

# **Japanese Middle-aged Women's Careers after Leaving their Jobs for Marriage and Childbirth.**

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## **Introduction**

High economic growth in the postwar period in Japan drastically changed the way the Japanese lived and worked. Men were expected to work for, and be devoted to, one corporation as a “salaried worker” until retirement. Women, meanwhile, were expected to take care of their family as the “stay-at-home housewives of salaried workers”. That way of life was the model for women. Although they found employment after graduation, they were forced to leave their jobs for marriage and childbirth due to retirement age discrimination. However, not all women who had left the workforce for marriage and childbirth continued to stay home. In particular, married women who passed the child-rearing age were quickly absorbed into the labour market as part-time workers. Those women became an indispensable presence supporting the period of economic high growth; they worked as non-skilled workers and as an employment control valve to accommodate economic fluctuations. The government guided this type of atypical employment of married women as national policy by offering an incentive of income tax deduction for spouses in the 1980's. Thus, the nuclear family of “salaried husband, full-time housewife, and two children” became the model for designing public policy.

Despite the statutory right to maternal leave, most women are still channeled to retirement or temporary interruption of their careers due to marriage and childbirth and then return to work as atypical employees. In this paper, atypical work is defined as employment outside the category of regular full-time work. Although the discharge due to marriage has long been banned since the 1980's, there still lie a number of difficulties for women to continue their careers as regular employees after marriage and childbirth. Particularly for women who have recently reached middle age after undergoing such retirement, the reality is that it is difficult to find alternatives in the labour market other than taking on unstable low-wage atypical employment.

In Japan, atypical employment workers are not guaranteed fair employment conditions. They are not directly covered under the social security system. Some of them are

dependents, that is, those who are indirectly covered under their husband's pension and health insurance. To maintain such status, they have to adjust their income to a low level, for example, under 1,300,000 yen a year. Consequently, most atypical workers are not covered for pension or health insurance, and in addition their wages are kept at a low level.

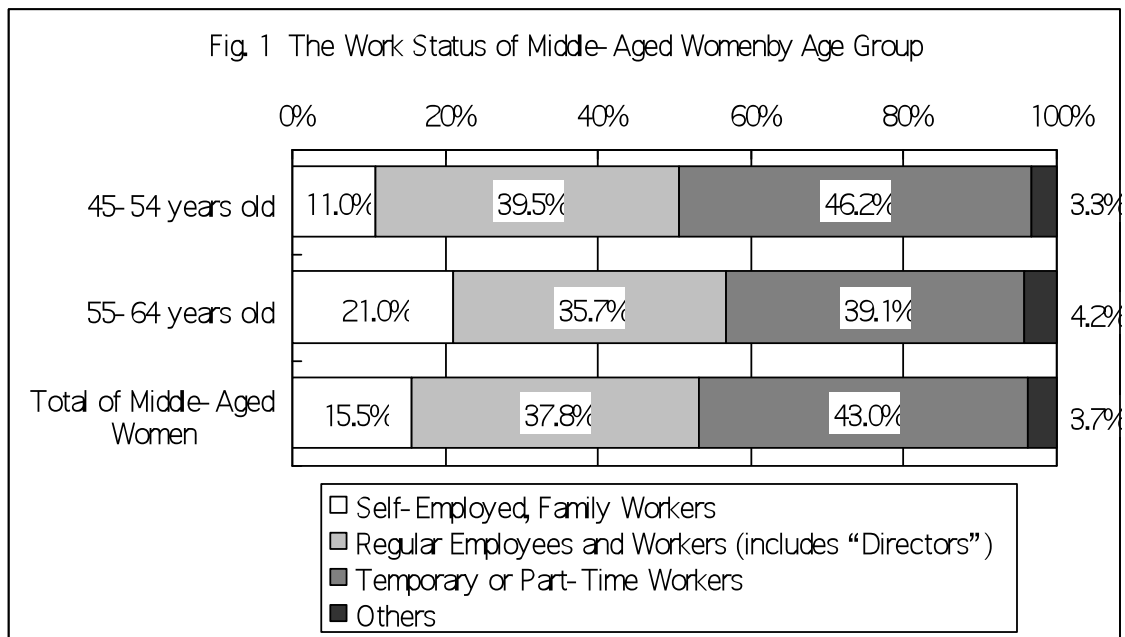
Under those circumstances, how have those women, presently reaching middle age, built professional careers of their own? In the case of interrupting their employment due to marriage and childbirth, how much time did they spend at home before returning to work? Or in fact, did they stay retired? Also, what factors have prescribed their career patterns?

