CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF THE AGEING WORKFORCE

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1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the economic risks of ageing posed by the ways in which men and women are employed in Japan. The focus is on the extent to which forms of employment make it possible for employees to achieve economic security during and after active employment. The concept of security, and its antonym, risk, are not new ways of framing the question of the social and economic consequences of ageing, but the concepts of employment performance and security have gained importance recently for analyzing new dimensions of social inequality emerging in relation to the liberalization of employment institutions in the context of economic globalization. In particular, paying attention to the “unequal distribution of insecurities” between social groups in the workforce (ILO 2004: 3) and viewing forms of employment contracts in relation to the types of security they offer (Kim and Kurz 2003) contribute to identifying new dimensions of social exclusion in the labour market. This is particularly important in Japan, where the crisis of employment performance is not rooted in long-term unemployment as in Germany, but rather in the expansion of non-regular employment forms (Osawa 2006).

The gender dimension of the ageing workforce is approached from a relational and institutional perspective, highlighting how employment contracts and social policy shape opportunities for securing a livelihood, for men and women as individuals, but also as partners in households and families. The concept of the “male breadwinner” (Ostner and Lewis 1995) refers to a particular model of gendered employment and

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1 The author wishes to thank Jun Imai for data and research assistance, Mari Osawa, Margarita Estevez-Abe and Karin Gottschall for comments and help in improving the data and argument.
social policy, considered dominant in Japan and Germany (Gottfried and O’Reilly 2002). As a model of livelihood security (Osawa 2007), the “male breadwinner model” points to how social policies intersect with gender relations, to define men as workers and women as wives and/or mothers. In the Japanese case, the model of the male breadwinner is rooted in particularly strong employment protections for male regular workers, who receive a family wage. The dominance of this model is evident in the comparatively high contribution of male wages to total household income, and pension policies delivering the highest rate of benefits to full-time employees with dependent spouses (Osawa 2006). Pension reforms in the 1980s actually strengthened the male breadwinner model in Japan, in part by adding a third class of insured to National Pension Insurance (NPI) for dependent spouses and improving survivor benefits. The intersection of employment practices and social policies in Japan had, by the end of the 1980s, established regular employment for men, and marriage to a regular employee for women, as the best security against the risks of ageing. In practice however, the dual structure of the Japanese labour market and high levels of non-agricultural self-employment well into the 1980s have meant that the “model male breadwinner” really only existed for male employees of large companies. So despite the policy dominance of the male breadwinner model, the majority of women were also regularly employed (see below), and dual earning couples outnumbered households with the “model” male breadwinner/full-time housewife throughout the 1980s (Osawa 2007).

In the 1990s, corporate restructuring in response to the long recession brought declines in regular employment and lower rates of wage growth over the life course for younger cohorts of Japanese men, including those regularly employed in large companies (Osawa 2006). At the same time, the strengthening of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law enacted in 1999, and the passing of the gender equality act in the same year, which launched a discussion of social policy reform in the direction of supporting an alternative “dual-earner/dual-care-giver” livelihood security system in place of the male breadwinner model, seemed to create an improved context for qualitative improvements in women’s employment in Japan. These hopes have been dashed however, in the wake of a fundamental deregulation of employment, and a consequent expansion of non-regular employment (Imai 2004), both of which changed the structure of women’s employment more fundamentally than men’s employment. In contrast to employment policy in the Euro-