The subordinate options connected with this area are about the respondents choosing between full-time or part-time employment as the indicator of their intention to balance work and family. Based on the research in the career development of women, it is assumed that a part-time job is not associated with the following career-propelling factors: motivation, aspiration, and career centrality (Farmer, 1985). White, Cox, and Cooper (1992) proposed the following tentative model of the relationship between the three components of career and achievement motivation which were found in their qualitative survey of the successful women: aspiration allows women to determine which goals to set in their careers. Mastery helps to concentrate on challenging goals, seek opportunities to test competence, and persevere in the face of difficulty. Increased competence through mastery leads to a greater career centrality, or the extent to which the individual sees involvement in a career as central to his/her adult life (White et al., 1992). The most important inference that researchers (e. g., White et al., 1992) drew from the model is that the perception of one's professional activity as a job, and not as a career, excludes any motivation for professional achievement. It was beyond the scope of the study to explore what kind of employment women are seek-

2 While the population growth is on the steady decline in Japan, the phenomenon of the baby bust, to the best of our knowledge, has not been registered yet, so the current study assumes that women generally plan to have children.

ing³ or whether they perceive their work participation as a job or a career, the latter being strongly associated with higher commitment to work and more intense conflict with family obligations (Farmer, 1985).

Taking into account the socio-economic context of Japan, female undergraduates are not expected to aspire for any solid long-standing career pursuits even after getting a degree in business. The 2010 Gender Initiative study by OECD shows that irrespective of their education, women frequently prefer working part-time and/or in health, education and service sectors rather than working long hours in the business sector (Adema, 2013). A similar judgment was made by another study focusing specifically on Japan: "Although more women work after getting married and having children today, basic patterns remain unchanged. Most women work from graduation until they have children, then stay home... In the last 15 years, men and women disagree about women working. Today 40% of women support the traditional pattern but 33% do not want to quit after getting married or having children" (*Geocities*, 2012).

As marriage and family are closely connected with the choices women make about their working life, another direction of exploration in this area was the intentions of young women regarding marriage. The above-mentioned study of Japanese women points out that "women who believe marriage means happiness have decreased in the last 25 years. Almost 70% of women in their 20s and 30s support those who stay single" (*ibid.*). The conclusion this study draws is that nowadays "women have more options than in the past. Women know corporate success is difficult and a healthy economy determines employment. Talent or ability does not necessarily lead to success. Many women do not want to compete with or model themselves after men with corporate careers. Some set new goals. Others are confused: they know their options, can't choose, and fall back on tradition" (*ibid.*). Thus the purpose of the survey in the first area of our research was to probe the intentions of female undergraduates with regards to employment and family life.

The second area of inquest was about family background, specifically about the respondents' mothers' employment history. Two questions of this area addressed current maternal employment, if any, and the one, if any, she maintained while her children were young. The importance of this matter for our inquiry is born by the fact that a maternal figure is generally the first and main role model for girls, and if their mothers opted to continue working while rearing children it might be a good predictor of the girls' choice to follow suite. On the other hand, mothers' opting out of employment for the sake of the family may be perceived by girls, through vicarious learning, as the only option for women with young children.

In this respect, maternal employment is one of the most extensively studied and consistent correlates of a girls' professional orientation. The focus on the role of the mother in women's career development is based on the assumed importance of the same-sex parent in influencing development. Daughters of employed women are found to have less stereotyped views of feminine and masculine roles than daughters of homemakers (Hoffman, 1972).

On the other hand, according to the research, early socialization experiences of participants in the study depend not only on the fact of mother's employment, but on the role she performed in the family, the family's attitude towards her job (career) and also on which paternal figure was the most influential in the girl's preadolescent and adolescent experience. The research in the area points toward two patterns of family socialization, which bear empowerment for the female career development. In the families with traditional sex-role distribution, empowerment is derived from the girls' stronger affiliation with their fathers who engage their daughters in activities usually reserved for sons. In the families with strong maternal personality, encouragement comes from the girls' identification with powerful feminine role models (Kelly, 1983; Marshall, 1984). The important nuance of the most influential paternal affiliation was however beyond the

