The Paradox of the Japanese Labor Market
Working Prospects for a Japanese Housewife

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Any translations from Japanese is made by myself unless stated otherwise. Japanese names will be written in western order, with given names first and surnames last. For transcriptions of Japanese words and names, I will be using the modified Hepburn system, where long vowels will be marked with a macron as ā, ĩ, ū, ē, ō, and all Japanese words will be written in italics, with the exception of proper nouns, and the original Japanese word or sentence will follow in brackets.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Japanese economy has had its fair share of ups and downs during the last six or so decades. From the devastation after the World War II, the following world famous economic miracle, oil crisis in the 1970s, bubble economy in the 1980s, the bursting of that bubble in the 1990s and the Lehman shock in 2008. What has been consistent throughout all this time though is the low and stable rate of unemployment, which has rarely exceeded 5% (only twice, once in 2005 and once in 2009/2010). Japan held the position as the world’s second largest economy for more than 40 years, from 1968 to 2010 when they were pushed down a spot by the exploding Chinese economy. In the years following the end of World War II in 1945, Japan went through fundamental governmental and society changes under the supervision of the Allied forces, the USA in particular. The political powers shifted from the Emperor to a parliamentary government system, and a new constitution was implemented. Women first earned the right to vote in 1947.

During the following rapid growth of the Japanese economy, one heavily supporting factor to the phenomena was the nuclear family with traditional gender roles with a working father, a stay-at-home mother and their children that was essentially ubiquitous to the Japanese postwar society.¹ Men’s roles have been to devote most of their awake time to their work place, hopefully engaging in so called “lifetime employments” where they are hired immediately (or even before) graduation, initially underpaid and over-worked, but more or less guaranteed a stable seniority-based income with yearly pay raises, benefits, and secure employment until retirement.

Women would generally work full time before marriage, with low entry level wages, quit working for childrearing, and maybe return to work as part time workers with continuously low wages. Their roles in the era of rapid economic growth, with increasing standards of living for the large majority of the population, would be to invest their time in supporting the stronger labor resource – men, and also to raise new resources – sons, in order to maintain the demand for workers in the Japanese industries.² This may appear highly unequal, but one could argue that it

¹ Hagström Linus m.fl., JAPAN NU Strömningar och perspektiv. Stockholm: Carlssons Bokförlag, 2015, pp 51-54.
was simply a “bare necessity” to cope with industrial and corporate needs, as the concept of a housewife is not in any way a derogative in Japanese society. This will be addressed further in section 4.1.

Returning to present time, gender equality in Japan is a hot topic. In last year’s Gender Gap Index, Japan ranked on 101th place out of 145 countries. While Japan’s scores are high on education and health indexes, political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity contributes to dragging the scores down. Only 9 percent of members in the Japanese parliament were women, and only 22 percent of the ministerial posts were held by female ministers.³

Japan is facing major demographic changes. With low birth rates and an increasingly elderly population, since its peak of 128 million in 2010, the population has shrunk with roughly one million people.⁴ There are estimations showing that by 2030 the population will have declined to 116 million, and less than 87 million by 2060.⁵ With this decline and the aging population, a growing labor shortage is also an impending problem. In order to tackle these demographic issues, the Abe administration has been looking to their female citizens who are not, or only to a limited extent, participating on the labor market. They introduced “womenomics” in 2013 as a complement to the “Abenomics” political policies for economic growth. The plan was to increase female participation rate in the labor force, have women positioned in 30 percent of managerial occupations by 2020 (from 10 percent in 2012) and reducing the over 20 000 children on waiting list for childcare to zero in order to make it easier for women to combine work and childrearing and to boost birth rates.⁶

1.2 Research questions and objectives

As I mentioned in the background section, through ups and downs in the economic history of Japan, unemployment rates have remained low. However, unemployment rates are not based on the entire population, but only the population participating in the labor force, i.e. actually working population and people actively seeking employment. Averaging at 63.9 percent from 1953-2016, labor force participation rate in Japan hit a record low at 58.5 percent in 2012 and is currently at 59.2 percent as of March 2016. Comparing to other high income countries the rate is fairly low.⁷

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>Feb/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>Mar/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>Dec/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>Apr/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>Apr/16  (odd decrease of over 3% since 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>Dec/15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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⁴ http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=ja&v=25
⁵ http://www.ipss.go.jp/pr-ad/e/eng/03.html
⁷ http://www.tradingeconomics.com/country-list/labor-force-participation-rate
This relatively low participation rate in the labor force in Japan might possibly be excused by the aging population, but even during Japan’s extremely rapid economic growth era, the rate was around 65 percent. This indicates that there must be other reasons as to why the Japanese labor force is relatively small. Thus, the objective of this paper is to find out more about people outside of the labor force in Japan, focusing on married women with children. Other groups outside of the labor force could for example include youth who did not manage to get a job after graduation and give up searching for a time. The reason I chose to narrow my research down to married women with children is because I remembered hearing about the Japanese infamous “M-curve”. Because of how the majority of married women in Japan follow a similar pattern as how they choose to work, or not work, after starting a family, this behavior translates to an “M”-shaped curve when women’s labor force participation is shown in a graph (see figure 1). As can be seen, the “M”-shape was more prominent in the 80’s than it was in 2013, but does this mean that more married women with children are working? Moreover, as will be clarified in this paper, Japan has had a long tradition of working husbands and stay-at-home mothers. These full-time housewives should be one of the largest group of people outside of the labor force in Japan. The reason I’m narrowing it down to married women with children is because having children out of wedlock is still taboo in Japan, marriage preferably comes before pregnancy, or at least a shotgun wedding before childbirth.