This paper, while focusing on class factors and gender role awareness, analyzes the factors that determine the careers of middle-aged women in modern times, in the hopes of shedding light on the struggles existing in the professional careers of middle-aged women.

In this paper, an analysis was conducted using questionnaire data from 45-64 year-old women in Odawara City, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan<sup>1)</sup>. The subjects of the investigation belong to the birth cohorts of women from around 1940 to the late 1950s; these women reached the marrying and childbearing ages between the period of high economic growth (from 1955 to 1973) to the 1980s, they formed a career pattern of employment interruption due to family-related events, and then reentered the workforce under the label of atypical employment<sup>2)</sup>. For this reason, the data is appropriate for conducting an analysis focusing on 'interruption and reentering the workforce.'

## **Employment Outlook and Professional Careers**

Before delving into the analysis, let us review the national data on employment outlook of current middle-aged women. According to the Labour Force Survey (mean from April through June, 2006), the labour force rate of 45 to 54-year-old women accounted for 72.8%, and 55 to 64 year-old women accounted for 51.9%, this would increase to 61.6% if the middle age group was also added. Of the labour population, the work status of employees excluding the unemployed is given in Fig. 1. It shows that the percentage of atypical employment such as part-timers and temporary staff accounted for 43.0% of the middle-aged total.



Note: Created from the Work Force Survey. Those ‘working at home’ are included in “Others.”

Based on the Odawara survey, among middle-aged women (45-64), the percentage by employment was 21.2% for Self-Employed, 21.5% for Regular Employee and Worker, and 54.8% for Temporary or Part-Time Workers. Compared to the above national data Fig 1, the percentage of atypical employment was higher still. The deduced reason for the concentration in disadvantageous atypical employment is the interruption of professional career due to family-related matters such as marriage and childbirth, in addition to the disadvantageous labour conditions mentioned in the previous section.

### Previous Research

There are several empirical studies that investigate the prognostic factors of women reentering the workforce after leaving it initially due to marriage and childbirth. The findings are as follows.

First, in regard to the class factor, in the previous studies (Hirao 2005), the economic power of the husband consistently controlled the wife’s reentry into the workforce. Hirao pointed out that

“It is implied that the reason why married women’s educational history (apparently) controls their reentry into the workforce is because it is mediated through their husbands’ income (the degree of economic urgency)<sup>3)</sup>” (Hirao 2005).

Hirao(2005) demonstrated that restrained reentry to the workforce for college-educated women could be explained by the revenue influence of the husband<sup>4)</sup>. Furthermore, Nakai and Akachi (2000) pointed out that if the first job was generally considered to be a highly reputed profession, that would be a factor in wishing to pursue it after marriage. However, for those who returned to work on a part-time basis after marriage and childbirth, the social ranking of the father or husband would influence whether the female would return to work or not.

Moreover, survey research by the Japan Institute of Labour (1997) found the tendency that as the child grows up, reentry into the workforce is encouraged. Also pointed out was the tendency that women with the strong norm “Wives are better off staying home without a job” did not seek employment.

However, those findings were based on research targeting relatively younger women, and did not aim to consider the reentry to the workforce by women who had reached middle age. For this reason, based on the lack of data of previous studies, this paper will examine factors that determine women’s return to work after reaching middle age.

