

Japanese Women's Labor Force Participation Rates : Application of the Structural Model

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the M-shaped labor-force participation of Japanese women, with particular focus on women workers who leave their jobs from the ages of 30 to 34. Two approaches developed by Kanter (1977) can be applied to explain the reason for why these women resign: one is an individual approach and the other a structural approach. The author suggests that a structural approach is a more effectively explanatory model than an individual approach in explaining why women in their thirties quit their jobs. According to Kanter, the structural model is comprised of three variables: the structure of opportunity within the organization, the structure of power, the proportional distribution of people of different kinds. In this study attention is particularly directed to the structure of opportunity and the proportional distribution of people for discussing Japanese women's labor pattern.

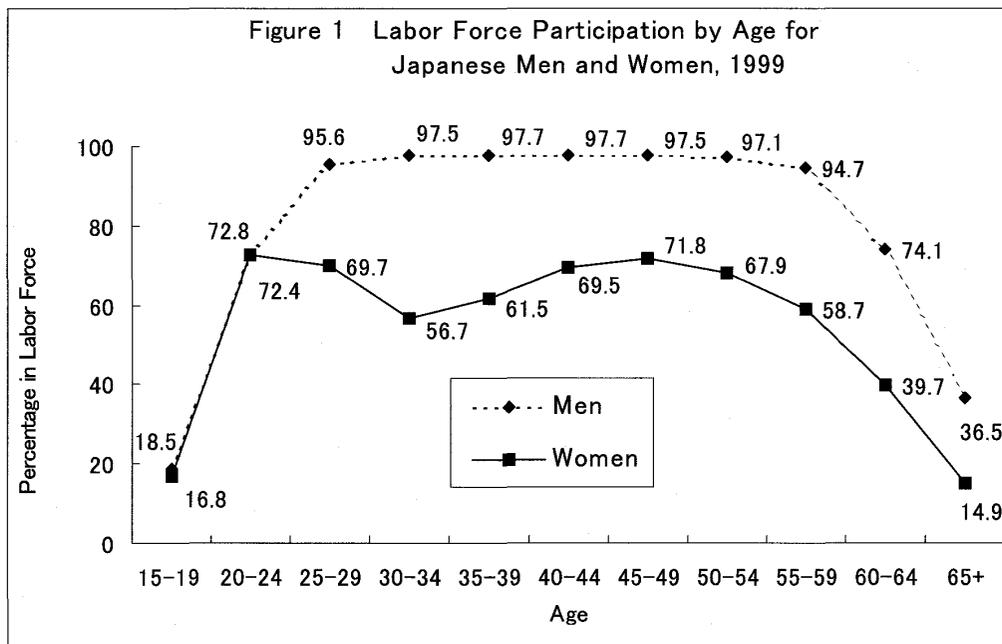
Key words: M-shaped curve, individual model, structural model

1. Introduction

With a dramatic increase in the number of women who received a higher education in recent years, demands for "self-expression" or "self-realization" are prone to rise as well; as a result, there are many women who find it difficult to be thoroughly satisfied with ordinary domestic tasks and child care. In Japanese society a considerable number of women are, actually, working in the occupational world today; in 1999, 49.6 percent of all females age 15 and over were in the labor force, compared to 76.9 percent of all males and, also, women consist of around 40 percent of total labor force (Prime Minister's Office, 2000: 308-311).

Yet, on the other hand, it has often been pointed out that labor force participation of Japanese women by age resembles an "M-shaped curve". On the other hand, that of Japanese men is not characterized by such a curve; instead, it displays a continuous-work pattern. As seen in Figure 1,

the overall distribution of women's labor pattern reveals a first peak occurring between the ages of 20 and 24 (72.4%) and a second peak between the ages of 45 and 49 (71.8%). The trough in the curve from the ages of 30 to 34 (56.7%) represents women who leave the workplace in order to get married or to have and raise children. Many of the returnees who re-participate in the labor force around the ages of 40 to 49 tend to be engaged in part-time work in spite of the lower wages and poorer promotion prospects in comparison with full-time work.



Source: Prime Minister's Office: 310-311.