As PM Abe is looking towards countries like Sweden, where both birth rates and women’s participation on the labor market are high, he is now asking the same from Japan’s female population. Considering the traditional gender roles that still are the norm in Japan this change should not come without complications. Based on this, the research question I will try to answer is:

**Women participating in the labor force are increasing in Japan, but what is the situation for married women with children? Are they also increasing on the labor market, and what challenges do they face?**

I think what makes my research relevant and unique is the comparison between the low unemployment rates and people outside of the labor force. As Japan is facing labor shortage due to the shrinking population I think it is important not to be content with the low employment, and make sure that working careers are available to all groups in society, and working, or not working, mothers in Japan deserve the same career opportunities as men have in the world’s third largest economy.

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8 [http://www.tradingeconomics.com/country-list/labor-force-participation-rate](http://www.tradingeconomics.com/country-list/labor-force-participation-rate) 2016.05.18

9 I actually first got the idea of people outside of the labor force when I read about youth who give up job searching and thus fall through school statistics of employed graduates, as non-active job seekers are not considered in the statistics.
2 Method, Material and Theory

As the purpose of this study is both to find out to what extent married women with children are participating in the labor force, and also what the challenges are for working mothers, I have chosen a mixed methodology approach to my research. I will gather, compare and analyze statistics of labor participation and employment types, mainly using statistics from government instances, namely the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare (MHLW from now on), the Japanese Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT), and the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (GEBCO), as they provide the most extensive statistics based on the whole population. Two smaller scaled surveys will be used to find out why people make the life choices that they do. Professor and associate professor Hiroko Kurumai and Yukiko Yokoyama from Hyogu University conducted a survey (H.K/Y.Y survey) targeting married women on their hopes for work in the future, and I will be using this to compare to the statistics of how the reality looks like. The other survey was conducted by Research Director Yutaka Asao at the JILPT regarding why people in non-regular employments chose the employment type that they did, which I also will compare to the statistics of married women in non-regular employments.

In addition, I will discuss speeches and law changes made by PM Abe, and what effects they have on the labor market by comparing them to the statistics and surveys. I will also try to

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give a more in-depth understanding of the Japanese working climate and perception of “work” by researching laws and social structures regarding work. Newspaper articles online will also be used to give a wider context where I find it necessary. Furthermore, the conception of the normative nuclear family in Japan is well explained by Staffan Appelgren, professor in anthropology at Gothenburg University, and will be referred to on a regular basis.\footnote{Hagström Linus m.fl., JAPAN NU Strömningar och perspektiv. Stockholm: Carlssons Bokförlag, 2015}

In order to put this research in a social context I will apply a social learning theory as a means to help me explain social structures in Japan. As this paper discusses traditional gender roles, and women’s opportunities on the labor market, the logical theory to use would probably be one with some kind of gender association. However, rather than simply putting the sexes on two different pillars and point out the disparities, I thought it would be interesting to focus more on why traditional gender roles in Japan still are as strong as they are. Social learning theory is usually referred to when trying to explain criminal behavior, but also as to explain how people’s identities are formed by the attitudes and behaviors of those around them. Particularly fitting the Japanese hierarchy society (will be explained in section 3.4) is the social learning theory regarding “modeling”. Sociology psychologist Albert Bandura explains how “[m]ost of the behaviors that people display are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of example.”\footnote{http://www.esludwig.com/uploads/2/6/1/0/26105457/bandura_sociallearningtheory.pdf p.5, 2016.06.22} This combined with the Japanese hierarchy structures gives little leeway for breaking out of traditional patterns. Bandura also states that “[t]he fact that behavior is controlled by its consequences is not a phenomenon created behavioral scientists, any more than physicists are responsible for the law of gravity. The process of natural selection has favored organisms adept enough to regulate their behavior on the basis of the effects it produces.”\footnote{Ibid. P.23, 2016.06.22} As will be explained in this paper, laws have been created in Japan to reduce discrimination at workplaces, but as discriminative behavior by employers and senior colleagues rarely get any legal consequences, discrimination continues.

3 First Things First – Definitions, and the Japanese Perception of “Work”

3.1 Definitions of employed vs unemployed

As of March 2016, Japan has an estimated unemployment rate of 3.4 percent, and the youth unemployment rate is below 6 percent.\footnote{http://www.tradingeconomics.com/japan/youth-unemployment-rate 2016.05.13} These are among the absolute lowest numbers of all OECD countries. However, we need to take a look at what qualifications one needs to be considered an unemployed. First, the Japanese population over 15 years of age is divided into those “in labor force” and those “not in labor force”, and the unemployment rate is based only on the people belonging to the labor force. The first group of those “in labor force” is subsequently
divided into “employed” and “unemployed”. According to Statistics Japan, Japan defines an unemployed according to the ILO (International Labour Organization) standards.\textsuperscript{15} These standards are as follows:

An “unemployed” is someone over a specific age who during the reference period was
- not paid for any kind of work, neither in employment or self-employment
- available for employment or self-employment
- seeking an employment, i.e. has actively applied for work as in hand in applications to employers, visiting work sites etc.

An “employed” person is someone over a specific age who during the reference period was
- in paid employment
- at work, performing some work and received payment in cash or in kind
- in employment but not at work. A person who during the reference period were temporarily not at work but still had a formal attachment to their workplace, as in
  - still receiving payment
  - having an agreement with the employer regarding re-positioning at the workplace
- in self-employment, a person who during the reference period performed any work for profit or for family gain, in cash or in kind, or
  - running a business but temporarily not working during the reference period for any reason
- working for any amount of hours at a family business, paid or unpaid\textsuperscript{16}

It should be mentioned that the “reference period” could be a week or even a single day, and the concept of “some work” could be as little as one hour’s work. In other words, a person who only worked for an hour during a whole month could be considered employed if that hour should occur within the reference period. Furthermore, someone who for one reason or another has given up on job hunting and are doing unpaid work at a family business is also considered employed.