## **Analysis**

According to the Odawara survey data, among 851 women with work experience, approximately 80% left their jobs to fulfill family obligations. 597 of these women who stopped work “to marry” (48.8%), “to give birth to a first child” (26.1%), or “to give birth to a second child” (6.1%) (or a combination of these) and could also pursue a career later were selected as analysis subjects.

First, concerning those 597 subjects, with the focus on whether or not they returned to work after an interruption, and the length of that period of interruption until returning to work, the careers of these women were classified into the following three career patterns:

“Returning to work after a short interruption,” returning to the workforce within one year of leaving their jobs.

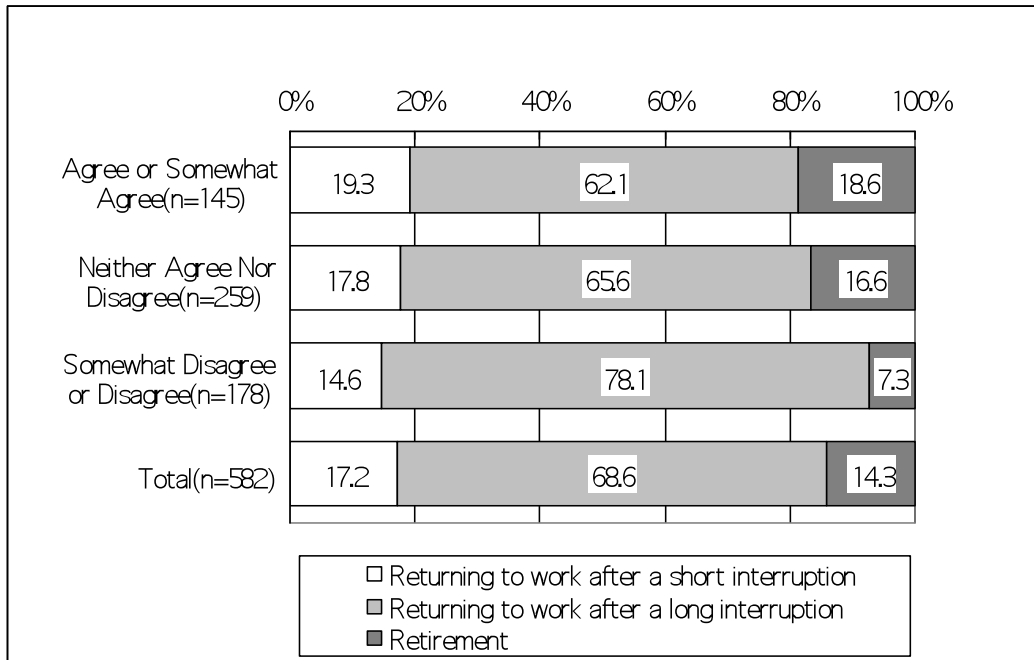
“Returning to work after a long interruption,” returning to the workforce after more than one year.

“Retirement,” taking up their job again<sup>5</sup>).

Among the 597 subjects of the analysis, “Return to Work After a Short Interruption” accounted for 17.2%, “Return to Work After a Long Interruption” 68.7%, and “Retirement” 14.1%. With nearly 70%, “Return to Work After a Long Interruption” applied to a very large majority. At present most middle-aged women once retired, but who did not stay retired are a minority. However, there was a relatively long break in time before returning to the workforce, and because of that break, one can imagine that their condition at reentry had grown more disadvantageous.

What are the factors that prescribe typical career patterns for middle-aged women? We conducted a polychotomous logistic regression analysis by regarding the above three models as dependent variables and “Retirement” as a criterion. Examined as independent variables were the age of the subject, educational background, the type of first job (first profession after final graduation), the perception of gender role division, the age of the youngest child, and husband’s educational background.

As mentioned previously, in the following analysis, we will focus mainly on the class factor and the influence of the perception of gender role division. For the variable that represents the class factor, the “husband’s educational background” will be used. The reason why “husband’s annual income” or “annual household income,” often deemed to be a class factor, is not used is because the husband of the subject female may have already retired and thus, the present economic power cannot be considered a prescribing factor for the wife’s career pattern. As for the perception of gender role division, we decided to use the agreement and disagreement (Agree; Somewhat Agree; Neither Agree Nor Disagree; Somewhat Disagree; Disagree) on the norm “Men should work outside while women should stay home taking care of the family.”