There are various reasons for why Japanese women choose the quit-and-return work pattern. One possible explanation for this is that many women face difficulties balancing work and household matters at the same time. In fact, the results of a survey about working pattern conducted in 1997 show that nearly 40 percent of women in their thirties quit jobs for marriage (13.1%) or child care (24.6%) (Prime Minister's Office, 2000: 43). Also, from the female employee standpoint, the appeal of part-time work was described in the results of a survey, 1995: such work "allows convenient working hours/days" (55.0 percent), "permits shorter working hours/days" (28.8 percent), and "is compatible with household chores and child care" (20.6 percent) (Inoue & Ehara, 1991: 95). From these figures we may presume that women prefer part-time jobs that allow them to take family matters into considerations.

Therefore, understanding the M-shaped curve needs to grasp the relations between those who drop out of the labor force from ages 30 to 34 and those who work again at ages 40 to 49. But, here emphasis is on women in their thirties who leave the workplace.

2. Individual Model

The individual model can be applied to explain why labor force participation drops when women are in their early 30s. This modelling of work behavior is based on the assumption that “the factors producing inequities at work are somehow carried inside the individual person” (Kanter, 1977: 261). The model supports the idea that the differences in labor pattern between men and women who are in their thirties is derived from the differences between men and women as individuals. That is, individual model-thinking leads women to believe that the problems which they encounter in the work setting lie in their own psychology (Kanter, 1977: 261).

If we think of women’s labor from the standpoint of this model, even though family may be a factor, the major reason women leave their jobs may be that they do not have the abilities or skills needed to pursue their careers; family demands such as child care tend to be seen as secondary to women’s “own” problem.

3. Structural Model

The concept of the structural theory is that all organizations share certain characteristics that, to a significant degree, determine the behavior of their participants. Kanter’s classic work, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977) suggested three variables constituting the structural model: the structure of opportunity within the organization, the structure of power, the proportional distribution of people of different kinds. That is, “opportunity, power, and relative numbers (proportions and social composition) have the potential to explain a large number discrete individual responses to organizations” (Kanter, 1977: 246).

These variables are related to each other, but in this study we focus on the structure of opportunity and proportional distribution of people of different kinds to discuss the labor pattern of women in their early 30s.

3.1 Structure of opportunity

According to Kanter (1977: 246), “opportunity refers to expectations and future prospects. The structure of opportunity...is determined by such matters as promotion rates from particular jobs, ladder steps associated with a position, the range and length of career paths opening from it, [and,] access to challenge and increase in skills and rewards...”.

In this work the structure of opportunity in organizations is translated into the differentiation of opportunity between sexes. We can hypothesize that women who leave the workplace tend to have fewer opportunities than men; many women are less likely than men to be offered responsible

and high-paying positions and they may not feel any pressure or commitment to remain at the company when marriage and the first birth occur.

After the Equal Employment Opportunity Law went into effect in 1986, a great number of Japanese enterprises began to introduce the two-track hiring system. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Labor in 1992, among the large-scale companies with more than 5,000 employees, 49.3 percent offered the system and in financial and insurance-related firms 24.2 percent offered these two courses.

The term “two-track hiring system” can be defined as offering employees one of two different employment tracks, general and integrated. In the integrated track, employees are in charge of handling, generally speaking, the company’s “key” business and are usually placed in responsible posts. They are also expected to accept potential transfers to branch offices in other cities and are eligible for promotion if they have served continuously in their corporations.

Employees in the integrated track, therefore, tend to occupy higher-level jobs and, then, hold higher-paying positions than those in the general track. In the general track, which is exclusively for women, employees receive lower wages and promotion is slower and limited, (even if they stay on the job for a longer period) and the work less demanding than for those in the integrated track to which they play a supporting role. Their jobs, thus, do not involve transfers to branch companies.

It should be kept in mind here that women are offered two tracks to choose from, while men are sometimes not given the choice; men are expected to take the integrated track from the enterprises by virtue of being male. Furthermore, some Japanese firms who adopted the two-track system divide employees into two different groups from the beginning: men for the integrated and women, irrespective of their various backgrounds, for the general track.

Needless to say, this discriminative dual-track recruiting system obviously coincides with the wage differential between men and women. When we compare monthly salaries of male and workers and female workers, other than for part-time employees, we notice there is a large gap: in 1998, women made only 214,900 yen per month (about 2149 dollars), which is 63.9 percent of what men earned (Prime Minister’s Office, 2000: 54, 315).

Being confined to the status of lower-paid shorter-term assistants to those (usually men) in the integrated track, the majority of women are so dissatisfied with their companies or jobs that they do leave the workplace, especially on marriage or birth of children.

