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Women and the Family in Transition in Postindustrial Japan

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LIKE most other industrial societies, over the past two decades Japan has undergone a period of restructuring from an industrial to a postindustrial economy. This process has greatly affected the lives of both working women and nonworking housewives, and in turn, their families. If the changes that women have undergone since the period of high economic growth were to be summarized briefly, "the advance of women into the workplace" would express the situation pretty well. According to the 1982 *Basic Survey of the Employment Structure*, more than half (50.8 percent) of married women work. The year 1982 is particularly noteworthy as the year in which the number of married women who work surpassed the number of full-time housewives, placing the latter in the minority for the first time.

How have Japanese women changed over the past twenty years? Emiko Shibayama, a women's labor economist, identifies the following eight changes in women workers since the 1973 oil crisis.

1. The percentage of middle-aged and older women who work has increased to more than 30 percent.
2. The percentage of women in the labor force has increased to over 40 percent.
3. The percentage of women workers who are employees (as opposed to workers in family businesses and self-employed workers) now exceeds 70 percent.
4. The percentage of all employees who are women has now climbed to 40 percent.

5. The average age of women employees has risen to the mid thirties, and the number of employees who have been married (i.e., who are married, widowed, or divorced) has increased to 70 percent.
6. About 70 percent of women employees work in tertiary industries.
7. The number of women employees who are part-time workers has climbed to 20 percent, and their patterns of employment have become both diverse and unstable (for example, they are sent from site to site or used as temporary or day workers).
8. More women are employed in the field of high technology.¹

From these facts, we see that the reality of women's advance into the workplace has not been so much an increase in the number of "career women" who were so glamorized at one time, but rather an increase in the unstable and low-paying employment of middle-aged and older women—in other words, the phenomenon that can be referred to as the "marginalization of women's labor."

Described in terms of their personal histories, these middle-aged women who are entering the workplace fall into the category of "workers who return to work after a hiatus"—those who left the workplace to marry and have children and then returned to work. By contrast, "continuous workers"—those who never stopped working, even when having or raising children—are, contrary to predictions, increasing by a surprisingly small margin.

The National Life Bureau of the Economic Planning Agency commissioned a study by Kiyomi Morioka and others that was published in 1987 as *Searching for a New Way of Life for Women*.² This survey of women by life pattern carefully examined the relationship between women's work and family life, placing 655 women into six categories, according to their life patterns:

Pattern 1: unmarried, no children, continue to work

Pattern 2: married, no children, continue to work

Pattern 3: married, have children, continue to work

Pattern 4: married, have children, quit work

Pattern 5: quit work to marry or have children, return to work after raising children

Pattern 6: married, have children, never worked

The study showed that Pattern 3 women, those who have children and continue to work, accounted for only 21.7 percent of participants in the survey. In terms of age, 27.8 percent of Pattern 3 women were in their thirties, 25.2 percent in their forties, and 27.9 percent in their fifties. If only employees (as opposed to workers in family businesses and self-employed workers) are considered, there are no significant fluctuations: 14.3 percent were in their

thirties, 14.4 percent in their forties, and 12.1 percent in their fifties. When you consider the fact that the percentage of self-employed women is decreasing, you can see a gradual increase in the number of employees who do not stop working when raising children, but because the total was only 27.8 percent the increase does not affect enough of a majority to be labeled "an increase in the number of career women who do not quit working even if they marry or have children." The majority of women in their thirties (57.2 percent) leave work to marry and have children. (This total is reached by adding together the number of women in the Pattern 4 category, that is, those who become full-time housewives when they get married and have children, and the number in the Pattern 5 category, that is, those who return to work after raising their children.) Thus the biggest change in women's lives since the period of high economic growth in the 1960s is that the "return to work after raising children" pattern, which was nearly nonexistent among employees at the beginning of the period, became the option selected by the majority of women.

As is well known, however, the working conditions awaiting the middle-aged and older women who returned to the workplace were terrible: unskilled positions at low wages with no job security. Shibayama says, "women's patterns of employment have become more diverse," but in this case "diverse" also means "not secure." We must also exercise caution when considering the data claiming that over 20 percent of women employees are part-time workers. If you consider women workers over age thirty-five, the number of part-timers increases to 1 in 3. Furthermore, the government's definition of part-time labor as "those who work fewer hours than regular employed workers" does not take into account the regulation of work hours.³ So there are those treated as "part-timers" who work nearly the same number of hours as full-time workers and who even work overtime while being paid by the hour or by the day. Thus, the phenomenon of nonsecure employment can be seen to extend even farther than is ordinarily imagined. To summarize, the burden of women's advance into the workplace has been borne by middle-aged women who have undergone many changes, including a marginalization of women's labor.

CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRIAL STRUCTURE

In order for the social phenomenon of women's advance into the workplace to take place, conditions on the demand side and the supply side of the labor market had to coincide. On the supply side, forces pushing women out of the home—the decrease in the birthrate and the automation of housework—emerged in the 1950s and have increased steadily ever since.⁴ But it would be difficult to say that conditions on the demand side allowed for the as-

similation of women into the workplace. In that sense, the changes in the demand side that created such a large increase in employment opportunities for middle-aged women were, Shibayama points out, the changes in the industrial structure that followed the 1973 oil crisis; in other words, the process of restructuring the economy.

The changes in the industrial structure greatly increased the proportion of tertiary industries in the Japanese economy. These changes made the economy softer and more information and service oriented. The heavy industries like iron, steel, and shipbuilding that had supported the economic growth of the 1960s had reached a dead end. Now, the information and service industries were supporting the growth. The Japanese economy had rushed from the industrial age to the postindustrial age.

