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# Much to be done in Japan's family and gender equality policies

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## ABSTRACT

Prime Minister Kishida's 'unprecedented' measures to counter declining births in Japan include increasing youth incomes, extending childcare leave entitlement and employee social insurance entitlement to precarious workers, and targeting 50% of fathers to take childcare leave by 2025 by increasing the childcare allowance to 80% of salary. He also proposed reskilling opportunities, and mandating firms to disclose their gender wage gap and gender managerial gap. However, reform should also make fundamental changes to Japanese employment practices and the Employee Social Insurance Scheme which is based on a breadwinner-housewife model. Unless the government explicitly moves towards a worker-carer model, the gender wage gap will stay high, and hinder marriage and births, since double income is seen as a must among younger generation. Fundamental change should be in line with the new attitudes of young non-married males and females.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

The Kishida government sees the challenge of Japan's low birth as well as the large gender wage gap as two top issues to be addressed. Japan's total fertility rate (TFR) dropped from 1.57 in 1989 to 1.26 in 2005, then showed slight increase to over 1.4 from 2012 to 2018 when the use of childcare leave and childcare places expanded. However, having a second child requires a higher contribution of fathers when both parents work, but this has not been achieved. The TFR again dropped below 1.4 starting in 2019 and reached another low of 1.26 in 2022. The drop was partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but only partly. We see a change in attitude among the young in different surveys, in that more of them expect to stay single.

Facing a shrinking labour force and prolonged low birth rate, Prime Minister Kishida's 'new capitalism' emphasizes human capital investment and the increased role of women in the economy, as well as the increased role of men in family care. The Kishida government claimed that it would tackle declining births as never before. It plans to re-construct social policy to support child-rearing, change work culture to allow fathers take an increased role, and to encourage the increase of women in management. The government also seeks to extend stronger protection for non-standard employees by increasing social security coverage. However, to

allow more equal involvement of men and women, the implicit contract inherent in Japanese long-term employment should be reformed, along with a change in the social protection for dependent wives. How much the Kishida government can reform employment practice and increase paternal involvement in child-rearing is yet to be seen. Whether Kishida can make a pathway to change social policy from a breadwinner model to a worker-carer model is very important for the coming years for the Japanese economy, which is experiencing both ageing and declining births.

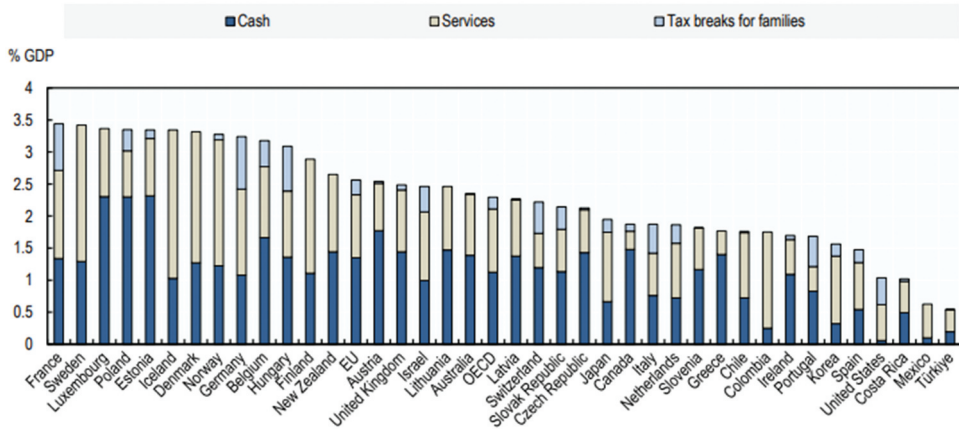
In this paper, I will first compare family policy and gender wage gap policies in Japan with OECD countries. I will then look at Kishida's new policies on family and on gender. Second, I will present statistics on the yet stubbornly strong gender division of labour within couples, showing that former policies have not provided much change in the strong gender division of labour. The third section argues that such gendered division of labour within households is embedded in the Japanese employment system. I will discuss the 'membership/non-membership' and '*unlimited contract*' concepts. In the fourth section, I will argue that the social insurance rules that favour breadwinner-carer model actually give incentives to married women to stay below the earning threshold and/or stay at low income. In the fifth section, I will look at changes of youth attitudes, which are not supporting the gendered division of labour. Lastly, I will show that many policies are still under discussion, and consider what additional policies might be added to bring about a stronger impact for Kishida's policies, since fundamental change of Japanese employment system and social security rules must accompany 'unprecedented' measures to address declining births.

