

# Japanese Female Researchers Balancing Work & Family



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Although women conducting research at universities, companies or national institutes in Japan are encouraged by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's support for "womenomics", they still face the uphill task of balancing work with family life. Unless the government provides them with additional financial help and larger workplace concessions they will not be able to continue working when facing important life-events or trying to manage family life effectively. Womenomics has stipulated that companies should hire more females to constitute 30% of their workforce, but it does not specifically address the work-life balance problems that female researchers unavoidably face. The areas that need to be addressed are post-marriage issues, such as childbirth, returning to work after childbirth, child care and flexible working arrangements. Obviously these are issues confronting all women but more so for researchers, given the lower female employment ratio of 14.7% in the above mentioned research institutions, where more women are isolated than in other sectors. In Japan, unlike Sweden, France or the United States where women continue working through important life-events with the help of public and private services, female researchers tend to leave their jobs in their 20s to 40s because they are unable to balance issues of work and life. At present there are 136,000 female researchers in Japan and though it is not a large number, their success can become a model for other women, who are already in the workforce or who will enter the workforce later in the decade, to succeed in their workplace and

balance work with the demands of a personal life.

## Female Workforce Up by 30% in 2020

While Japan offers very good educational opportunities for women, they tend to leave their jobs when getting married or rearing children. This tendency, called the "M-shaped decrease of female employment", has been a major concern of the government in trying to sustain the Japanese economy in the face of a low birth rate and an aging population. Seeking greater participation of women in the economy, former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi proposed in 2003 the goal of hiring and promoting female employees, both in public and private organizations, so that they account for 30% of managerial positions. Progress has been slow. In 2012, the female employment ratio in managerial positions was still only 11.1% (Statistics Japan, Labor Force Survey, 2012), the lowest among developed countries in the OECD, and in 2015 the government admitted that the goal is practically impossible to achieve and modified the percentages according to sector. Now the goal is to have a female ratio of 7% (3.5% as of December 2015) in national organizations, 20% (currently 14.7%) in local public organizations and 15% (currently 9.2%) in large corporations by 2020. Given that the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace in 2015 was more for the stipulation of the goal without penalties and that it was applied merely to national and local public organizations and large corporations excluding small and medium-sized companies that comprise 99.7% of the total of 3.82 million companies in Japan, the change in general has only been partially recognized by society. However, some sectors including research institutions are now facing top-down changes and are consciously recruiting female researchers and making efforts to improve the working condition of women.

## Traditional Marriages Shunned

Female researchers who feel anxious about their future are increasingly shunning traditional marriages, which are very costly, or forfeiting the option of marrying altogether. Not only is getting married a costly proposition but motherhood and raising children is much more difficult. According to a Cabinet Office report in 2010, the number of late marriages has been increasing: the average age that men marry is 30.5 and women 28.8, while approximately 47% of men



Photo: Author

A young female researcher

and 34% of women are unmarried in their early 30s. In Japan, many people start saving for marriage expenses immediately after starting to work. Wedding ceremonies, which are traditionally divided into three categories — a wedding ceremony with family, close friends and work-related guests, a wedding reception with larger numbers of guests, and a casual party at night with friends — cost on average about 3.6 million yen. The recent trend of late marriage as well as smaller income makes it increasingly difficult to have such ceremonies.

As researchers start working in their late 20s after completing their masters degrees or doctorates, later than people in other sectors, they need to earn over a shorter period to save money for marriage and a life together with their partner. However, it is a minor issue in comparison to the difficulties of post-marriage life they need to deal with. Many universities, as well as some companies, prefer not to have a husband and wife working in the same institution. In addition to this subtle cultural barrier, it can be difficult to find a post in one's own area of specialty, and it is not uncommon for a married couple to live separately after marriage and have difficulty in raising children. The government initiative to promote hiring researchers within the city or prefecture where they live or where the spouse works may help resolve this issue.

### Childbirth Costs & Government Support

The government allows pre-maternity leave (optional, with application six weeks in advance of the expected date of birth), post-maternity leave (eight weeks, out of six mandatory weeks) and childcare leave (both men and women can take this leave till the child becomes one year old in principle) for those who have worked for the same employer for over one year, provided that the work contract will not be over before the child becomes one and a half years old. Based on the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law, the government provides maternity leave payments of 67% (decreasing to 50% after 180 days) of salary. In addition, it provides health care and a subsidy of 10,000 to 15,000 yen per month till the child becomes 15 years old.

Mikiko Fujiwara, a researcher at the Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry, has suggested a reconsideration of family policy by reallocating budgets for the elderly on which Japan has placed primary importance. Increasing the number of childcare centers for those under the age of one, raising child rearing allowances, eliminating medical costs, having longer periods of childcare leave allowance and making childcare and babysitter fees tax deductible could be some possible changes, she proposes. To lead such necessary changes, more importantly, a minister of family policy should have a Cabinet post and be a female in her 40s, with a support council of women in their 20s and 30s.

### Child Care from Birth to 3

It is widely known that, along with other numerous targets, the government should increase funding for child care, due to the scarcity of nursery schools and a care system especially for children under 3 years old. Increasing such public and private services is an urgent



Photo: Author

A research office in Kanagawa Prefecture

target, together with the improvement of conditions for workers. One solution is to promote the participation of both men and women in childcare leave and to gain the understanding of colleges to that end. It is essentially a question of work ethic and custom that prevents the actual usage of such leave, and this is something that universities and far-sighted companies should recognize.

### Returning to Work

In Japan female full-time and part-time researchers tend not to return to work immediately after childbirth as admission to day care (*Hoikuen*, where children of up to 5 years old will be taken care of), especially for children up to 3 years old, is extremely difficult. It is generally true that women in Japan prefer to raise children when they are small, though they are today willing to work and raise children simultaneously if their working conditions were relaxed. This problem is increasingly being addressed by some institutions of higher learning and companies. Some institutions such as Tokyo University, Hokkaido University and Ochanomizu University are providing daycare services inside the campus to enable women to work when their children are young. Those who would like to continue with independent research now have the opportunity to do so. But these measures are too few and far between. A concerted effort must be made by the government to create a policy of employment where female researchers can overcome the issues of childbirth and child rearing, and safeguards must be provided if organizations or companies fail to incorporate such measures in their work policies.

In many countries in Europe working from home has become a new reality. This new measure could also be included in reforms of the workplace for female researchers in Japan who form a vulnerable section of society. If the nation takes care of the higher-educated workforce it could create greater social harmony, use highly intellectual talent to think innovatively and stem the falling birthrate.

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