3 From our personal experience as student advisers it should be noted that very few students, both men and women, have formed any vocational preferences in their junior college years and only about half of them have done it by the time of graduation.

scope of this pilot study as the assumption was made that, in Japan, mothers are the major, if not the only, role models. This assumption is also supported by the research:

Women are realistic. Fathers probably work long hours far from home and return late. Women see fathers don't enjoy themselves. They spend less time with families than they want. Mothers are probably homemakers who might work part-time not far from home or, less likely, full time in offices or factories. They probably don't have careers, staying home while children are young and need care. After children go to school, mothers return to work either part or full time... Young women might want careers, different from their mothers, or may realize how hard full-time careers are while bringing up children (*Geocities*, 2012).

The third area of exploration was whether young women perceive the need for gender equality in the workplace, as the perceived discrimination is assumed to be counter-productive in one's professional development and commitment. The mechanism of organizational socialization and the way it curtails women's professional development is the most difficult to explore and was beyond the interests of this research. What is important, however, is the expectation that women will not aspire to much professional achievement if they perceive the socialization of them into traditional secondary roles at work. Two factors, which even young women may be cognizant of, are in the interplay here. On the one hand, Japan, like the USA and many other countries, officially condemns gender discrimination in employment (e. g., Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – in the USA; Law on Securing Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment of 1985, amended in 1997– in Japan). On the other hand, the salary gaps and promotional statistics in both countries clearly indicate that gender equality has not yet become the desired reality. The fact that undergraduate women do not perceive themselves as equals to men may undermine their decision to make a lifelong commitment to work.

The fourth and fifth areas of research were connected with the respondents' perceptions of the workplace being responsive or cognizant of needs of women with children. Janet Hanson, who made an astounding career at Goldman Sachs and was “a Wall Street big hitter,” stated when she decided to swap her managerial job with starting her own coaching business for women: “Women need help in how to handle a dual-career marriage, maternity leave, time management, and getting and staying ahead in an increasingly competitive work environment. In the last three years, I have seen women opt to leave the firm rather than try to articulate their problems to management in a way that makes professional sense. Typically management doesn't even know there is a problem until the woman announces that she is leaving!” (Hanson, 2006, p, 5).

On the other hand, management might be well aware of “women's issues,” and, anticipating them, does not make any serious commitment to the developing or promoting young female employees. As was admitted in a private conversation under the conditions of anonymity by the president of one Japanese medium-size private company, management does not see young female employees as a valuable asset to the company since they are expected to leave work as soon as they get married and have children, therefore they are not included in any professional development programs or shortlisted for promotion.

This problem can and should be mitigated through various family policies that help reconcile work and care commitments of both parents, not just mothers. Such policies include “the provision of financial support through cash transfers (family allowances, child benefits, working family payments, and maternity, paternity and parental leave payments and birth grants); fiscal measures (e.g., child tax credits or family tax allowances); or the provision of in-kind benefits, including early childhood education and care services” (Adema, 2013). Japan is notoriously slow in utilizing these measures. Looking, for instance, at maternity/paternity leave, Japanese law allows either parent to take leave of up to one year after childbirth, but “almost all of those who do so are women, a reflection of traditional gender roles that remain entrenched... Nationwide, only 1.2 percent of fathers take advantage of paternity leave” (*Lifestyle News*, 2010).

The limitations of our survey instrument did not allow us to explore in detail the perceptions of the respondents with regards to the above-mentioned family policies. Besides, it seemed logical to assume that young female undergraduates are hardly familiar with or even aware of the former. Therefore, the attempt was made to solicit a general opinion of subjects about the support women with children can expect in the workplace and what kind of services and policies young women see as the most effective in keeping working mothers in the workforce.

Thus, with the focus on the five mentioned above conceptual areas, several lines of inquiry were determined and a survey was designed to address nine working hypotheses.

Hypothesis #1. Most of female undergraduates intend to be engaged in full-time employment.

Hypothesis #2. Most of young women intend to get married soon after graduation.

Hypothesis #3. Most of women plan to continue working full-time after getting married.

Hypothesis #4. Most of women are likely to quit working after giving birth to a child/children.