Note: regarding the perception of gender role division (the norm “Men should work and women should stay home”), since five classifications showed the degree of expectation less than 5 cells, we tested it by dividing them into three classifications.

Before conducting the analysis, the relationship between career patterns and the six factors was examined by cross tabulation. As shown in Fig. 2, as the result of a chi-square test, it was found that those who “Disagree or Somewhat Disagree” with the norm “Men should work and women should stay home” tended to often “return to work after a long-term interruption” and fewer “retirement” (p=0.008). Other variables did not show any statistically significant relation<sup>6</sup>.

Table 1 shows the result of a logistic regression analysis. The middle column denotes the return to work after a short-term interruption while the right column denotes the return to work after a long-term interruption; it shows that if the odds ratio is less than 1 compared to the retirement model, it was likely to follow the retirement model.

Table 1 Polychotomous Logistic Regression Analysis

Career Patterns	“Returning to work after a short interruption” vs. “Retirement”		“Returning to work after a short interruption” vs. “Retirement”	
	Odds Ratio	Significance Level	Odds Ratio	Significance Level
Intercept		*		**
The Age of the Subject	0.898		0.879	**
The Age of the Youngest Child	1.060		1.077	*
Educational Background of the Subject	1.176		1.023	
Husband’s Educational Background	0.788	**	0.854	*
The Norm “Men should work outside while women should stay home taking care of the family”				
Agree	0.828		0.582	
Somewhat Agree	0.262	*	0.273	*
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	0.207	*	0.3	*
Somewhat Disagree	0.431		0.985	
Disagree				
The Type of First Job				
Specialist and Technical	0.960		0.593	
Clerical	0.842		0.532	
Sales and Services	1.607		0.741	
Technical and Production				
*p<.05, **p<.01				

Note1:  $-2\text{Log L } 717.056, \chi^2 (df)43.411(22)**$ , N=457.

Note2: the years of the subject’s education and that of the husband’s education: junior high school graduate (9 years), high school graduate (12 years), vocational school or junior college graduate (14 years), and college (16 years). As for graduate school, all were converted to 16 years since graduate school was not distinguished from college in the survey question. The type of first job dummy of the subject (the type of first job after graduation) consisted of specialist and technical, clerical, sales and services, and technical and production. We excluded “agriculture, forestry, and fisheries” due to lack of samples.

From the analysis, it was found that firstly, middle-aged women whose husbands’ years of education were greater tended to retire. Also, those who were in the “Somewhat Agree” and “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” categories concerning “Men should work and women should stay home”, tended to select the ‘retirement’ model. Furthermore, the higher the age of the subject, the more the subject tended to select the ‘retirement’ model rather than the ‘return to work after a long-term interruption’ model. While the higher the age of the youngest child, the

more the subject tended to select the ‘return to work after a long-term interruption’ rather than the ‘retirement’ model. Meanwhile, no statistically significant influence was seen in the educational background of the subject, the type of first job, in the selection of career patterns.

As seen in previous research, the higher the husband’s educational background, the greater the tendency the wife continued as a full-time housewife. Also, the type of first job did not influence reentry into the workforce of middle-aged women, which is consistent with the findings of Nakai and Akachi.

In addition, in relation to the gender role division, those who checked “Somewhat Agree” with the norm “Men should work and women should stay home”, tended to select the ‘retirement’ model, which also matched the results of the Japan Institute of Labour. However, those who were undecided on the same norm (“Neither Agree Nor Disagree”) also selected the ‘retirement’ model. How should we interpret these findings?