3.2 Regular and Non-regular Employees in Japan. \textit{Seishain} vs \textit{Hiseishain}

In Japan, a full-time worker with an open-ended employment who was directly employed by their employer (as in not by an outstanding agency) is called a \textit{seishain} (正社員), a regular worker, engaged in a \textit{seikikōyō} (正規雇用), a regular employment. If any of those criteria is not met, they would be a \textit{hiseishain} (非正社員), a non-regular worker, engaged in a \textit{hiseikikōyō} (非正規雇用), a non-regular employment. The most common types of non-regular workers in Japan are part-time workers, \textit{arubaito}\textsuperscript{17} workers, fixed term and non-fixed term contract workers and dispatch

\textsuperscript{15} \url{http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/roudou/qa-1.htm} 2015.05.17
\textsuperscript{16} Information taken from the ILO’s homepage \url{http://laborsta.ilo.org/applv8/data/c2e.html}
\textsuperscript{17} The term “\textit{arubaito}” (アルバイト) comes from the German word “arbeit” (work) and is essentially a part time job. The difference between actual part time work and \textit{arubaito} is a bit obscure since there is no particular legal differentiation between the two. However, while part-time work can also include skilled work, \textit{arubaito} is almost
workers, but non-regular employment can have several different structures. As there is no legal definitions that differentiates between seikikōyō and hiseikikōyō, it is hard to actually pin-point their characteristics as the terms differs between work places. At some companies the work assignments between the two employment types may not be much different at all, and at other work places there may be clear distinctions. But Yūji Genda, associate professor in social science at the University of Tokyo argues that “[t]he word seishain carries a vague image of a full-time worker required to flexibly carry out a range of duties in various locations, who is thereby guaranteed long-term employment.”, and that “[t]here is a strong association between hi-seishain and unskilled laborers […]”.

The wage difference between regular workers and non-regular workers is severe. Although most regular employments initially are not particularly well paid, seniority based salaries and bonuses help to perk up the income level substantially and provides a steady increase in payment over time. Non-regular employment on the other hand, is to a much smaller extent provided with such benefits.

always menial work. And while a part-time job most likely is one’s main occupation, arubaito is something you do on the side, for example while studying or working another job.

18 [http://www.jil.go.jp/english/reports/documents/jilpt-reports/no.10.pdf](http://www.jil.go.jp/english/reports/documents/jilpt-reports/no.10.pdf) pp.9-10 2016.05.15
20 [http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/2r9852000000cguk-img/2r9852000000ch56.pdf](http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/2r9852000000cguk-img/2r9852000000ch56.pdf) 2016.05.22
Figure 2 from the MLHW shows where the different employment types peak in terms of yearly wages. Obviously, part time work peaks the lowest, with 40 percent earning up to 990 000 yen (keep this sum in mind when reading about tax deductions in section 4.2). Dispatch and contract workers peak around 2.5 million yen, and regular workers peak around 4 million yen. Although the peak of the regular employment type is only at 20 percent of the workers, because of the seniority-based salaries it does not level out to zero at higher income levels like the other employment types do. Furthermore, benefits like bonuses which would add to the yearly income are probably not included in these statistics.

While Japan does not have many governmental funded social security mechanisms, these are instead to some extent provided by employers. However, there are large disparities between the social benefits of full-time regular workers and those of non-regular workers. Many Japanese companies provide their regular workers with a variety of social benefits such as health and unemployment insurance, housing support, yearly bonuses and severance payment. Although some non-regular workers may have access to some of these benefits, the difference in proportions are vast. Below (table 1) is an extract of the benefit differences between regular and irregular workers. It shows the percentage of how many regular workers and irregular workers respectively received a selection of benefits from their employers.21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of</th>
<th>Health insurance</th>
<th>Severance pay</th>
<th>Bonus payment</th>
<th>Welfare pension</th>
<th>Personal asset support (housing etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular workers</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non regular workers</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Source: MHLW

3.3 The increase of non-regular work in Japan

Since 1984, the rate of non-regular work in Japan has increased from 15.3% to 37.5% (as of year 2015, see figure 3).22 The largest group of non-regular workers are part-time employees, followed by arubaito workers. According to statistics Japan, women comprised of 70 percent of all non-regular workers (as of 2012), and as will be shown in section 4.1 the majority of them work part-time jobs.23

21 http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/2r9852000000cguk-img/2r9852000000ch56.pdf 2016.05.13
22 http://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/06-Seisakujouhou-11650000-Shokugyouanteikyokuhakenyukiroudoutaisakubu/0000120286.pdf 2016.05.19
Research Director at the JILPT. Yutaka Asao expresses an inclination towards the notion that most developed countries as they reach the peak of their economy experience similar tendencies on the labor market with an increase of non-regular employment. On the other hand, the ILO describes another scenario where a country have extremely low unemployment but high rates of non-regular working conditions.24

Low unemployment may disguise substantial levels of poverty, as high unemployment rates often occur in developed countries with low incidence of poverty. In countries with limited social protection, unemployment insurance and welfare benefits, many individuals simply cannot afford to be unemployed. Instead, they must survive by any means, often by taking up low quality, poorly remunerated jobs in the informal economy or in informal work arrangements. By contrast, in advanced countries with well-developed social protection and higher living standards, workers can better afford to take the time to seek more

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24 http://www.jil.go.jp/english/reports/documents/jilpt-reports/no.10.pdf  p.35 2016.05.14
desirable jobs. Therefore, comparing unemployment rates across countries with very different social, economic and institutional contexts can be misleading.

With this as a background, one could suggest that although Japan is the world’s third largest economy, the Japanese labor market is showing tendencies towards that of a developing country. In a survey from 2010, part time workers, fixed term contract workers and dispatch workers were asked what their main reasons were for choosing a non-regular employment type. The answers differ quite a lot between the three employment categories (see figure 2). The alternative that got the majority of the part-time workers, 39%, “I want to work hours that suit my convenience” were only chosen by 8.9% of the contract workers, and 11% of the dispatch workers. The alternative “Lack the opportunity to work as a regular employee” were chosen by 20.8%, 37.1% and 34.9% respectively. All though we cannot say for certain whether “lacking the opportunity” refers to their own personal capabilities or external hindrance, but 20.9% of the contract workers also chose an alternative that there was the potential opportunity to be offered a regular job after the contract expires, which could indicate that most of them are involuntarily fixed term contract workers and that they are hoping for a regular employment.