Why do employers typically give women fewer opportunities than men? The sexual division of labor which assigned men to market work and women to domestic work encouraged employers to establish the Japanese-style management on the assumption that all workers who took paid jobs were men and that every man was supposed to have a stay-at-home wife.

Male workers who were freed from domestic labor could endure, therefore, harsh conditions

such as overtime work. Today, Japanese-style management, which continues to be based on the idea of the division of labor between sexes, tends to define the domestic as women's sphere, even for women who are employed outside the home. Therefore, employers are likely to bolster the belief that household labor is women's responsibility and that paid work is secondary to their household duties.

Also, the inclination of women to quit their jobs on marriage or childbirth naturally causes employers to be careful about recruiting women for well-paying responsible posts; employers have a fear that recruiting women may reduce profits on the grounds that women are less productive or more costly to hire than men. In other words, since many women actually give up their jobs on marriage and childbirth—it must be noted here that those women may leave the workplace against their will, though—employers are likely to assume that motherhood may cause women to miss more work or bring about higher turnover rates than men.

3.2 Proportion of men and women employees

The proportional distribution of various kinds of people refers to “the social composition of people in approximately the same situation. It is a simple quantitative matter of how many people there are of what relevant social types in various parts of organization...” (Kanter, 1977: 248).

This factor can be considered in terms of the proportion of men and women in organizations. We can hypothesize that compared to men, lower proportions of women workers have managerial positions; this, in turn, induces women workers to leave their jobs more easily than men.

The discriminative dual-track recruiting system may effect on-the-job training within firms. Japanese corporations do not tend to recruit new employees individually to fill certain positions but hire a new batch of college or university graduates annually. The members of the group will experience training and education for a couple of months and are, then, distributed among the various departments in the company. Since the system is often costly for companies, the vast majority of employers are unwilling to bear the expense of training and educating female workers.

In reality, as much as 35.4 percent of firms, as a basic survey of female employment conducted by the Ministry of Labor 1992 indicates, provided only men with internal on-the-job training which is necessary for executing managerial jobs. A study regarding women's labor in 1991, in addition, reported that 52.0 percent of female employees had never received this sort of training or education (Sakamoto 1995: 43-45).

As a result, even after the enforcement of Equal Employment Opportunity Law, just a handful of women reach the top of the corporate hierarchy. Within the three most common managerial posts in our society--that is, *bucho*, *kacho*, and *kakaricho* posts--, women occupy a small percentage

of department chief (*bucho*) positions (2.0percent), 3.2 percent of division chief (*kacho*) positions and 8.1 percent of subsection chief (*kakaricho*) positions in 1998 (Prime Minister's Office, 2000: 52). As you can see the higher the post (*bucho* is highest) becomes, the lower women's proportion is.

Most women are, thus, more likely than men to be assigned dead-end jobs; in fact, women workers are often excluded from the hierarchical structure which can be found in many Japanese companies. (Hierarchical structure, or, rather, vertical ranking among coworkers, are usually formed according to the order of entry into the company and functions, by and large, as job ladders which are promotion paths that connect lower-and higher-level jobs.) Also, since employers sometimes cannot expect sufficient return on the investment they make in training women workers, they are often reluctant to train female employees (mostly through on-the-job training). In such a biased working environment, that is to say, one which displays discriminatory treatment toward women workers, women may leave the workplace voluntarily; women, who are not given responsible jobs or are promoted less than men, may not feel any pressure to remain at the company or they may lack the commitment to continue working, especially after they marry and have children.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the pattern of women's labor, particularly from ages 30 to 34 based on two models discussed by Kanter (1977): the individual model and the structural model. A comparison of the two suggests that the structural model has a greater capability for explaining conditions of women's labor. There are at least two reasons why the structural approach is more useful.

First, the individual model ignores the range of differences among women. And second, the model ignores common situations between men and women in their work behavior and attitudes; "every statement that can be made about what women typically do or feel holds true for some men... what appear to be "sex differences" in work behavior emerge as response to structural conditions, to one's place in the organization" (Kanter, 1977: 262-263).

Therefore, change might evolve from shifts in at least two dimensions recognized by the structural model: one in opportunity and the other in proportions. For example introducing affirmative action into all levels of organization may be effective in altering a gendered workplace; affirmative action modifies employment practices to ensure that women have equal job access with men.

Women may be able to continue working even after marriage and childbirth if we achieve

greater equity in all stages of employment as well as more adequate social services, such as child care. We must choose a new direction within society in order to satisfy all workers.

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