## **Japan's family and gender equality policies in comparative perspective**

In this section, policies for children and policies for gender equality in labour market in Japan will be compared with other OECD countries.

### ***Policies for children***

Figure 1 shows public spending on family benefits from the OECD Social Expenditure database of 2019. It gives a general overview of the scale of Japanese expenditure on family benefits. Benefits in cash include single families, which may not be included in the data from other countries which do the transfer through tax system. Despite this, benefits in cash to families are as low as 0.66% of GDP in Japan, and declined from 0.74 in 2011 when the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) regained power from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and child benefits in cash again became means tested. Benefits in services such as day care started to rise from around 0.45% of GDP to the 1.08% of GDP in 2019, reflecting the large increase of childcare places. Support for childcare provision was reformed in 2012 to include not only day care centres but also nursery schools. Prime Minister Abe, who came into office in late 2012, made a rapid increase of childcare places. Tax breaks for families stayed around 0.20% of GDP. In total, the expenditure for families was 1.95% of GDP in 2019, which is below the OECD average of 2.29%. The Kishida government furthers plan to increase expenditures for families, especially child allowances, and childcare leave allowance.



**Figure 1.** Public spending on family benefits by type of expenditure. (% GDP, and latest available) Source: OECD Social Expenditure Database. Accessed 19 November. [https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF1\\_1\\_Public\\_spending\\_on\\_family\\_benefits.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF1_1_Public_spending_on_family_benefits.pdf)

### **Policies for closing the gender wage gap**

The gender wage gap in Japan is large among the OECD countries. The *Equal Employment Opportunity Law* was enacted in 1986, strengthened in 1997 and 2007, but its power is weak as this policy only mandates firms to equally treat both men and women if hired in the same work category. However, firms hire much fewer women than men in implicit long-term employment contract, associated with high wage increases and long working hours. More women tend to be employed in a different and slower promotion work category and in non-standard work employment. The Japanese public pension still holds ‘model insured workers’ as ‘full-time salaried working males’ who have ‘dependent housewives’. Spouses married to salaried workers are given beneficial treatment as dependent housewives under the Japanese social security system, as we shall see below.

## **Kishida’s new family and gender equality policies**

### **Proposed changes in family policy**

Kishida’s ‘new capitalism’ proposes to put more focus on the younger generation and the child-rearing life stage as it recognizes the declining births as one of its most important challenges. The Cabinet Office announced in April 2023 that the priority is to increase income level of youth, abolish means-test for child allowance, increase the age limit, and double the allowance for the third child from late 2024. It will also encourage non-standard workers to become regular workers and encourage workers to move into fields with high labour demand by offering re-skilling opportunities (see Zou 2024).

Second, it proposes to take various measures to change the social climate so that the child-rearing burden should be born not only young women, but also by men, and by society. The government set a target for men’s child-care leave take-up of 50% in 2025, and 85% in 2030. In order to accelerate the use, Kishida decided to promote disclosure of

take-up by companies, and also to provide support for small and medium-sized companies. It also proposed to increase the childcare leave allowance to 80% of income for 28 days from the present 67% if both parents take the leave for more than 14 days within 8 weeks after the birth of the child, hoping that the higher replacement rate will allow more fathers to take the leave. This is planned to be implemented from 2025. The government will also extend the child-care leave allowance to non-standard workers and self-employed workers if they are not otherwise entitled to receive it.

Third, the government plans to increase the income of non-standard employees, firstly by increasing the minimum wage, and secondly by changing social security policy so that they will be covered by the employee social security scheme. At the same time, the government will take measures so that housewives do not adjust their working hours to keep their income below the tax and social security thresholds. It will offer subsidies to companies in the coming three years so that increased social security payments for the companies and also the employees will be off set by pay increases. The government is also discussing including even shorter working week employees in the social insurance scheme.