As Veronica Beechey notes, citing the example of the OECD countries, since the 1973 oil crisis women's employment has grown dramatically in nations like Japan and the European countries, which are advanced industrialized economies.⁵ Beechey emphasizes the structural depression and consequent "paradoxical increase in the employment of women when there is a high rate of unemployment." "A high rate of unemployment" means unemployment among adult male workers who normally have secure employment; "an increase in the employment of women" means an increase in nonsecure jobs for middle-aged women. This does not mean, as is often claimed, that women have "usurped" men's jobs. First, the jobs women are getting didn't exist before because they are new kinds of jobs in growing industries. Second, the jobs that women are being given have such poor conditions attached to them that there is no reason that any adult male worker would accept them.

The number of women workers increase during times of change in the industrial structure for the following reasons.

1. Because of the softening of the economy, a worker's gender becomes less of an issue, relatively speaking.
2. In the service sector, there is an increase in the number of irregular-shift jobs with hourly and seasonal variations.
3. These latter jobs, considered "suitable for women," are made into "part-time jobs" because they are "women's work."⁶ Thus, the new employment opportunities for women are jobs with low salaries and no job security that an adult male worker would not accept; in other words, "jobs for pin money."

There is a uniquely Japanese aspect of this trend that is not common to the other OECD countries: Japan has no immigrant laborers. Since the high economic growth period of the 1960s, the Japanese labor market has consis-

tently suffered from a labor shortage. Having lost its overseas colonies and being bound to a policy of "peaceful growth," Japan has not opened its labor market to foreigners. Under the 1990 Immigration Control Act, the foreign workers permitted to enter Japan must be trained workers "who perform a job that cannot be performed by a Japanese." The labor shortage experienced during the high economic growth period, however, was one of unskilled workers. One way that companies addressed this labor shortage was by the introduction of factory automation and robotization. But for the jobs they still needed to fill they had no choice but to depend upon the ranks of the latent unemployed: married women. Consequently, married middle-aged women workers filled unskilled jobs that couldn't be done by machines; jobs that in other advanced industrialized nations might be filled by immigrant workers. National policy regarding the introduction of immigrant workers and trends in the employment of women are thus very closely connected. This is because the two groups would compete against each other directly for unskilled jobs.

Claudia von Werlhof calls this marginalization of women's labor, paradoxically, "the housewife-ization of labor."⁷ The phrase "participation in the marginal labor market" connotes that the fence marking the boundary between the paid labor of the formal sector and the unpaid labor of the informal sector has been lowered so that women can easily go back and forth between the two. A "housewife," then, is someone who is always on call to respond to the demands of the informal sector, which normally means family responsibilities such as child rearing and taking care of the elderly, usually her parents-in-law.

THE DIVERSIFICATION OF WOMEN'S LIFE-STYLES

When thinking about the increase in the number of women who return to work after an interruption, it becomes clear that the realities of women's advance into the workplace may have constituted changes not entirely welcomed by women. If we confine our discussion to married women with employment experience who have children, we find the following three groups of women.⁸

1. Full-time working wives (women who don't stop working when they marry)
2. Part-time working wives (women who stop working to marry and/or have children but later return to work)
3. Full-time housewives ("nonworking" women)

As mentioned above, Group 1 (full-time workers) constitutes about 14 percent of thirty-year-old employees and is not increasing significantly. Group 3 (full-time housewives) is on the decline. In the mid 1980s, the households in

Japan with two incomes exceeded 60 percent. The number of workers in their forties also exceeded 60 percent, which means that the proportion of wives over age thirty-five who do not work is now only in the 30 percent range.

The group that has gone from near invisibility to being an overwhelming majority over the past twenty years is Group 2, women who have returned to work after an interruption. These women, now in their forties and fifties, came of age during the period of high economic growth, and when they left work to marry and have children they had no idea that they would ever return to the workplace. At that time, women did not really have the concept of a life in which they would stop working for a time and then return. It wasn't until twenty years later that the restructured economy would so greatly increase the number of women workers. By this time they were completely unprepared for their return to the workplace, and, now middle-aged, they had no idea what the workplace they were returning to would be like. Women thus faced a new experience for which there was no historical precedent.

Today women's options have become more varied, and that raises the following question: When women choose from among the options available to them, what is the determinant variable? Women in the three groups above face two decisive times in life. The first is when they are about to have children and have the choice of leaving work or continuing. The second is when they are in the post-child-raising stage of life and have the choice of returning to work or remaining at home. Many variables, including her educational background, her sense of self as an independent being, and the structure of her family, will influence a woman's decision, but statistics show that ultimately it is a material reality—her husband's income—that matters most.

According to the *1989 Basic Survey of the Employment Structure*, which divides household income into five levels, each comprising 20 percent of the population, nearly 50 percent of wives in the first four levels (i.e., from the lowest to the second highest) work. There is not much difference in the percentages of working wives among those levels, which together constitute 80 percent of the population. This 50 percent figure is close to the average rate of participation in the labor force by married women. By the fifth level, that is, among the top 20 percent of the population in terms of household income, the number of working wives suddenly drops about 10 percent to 38.1 percent. The dividing line between the fourth and fifth levels is an annual income of 7 million yen. In other words, it takes an annual income of that much or more for a wife to be able to be a full-time housewife. This is also clear from the fact that the first motivation women cite for going to work part-time is economic necessity, "to supplement household income."⁹ Between 1986 and 1989, the