



# ASIA - PACIFIC POPULATION & POLICY

## Caring for the Elderly and Holding Down a Job: How Are Women Coping in Japan?

Asia-Pacific Population & Policy summarizes research on population and reproductive health for policymakers and others concerned with the Asia-Pacific region.

This publication was made possible through support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the East-West Center or of its supporters.

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ISSN 0891-6683

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Middle-aged women are the focus of increasing policy attention in Japan—both as participants in the labor force and as caregivers for the elderly. After decades of low fertility, economic planners are concerned about the country's shrinking work force. Japanese women who stay on the job as they marry and raise families play an important role in helping to compensate for declining numbers of male workers.

Decades of low fertility combined with rising life expectancies have also resulted in rapid population aging—growth of the oldest age groups as a proportion of Japan's total population. As in other Asian countries, many elderly people live with their adult children, and primary responsibility for their care tends to fall on middle-aged daughters and daughters-in-law. As of the mid-1990s, 23 percent of married women in their forties and fifties lived with their own or their husband's parents, according to the National Opinion Survey on Female Labor, Rearing of Infants, and Care of the Elderly.

Policymakers are worried that women who work may not be willing—or able—to care for elderly family members at home. The result could be fewer women remaining in the work force, greater government outlays on care for the elderly, or both.

Can women do both—hold down a job and look after the elderly? Drawing on a recent national-level survey,

this issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* assesses how the age and health status of elderly Japanese men and women affect the labor-force participation of the middle-aged women in their households.

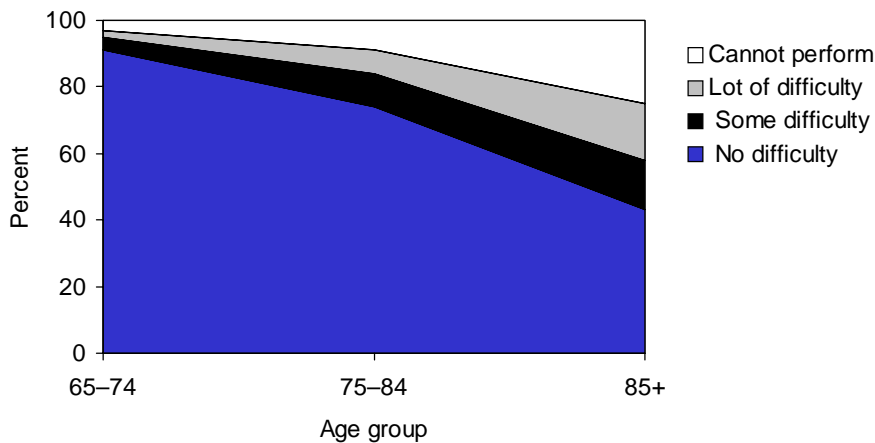
### ABOUT THE STUDY

The findings discussed here are from the first round of Nihon University's Japan Longitudinal Study of Ageing. The University's Center for Information Networking conducted field work in late 1999 and early 2000.

The survey interviewed 4,997 men and women age 65 and above. Of these, 1,044—or 21 percent—live with a married daughter or daughter-in-law. This analysis is restricted to these 1,044 elderly respondents and the 1,044 adult women who live with them.

Nearly all (97 percent) of the daughters and daughters-in-law are below retirement age, which means that they would have to retire early if they were needed at home to care for an elderly family member. The current work status of these women is categorized as full- or part-time employment outside the home, family worker (for example, in a family business or farm), or housewife.

Along with other characteristics, the survey provides information on each elderly person's age and health. The research team based their assessment of



**Figure 1** Disability increases with age, but most of the elderly are healthy

Source: Data from Nihon University's Japan Longitudinal Study of Ageing, 1999–2000.

Note: Health status is defined in terms of whether an elderly person can perform all 14 internationally accepted activities of daily living (ADLs) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs) with no difficulty, has some or a lot of difficulty performing one or more activities, or cannot perform one or more activities at all.

health status on an elderly person's ability to perform an internationally accepted set of activities of daily living (ADLs) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs). These range from taking a bath or shower to using the toilet, taking medicine as prescribed, going shopping, preparing meals, and paying bills. Health status is defined in terms of performing each of the 14 tasks with no difficulty, some difficulty, a lot of difficulty, or not at all.