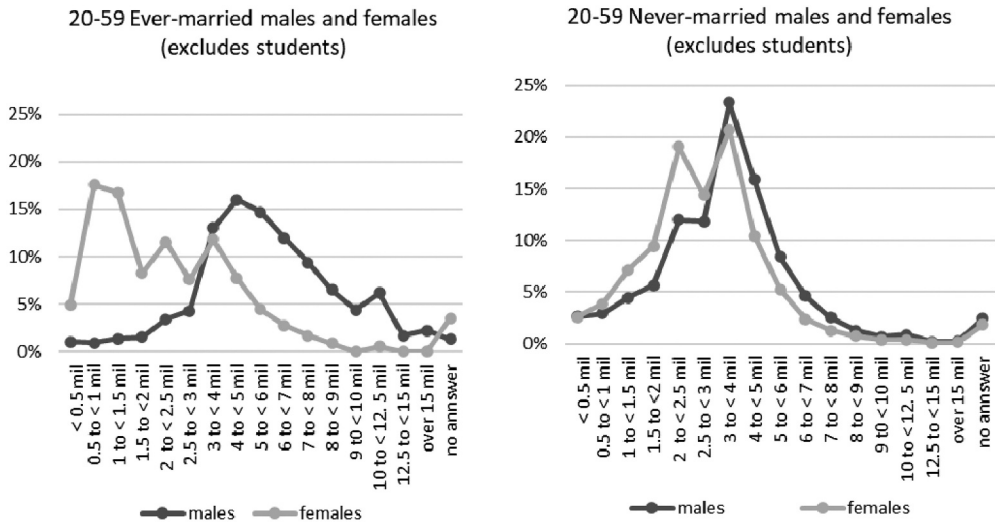
The fourth point is to encourage women in management. The Kishida government newly mandated disclosure of the gender wage gap at companies over 300 regular employees by the Law for the Promotion of Women's Activities from 2022. Some statistics were already mandated to be disclosed but companies previously could choose what data to disclose among options. It also mandated that companies listed on the Prime section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange disclose female board members and make a Female Executive Information website in which companies' appointments of women to executive positions is shown. Government policy on women is to achieve women's economic independence, and to progress the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality.

## **Trends in annual income distribution and domestic work hours of males and females**

### ***Unchanging gender income gap among ever-married males and females***

The policies that aim to increase women's employment and promotion were already introduced from late 2012 by the Abe administration, called *Womenomics* policy. The policy did result in more women who keep long-term employment, or *seishain* status, at their first birth using childcare leave, especially among university graduate females. The percentage of mothers with young children who keep their long-term job rose to nearly 50% of university graduates, whereas the comparable number was only around 30% in the early 2000s (Nagase 2018a). The rate should be even higher today. Working hours of part-time workers also increased during *Womenomics*.

However, [Figure 2](#) shows that the gender income gap today is still surprisingly large. Even though we see an impressive increase in the labour force participation of married women in Employment Status Surveys, their income continues to stay low, unless they keep long-term employment during child-rearing years. The left side of [Figure 2](#) shows the income gap of ever-married males and females. Ninety five percent of ever-married males earn more than 2 million, while for ever-married females, it was only 53% as many quit work and return to non-standard



**Figure 2.** Annual income distribution of ever-married and never-married workers. Note: The figure excludes non-workers. Figures for ‘ever-married’ include those who are married, divorced or widowed. Source: Statistics Bureau. Employment Status Survey 2022.

employment. Should the statistics include married women out of the labour force, the percentage would be even much smaller, presumably around 35%. On the other hand, income gap between gender is small for never-marrieds, as shown on the right side of Figure 2.

**Large domestic work hour gap within couples**

We also see that when married, women do much of home production. *The White Paper on Gender Equality 2023* (Cabinet Office 2023) provides an international comparison of the difference between men and women in paid and unpaid work, that Japanese men’s daily paid work time is the longest among OECD countries and Japanese men’s unpaid work the shortest.

Table 1 shows time use of parents living with children over years using data from the Statistics Bureau’s Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities. We do see some closing of gender gap compared with 1991, such as a slight increase of domestic work by husbands, especially when families have new born babies as can be seen in the third panel: domestic work of fathers increased from 4.4 hours per week in 1996 to 15.4 hours in 2021. Yet as also shown in the table, in 2021, average weekly domestic work hours was 7.6 hours for husbands and 39.2 for wives, while average work hours were 44.1 for husbands and 19.0 hours for wives, showing a large disparity. Even for double income couples with children, average weekly work hours of husbands in 2021 was 50.4 while wives was 28.5, and average weekly domestic work hour of husbands was 7.1 while that of wives was 34.8. It is hard to see any strong signs of closing of the gender gap in the time series.