Hypothesis #5. Most of them will remain homemakers after their children grow up.

Hypothesis #6. Most of their mothers are currently either homemakers or work part-time.

Hypothesis #7. When participants of the study and their siblings were young children their mothers did not work or worked part-time.

Hypothesis #8. The majority of female undergraduates believe that workplace should be egalitarian and free from gender discrimination.

Hypothesis #9. Most of them do not believe Japan offers adequate conditions for women to return to work after given birth to a child.

These hypotheses were tested through ten multiple choice questions of the questionnaire, which was structurally designed in such a way that questions and answers related to the investigated conceptual areas were distributed within its frame following certain logic. The questionnaire started with the general question about the post-graduation plans of the respondent. The suggested options included: employment after graduation, the type of employment (full-time vs. part-time job), intentions to get married or to continue studying, or to travel. Next was the cluster of questions on intentions regarding employment after getting married, and during and after the child-rearing period. In the middle, there were two questions regarding current and previous maternal employment status. At the end of the questionnaire there were questions related to the perceived compatibility of work and family life. They probed the respondents' opinion about gender equality in the workplace, its receptiveness toward the needs of working mothers and the respondents' suggestions of measures necessary for making working and social environment more supporting of those needs. To ensure the clarity of the questions, the survey instrument was bilingual and administered in English and Japanese.

Data collection procedures were designed to ensure anonymity for respondents, the confidentiality of their responses, and, of course, as high a rate of response as possible. The instrument for administering the survey was online program *SurveyMonkey*, available for free in its limited to 10 questions and up to 100 respondents format. In compliance with the limitations of the format, the researchers sent the links to two sites with identical questionnaires to two batches of undergraduate female students (first and fourth years of study, and second and third years of study), none of the groups exceeding 100 respondents. A message in English and Japanese was distributed via university electronic mail to all female students officially registered at the NUCB Department of Communication. It explained in brief the purpose of the research and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality for all respondents. As the audience receiving the questionnaire was assumed to be familiar with the mechanism of online surveys, no further instructions were provided. Two weeks after the initial mailing a friendly reminder was sent to the participants. Two weeks after the income of new responses had ceased the results of the survey were subjected to further analysis.

Presentation of Data

The following data are based on information provided by 100 subjects, all undergraduate women who returned usable questionnaires. There were 150 questionnaires distributed, out of which 110 were returned. However, 10 questionnaires were not included in the analysis because they were not complete, with the subjects skipping over half of the questions asked. The information which could be extracted from the completed answers of the rejected questionnaires did not significantly differ from that provided by the usable questionnaires. Thus, this resulted in a yield of 67% for the survey.

Questions #1 and #10 elicited comments. There was only one comment to Question #1, which fell well with one of the provided options and was counted as such, while Question #10 produced 5 comments to be discussed below.

The demographics of the study population was not explored as it was assumed to be homogeneous, comprising female undergraduate students with the average age of 20 years. The marital status was assumed to be single, and the specifics of educational attainment (a freshman, a graduate, etc.) were neglected due to the study limitations.

The majority of the respondents, who returned usable questionnaires, answered most of the questions, though some of the questions were skipped by more participants than the others. The first research question of the instrument, “What do you want to do after you graduate from the university?” yielded the highest number of responses, 104, without any omission. While some of the respondents (13%, N = 14) have not yet made any decision, the majority of the subjects (78%, N = 81) plan to engage in full-time employment (Chart 1).

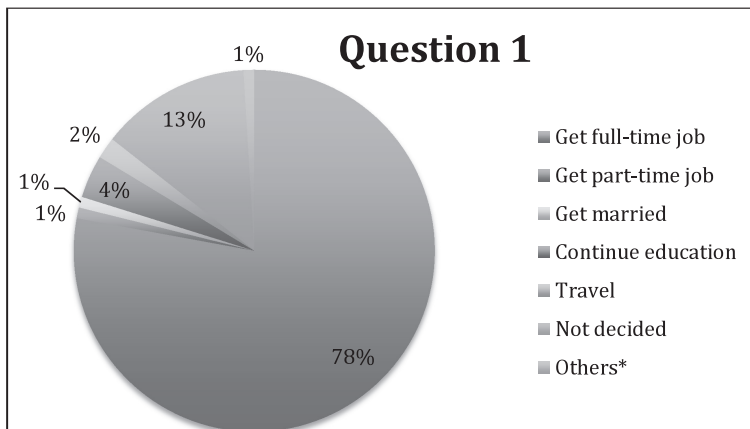


Chart 1. Question 1. “What do you want to do after you graduate from the university?”