One suggestion is the view of “rational selection and cognitive discordance based on the division of the labour market” proposed by Kimura (2000). This can be the basis of a consistent explanation of why the tendency of highly educated women in Japan choose to be full-time housewives while holding a negative view of gender role division. In Japan, the labour market between full-time and part-time jobs is clearly divided; once interrupting a career, even highly educated women have a hard time returning to full-time work. On top of that, since those women tend to marry husbands with a high academic background (thus, high economic power as well), the necessity to return to the labour market is also lessened. In other words, the perception of gender role division and the employed status are reversed. For this reason, despite the fact that highly educated full-time housewives wished to continue employment, they fall into cognitive discordance and then shift their perception of gender role division in the direction of rationalizing their employment status.

Can we verify a similar phenomenon in the Odawara data as well? Let us analyze how the perception of gender role division is related to what kind of attributes. Here, we conducted a cross tabulation by considering the agreement and disagreement with the norm “Men should work and women should stay home” as dependent variables, and by regarding the age of the subject, the type of first job, and educational background as independent variables. The results did not show a significant relation with the educational background of the subject. Thus, only the relation between age and the type of first job are shown.

Fig. 3 is the tabulation of all female subjects in the Odawara survey. The higher the age, the greater the tendency to affirm the perception of gender role division.

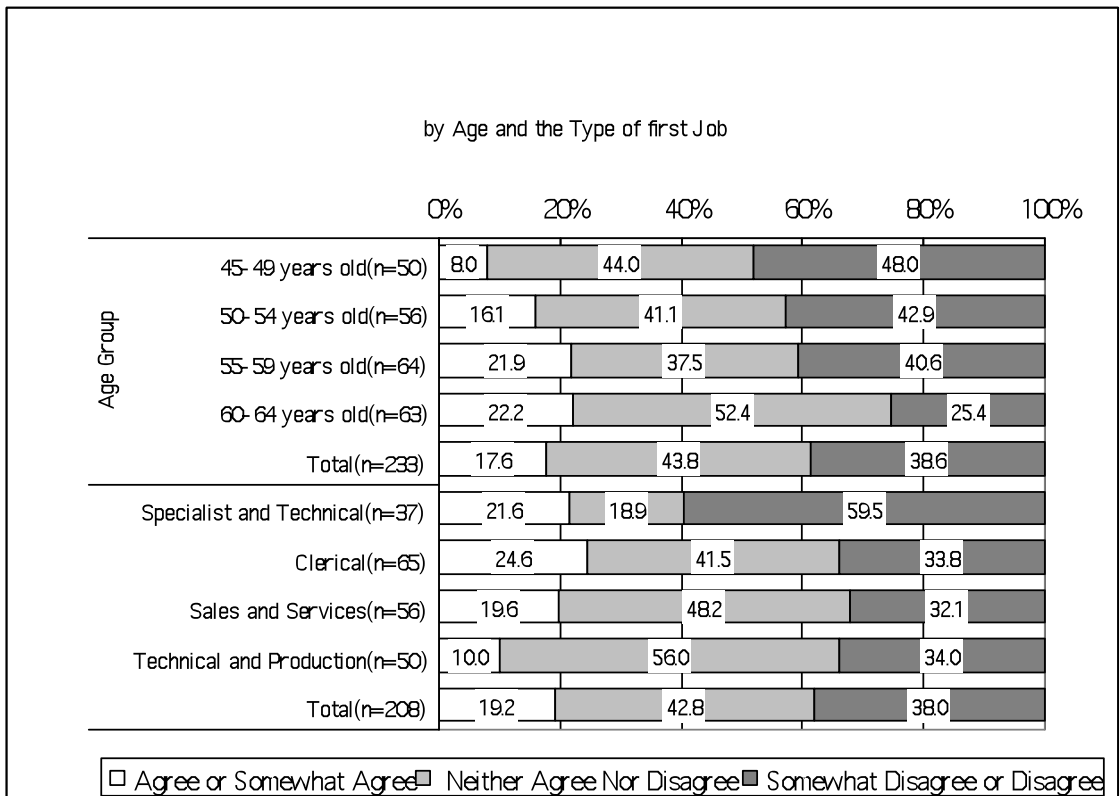
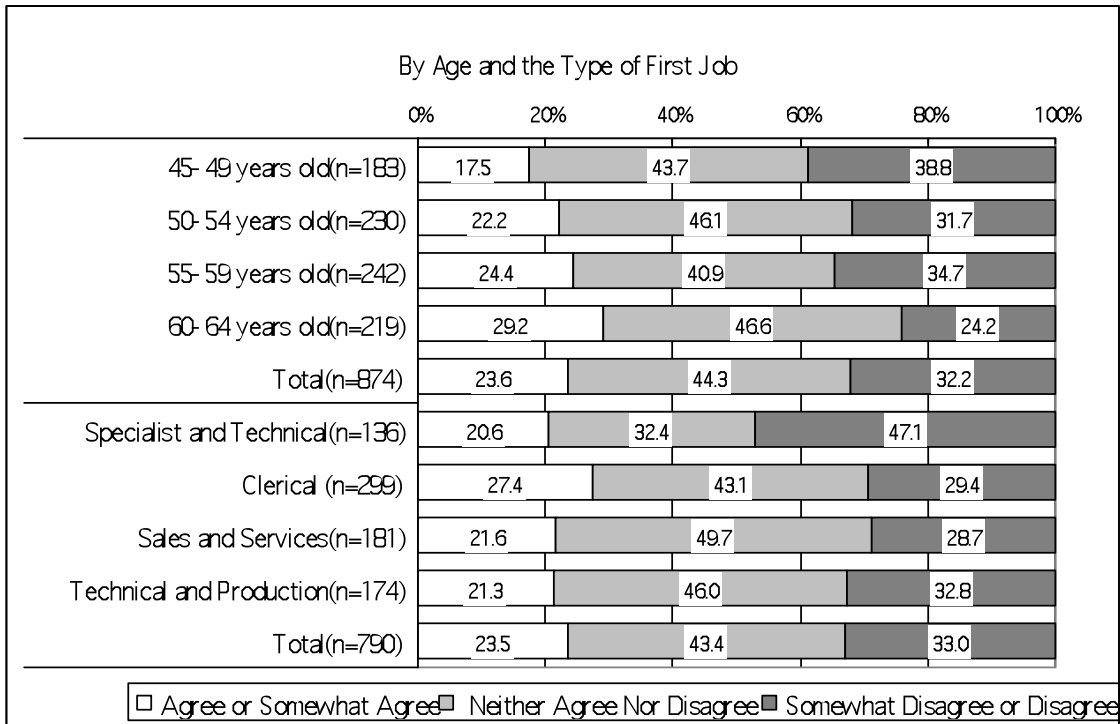