**Table 1.** Weekly work and domestic work hour average of husbands and wives living with children.

		1996	2006	2016	2021
<b>All married couples with children</b>					
Work	husband	48.5	47.4	46.4	44.1
	wife	17.2	16.5	18.1	19.0
Domestic work	husband	3.0	4.8	6.1	7.6
	wife	40.7	41.0	40.4	39.2
<b>Married couples with children, both in labour force</b>					
Work	husband	52.0	52.6	52.6	50.4
	wife	31.5	29.9	28.7	28.5
Domestic work	husband	2.3	3.9	5.4	7.1
	wife	31.9	33.3	34.3	34.8
<b>Married couples with youngest child 1–2</b>					
Work	husband	53.2	54.1	53.1	51.8
	wife	11.8	14.6	20.8	22.6
Domestic work	husband	4.4	7.5	11.4	15.4
	wife	46.2	43.5	42.8	42.1

Note: Husbands and wives with child(ren) living in the household. Data were reported by minutes of an average day of a week. The author converted to weekly hours. Domestic Work includes household chores, child care, elderly care and shopping.

Source: Statistics Bureau. Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities, Long time Series, various years.

### **Large gender gap in promotion**

Due to requirement of long working hours and difference in employment category, women have been much less likely than men to be promoted to managerial positions. The female ratio of section heads was around 12% in 2021 according to the Basic Wage Structure Survey. Using the micro data of the same survey, Nagase (2021) found that women were promoted much later and much less compared with men. For younger cohorts, the difference in promotion timing between genders became smaller, yet women were only about half as likely to be promoted as men.

### **Japanese labour practices that reward high commitment and long-term employment**

#### ***'Membership' and 'non-membership'***

Why is the gender income gap and gender domestic work gap so stubborn when the government has introduced policies to close it? As early as 2003 the Gender Equality Bureau made a national target of 30% of leadership positions to be held by women by 2020, but it was far from reached. I presume that the strong division of labour within households that we see comes only from culture and tradition, but also from Japanese employment practices that inherently reward long-term dedication of workers to companies, implicitly expecting the workers' spouses to take care of family and children, and also from social security insurance that gives comparably high benefits to spouses that earn below the income threshold so as to be identified as 'dependent'.

In his report to the Industrial Competitiveness Council, Employment and Human Resources Subcommittee hearing, Hamaguchi (2013) described Japanese employment practices as 'membership type employment' and 'non-membership type of employment'.

To be a member, one typically enters a firm at graduation, and is expected to follow a seniority-based wage path in a lifetime employment contract. In return, employers typically can order overtime work, and allocate employees to different departments and jobs for human resource development in the long term. On the other hand, some long-term contracts are regionally based, and are offered more to females. When the place of employment is pre-determined, wages rises are expected to be much less. As for 'non-membership work', described by Hamaguchi, or non-long-term contract work such as hourly part-time employment and fixed-term contract work, where the work hours, job content, and place of work are defined, wages are typically much lower than long-term employees. Such 'non-membership' employees are typically seen as outsiders by company-based labour unions.

Since it is not easy for workers to raise children under 'membership contracts', many companies have given a spousal allowance to add to the husband's salary, expecting that the employees have a low-earning dependent spouse to care of children and the elderly. Such spousal allowance is not only added to the monthly salary, but also to the annual bonus payment, and to retirement lump sum payment, and even to the public pension payment after retirement.