Several other factors that might influence women's work-force participation are considered in the analysis. These include the elderly parent's age, sex, marital status (spouse present, dead, or living elsewhere), education, and income; whether the household is in a rural or urban area; and whether another daughter or daughter-in-law (who could help with care) lives nearby. Characteristics of the middle-aged women include relationship to the elderly parent (daughter or daughter-in-law), age, education, number and age of children and their level of schooling, and husband's age and education.

These variables are included in the analysis because their effects might bias the estimated effects of an elderly

parent's age and health status on a woman's work-force participation. Such potentially confounding effects are controlled using multinomial logistic regression analysis.

### ELDERLY MEN AND WOMEN: MOSTLY HEALTHY, MOSTLY YOUNG

Most of Japan's elderly are in good health, and most are in the youngest post-retirement age group. Among the 1,044 elderly men and women included in this analysis, nearly half (49 percent) are age 65–74, and only 8 percent are age 85 or older. Most (81 percent) have no difficulty in performing any of the 14 activities of daily living. Only 7 percent are unable to perform one or more activities.

Reported disabilities increase steadily with age (Figure 1). Yet 42 percent of men and women age 85 and older can still perform all the daily activities without difficulty. Only 25 percent are unable to perform one or more activities at all.

Thus the large majority of the elderly, even at age 85 and above, are in

fairly good health. Most middle-aged women who live with these elderly people should not have to quit their jobs to care for them.

### DAUGHTERS AND DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW: MOSTLY WORKING

More than half (52 percent) of the women living with an elderly parent or parent-in-law work outside the home. This is comparable with national statistics on middle-aged women's employment. Among women in their 40s, more of those who live with an elderly person are working full-time and fewer are working part-time than the national average (Figure 2).

It is not surprising that full-time employment is high among middle-aged women who live with an elderly family member. Most of the elderly covered in this analysis are healthy, and several studies have shown that elderly household members provide considerable help at home, including built-in childcare. But what happens when an elderly person who lives with a daughter or daughter-in-law grows older and suffers from one or more disabilities?

### AS THE ELDERLY GROW OLDER

An elderly person's age has a significant effect on a married daughter or daughter-in-law's work status. As the elderly person in a household grows older, the middle-aged woman is less likely to work full-time and more likely to be a housewife (Figure 3). The likelihood of working part-time remains about the same.

Fifty-nine percent of women who live with a family member age 65–74 work full- or part-time outside the home, compared with 40 percent of women who live with a family mem-

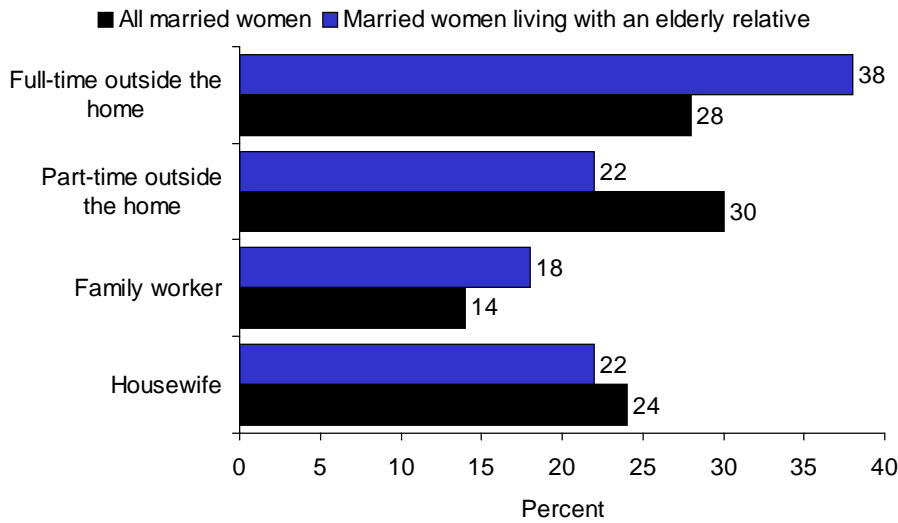


Figure 2 Married women age 40–49 are more likely to work full-time outside the home but less likely to work part-time if they live with an elderly relative

Source: Information on women living with an elderly person is from Nihon University’s Japan Longitudinal Study of Ageing, 1999–2000. Information on all married women is from a survey conducted by the Manichi Newspapers in 2000.

