

Increasing Educational Gradient: Cohort Changes in Women's Employment around Childbirth in Japan

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Introduction

Contrary to many high-income countries, the relationship between mothers' education and employment in Japan has been strongly positive. There is no clear consensus that women's education is positively associated with labor force participation (Brinton, 1993; Choe et al., 2004; Kohara, 2007; Lim & Raymo, 2014; Raymo & Lim, 2011; Waldfogel et al., 1999). The weak education-employment relationship has been argued to reflect gender essentialist normative expectations and work-family arrangements (Brinton & Lee, 2016; Brinton & Oh, 2019).

However, recent policy, labor market, and ideational changes are expected to promote employment participation for highly educated mothers, which may increase educational differences in employment during childbearing periods. Recently amended and implemented policies that support working mothers are targeted towards women in the core workforce, resulting in increased employment continuity and promotion among permanent-contract employees (Mun & Jung, 2018; Nagase, 2018; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022). Additionally, while non-standard employment has increased since the late 1990s (Brinton, 2011; Kalleberg et al., 2021), highly educated women and men are less affected by it (Fukuda et al., 2020; Sakaguchi, 2018). Furthermore, traditional gender-role expectations on mothers are gradually changing (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022). Despite these expectations, there is little evidence on whether and how they have changed in recent years in Japan.

In this paper, we examine how educational differences in women's employment careers (i.e., employment rate, regular and non-standard employment rate, and likelihoods of retaining employment) around first and second birth has changed across women who were born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Methods

We use the data obtained from the Japanese Panel Survey of Consumers, 1993–2020. The analytical sample consists of women who were born in 1960–1989 and gave birth to their first or second child when aged 20–44. The data was transformed into person-year files from two years before to two years after the first and second births with referencing to the prospective responses and retrospective job history information.

Results and Discussion

Our results show that the educational gradient in employment rate around childbirth sharply increased in the most recent cohort, among the 1980s-cohort women. Highly educated women become more likely to be employed, especially employed in regular employment jobs both around the first and second birth. In contrast, less educated women did not increase in employment rate and became more likely to be employed in nonstandard employment. The differences in composition in employment status by education are linked to the rising educational gaps in employment continuity (i.e., lower risk of employment exit).

The results have broader implications for inequality. While the educational gradient in women's employment around childbirth in Japan was not clear, it is now getting closer to other high-income countries with a positive education-employment relationship. The increasing gradients will increase the labor market inequality among women (Budig and England, 2001; Doren, 2019) and between-household inequality hereafter (Esping-Andersen, 2009). The increasing educational gradient is also in line with the trends in educational gradients in the marriage rate (Fukuda et al., 2020), which is consistent with the "diverging destinies" thesis (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan & Jacobsen, 2015; Raymo et al., 2023).

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