There was a considerable number of those who had no decision about their future, post-graduate plans (13%, N = 14). Other options, such as working part-time, traveling or getting married yielded single responses, with the exception of continued education (N = 4).

With regards to Question 2 about their intention to get married, reflected in Chart 2, it is worth noting that 4 subjects skipped this question and 15 (15%) have decided not to get married at all or have not made their mind about it yet. With those who preferred not to answer this question, the number of young women not considering marriage as their only life choice hypothetically increases to over 18%, making up almost one fifth of the surveyed population. The number of respondents who want to get married as soon as possible (25%) equals that of those who want to get married 3 years after graduation. With those who want to get married 5 years later, this number increases up to overwhelming majority of 75%, with only 11% of

women planning to do it 10 years or more later.

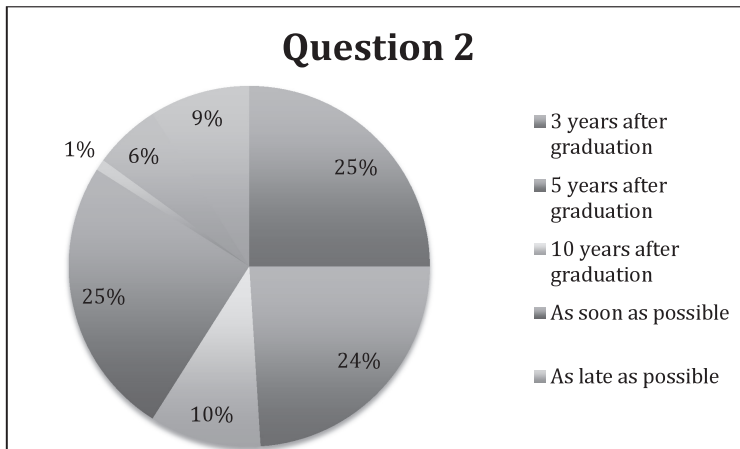


Chart 2. Question 2. "When do you want to get married?"

Responses to Question 3 (Chart 3) about what women planned to do with their employment after getting married indicate that only 8% of them want to quit working, while the majority (73%) want to continue working and 19% are undecided about the issue. The number of women staying in employment after the birth of a child does drop (Question 4, Chart 4), but only by 20%. Thus, 51% of the respondents plan to continue working, while 28% plan to quit and 21% are undecided.

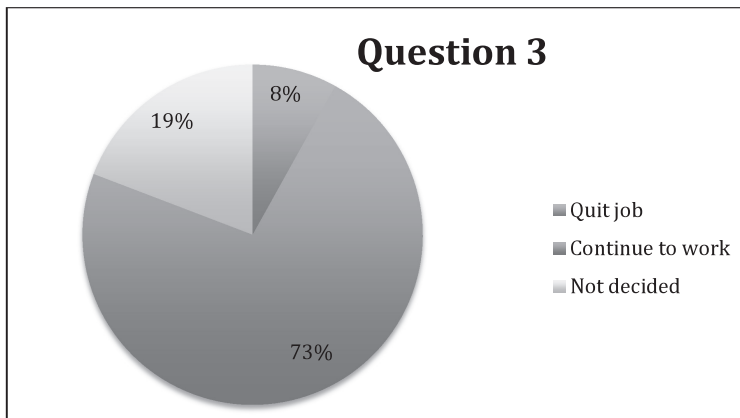


Chart 3. Question 3. "What do you intend to do after getting married?"

