The inter-role conflicts among female workers playing a dual role in Japan

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Abstract. Since Shinzo Abe took the helm as prime minister in 2012, Japan’s female labour force participation has ticked up. Abe’s push for female empowerment was since the decline in births in Japan had been considered the fastest in the world. However, barriers are still common among female workers especially those having underage children, a condition in which inter-role conflicts occur. This research focuses on inter-role conflicts that arise on female workers playing a dual role and aims at looking into their way of playing the role in both public and domestic sectors. The research applies interviewing as the method in the qualitative approach. This research concludes that women in the workforce still face certain impediments including inflexible working hours and restrictions in family and household time.

Keywords: Japan, women, worker, economy, conflict

1. Introduction
Based on data from The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT), women represented 43.8% of the entire Japanese labour force in 2018, a figure nearly equivalent to those of western and developing countries. However, the occupation rate of women in managerial position in Japan is 13.2%. This is only better than South Korea which records 10.5% yet remains lower compared to some developed and developing countries like the United States, France, Germany, the Philippines, and Malaysia [1]. Various issues have contributed to the percentage including high demand on work quality, long working hours, and inflexible working arrangements. As a result, lack of work-life balance has caused work-family conflicts to occur [2], leading the country to record low gender inequality index despite its high human development index [3].

In addition to heavy workload, Japan’s female workers, especially those playing a double role, must bear huge responsibility for care of the family, notably those with toddlers. In effect, the women in the workforce of such issue will see a decline in their performance, resulting in work-family conflicts: a situation where an individual experiences incompatible demands between work and family roles [4].

The government of Japan was fully aware of the problem that the female workers dealt with when introducing women’s economic empowerment program called womenomics. In Abe’s structural reform, womenomics is a key element. It is associated with the ambitious policy of economic reforms dubbed Abenomics that Shinzo Abe launched after he was elected prime minister in December 2012 so as to stimulate the economy. The strategy concentrates on three main parts of economic policy called “three arrows” including monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reforms. Abe also announced that the
key part of the structural reforms will focus on womenomics or women’s economic empowerment through reforms and policies to encourage women to participate—and make progress—in the workforce. The Wall Street Journal quoted Abe in an article in 2013 as saying that Japan needed to optimize women as the least acknowledged human resources in Japan so as to boost the domestic economy. For that matter, Abe said in his speeches before the UN General Assembly in September 2013 and the World Economic Forum in January 2014 that he would key in on female labor force participation in Japan.

Abe persuades more women to join in the labour force and urges them to keep working after becoming mothers and offers chances to take leadership positions at work. This is due to the fact that gender inequality index in Japan is considered low among high income countries. It is believed that one of the ways for boosting the economy is to narrow the inequality gap. In the long run, such an attempt may alleviate matters that are related to the demographics. Despite growing optimism toward the Abe administration in the women empowerment policy, some experts are discouraged by the fact that Japan still holds dear traditional culture and belief on gender role.

Abe builds his policy on two principles. Firstly, Japan wills to respond to international criticism on the country’s low gender inequality index. Secondly, Japan copes with demographic and economic challenges, shrinking and aging population, low birth rates, labour shortage, low GDP growth, deflation, stagnation in domestic investment and consumer spending. The factors in question prompt an acknowledgment from the government that women in Japan have long been out of the workforce radar and are now needed to help save Japan’s economy. This paper raises questions on issues that female workers in Japan face in playing their dual role in the public and domestic sectors and touches on efforts launched by the government in working on the problem. We interviewed five workers cum housewives in Japan to focus on the research.

2. Methodology
This research employs a qualitative approach through which meanings on various social and human issues are explored and comprehended by ways of presenting questions and procedures, gathering specific data from participants, analysing data inductively from general to detailed topics as well as interpreting data. This research also focuses on constructivist paradigm in its analysis where researchers rely on as many aspects as possible of the participants’ views on the situation being studied through open questions. Case study is adopted as the research strategy of which data is collected by interviewing five female workers cum housewives, observing data, and documenting data.

The respondents are five female workers cum housewives with age range of between 30 and 39 years old, and a childless female worker whose age is over 39 years old. A and B have two kids aged 8 years old and under one year old, and B has kids of 8 years old and 5 years old. C’s kids are aged at 9, 7, and 3 years old. D has kids aged seven and two. The questions posed are divided into two main groups concerning supports from family, colleagues, and superiors on dual-role female workers, and expectations toward the government on the dual-role issue.

3. Discussion
The World Economic Forum publishes 4 indicators in its annual report used to measure the Global Gender Gap Index. The Global Gender Gap Index examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories or sub-indexes as following:

1. Economic Participation and Opportunity
   Sub index of Economic Participation and Opportunity is captured through three concepts: the participation gap, the remuneration gap and the advancement gap.

2. Educational Attainment.
   The gap between women’s and men’s educational attainment or their current access to education is captured through ratios of women to men in primary, secondary and tertiary level education.

3. Health and Survival
This sub index provides an overview of the differences between women’s and men’s health. There are two indicators to measure this index. The first is the sex ratio at birth, which aims specifically to capture the phenomenon of “missing women” prevalent in many countries with a strong son preference. Second is the gap between women’s and men’s healthy life expectancy, calculated by the World Health Organization.

4. Political Empowerment

Sub index of Political Empowerment measures the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making, through the ratio of women to men in minister-level positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions.