Note: Family worker refers to women who work in the traditional sector such as a family farm or business where the place of work is usually in or near the home.

ber age 85 or older. This pattern emerges after controlling for the age of the younger woman, the health status of the elderly person, and all the other potentially confounding variables.

The decision of a daughter or daughter-in-law to quit work as a parent grows older may be based on a general increase in frailty or an accumulation of bouts of illness, both of which are

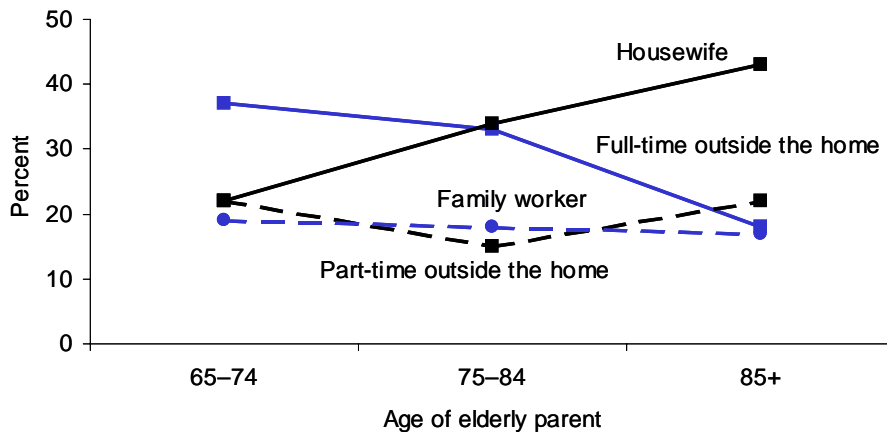


Figure 3 As the elderly grow older, the middle-aged women in their households are more likely to be housewives and less likely to work full-time outside the home

Source: Naohiro Ogawa, Robert D. Retherford, and Yasuhiko Saito (2001). *Care of the elderly and women’s labor force participation in Japan*. Paper presented at the Seminar on Population Ageing in the Industrialized Countries: Challenges and Responses. Hosted by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) and Nihon University’s Population Research Institute, 19–21 March 2001, Tokyo, Japan.

Note: Net effects of parent’s age on woman’s work status with other characteristics of the woman (including age) and of the parent (including health status) held constant, based on multinomial logistic regression.

likely to be related to age. There may also be a generational effect operating, inasmuch as older parents tend to be more traditional and may expect more care at home from their daughters or daughters-in-law.

The relationship between a woman’s work-force participation and the age of her elderly family member is particularly important because the “oldest old” are the fastest-growing age group in Japan. In 2000, men and women age 85 and older accounted for 2 percent of the national population—in 2050, they are projected to account for 10 percent.

### WHEN THE ELDERLY ARE DISABLED

An elderly person’s disabilities also have a significant influence on a daughter or daughter-in-law’s participation in the work force, but mainly when these disabilities are severe. When an elderly person has some or a lot of difficulty in performing any of the essential activities of daily living, such problems do not have a strong influence on the daughter or daughter-in-law’s work-force participation (Figure 4). When an elderly person is unable to perform one or more of the essential activities, however, the daughter or daughter-in-law is much more likely to work full time and much less likely to work part time outside the home.