### ***Unlimited contract regular employees and limited contract employees***

Sato (2012) categories long-term employees as 'unlimited contract regular employees' (*mugentei shain*), and employees whose work location and job type as limited 'limited contract regular employees' (*gentei shain*). He defines the former as a work contract where companies can order job content, work relocation and also overtime work. This naming does indicate the difficulties of balancing work and family, and may be another way to look at Hamaguchi's description of 'membership work'. In Europe and the U.S., transfers and changes of job content, even within the same company, are typically only realized after an individual applies for the position and is hired for the position. Such is not the case under Japanese long-term employment.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW 2012) 'Study Group Report on Various Forms of Regular Employees' for which Sato was the chair, identified the number of the 'so-called regular employees' (or unlimited contract regular employees), in a survey conducted at companies with over 300 employees. In this survey, according to his classification, Sato found that among the long-term employees, more than 40% were 'unlimited contract regular employees', and less than 30% were 'limited contract regular employees', from the viewpoint of work hours and work location, while the rest cannot be classified as such. If classified by gender, the survey found that more than 70% of unlimited contract regular employees were men, 45% of limited contract regular employees were men. On the other hand, survey found that 70% of non-standard workers who are not 'long-term employees' were women.

The ratio of female employees clearly increased as work location, job, and working hours become more well defined. At the same time, their annual income decreased. While more than 70% of unlimited contract regular employees earned annual incomes of ¥4 million or more, this figure was less than 50% for *limited contract regular employees*. For non-standard employees, the figure was only just over 10%. This shows that wages in



Japan are defined not so much by occupation but more by whether one has an unlimited regular employee contract and also on whether one is long-term employee or not.

This survey found that the disadvantages of the work style felt by limited contract regular employees were 'low salary' (nearly 50%) and 'lack of prospects for promotion and advancement' (25%). On the other hand, 'Worries about relocation' (35%) was the most common disadvantage felt by unlimited contract regular employees. As many as 60% of them replied that they wished to convert to a contract with limited work location, but 60% of them hoped that this would not result in lowering their wages or promotion prospects. In other words, 'unlimited contract regular employees' are dissatisfied with company-ordered transfers, but don't want lower wages or promotion. The Abe administration's *Work Style Reform* policies enacted in 2019 put clear overtime hour cap on all employees for the first time, and introduced the 'equal pay for equal work' principle, but Japanese courts seem to define 'equal work' as not only pertaining to occupation and work content, but also to how much the work contract expects company-initiated job rotation and relocation.

### ***Job descriptions not clearly defined in Japanese-style employment***

Ono (2016) points to 'overtime work as norm' (*tsukiai zangyō*) as a phenomenon unique to Japan under strong group ties and hierarchical relationships. He also notes that job descriptions are not clearly defined, so that job rotation can be flexibly handled. Furthermore, the spousal tax deduction given to the household head reflects the socially accepted notion that wives are to work so long as it does not impact on their housework duties, which strengthens the traditional division of labour. Since Japanese employment practices are based on the complementarity of various systems, he says there will be pain and resistance on the part of both individuals and companies before a new equilibrium can be achieved to remedy long working hours.

In sum, while there has been much discussion about the need to reform Japanese-style employment, it is still not easy for employees to achieve work and life balance. While there has been a significant increase in the use of childcare leave, it is mainly women who take childcare leave and work shorter hours for the sake of childcare.

## **Social insurance regulation favouring a gendered division of labour**

### ***Social insurance premium exemption of low-earning spouses***

In addition to employment practices, social insurance has also given explicit and special consideration for dependent spouses of salaried workers. Dependent housewives of salaried workers do not have to pay their social insurance premiums on medical insurance but are nonetheless given the full entitlement of medical insurance as dependents. As to the old-age public pension for employees, dependent housewives are given even more special consideration called 'category 3' – they are exempted from social insurance payment but are given the full *Basic Pension Entitlement*.

This reform to give *Basic Pension Entitlement* to housewives without their payment came about in 1985. The reform was brought about to settle different challenges then, but the concept of 'Japanese-style welfare society' advocated from around the end of the