![Figure 4 Source: JILPT, 2010](http://www.ilo.org/hanoi/Informationresources/Publicinformation/newsitems/WCMS_309278/lang--en/index.htm)

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3.4 Being a full-time regular worker in Japan

According to the Japanese Labour Standards Act, “as a general rule”, employers are not supposed to let their employees work more than eight hours a day, and 40 hours a week. If the working day adds up to 6 hours, there has to be a 45 minute break, an hour if the working day is 8 hours. All workers must have at least one day off work a week.27

However, Japan has a corporate tradition of extensive overtime work, and showing loyalty to your employer by investing as much time as needed to get the job done. As long as the superiors are still in the office, the subordinates will be reluctant to leave. Although there are national labor laws (table 2) to prevent excessive overtime, the phenomena is not limited to the corporate sphere, but rather incorporated in the Japanese working mindset, their perception of “work”, the give-and-take between the social security provided by the workplace in exchange for the workers’ devotion and loyalty to the company.28 Also, hierarchy structures that are deeply rooted in the Japanese society starts early in educational institutions. One is always supposed to show respect to the elders and, not only in terms of behavior, but it is also incorporated in the Japanese language where the grammar used differs whether one is talking to someone older – or someone higher up on the social or corporate ladder – or if they are younger and/or with a lower social status. Students and business coworkers alike are divided into senpai (先輩) and kōhai (後輩), superiors and subordinates. At the workplace, a senpai is not necessarily a person in a managerial position, but a coworker who entered the company before you, and you become senpai for new workers entering the company after you. At school, students in grades above you are your senpai and students in grades below you are kōhai.

Extensive overtime and dedication to the workplace are not something limited solely to the corporate industries. Journalist Kevin Rafferty had a talk with a “…50-something clinical professor and departmental head in a busy and reputed university medical faculty in a major Japanese city.” She described some difficulties she is facing when her female staff go on maternity leave. A year earlier, six of the forty clinicians in her department were on maternity leave at the same time. At the time of the interview there were only three, but still a burden she says, as there is no room in the budget for replacing the non-present personnel. Instead, everyone must work harder.

It is much easier with men. They come dedicated to the work and don’t take family time off. I don’t know what I would do if one of my female staff took time off for a second child because the whole system, including budgets that are squeezed tight all the time, will not support women who come and go and who are not dedicated to their work.29

It is not easy to find any statistics covering the amount of overtime that Japanese workers actually endure. Kazuya Ogura (ph.d in commerce, Waseda University) writes in an online article that

27 http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2008/12/dl/tp1216-11-01.pdf 2016.05.15
28 Hagström et al, 2015, pp.55-56
29 http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/12/31/commentary/japan-commentary/abes-womenomics-program-isnt-working/#.VzXmIoQ3kVf Quote from the statement in this article 2016.05.13
through his research he found that 85 percent of full time employees work overtime in Japan. He also argues that government and international statistics regarding working hours rarely reflects reality as unpaid overtime, so called *sābisu zangyō* (サービス残業), is not represented in the numbers. The Japanese Trade Labor Union (Rengo) conducted a survey in 2012, targeting 1000 regular workers regarding their working hours. Out of the 1000 workers, 963 people stated that they had worked overtime, and the average overtime work per week was 28.5 hours. A little more than 10 percent had worked 30-40 hours, and almost 5 percent worked 50-60.\(^{30}\)

By law, the overtime allowed is fixed depending on the reference period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2 Allowed over-time hours stipulated by law. Source: MHLW\(^{31}\)*

If one works overtime the employer is by law obliged to add a 25 percent extra pay for the extra hours worked. Should one work more than 45 and up to 60 hours overtime the employer is by law obliged to add an additional 25 percent, totaling in a 50 percent extra pay for the overtime hours. (This may seem contradicting since one was not supposed to be allowed to work more than 45 hours overtime per month.) There is also a special clause, *tokubetsu jōkō* (特別条項) when for a fixed period of time, not more than 6 months, there is virtually no limit in overtime hours.\(^{32}\)

According to Japanese law, workers are entitled to 10 days of paid leave after working for at least 6 months. After another year’s work an additional 11 days of paid leave, and 12 days after the third year and so forth up until 6.5 years of work. However, although this is stipulated by law, Japanese workers rarely use up their paid leave. In the Rengo survey, only 7.4 percent of the participants had used all of their paid leave, and almost 23 percent had used none at all. Another 23.7 percent had only used one tenth of their days. When asked for the reason, almost half of the participants said that they were understaffed at work, and they did not want to cause trouble. 38.4 percent said that they wanted to save them for emergencies and, surprisingly, if they would become sick. Around 35 percent said the atmosphere at work did not make it easy to ask for time off, and 19 percent said that no one else around them seemed to take any time off either.\(^{33}\)

Although being something which could happen to regular and non-regular workers alike, working yourself to death is a common enough scenario to have its own word in Japanese. *Karōshi* (過労死), literally “death by overwork”, a term coined in Japan in the late 70’s, has up until recently been almost exclusive to middle-aged men, but lately apparently also started


\(^{31}\) [http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2008/12/dl/tp1216-11-01.pdf](http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2008/12/dl/tp1216-11-01.pdf) 2016.05.17

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

occurring among youth and women, according to a recent article in Reuters. Companies which take advantage of youth, and mothers trying to get back into the labor market, advertise full-time employments, but when an applicant has gone through the interview process and landed the job they are instead offered a non-regular employment which includes several hours of sābusu zangyō with a promise of regular employment in the future. But instead of keeping that promise, lay-offs and new recruitments allow the company to save on personnel costs. The MHLW announced in June last year that starting November measures would be taken to prevent further incidents with karōshi and to contribute to a society where people can have a balanced work life and live healthily. However, the measures boil down to only 2 items, both more or less vague statements on how they will make efforts to find out more about karōshi through surveys, and how they must get local authorities and business entrepreneurs to co-operate.

