CHAPTER 4

The Impact of a Changing Employment System on Women’s Employment upon Marriage and after Childbirth in Japan

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1 Employment Flexibility and Women’s Employment

The latter half of the 1980s saw a growing trend toward employment flexibility in many countries developing amid intensifying international competition caused by economic globalization (Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006). In Japan, the issue of men who became unemployed in their middle to early old age became an object of focus in the 1990s (Nakatani 1987; Nomura 1994), followed in the 2000s by the rise of non-standard employment among the young (Genda 2001; Jo 2006). However, the trend toward employment flexibility in fact developed earlier for women than men in Japan, and had broader and deeper reach. The rate of non-standard employment among women in the labor force started rising as early as the 1970s and the proportion of women among non-standard employees has been consistently far higher than that of men (Otobe 2006).

Nevertheless, in Japan, it was the trend toward employment flexibility among men (young, middle-aged, or old) that aroused public concern. After World War II, systems of family, employment, and social security developed based on the model of the male breadwinner, namely that men earn the income while women carry out domestic chores and provide child and elderly care (Osawa 1993). The trend toward men’s employment flexibility thus shook established institutions to their core. In contrast, the trend toward women’s employment flexibility drew much less public attention. The reason for this was that women were not regarded as the main breadwinners in the above-mentioned systems and their employment insecurity was therefore not considered as problematic as men’s. However, with the male breadwinner model under question, changes in women’s employment have been recognized as having a crucial impact not only on employment and social security systems but also on family and individual security.

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1 This study uses, with permission, data for Japan from the 2005 SSM survey. The author refers to the syntax used by Yasuda Tokio regarding data analysis. The author would like to express her appreciation for the helpful comments made on this study by other contributors of this book.
This chapter analyzes data provided by the Social Stratification and Mobility (SSM) Survey of 2005 to clarify the ways in which the trend toward employment flexibility has transformed Japan’s employment system and how this transformation has impacted women’s employment at marriage and childbirth. On the basis of these results we will discuss how the life course of women is changing in Japan today.

2 Research in Europe and the United States on Impacts of Economic Globalization on Women’s Employment

According to research from Europe and the United States, economic globalization has had the following effects on the employment of women. Firstly, on the quantitative side, there was an increase both in terms of the rates of labor participation among women and in the length of service. Formerly the main causes for women to interrupt employment were marriage and childbirth, but from the 1990s onward the trend for marriage as a cause of employment interruption declined considerably. In the United States and Sweden, with their liberal and social democratic welfare regimes, childbirth also declined as a reason for employment interruption (Esping-Andersen 1990). Further, the extent to which women decided to re-enter the labor market after an interruption rose. Two factors lay behind this quantitative expansion of women’s labor participation. The first was that an increase in flexible employment opportunities caused by global economic competition made it easier for women to reconcile work and family. The second was that flexible employment also sometimes resulted in insecurity. The rising insecurity in male employment increased the need for women to have gainful work, which further increased because of the expanding risks of divorce or relationship dissolution associated with men’s rising employment insecurity (Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006). These changes are sometimes understood as the transformation from “male-breadwinner model family” to “adult worker model family” (Lewis and Giullari 2005), or as a change from the “Fordist model” to the “post-Fordist model” (Mayer 2004).

Secondly, on the qualitative side, women’s employment has become more insecure. The risk of unemployment increased in comparison with the past, and re-employment became more difficult. Moreover, downward mobility (moving to a lower level of employment according to socio-economic indices) has increased, while upward mobility (moving to a higher level of employment) has decreased (Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006; Glover and Kirton 2006).

Thirdly, not all women are exposed to the risk of employment insecurity to the same extent. Depending on the resources that individual women possess