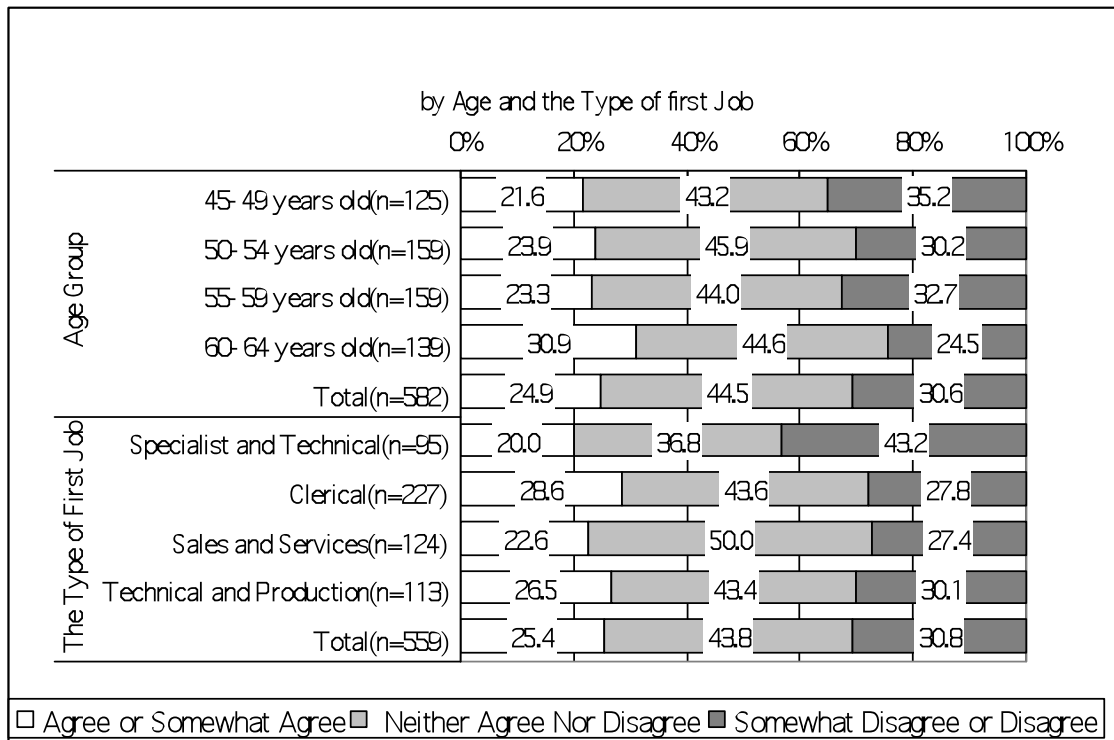
Next, let us examine the relationship between the type of first job and gender role division. Clerical is an area of work where there is a particularly strong tendency to retire due to marriage and childbirth. Selecting a clerical job at the time of choosing the type of first job means that at that point, it is probable that the female foresaw that she would eventually accept the role of full-time housewife. In other words, the female, concerning gender role division, felt highly affirmative from the onset. In the meantime, selecting Specialist and Technical means that it was highly possible that compared to those who selected Clerical, the subject wanted to continue employment after marrying and having children. In other words, the tendency to affirm gender role division was weak. In that case, looking at the relationship between the current perception of gender role division and the type of first jobs, those whose first jobs were Clerical were affirmative about gender role division, while those whose jobs were Specialist and Technical were negative about it. We can not know the subjects' perception of gender role division at the time they selected their first job.