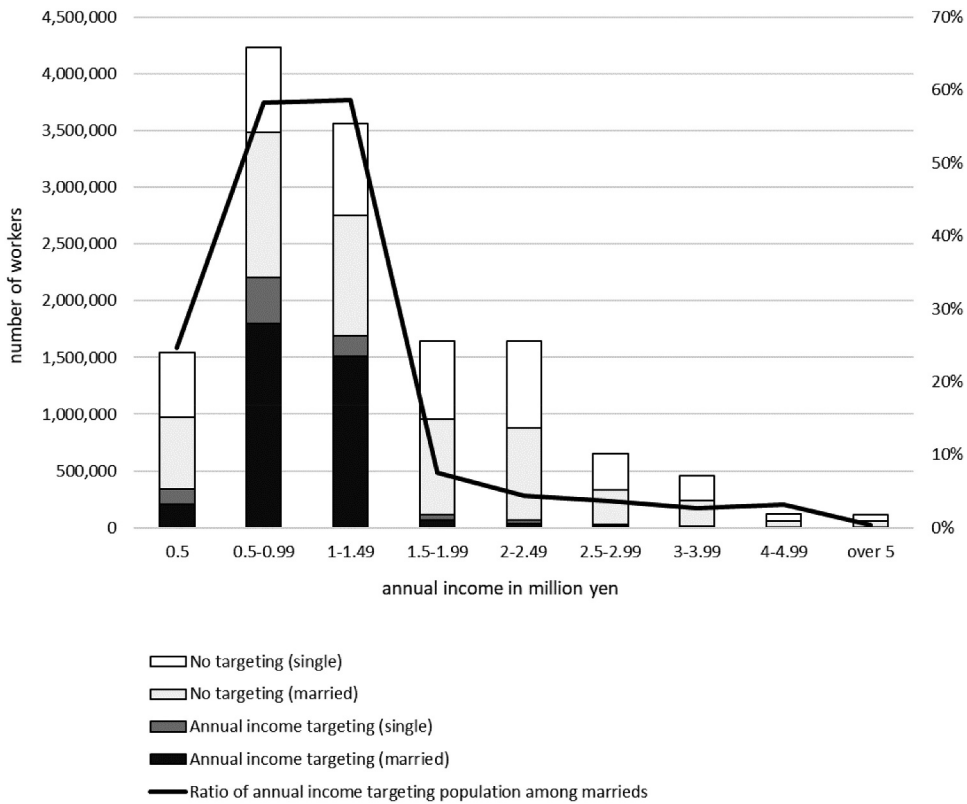
1970s by the LDP might have given it support. Hori (1981) characterized the ‘Japanese-style social welfare concept’ of the time as denying the Western-style social welfare state, emphasizing self-help efforts, welfare by families, mutual assistance in local communities, and corporate welfare. As for corporate welfare, he cites lifetime employment and seniority-based wages as providing life income security, retirement benefits, corporate pensions, health insurance unions, and unemployment insurance benefits. As for welfare by families, he points out that the 1978 White Paper on Health and Welfare extolled the extended family as an ‘informal asset of welfare’. Osawa (1993), on the other hand, described the 1986 and 1987 White Papers on Welfare as ‘family-oriented, big business-oriented, and male-oriented’, noting that it was men who were to be the model insured workers, and not women.

The spouses of salaried workers were seen at the time of the reform as the ones who would take care of housework, childcare, and elderly care. Thus, the reform of 1985 indeed encouraged women to stay as low-earning housewives. This social security system continues to this day as discussed in Ochiai (2015). It is not in line with the changing consciousness of today’s youth and the economic demands for women’s employment. It is also not in line with the changing Japanese family. In 1985, among households with family members 65 years old or older, 44.8% lived in three generation households and 13.1% were single-person households. In 2022, three generation households constituted only 7.1%, and single-person households 31.8%. In 1985, only 1.25 million elderly lived alone, but the number in 2022 was 8.9 million. Women are no longer an ‘informal asset of welfare’ where they stay at home to take care of the elderly.

The system favouring dependent spouses was questioned in 2000–2001 when a ‘Changing Lifestyle of Women and Pension Committee’ was organized at the Ministry of Health and Welfare, for which the author was one of the committee members. At the time, all those aged 20 to 59 who were not covered by employee insurance were mandated to pay the pension premium to the Peoples’ Pension, including students and unemployed, while low-earning housewives were exempted but given the same *Basic Pension Entitlement* since the employee pension was paying the premium for them. The committee gathered a considerable audience, and was given widespread media coverage, signifying high public interest. Six options to change the Category 3 were proposed (Ministry of Labour Health and Welfare 2001), but the Commission did not reach an agreement, and the Ministry did not implement any of the options, except in 2004, when pension splitting upon divorce was introduced based on the discussion.