4 The Japanese Housewife

4.1 Overview

The general word for housewife in Japanese is shufu (主婦). A shufu is a married woman whose main purpose is to take care of household and children if there are any, whereas the husband works outside of the home. This nuclear constellation can be traced back to the Japanese industrial revolution era, where the physically stronger men would work with manufacturing and women would take care of the home, children, sick and the elderly. Although the main task for a Japanese housewife is to take care of the home and children, she can still have some kind of occupation outside of the home. A full time housewife however is mostly referred to as a sengyō shufu (専業主婦).

Appelgren also describes a normative conception of a family in postwar Japan, with traditional gender roles with a working husband, full time housewife and their children. This creates a mutual dependence where the female is dependent on her husband to be the breadwinner and to bring income, and the male is dependent on his wife to take care of the household and the upbringing of the children. However it should be fair to suggest that the spouse with no income is more dependent than the breadwinner spouse. As will be clarified in chapter 4.2, landing a regular job after childbirth can be a struggle, which could make the spouse with no income reluctant to separate for economic reasons, even if there were reasons for wanting to do so. Especially since it often falls on the woman to take care of the children if they were to divorce. Appelgren argues that even though more and more families in Japan are made out of different

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34 http://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-economy-overwork-idUSKCN0X000F 2016.05.24
35 Ibid.
36 http://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/06-Seisakujouhou-11200000-Roudoukijunkyoku/0000061175.pdf 2016.05.24
37 https://kotobank.jp/word/%E4%B8%BB%E5%A9%A6-529270 (世界大百科事典 第2版の解説)
38 Hagström m.fl., 2015 p.54
39 According to the GEBCO report, there were 3,860,000 single mothers with children vs 660,000 single fathers with children. http://www.gender.go.jp/about_danjo/whitepaper/h26/gaiyou/pdf/h26_gaiyou.pdf p.5 2016.05.16
constellations than the traditional nuclear one, these alternative family constructions are considered faulty from a normative perspective and have to be made excuses for and explained.\textsuperscript{40}

With \textit{sen} meaning “specialized” and \textit{gyō} meaning “work”, the term \textit{sengyō shufu} suggests that being a full time housewife is qualified work and requires a certain amount of skills. It is not unusual that she would be taking care of the household finances, and the image of the hard working husband who brings his wife his whole income and only get pocket money in return is a scenario rumored to be the standard proceedings.\textsuperscript{41} However, no matter how highly regarded full-time housewives may be, the fact still remains that it is work without monetary compensation, and they are economically dependent on their spouse.

Though the number of households with full-time housewives are decreasing, statistics from the Japanese Institute for Labour Policy and Training show that in 2014 there were approximately 7.2 million \textit{sengyō shufu} in Japan (see figure 5).\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5.png}
\caption{“The transition of households with full-time housewives and households where both spouses are working” The dotted line represents households with full-time housewives. Source: JILPT}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5.png}
\caption{“The transition of households with full-time housewives and households where both spouses are working” The dotted line represents households with full-time housewives. Source: JILPT}
\end{figure}

In the GEBCO report (see figure 1) statistics show that women participating in the labor force are increasing, peaking at around 79 percent in ages 25-29, and the lowest rate at around 69 percent in ages 30-39 in 2013. The “M-curve” is levelling out. Figure 5 shows that more and more

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Hagström m.fl., 2015 p.54
\item \textsuperscript{41} Although this is a highly non-scientific theory, it is often heard of and joked about.
\item \textsuperscript{42} http://www.jil.go.jp/kokunai/statistics/qa/a07-1.html 2016.05.18
\end{itemize}
married women are starting to work. Concurrently, the amount of non-regular employment, as opposed to the regular ones, are also increasing, which could be seen in figure 3.

Below in table 3 is a compilation of statistics from 2013 regarding married women’s participation in the labor force based on the whole population. The majority of married women in all ages with children who are in employment are non-regular workers, of which the vast majority are part-time workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Married women without children</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>*of which part-time workers</th>
<th>Not in employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (total)</td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>Non-regular workers*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-24 (54 400)</td>
<td>15 800 (29%)</td>
<td>17 900 (33%)</td>
<td>8 900 (50%)</td>
<td>19 500 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29 (327 100)</td>
<td>122 100 (37%)</td>
<td>103 600 (32%)</td>
<td>54 400 (53%)</td>
<td>98 400 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34 (430 900)</td>
<td>148 100 (34%)</td>
<td>144 700 (34%)</td>
<td>68 400 (47%)</td>
<td>128 800 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-49 (440 100)</td>
<td>132 700 (30%)</td>
<td>149 200 (34%)</td>
<td>83 700 (56%)</td>
<td>139 200 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44 (449 700)</td>
<td>115 700 (26%)</td>
<td>155 100 (34%)</td>
<td>91 800 (59%)</td>
<td>153 700 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49 (454 600)</td>
<td>111 900 (25%)</td>
<td>158 700 (35%)</td>
<td>107 900 (68%)</td>
<td>153 300 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54 (668 000)</td>
<td>150 300 (23%)</td>
<td>249 200 (37%)</td>
<td>177 000 (71%)</td>
<td>217 300 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59 (1 123 000)</td>
<td>186 900 (17%)</td>
<td>381 600 (34%)</td>
<td>294 000 (77%)</td>
<td>448 500 (40%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Married women with child(ren)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>*of which part-time workers</th>
<th>Not in employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (total)</td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>Non-regular workers*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-24 (112 600)</td>
<td>11 200 (10%)</td>
<td>23 600 (21%)</td>
<td>16 400 (70%)</td>
<td>75 300 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29 (641 600)</td>
<td>122 500 (19%)</td>
<td>141 900 (22%)</td>
<td>106 000 (75%)</td>
<td>363 700 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34 (1 512 600)</td>
<td>313 900 (21%)</td>
<td>383 500 (25%)</td>
<td>288 700 (75%)</td>
<td>768 000 (51%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39 (2 256 300)</td>
<td>433 700 (19%)</td>
<td>739 300 (33%)</td>
<td>576 700 (78%)</td>
<td>988 900 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44 (2 358 300)</td>
<td>428 700 (18%)</td>
<td>963 900 (41%)</td>
<td>751 700 (78%)</td>
<td>840 500 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49 (1 851 900)</td>
<td>342 100 (18%)</td>
<td>858 900 (47%)</td>
<td>689 900 (80%)</td>
<td>535 600 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54 (1 458 900)</td>
<td>273 800 (19%)</td>
<td>649 800 (45%)</td>
<td>511 500 (79%)</td>
<td>425 900 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59 (1 201 100)</td>
<td>198 500 (17%)</td>
<td>454 800 (38%)</td>
<td>360 600 (79%)</td>
<td>443 300 (37%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Employment stats for married women. Percentage have been rounded up or down to nearest whole percentage unit, i.e. 25.6% → 26%, 34.4% → 34% etc. Employment types like “self-employed” and “family worker” are not included, therefore the percentage do not add up to 100 percent. Source: Statistics Japan\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{43} http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/GL08020103.do?toGL08020103&classID=000001048179&cycleCode=0&requestSender=search table 220, 2016.05.22
Between 50-60 percent of the working married women without children in ages 35-44 were working part-time jobs, compared to 78 percent of the working mothers. Unemployment among the ages 15-29 differs a lot between mothers and childless women, where a much larger portion of the mothers are unemployed. This changes however in the older age brackets. From the age 45 and up, a larger portion of the mothers are working, compared to those without children. This could be due to a larger economic burden on households where they need to finance education and other living costs for their children.