Based on the Global Gender Gap Index 2020 [7], Japan is ranked only 121 out of 154 countries. Japan, along with China and Korea Republic, are ranked far below other developed countries. Those three countries are ranked below Indonesia as well, which placed 85th in the rankings. Out of the four sub-indexes, Japan are relatively better in the aspect of “Educational Attainment” and “Health and Survival”. However, in terms of Economic Participation and Opportunity and Political Empowerment, Japan is ranked above 100th place, showing that the improvement of women’s education in Japan is not followed by participation in economy and politics.

Historically, the roles of Japanese men and women have changed due to the country’s social shift, from a matrilineal system to a patrilineal system. This became fully realized in the Edo period (1603~1868) from the rising influence of Confucianism. Confucianism emphasizes the "men outside" and "women inside" concept as well as sanju no dotoku, which means “a woman should in youth obey her father, in maturity her husband, and in old age her son”. Equality between men and women began in the Meiji period where the government sought to adopt western ideas concerning a formal education system between men and women. In 1986, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was issued to prevent discrimination against women [8].

In Meiji period, government introduced ideology of ryosai kenbo (good wife, wise mother) as an ideal concept of Japanese women’s education. It was established through promulgation of the Ordinance on Girls’ High Schools in 1899. But, in the other hand, this concept also justified and rationalized the division of labour by gender in the manner of “men work while women do housework and raise children,” and this existed not only in pre-war Japan, but also in post-war Japan [9].

An attempt to narrow the widening gender gap in Japan is believed to have been a way of boosting the economy and alleviating demographic problems in the country in the long run. Today, Japan has been one of the countries in the world whose population is falling yet enjoys the world’s longest average life expectancy. The current situation is supposed to lead the country to economic stagnation going forward. Abe’s policy of female empowerment—womenomics—has become a strategy to anticipate such a circumstance. However, in practice, female workers, especially those playing a dual role, may still have to deal with a number of issues. This has inspired role conflict among them.

Work-family conflict, also known as work-family interference, is a form of inter-role conflict that occurs due to tensions in the workplace and incompatibility of certain aspects within the family [4]. Work-family conflict is a within-person across-domains transmission of demands and consequent strain from one area of life to another [4]. Inter-role conflict is classified into work interference with family (WIF) and family interference with work (FIW) [10]. The WIF appears when work sneaks into family life, while the FIW occurs when family interferes with work. Three indicators are applied on the WIF and the FIW. They refer to variables in the workplace, variables outside of the workplace, and individual and demographic variables. As for variables in the workplace, what matter are issues concerning work and working environment such as flexible schedule and workplace stress. Variables outside of the workplace include marital conflict, number of hours spent to care for children—youngest child—and family. While individual and demographic issues include personality, attitude, and various individual contrasts like sex, income, and copying style [10].

When asked about workplace family support, the majority of female workers said that they gain support from the family, especially husbands and parents. Only one person declared that her family was
not supportive. B said that when she had to perform a business trip, her husband would take care of the children and other household chores. C said that her mother who lives nearby would help her drop off her child at a day care center and prepare food for the kid. Meanwhile, D said her family took care of her child and sent the kid to a hoikuen (day care) when she had to work during the holidays. Not having any child, E said that she and her husband have committed to support each other from day one of their marriage.

The majority of female workers said that none of their superiors had supported them on the dual role issue. Nonetheless, their colleagues fully understand the matter. A said that with the support from her colleagues, taking a leave was easier, while B could go home earlier at a certain time. Colleagues with more experiences would also offer them suggestions on parenting. D in fact mentioned that her company had adopted the principles of gender-friendly workplace.

In taking care of the children, most interviewees are aided by their parents, especially mothers, who live at close quarters. Their husbands share the duty as well. However, they take advantage of day care centres during business days, mainly for the workers with toddlers. They expect that the government can provide more day care centers so that shorter waiting list is possible, caregivers have improved skills, and children who are healthy and unwell can be separated. They also suggest that the government builds a different system for male and female workers, opts for more recruits than apply overtime, creates gender-friendly workplace, eliminate long working hours, cuts taxes for working mothers, makes possible more flexible working arrangement with ICT. Remote work enables workers to get jobs done and taking care of children or ailing family members. Yet, a respondent does not quite support remote work as it may lead to loss of focus. C said the burden of taking overtime and working during holidays reduces her time of gathering with the family.

The illustration above shows that—taking into account variables that refer to the WIF or FIW—two issues can be identified. When dealing with flexible working arrangement and stress in the workplace, data shows that female workers do not get access to flexible working arrangement. Instead they still have to work overtime or during the holidays. Even so, concerning external factors which impede working mothers, three variables being used include marital conflict, number of hours spent to take care of children and family, and the age of the youngest child. Of the said variables, inflexible working arrangement has caused the working mothers to have restricted time in taking care of the family and the children. All the more, most of them still have toddlers. As a result, they are prone to WIF or FIW, conditions in which workers’ performance and productivity may be affected. In addition, the idea to add more day care centres must be answered by the government.

4. Conclusion
As a one of the developed countries, Japan’s high level of education does not lead to the high level of women’s participation in economic sector. This condition occurs due to traditional culture of woman role, the lack of family support, unaccommodating work environment, and limited supporting facility for a career woman. The government of Japan has launched several attempts to improve women’s participation in the economy, one of which is the issuance of womenomics policy. Analysis over interview data shows that female workers are almost uninterrupted by their spouses and families. Problems in fact emerge in the workplace. They are hindered by inflexible working arrangement, which leads to loss of time in taking care of the family. In addition, the government should provide more affordable day care centres so as to cut short of the waiting list.

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