### ***Annual income targeting of married women that keeps part-time wages low, and proposed changes***

According to Statistics Bureau’s Employment Status Survey of 2022, among 29 million women in the labour force, around 14 million were non-standard female workers, and two out of three of them, that is, 9.3 million females, earned below ¥1.5 million, or roughly \$10,000 a year, which is not enough to make one’s own living. Of these, 70% were housewives. The remaining one third are singles, but as shown in Figure 3, they mostly earned below ¥2.5 million a year, which is not enough for single living, so many such singles often share housing with their parents. According to the same statistics, as shown in Figure 3, 58.3% and 58.6% of married non-standard workers who earned ¥0.5 to



**Figure 3.** Income targeting among non-standard female employees. Source: Statistics Office. *Employment Status Survey 2022.*

1.0 million and ¥1.0–1.5 million respectively replied that they intentionally adjust their work hours so that their annual income is below a certain income threshold to take advantage of tax and social security tax exemption rules. Non-marrieds can also become dependent on their parents and can be exempted from medical insurance, but they are not given entitlement to the public pension as dependent wives unless they pay their own premium. Therefore, such work adjustment and income targeting are smaller for non-married women as shown in Figure 3.

Companies were not required to include non-standard workers in employee social insurance if their work hours were below 75% of regular employees. Many were housewives who got their social security entitlement as ‘dependents’ through their spouse. Both companies and wives took advantage of this rule, so that they were both exempted from social security fees. Today, however, MHLW is trying to include more part-time workers in employee social insurance, to collect social security tax from housewives but also to extend social protection to different workers. Starting from larger firms in 2016, workers with more than 20 hours over the 1.06 million yen threshold were mandated to be included in employee insurance. The company size will be lowered to firms with more than 50 employees in October 2024. The Kishida government is now trying to further include more employees by mandating smaller-

sized firms, and to extend to even shorter work-week workers. However, a survey by JILPT showed that 48.1% of Category 3 workers avoided the social security levy reform of 2016 by shortening their working hours, while such work hour adjustment was about half as much for workers who did not have Category 3 benefit (JILPT 2022). The same survey also showed that about one third of firms replied that they changed human resource management. Of these, two out of three had tried to shorten work hours to avoid the social insurance tax levy, while more than half replied that they tried to extend work hours of workers to whom the firm had to pay social security tax.

Finally, again, the discussion for change of Category 3 is on the table of the Government Pension Committee. As noted above, while employers have benefitted from the current system as they can employ housewives without paying any social insurance premium, more companies are now concerned about future labour shortages. Keeping housewives on low wages and making them work short hours is not sustainable under the declining labour force trend.

According to the Social Security Council Public Pension Actuarial Committee, 2023, about 30% of women in the 40–44, 45–49, and 50–54 age groups are covered by Category 3, and account for 70% of the Category 3 insured. Analysis shows that when the youngest child gets older – from under 6 to 6–9 and to 10–12 years old – the working hours of married women increase and more women hit the income targeting threshold, so they adjust their work hours and the ‘annual income threshold’ becomes a constraint (Nagase 2018b). In other words, the current Category 3 coverage system is constraining the working hours of middle-aged wives.

Kenjō and Kenjō (2022), discuss the possibility of levying the social insurance tax only on employers so that housewives who are exempted from social insurance tax can choose whether to have additional pension for themselves or not. Koreeda (2023a, 2023b) discuss levying the social insurance tax for short working week workers to both employers and employees, while retaining some benefit to housewives who had been exempted from all these taxes. Both Kenjō and Koreeda propose reforms while keeping Category 3 insurance for housewives. Nagase (2023) on the other hand advocates increasing coverage to short hour workers, but taking steps to abolish Category 3, creating support and credit for those who are out of work or low paid due to child care (the proposal extends the benefit not only to dependents of salaried workers, but also to single mothers and wives of self-employed), and also re-defining what ‘equal work’ is in the government’s ‘equal pay for equal work’ principle. The present definition of ‘equal work’ in Japanese law not only looks at actual work content, but also to the implicit employment contract of overtime work and job rotation (Kanki 2018), as noted above, meaning that two workers doing the same tasks are not necessarily deemed to be doing ‘equal work’. Unless more weight is given to what women – often working under ‘limited work contract’ and on ‘non-standard work contract’ – actually do, the gender wage gap will not be easily narrowed.