Looking at the results obtained on Question 5, probing the intention of women to work after childrearing (Chart 5), shortcomings of the previous Question 4 become obvious – we have not followed up on the type of work (full-time or part-time) 51% of women want to maintain after giving birth to children. Therefore the picture of women's intentional return to employment is not quite conclusive. From the responses to Question 5, it is obvious that only 8% of those 28% who decided to quit will remain housewives, while the majority (69%) will maintain their employment or return to it (36% full-time and 33% part-time). With the above-mentioned weakness of Question 4, important data on women's intention to change the type of

employment from full-time to part-time while childrearing and then restore their previous working status afterwards have not been obtained.

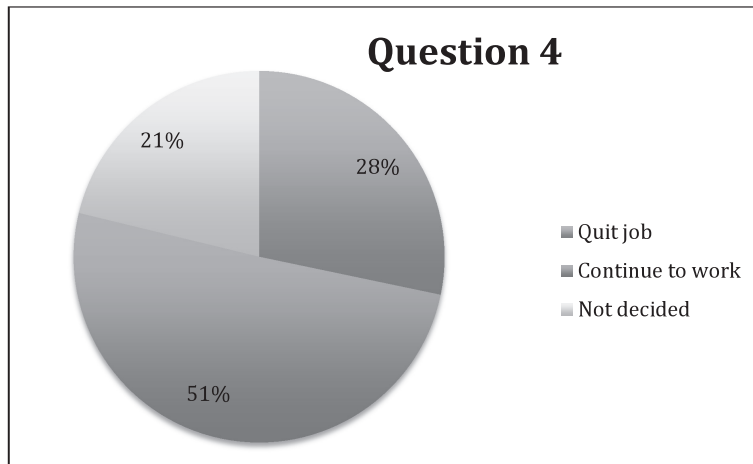


Chart 4. Question 4. “If you are still working after marriage, what do you intend to do after giving birth?”

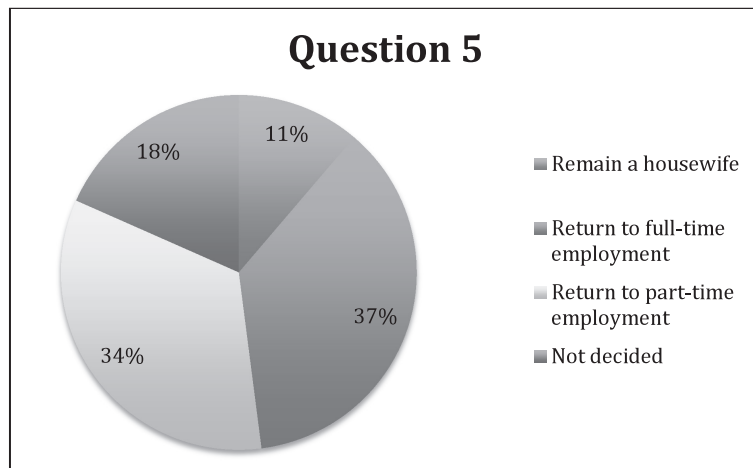


Chart 5. Question 5. “If you have quit your job after marriage and childbirth, what do you intend to do when your children grow up?”

Some interesting findings were rendered by responses to Questions 6 and 7 about the respondents’ mothers’ employment status (Chart 6 and Chart 7). It turns out that currently only 20% of mothers do not work while equal numbers (40%) are employed either full- or part-time. The picture was somewhat different years earlier, when women of the older generation were engaged in childrearing: they were distributed in three roughly equal groups, with 34% working full-time, 31% working part-time and 33% not working at all.

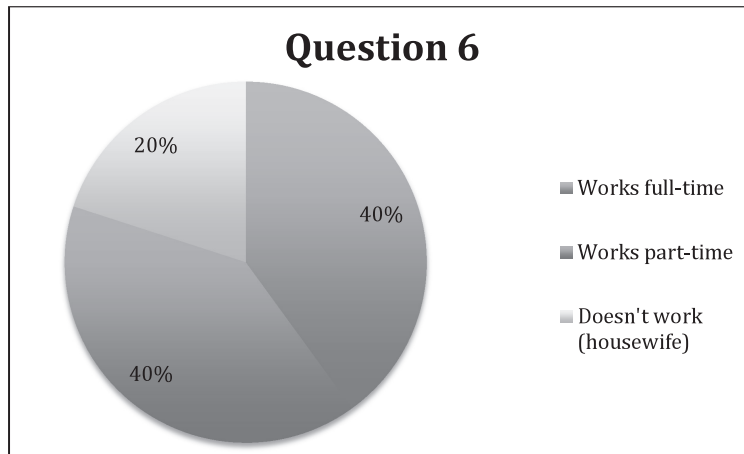


Chart 6. Question 6. "What is your mother's occupation?"