In the simplest form of the model, the probability of a daughter or daughter-in-law working full time increases from an average of 33 percent when the elderly parent has “no, some, or a lot of difficulty” performing any of the essential activities to 42 percent when the elderly parent is unable to perform one or more activities. The probability of the middle-aged woman working part-time falls from an average of 19 percent for the first three categories of

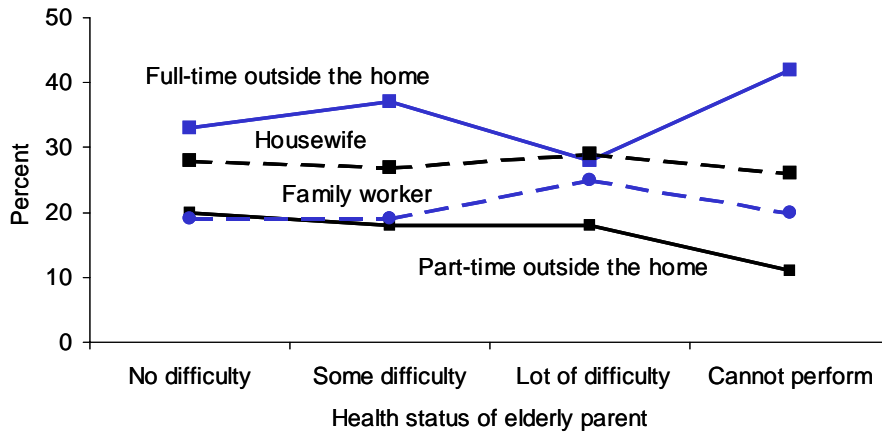


Figure 4 When the elderly are seriously disabled, the middle-aged women in their households are more likely to work full time and less likely to work part time outside the home

Source: See Figure 3.

Note: Net effects of parent's health status on woman's work with other characteristics of the parent and the woman held constant, based on multinomial logistic regression.

disability to 11 percent when the elderly person is unable to perform one or more activities.

This increase in full-time work may occur because an elderly person with a high level of disability is likely to be hospitalized for long periods. Although nursing-home care is rare in Japan, hospital stays tend to be much longer than in the West. One major expenditure under the social security system is long-term hospital care for the elderly.

When an elderly person is hospitalized, the daughter or daughter-in-law is free to work full time. She may also feel pressure to work to help defray the cost of hospitalization, some of which falls on the family.

One interesting result of the regression analysis is that an elderly person's age and health status affect a daughter or daughter-in-law's work-force participation independently. Women who live with an elderly parent or parent-in-law are less likely to work either full or part time outside the home as the elderly person grows older but are more likely to work full-time outside the home if the elderly person becomes seriously disabled.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Given the unprecedented level of population aging in Japan, the government is rightly concerned about the financial and personal costs of caring for the elderly. One response has been a substantial expansion of the social security system in recent decades. Old-age pensions and medical coverage became universal in 1961, and benefits have greatly increased since then.

But the policy of increasing benefits has not been entirely consistent. In 1986, the government introduced policy measures to curb the escalating costs of medical care for the elderly. New policies included the introduction of a co-payment requirement for medical services. In addition, the government has promoted the establishment of geriatric hospitals for long-term care. These facilities are less costly to the government than regular hospitals, but they are more costly to elderly patients and their families.

In light of the Japanese government's policy concerns, the primary implication of this analysis is that middle-aged

women are unlikely to drop out of the labor force in large numbers to care for the elderly. Even in households with an elderly person age 85 or older, fewer than one-half of daughters or daughters-in-law are full-time housewives.

Three trends suggest that labor-force participation rates for these middle-aged women may well increase. First, Japan's male labor force will continue to shrink due to earlier declines in fertility, so that women will continue to be in demand to meet the country's labor requirements. In response, employers are beginning to provide flexible arrangements that make employment more attractive to married women with responsibilities at home.

Second, Japan has recently established the largest and most comprehensive program of mandatory long-term care insurance in the world. Announced in April 2000, one goal of the new program is to lighten the burden of providing in-home care for frail elderly persons, for example by providing help with housework and meal preparation. If, given this type of assistance, more of the elderly with disabilities remain at home rather than staying in hospitals for long periods, the result could be less full-time and more part-time employment for daughters and daughters-in-law. It does not seem likely, however, that middle-aged women will drop out of the work force altogether.

And finally, the tradition that married women are required to care for their elderly parents-in-law is weakening in Japan. One sign of this shift is a dramatic change in residence patterns. In 1975, more than half (54 percent) of all households with a person age 65 or older consisted of an elderly person or couple living with their adult children. In 2000, the proportion had dropped by half—to 27 percent. As fewer Japanese women live with their elderly parents or parents-in-law, fewer will feel obligated to quit work to care for them.