Looking back at the JILPT survey in section 3.2, the majority of the part-time workers stated that their reason for choosing that employment was “I want to work hours that suit my convenience”, which may sound somewhat selfish, but assuming that many of them are working mothers with families to care for makes it sound more reasonable.

4.2 Do they want to work?

According to a survey made by Recruit Japan over 80% of the sengyō shufū with children want to return to the workplace where they worked before childbirth, or find a new employment.\(^{44}\) In an article on Economic News from 2013 it is said that 12% of sengyō shufū households are struggling financially.\(^{45}\) Even though these women do want to work, the lack of childcare facilities and workplaces with reasonable working hours to allow them to also be mothers complicates the situation. When you read comment sections of blogs regarding the working prospects of full time housewives, you will find similar arguments that, even though there are many who would prefer to work, both society and personal insecurity related obstacles can make it difficult to get back into the labor market.

Hiroko Kurumai and Yukiko Yokoyama at Hyogo University conducted a survey in 2013 targeting 1000 married women in the Osaka and Hyogo area, who at the time were not in employment (i.e.a sengyō shufū), about their hopes and plans for work in the future.\(^{46}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Want to work immediately</th>
<th>Want to work eventually</th>
<th>Do not want to work (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age of youngest

\(^{44}\) [http://www.sankei.com/life/news/141209/lif1412090015-n1.html](http://www.sankei.com/life/news/141209/lif1412090015-n1.html) 2015.08.02 (no longer accessible, was referred to on this site: [http://girlschannel.net/topics/250355/](http://girlschannel.net/topics/250355/)) 2015.08.02

\(^{45}\) [http://economic.jp/?p=4945](http://economic.jp/?p=4945) 2016.05.12

\(^{46}\) [http://ci.nii.ac.jp/els/110009623782.pdf?id=ART0010091134&type=pdf&lang=en&host=cinii&order_no=&ppv_type=0&lang_sw=&no=1463179639&cp=2016.05.02](http://ci.nii.ac.jp/els/110009623782.pdf?id=ART0010091134&type=pdf&lang=en&host=cinii&order_no=&ppv_type=0&lang_sw=&no=1463179639&cp=2016.05.02)
child

No children    22.6    53.2    24.2
Up to preschool 10.9    77.0    12.1
Elementary school 24.7    55.7    19.5
Jr. High school   16.7    60.6    22.7

Husband’s income
(in yen, x 10,000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-149</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150-299</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-499</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-699</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700-999</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Work experience
as a full time employee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>62.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In complementation, they continued the survey with asking the reason why those who stated that they wanted to work at one point or another. The participants could choose up to three of the following reasons:

1. It was my intention from the start to go back to work again
2. I want to contribute to society through working
3. I want to save money to prepare for the future
4. I want to earn my own money that I can use freely
5. Since I’m not working we have no leeway economically
6. I like working outside of the home
7. I finally manage to find some spare time, and want to use it to work
8. I want to make use of my knowledge and experience
9. I feel like I’ll be left outside of society if I don’t
10. Other
As shown in figure 7, the top three reasons for why the women wanted to work was to improve the economic situation for themselves and their family. The more career oriented alternative (8) “I want to make use of my knowledge and experience” was below or around 10 percent. This reflects well the discourse that Appelgren is pressing as how the work choices of married women has little to do with her own self-fulfillment and more to do with “chipping in” to deal with increasing costs like housing and the children’s education.47

Since the major reasons why housewives would want to work are economical, a crucial question is if it actually pays off to work. In Japan, if a married couple both work full time, they will get an automatic tax deduction on both of their income. Should one of the spouses not work at all, his or hers tax deduction can be transferred to the other spouses income. Furthermore, should that spouse start working part time, earning less than one million yen a year, he or she could still get the tax deduction, while the other full time working spouse gets to keep the double deduction. The government has been said to be considering abolishing these tax deductions as an incentive for women to work full-time jobs.48 However, abolishing the tax deductions and putting

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47 Hagström et.al., 2015 p.60
more economic pressure on households could end up forcing women to engage in an employment that is not supportive of working mothers.