On the whole, however, the perception of gender role division at the time of selecting the first job can be still maintained. Expressed differently, the selection of the first job and the perception of gender role division correspond with each other.

Now let us compare Fig. 4 and Fig. 5. Fig. 4 shows "Those who have working experience and never had to leave a job for the sake of family duties or family roles (marriage, childbirth, or the caring for the family)<sup>7)</sup>." Fig. 5 shows a tabulation result for "Those who have experienced leaving a job for marriage and childbirth." Females who never had to leave a job due to family responsibilities correspond to the current perception of gender role division and the selection of the type of first job. However, this type of correspondence is not seen among those who interrupted their career for marriage and childbirth.

How should we interpret this trend? First, those who disagree with gender role division tend to be in the category of Specialist and Technical worker. Those people also tend not to interrupt their careers. The interpretation is that when comparing those who do not interrupt with those who do, the former tend to be more opposed to gender role division. The second interpretation is that as Kimura (2000) pointed out, in order to avoid facing the reality of not been able to return to full-time work due to interruption even if they wish to do so, they possibly rationalize this by modifying their perception of gender role division. Expressed differently, it is a mechanism not only based on the perception of gender role division, but also, conversely, helps shape a perception of gender role division by adjusting oneself to the existing career.





\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

Although there is no data available on the perception of gender role division before employment interruption, and thus it is not certain, but if adopting the latter interpretation of adjusting to their career, one can interpret the results of the above polychotomous logistic regression analysis in the following manner. The trend that those who do not clearly show agreement or disagreement with the norm “Men should work and women should stay home” tend to choose to be full-time housewives. This means that those women have fallen into a situation in which they cannot clearly express their opinions on the perception of gender role division since in reality they face the dilemma of finding it difficult to return to full-time work, and also having doubts about the role of a full-time housewife.

