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History I

29 June 2019

Livelihood in Japan: Women and Women's Labor

Today, women are playing crucial roles in families and in the society in Japan. But looking back to decades ago, their existence in national economy and labor market were a kind of diminished, even totally absent, especially during WWII and in post war Japan. At the beginning, the situation in Japan was quite similar to that of China: the labor division based on gender was adopted by the society and implicitly admitted by the state. Women were assigned to mainly deal with household work rather than to get paid jobs; whereas men were expected to work hard to raise the family. The labor division and, more generally, the “layout” of labors was always closely related to the economic situation of the country. The shift of the labor division was largely attribute to the problem of “livelihood,” which means the necessity to live, or the problem of living. In the context of Japan, there were many factors that influenced and transformed women's labor, including the change of living expense, the preference between lifetime employment (LTE) and short-term jobs such as *Arubaito* and the mechanization of manufacture industry. This essay will explore how women's labor transformed in post-war Japan and analyze what still caused gender inequality after women's participation in national labor market and economy.

During *Showa* period in post-war Japan, there was a significant difference in labor division based on gender. As companies attached importance to their employees' loyalty, they adopted lifetime employment regime, and, as a result, workers' sources of income could be guaranteed

for a life-long time. However, because of the patrilineal society, similar to China's situation, this policy only influenced men who made up nearly all the labor demographic composition in companies. Since in a nuclear family, the male obtained sustainable and stable income, the female was expected to handle domestic labors, which was less related to national economy, in order to maintain the family's wellness. Moreover, the problem of livelihood was also closely related to this kind of gendered labor division. To raise children, one of the parents had to spent time with the them. However, under a high pressure working condition, husbands hardly had time and vigor to pay attention to family affairs. Therefore, the burden fell on wives. Even though there were women participating public services,

“own small businesses, including clothing shops or beauty salons, not to mention nightclub-type establishments called “snack pubs.” These are small bar-like places where the female proprietor serves (largely male) customers alcohol and snacks, often entertaining them with conversation and *karaoke*.” (Shelton, 2006, p.34)

these activities did not contribute major parts of income for the family and the wives, in the view of livelihood, were still subordinate to husbands. It seemed, though, holding properties of the family and took charge of all these family affairs provided women a certain degree of power in the family; however, the power imbalance still existed due to the lack of freedom on choosing their work and owning stable source of income that could serve for their own wellness. If we look at men in this family-society structure, they had more freedom on choices of jobs and personal activities: they could go to *Nomikai* held by companies, and could even join in entertainment activities that made it possible for them to get in relationships with other women working in night bars. Therefore, this imbalance on personal wellness and freedom caused the gap in gendered labor division, and even became a source that caused instability of families.

This structure of labor division heavily relied on husbands' ensured source of income and the stable growth of the economy, which delivered the information to companies that LTE did work for gathering profits.

“the practice of lifetime employment points to an industrial relations system favorable to successful employee participation which has contributed to the postwar success of Japanese firms, in particular in manufacturing” (Kato, 2000, p.5).

It could be broken when the LTE became no longer the optimum choice, which led to insufficient income to cover for a family, and when the economy grew so fast that male labor became inadequate for the market, and thus caused the demand of women's labor (Macnaughtan, 2006, p. 33). However, despite that women were included in the labor market, the majority of the working women were self-employed:

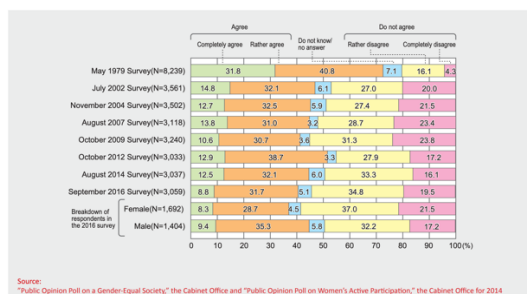
“one-third of females in the labor force in 1970 were in this category [self-employed], with the majority engaged in agriculture, working on the small farms of their husbands” while “in 1970 only 55% of women in the labor force was engaged in paid employment” (Shelton, 2006, p. 34).

Still, they were expected to take care of the “inner” affair as a compensation to the income for the family; again, it was because the issue of livelihood. This also explains why women were predominantly took *Arubaito* rather than being employed regularly (as full-time worker in companies). The incentives of getting paid attributed to aspirations of middle-class life (Shelton, 2006, p. 36) as single income from husbands could not sufficiently cover the need; the work-life balance and the necessity of parenting made women workers prefer working in part-time jobs (Macnaughtan, 2006, p. 38). However, it unavoidably caused the problem of inequality in wage and in chances of promotion as majority Japanese families still took males' income as the

primary source and while women were not crucial roles in companies. Moreover, the “M-Shape” of the pattern of women’s employment indicated that women were tend to handle house care and childbirth around age 30, and they will return working after their children reach certain ages when they feel secure to leave their children (JILPT, 2002, Vol. 17).

Even after several years of development, Japan today still has many issues on gender equality, which is largely reflected in the labor division as well as in working conditions. Even though there were legislative efforts, it hardly had effect on companies’ policies as it only provided *suggestions* rather than powerful restrictions (Shelton, 2006, p. 44). According to “The Global Gender Gap Report 2018” published by World Economic Forum, Japan ranked 110 among 149 countries in the ranking of global index of gender equality, far below the global average. Specifically, in the score of “economic participation and opportunity” is 0.595 out of 1.00, ranked 117; the score of “political empowerment” is 0.081 out of 1.00, which is surprisingly low, ranked 125. The data reflected that the gap in the gendered labor division is still a problem in Japan, especially in the field of politics. Moreover, when people seeking “equality” for women, most of them only considered giving women equal rights to work and be paid but didn’t consider the equal division of labors related to families. One explicit example is the child-caring. If the labor is divided equally, women and men should be equally responsible for child caring, which made it possible for most women to remain at positions after having a child. However, the M-curve of women’s employment status, which didn’t happen for men, indicates that many of them chose to handle the major part of child-caring and become “full-time employees” of the family, which caused an implicit inequality between men and women. It is a pretty complicated issue since it is closely related to families’ and companies’ livelihood. Higher position means higher life quality; higher life quality brings intensity of working and thus make them spend less time

with the children. The root of the problem, still, is companies' policies. As capitalists only look for the productivity, they do not take employees' labor, both men and women, for their family into consideration. One possible way to cope with this problem is to take employees' efforts on family affairs into account as an evaluation criteria during promotions. There might be other intersectionality that worsen gender inequalities such as ages, nationalities, religions, etc., and all these factors should be taken into account. On the bright side, the good thing is that the perception that women should focus more on family affairs is changing and the stereotype about gendered roles is decreasing. According to "Public Opinion Poll on a Gender-Equal Society" proposed by the Cabinet Office, in 1979, more than 70% of the participants agreed that "Husband is expected to work outside the home, while wife is expected to take on domestic duties." This number decreased to 40% in 2016 (44% male participants agreed). The situation may get better while the population diversity increases and becomes more internationalized.



(Source: Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, downloaded on 30 June 2019, available at <http://www.gender.go.jp>).

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