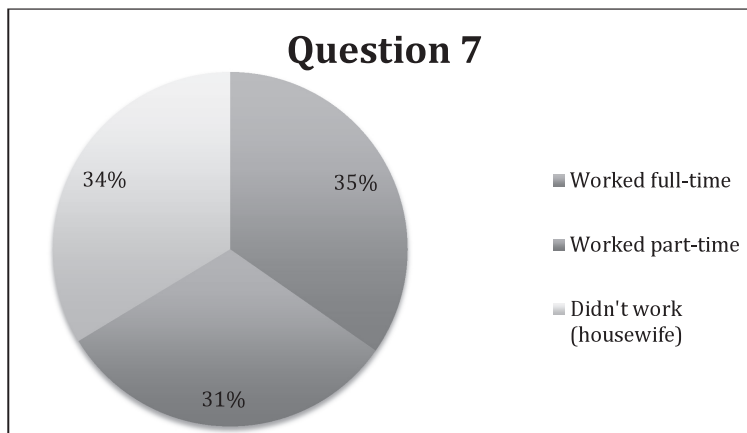


Chart 7. Question 7. "What did your mother do when you/your siblings were little?"

A separately standing Question 8 probed women's perception of gender equality in the workplace (Chart 8). The majority ($N = 58$, 69%) of the respondents believed that women should be considered equal to men, while the minority ($N = 20$, 21%) said "No".

Interestingly, 10% of surveyed business university graduates have no opinion on the issue, even though the question was not connected with any experience or practical knowledge, unlike the next one, Question 9.

When the survey addressed the issue of whether Japan is providing conditions for women to return to work after giving birth (Chart 9), it is understandable that the number of the respondents who answered the question with "Don't know" increased to 16%. An almost equal number (18%) have given a positive answer, while the majority ($N = 63$, 66%), said "No". It is worth noticing that the number of responses to this question dropped to 95.

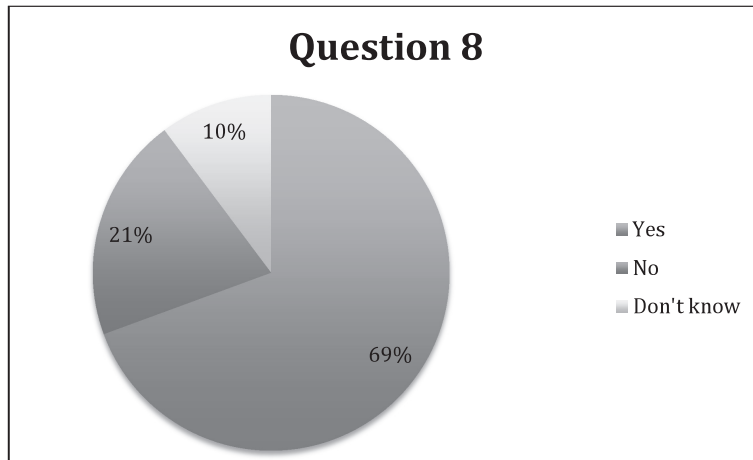


Chart 8. Question 8. "Do you think that women should be considered men's equals in the workplace?"