### Conclusion and Future Tasks

As mentioned in the introduction, most middle-aged women today leave their professions for marriage and childbirth, and then reenter the workforce as part-time workers. It has also been mentioned in previous research that what prescribes this kind of choice in reemployment for middle-aged women was mainly based on the class factor. In this paper also,

the influence of class factor was evident: the higher the educational background of their husbands, the more restricted the return to the workforce would be. Furthermore, women who affirm the norm of gender role division tended to choose to continue being full-time housewives after marriage and childbirth; women who do not have clear opinions on gender role division also chose to be full-time housewives. This reflects the current struggles of middle-aged women today who cannot find a job with satisfactory working conditions while the atypical employment of married women increasingly advances. On the other hand, middle-aged married women cannot simply feel comfortable their own circumstances due to the harsh public view of full-time housewives.

If those women are given an opportunity to obtain a well-paid full-time job and return to the workforce, it is possible that the perception of gender role division may change accordingly. As Kimura (2000) pointed out, it is important to reform the structure of the labour market that confines women into atypical employment. And by doing that, the struggles of middle-aged women today can be resolved.

Women's careers were sometimes regarded as the 'result of self-determination' by the 'affirmation of gender role division.' However, what the analysis in this paper suggests is that perceptions of gender role division are changeable so that they can be adapted to the circumstances women are placed under. For this reason, just because the perception and circumstances are adaptable, we should not overlook the very structure that locks women into atypical poor conditioned employment. Rather, we must resolve gender inequalities in the workplace, which is one major cause for women's struggles in the employment-housewife roles.

Lastly, the future tasks of this research must be stated. This paper was intended to reinforce the assertion of Kimura (2000) that women would change the perception of gender role division by rationalizing their own employment status. However, this needs to be verified using suitable panel data in the separate paper.

## NOTES

<sup>1)</sup> This research was conducted in 2003-2004 by the Ochanomizu University 21st Century COE Program, Project 4: *Studies of Human Development from Birth to Death*.

<sup>2)</sup> According to Shima (1997), the 1941-45 cohort was characterized thus: they worked as employed workers during their youth. After interruption of employment due to marriage and

childbirth, their part-time employment increased when they completed child-rearing. The employment interruption of the 1946-50 cohort suddenly became short-lived. There was no specific change in the 1951-55 cohort. The 1956-60 cohort ensured “the tendency to put off marriage and childbirth and popularization of higher education.” In addition, they reached employment age at the time when the shift to industrial structures such as the popularization of employed workers and part-time workers was established. Thus, they were cohorts collectively representing the change in women who were born in the *Showa* era (1926 – 89).

<sup>3)</sup> According to the Japan Institute of Labour and Hirao (2005), there is a difference between junior-college and four-year university graduates. However, the reason has not been sufficiently analyzed.

<sup>4)</sup> According to Yamato (2005), from the 1995 national survey data of “Social Stratification and Social Mobility,” the 1926-45 cohort did not experience a popularization of high school education, and showed a high percentage of college graduated women returning to work. However, the 1946-55 cohort did not show this kind of exceptional phenomenon; the educational background of the subject did not have any impact upon the promotion of reentering the workforce, indicating strong economic factors.

<sup>5)</sup> In this research, when there were multiple interruptions, we adopted the length of interruption from the last time the subject leave. Reentry into the workforce means employment six months or longer. If the subject did not last more than six months and leave the job once again, this case is considered the “retirement” model.

<sup>6)</sup> As for the age of the youngest child, we conducted tests by stratifying it as follows: under 16 (junior high schooler or younger), 16 or older and younger than 19 (high schooler), 19 or older and younger than 23 (college students), and 23 or older. However, it was not significant.

<sup>7)</sup> In this case, rather than excluding only those who had no experience of employment interruption due to marriage and childbirth, we found it more appropriate to also exclude those who experienced interruption due to the caring for the family member as a family responsibilities.

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#### **ADDITIONAL NOTE**

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