4.3 Returning to work after childbirth

In the H.K/Y.Y survey, out of the 1000 participants, 763 women stated that they wanted to work at some point. They were subsequently asked what type of employment they would prefer. Only 10.5 percent said that they wanted to work as a regular worker from the start until they retire. Another 24.4 percent said that they wanted to start off with some kind of part-time employment, and later move on to a regular employment. In comparison, the majority, 43 percent of the participants, said that they wanted to find a work place that allowed them to always work part time until retirement. 10.7 percent wanted to engage in some kind of work that could be done from within the home.49

We have already seen how the curve for married women participating in the workforce is steadily heading upwards. We have also seen that most of them are still working non-regular jobs. Now, changing the point of view, how do the employers and workplaces receive female staff when they get pregnant or women who already have children? Over the years media has covered stories from time to time about Japanese workplaces regarding different kinds of harassment, such as sekku hara (セクハラ), sexual harassment, mental and physical harassment or gender discrimination generally performed by male staff and management towards female staff, pawa hara (パワハラ), power harassment, mental and physical harassment performed by management towards younger or more newly recruited staff. In 2014 mata hara (マタハラ), maternity harassment, was added to the titles, where both management and regular staff, male and female, have been reported to discriminate against mothers and pregnant staff. Pregnant women involved in irregular employments have also reported unfair lay-offs or how they have been forced to quit voluntarily.50 A MHLW survey from 2015 targeting women in ages 25-44 tells that 48.7 percent of pregnant dispatch workers and 21.8 percent of pregnant regular workers have experienced harassments. Only 5.8 percent of part-time workers and 13.3 of fixed-term contract workers had been subjected to discrimination. The most common type of harassment was pregnant women being told that they are “bothersome” and asked questions like “why don’t you quit?” etc. But there were also occasions where regular workers had involuntarily been demoted into non-regular status and pays that had been cut. 51

49 http://ci.nii.ac.jp/els/110009623782.pdf?id=ART0010091134&type=pdf&lang=en&host=cinii&order_no=&ppv_type=0&lang_sw=&no=1464043687&cp= p.4 2016.05.17
50 http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/10/27/editorials/ending-maternity-harassment/#.Vv0DieQ3kVd 2016.05.06
51 http://ci.nii.ac.jp/els/110009623782.pdf?id=ART0010091134&type=pdf&lang=en&host=cinii&order_no=&ppv_type=0&lang_sw=&no=1464043687&cp= p. 6 2016.05.17
If anyone was in doubt that these types of harassment were occurring in the world’s third largest economy, an incident in at the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly in June 2014 put the issues into light. When Your Party member Ayaka Shiomura addressed concerns regarding women’s issues and the low birthrates in Japan, she received jeers from male members of the Diet, shouting at her “why aren’t you getting married yourself?” etc.\textsuperscript{52} Professor in Human science at Osaka University Kazue Muta argues that even though there are laws prohibiting these kinds of behaviors and an increasing awareness in society of the issues, deeply rooted corporate traditions and social values make progress slow. She continues with pointing out that some men in the work places are not even aware that their actions are discriminating, and women are reluctant to openly confront and protest against the harassments. This reluctance she adds, is a result of both group mentality where the harmony in the group must not be disturbed, and also further pressure on women to always be submissive and pleasant.\textsuperscript{53}

5 Prime Minister Abe’s Promises

5.1 Equal terms for temporary workers

A revision of the labor law for part-time work was made by the Abe administration and came into effect on April 1\textsuperscript{st} 2015, prohibiting employers to engage in discriminatory treatment between regular and non-regular workers, regarding pays and benefits. Previously this law did only cover non-regular workers with an open-ended employment, but after the revision it will also be applicable on fixed-term temporary workers.\textsuperscript{54} However, in order for this law to be applied, the non-regular worker must have the exact same work duties, and also be available for staff relocation to the same extent as regular workers do. This opens up opportunities for employers to adjust the assignments of non-regular workers on a small detail, so that the working terms will differ slightly from those of the regular workers, and thus not require them to provide the same terms for their non-regular workers. Even if the employer would not adopt these kinds of schemes, being available for staff relocation and probable long hours of over-time, as have been mentioned is a common trait of full-time work in Japan, simply is not an option for most working mothers with young children.

5.2 Daycare for all children

In a speech in April 2013 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced that in order to boost growth in Japan they would have to further incorporate into the political and economical society one of

\textsuperscript{52} \url{http://www.nippon.com/en/column/g00188/2016.05.14}
\textsuperscript{53} \url{http://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00171/2016.05.14}
\textsuperscript{54} \url{http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/0000060383.html}
their most unutilized human resources – women. In fact, women is the key ingredient. Allowing women to “shine” in society is a main slogan.56

One major issue women face when they want to return to work after childbirth, is the lack of daycare options for their children. In recent years, the estimated number of children on the waiting list for daycare has ranged from 20 000 something to a staggering 72 000. In his speech P.M Abe announced that they would make arrangements to increase the available childcare for 200 000 children in 2013-2014 and aiming to eliminate the childcare waiting list by 2017, when the demand is expected to reach its peak.57

This seemingly smooth progress took a toll when an anonymous blogger wrote an entry with the title “(I) was rejected daycare – die Japan!” on February 15th this year.58 They described, in coarse words, how they were not able to find a spot at a nursery school for their child and how they now probably will not be able to get a job. At first Prime Minister Abe declared that since the author was anonymous there was no way of telling if this story was true or not, and thus decided not to address it further.59 However, within days the blog had over 10 000 approvals and had been shared around 30 000 times on social media, with thousands following the hashtag “I’m the one who got rejected daycare” eventually resulting in a more modest protest of slightly more than 30 people holding signs with the same message in front of the Diet on March 5th.60 This made the Abe administration reconsider, and assured that they would direct more resources towards cutting the waiting line for childcare.