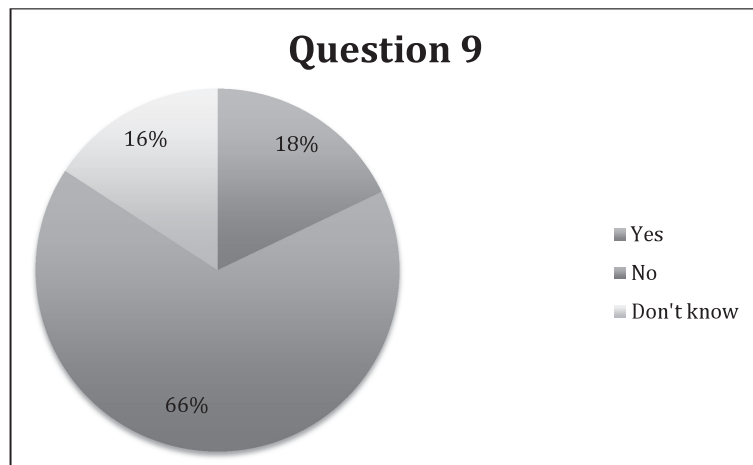


Chart 9. Question 9. "Do you think Japan offers conditions for women to return to work after giving birth?"

The last question of the survey yielded the least number of responses (N = 67). Question 10 sought suggestions of the respondents with regards to improving the current situation of working mothers (Chart 10). Since it did not have the option of "Don't know" answer, it is not surprising that the number of responses dropped from the initial 104 to 67. A lower response rate is somewhat heightened by six comments provided separately, but it is not clear whether these comments were given additionally to the answer choices of the survey or instead of them. The answers received to Question 10 were distributed in the following manner. The majority of the surveyed population (39%, N = 26) thought that the best option for women is flexible working time, the next popular choice (30%, N = 20) being paid childcare leave. 21% of the respondents (N = 14) voted for more daycare centers for children, while the increase in husband's help was viewed as important only by 9% of women.

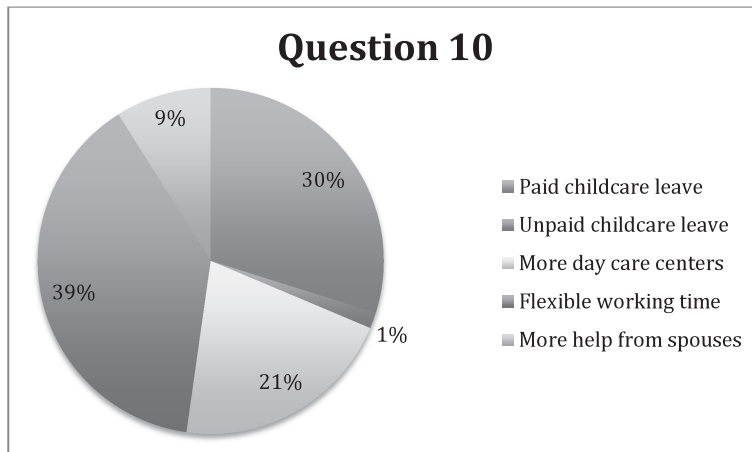


Chart 10. Question 10. "What would you like to change about the current situation of working mothers?"

The comments provided to the last question are very interesting, some of them serving as a development of those options suggested by the researchers ("I would like to see more day care centers within companies") or aggregating them:

"I think that reform is necessary for points 1, 4, 5 (paid childcare leave, flexible working time, more help from spouses, n. a.). A more favorable environment should be created for working mothers, while deepening the interest and understanding of the male spouses regarding child rearing" "I think all of the above should be improved", "I think there should be more day care centers" "Japanese need more understanding of working mothers".

Conclusion

The findings of the present study have revealed that, although young women are increasingly willing to participate in the workforce and even intend to continue working after marriage and childbirth, they are also aware of the hurdles which are still very much embedded in a conservative and sexist employment system. Despite Prime Minister Abe's intention of creating "a society in which women can shine", statistics show that Japan is not prepared to go beyond the façade of gender equality rhetoric. If male and female labor force participation rates remain at the levels observed in 2010, then the Japanese labor force will shrink considerably. ...Japan could avoid the looming labor force crisis if female participation rates were to converge over the next 20 years to the male participation levels of 2010 (Adema, 2013).

By way of conclusion, we will quote a respondent's comment, which expresses the conundrum of Japanese women in a nutshell: "Although many women would like to continue working, there is a tacit understanding that they should quit their jobs upon marriage. Even now, when equality is claimed widely, it is the woman who is responsible for child rearing, and although she would like to return to work after the children grow up, in many cases they find their position filled by a younger man. I hope for a society where women can work more freely."

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