## **Changing attitudes and gender role choice among youth**

The younger generation no longer supports a strong gender-role division of labour within the family. The ‘Marriage and Family in the Era of 100 Years of Life Survey’ (2022) was

commissioned by the Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office for the 2022 *White Paper on Gender Equality*, shows an interesting change of attitudes.

First, the desire to marry is found to be lower among singles: more than 60% of women and nearly 60% of men in their 20s would like to get married, but the desire declines with age. Even lower is the ideal number of children for singles. Twenty four percent of women and 31% of men in their 20s said they wish to have no children, and an additional 14% of women and 15% of men said they don't know. Considering that society cannot sustain itself without nurturing the next generation, we should reflect on why 40% of young people responded like this.

We also see a rapid change in the ideal way to take care of infants aged 2 or 3. For the age group in their 20s, more than 50% of males and over 40% of females answered that their ideal is to use childcare leave and work return so that both husband and wife can have long-term employment. On the other hand, for those in their 60s, the comparable ratio thought that husbands working full-time and wives staying at home was ideal.

The working styles and family formation of the younger generation are changing in response to these attitudes, yet changes are slow; family formation has actually stagnated, and childbearing has continued to decline.

### **How can we change the gender-role division of labour in the family?**

Looking back at men and women now in their 60s who entered the labour market in the 1980s, 'Japanese-style employment' was in full swing. It was taken for granted that women would quit work after marriage or childbirth, and even if they remained in the company, the wage gap between men and women was assumed to be exceptionally large. In 1985, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was enacted, but it only resulted in the renaming of female jobs as 'slow-track jobs (*ippanshoku*)' and male jobs as 'career-track jobs (*sogoshoku*)', and did not change Japanese employment practices by seriously considering the recruitment and training of women who would have children to fully build their human capital. Although the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was strengthened, many women were not hired for career-track positions in the same way as men, and even those women who were hired for career-track positions often left the workforce for family reasons and also by questioning the high commitment to company in the male dominated community. What followed was a shift to non-regular employment, including among single people and young people, and since 2000 the number of non-standard workers has increased substantially without any major changes in the rules for regular employees.

It was after 2007 to 2010 that women returning to work after taking childcare leave increased and then accelerated. However, this was mainly for regular employees of large companies, and the increasing number of non-regular employees were not subject to support and training, even at large companies. Since then an increasing number of companies have consciously increased the number of women in career-track positions. However, it is difficult to say that the system has changed sufficiently when it comes to how employers incorporate child rearing, which is an important part of human life, while also building their own human capital. In addition, the preferential treatment for

households with dependent spouses does not provide sufficient support for family formation, but this point has not yet been seriously reviewed.

In post-COVID society, economic support for households with children and social support in the form of flexible working hours and childcare time should be provided to both male and female employees, including part-time workers, and in addition, low-income households should receive economic support. The same is true for households that need to provide full-time care. Systems that encourage women to remain as dependents should be abolished, but at the same time, more flexibility in work hours should be introduced, as well as support to re-enter the labour market and better childcare support.

### **Conclusion: proposal for additional change**

Sato et al. (2022) point out that unless the work style of unlimited contract regular employees is reformed, the increase of limited contract regular workers will only increase the stratification of regular employees. Although new employment styles are emerging, so far stratification is undeniable.

There are still 7.5 million Category 3 females who are exempted from any social security premium payment and are given premium payment from the employee group as a whole. These women do work when their children grow older, but they often are poorly paid, and they even try to adjust their work hours so that they can keep their income below the 1 to 1.3 million yen thresholds. This system has to be fundamentally changed. I propose to expand childcare leave entitlement and at the same time reduce beneficial treatment of housewives on social insurance when their youngest child is over certain age, such as age 9 so that fewer women make working hour adjustments to obtain social security premium exemption when they indeed can work more hours. I also propose to implement policies to increase the hourly wages of non-standard workers, and to include them in employee insurance. At the same time, we should change the understanding of the 'equal pay for equal work' principle, so that 'Equal Work' is what one does at the time of comparison, instead of being in a 'membership' employment relationship or not. 'Unlimited contract' employment itself should be changed if the government truly seeks higher involvement of fathers in childrearing.

Overall, the government is trying to change social policy and family policy from a breadwinner model to an earner-and-carer model. However, the change proposed still lacks ambition. Large change needs coordination of different interests. The government should take stronger leadership to bring about this change.

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