In the aforementioned speech, P.M Abe mentioned that he had found that the most common reason why mothers chose to quit working after having a child was not because it was difficult to combine work and childrearing, but because women by choice wanted to stay at home and raise their child. This surely has some truth in it considering the strong traditional gender roles in Japan mentioned earlier. As opposed to this though, in 2015, 950 000 women stated that although they wanted to work they chose not to search for a job because of pregnancy or childrearing.61 This would suggest that a fair share of full time housewives would be prepared to work, should there be sufficient support for them to do so.

55 女性が輝く社会 (josei ga kagayaku shakai), a society where women shine, mentioned in Abe’s speech.
56 http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abebstatement/201304/19speech_e.html 2016.05.18
57 Ibid.
58 “Hoikuen ochita nihon shine!!!” 「保育園落ちた日本死ね！！！」 http://anond.hatelabo.jp/20160215171759
2016.05.12
59 http://www.asahi.com/articles/ASJ3355J2J33UTIL01N.html 2016.05.13
60 http://www.asahi.com/articles/ASJ35540VJ35UTIL00N.html 2016.05.13
6 Conclusion and Summary

6.1 Conclusion

I named this paper “The paradox of the Japanese labor market…”, which is a bit misleading as I would argue that there are actually several paradoxes. Unemployment rates are low, but many are outside of the labor force. There’s a labor shortage but still the sought after regular employments are getting harder to land, and the employers do not seem to value their female workers enough to support them during pregnancies and childrearing. More women are staying employed, but at the same time birth rates have decreased.

Returning to my original research question, “Women participating in the labor force are increasing in Japan, but what is the situation for married women with children? Are they also increasing on the labor market, and what challenges do they face?”, I would say that the answer is more or less clear; yes they are, but their opportunities are restricted. Figure 5 showed a large increase of married women participating in the labor force, but combining full-time work with the Japanese corporate tradition of long working hours with childrearing is just not realistic for most.

As the number of working married women are increasing, so are the non-regular jobs. And the “M-curve” in figure 1 is levelling out, but that is hardly caused by working mothers since more that 50 percent of all working mothers aged 15-39 were not working, as could be seen on table 3. This would suggest that the women levelling out that curve are mainly single women, and also married women without children. Which would mean that working women are not having children, and women who are having children do not work anymore now compared to what they used to. Although it is a bit early to tell if the “womenomics” will have any larger impact, I would argue that judging by the not so easy to sway traditional gender roles, and also attitudes in the corporate sector, changing the working situation for mothers will require more pressure on business entrepreneurs and other employers to prevent discrimination. Starting as early as the pregnancy, many women face some level of discrimination in the form of maternity harassments at their work places, and if we regard behaviors like matahara and other discrimination in the work places as criminal, which they are although, as Muta explained, some are not realizing that they are being discriminative, social learning theory suggests that this behavior will continue as long as there are no dramatic consequences, and since most women are reluctant to protest, the consequences are not implemented.

Moreover, finding daycare spots for their children are still also proving to be a challenge for many, and should they not find accommodation, traditional gender roles stipulates that the mother will be the one to take care of the child.
6.2 Reflections

What I have found to be most difficult in this research are definitions of certain words and concepts in Japanese, and in English too for that matter. Initially it was the definition of unemployed which boggled my uneducated self. Later it was the Japanese definitions of housewives and different types of non-regular employment, the latter I have chosen not to be too particular about since I do not believe those slight nuances would have any impact on my research as in the end, all non-regular employment types are vastly less beneficial compared to regular employment in Japan, which is the main issue. Regarding the definition of a housewife, I have chosen to only address the general term shufu and the term for a full time housewife sengyō shufu, disregarding a third concept called kengyō shufu (兼業主婦), which refers to, as I understand it, a married woman who both does the majority of the housework and also works outside of the home, which according to my experience is usually just referred to as a “regular” shufu.

During my time of studying in Sapporo, Japan in 2009-2011, I had an arubaito at a noodle factory where I packed noodle bento boxes for convenience stores. As far as I noticed, none of the Japanese workers ever used their paid leave, or took any time off. Maybe because of peer pressure, but I and another exchange student working there only used it once. So my experience reflects well the working environment I have described in this paper. Also, our working hours were not fixed, you would work until all the bento orders were completed. On school days, we started to work at 2 pm after classes, and if we worked weekends we would start at around 8 or 9 am. During most part of the year we would finish between 5 and 7 pm. However, during summer vacation the factory was extremely busy. It was not unusual to go to work at 7 am, and not finish until around 11 pm. No one questioned this. At least not openly. Only very few, maybe two of the women out of around 20, would go home early every day for family reasons.

I think it would be interesting to research about how gender roles are depicted in Japanese manga and anime directed towards children, and also in media in general, and see what kind of parallels can be drawn on how the Japanese society and labor market looks like.

6.3 Summary

In today’s Japanese society, with low birth rates and an increasingly elderly population, the labor market is facing acute labor shortages. To tackle this problem, the Japanese government has started promoting more women to join the labor force. By introducing “womenomics” in 2012, which included revising laws and legislations, providing daycare for all children, and presenting a goal of having 30 percent of all leadership positions held by women by 2020, they urge women to
pursue their own careers and to “shine” in society. Traditionally, most women in Japan quit working after having children, and while some go back to work after a few years, many of them only work part time, or in unskilled labor. Many do not reenter the labor force at all.

In this paper, I wanted to find out what the situation is for married women with children on the labor market in Japan today. To do so, I have gathered statistics regarding their work patterns, and compared it to surveys focusing on women’s hopes and expectations of working in the future. In addition, I have researched on what difficulties they are facing at their workplace when announcing pregnancies and what newspapers report about it. Some of the goals that the Abe administration will also be tackled, and examined how they translates to reality. This paper also clarifies some issues regarding the working climate in Japan, explaining different employment types and their pros and cons, and also how the Japanese perceives “work” and some peculiarities in their work places.

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