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### Recommended Citation

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Occasional Paper No. 9304  
April, 1993

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Female Labor Force  
Participation in Japan:  
Continuity and Change in  
the Post WW II Period

Chikako Usui

**FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN JAPAN:  
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE POST-WW II PERIOD**

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, April 9, 1993.

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, women have made a number of significant economic and political gains among all industrially advanced nations as indicated by the increased number of political offices held by women, their access to top occupational positions, and the average income earned by women compared with that by men (Kerbo 1989: 421). However, there continues to be a considerable cross-national variation in the status of women. Japan has often been cited as an example of a reluctant society towards achieving gender equality, and a number of studies (Kerbo, 1989; Okelly and Carney, 1986) offer the view that the status of women remains much lower in Japan than in any other industrial nation.

As researchers have moved to examine causes of gender inequality in the Japanese economy, there is growing recognition of the institutional barriers stemming from firm-specific labor relations that are quite different from those found in the United States. In addition, these studies point out the strong interplay between these institutional factors and women's family careers in shaping women's positions in the overall economy. Brinton (1989), for example, shows how Japanese employment practices affect men and women differently as they are placed into different job-tracks within a firm. In contrast to American hiring practices, large firms in Japan hire high school/college graduates fresh out of school only once a year. Those placed in career-tracks in the large firms, which is the key to move up to managerial positions, will receive extensive in-house training, seniority based wage and promotion, and permanent employment. Those placed in non-career tracks (mostly women) are assigned to assistant jobs without the prospects for in-firm career mobility. Because many women withdraw from the labor force temporarily during child bearing years, their chances of getting re-employed at large firms become severely limited. Consequently, they seek jobs in medium and small size firms

in the secondary labor market<sup>1</sup>. Having shorter job tenure and fewer skills by the time they re-enter the labor market, these women receive low wages and limited opportunities for promotion. One of the notable consequences of these institutional mechanisms working in conjunction with women's family responsibilities is exemplified by the overall pay differential of 55.5 (women) to 100 (men) in Japan, as compared with 68 to 100 in the U.S.

This paper examines recent changes in the structure of the Japanese economy and shows that Japan's phenomenal economic changes during the 1970s and 1980s have tended to limit women's full participation in the economy. The increased international competition and the adverse economic conditions caused by the oil shock during the 1970s intensified the duality of the Japanese economy as evidenced by sharp increases in the number of small firms engaging in subcontracting as well as by the creation of a massive temporary, part-time work force. Many Japanese women were drawn into the modern paid-employment that expanded rapidly but were incorporated as temporary, part-time workers, not as part of the full-time work force. Examination of the impact of the dual economic structures that emerged in Japan since the mid-1970s shows further strengthened gender stratification. The last section of this paper examines work orientations and preferences among Japanese women in the last three decades. Although the dual labor market thesis (or labor market segmentation thesis) is useful in explaining

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<sup>1</sup> The term, 'secondary labor market' stems from the labor market segmentation literature (Ford, 1988: 140; Gordon, Edwards and Reich, 1983) that considers the nature and impact of economic structures on workers. Briefly speaking, this perspective suggests that the private economy is divided into two sectors: the core (or primary) and the secondary (or periphery). The core sector consists of the large firms with stable employment, opportunities for internal mobility, and high wages for workers. Firms in the secondary sector are small and medium size firms with marginal profits, labor intensive work, low capital input, and intense competition for survival. The jobs tend to be unstable and wages are low. Traditionally, women, minorities, and immigrants find themselves in this sector of the economy.

structural causes of gender stratification in the Japanese economy, it is not clear whether individual Japanese women respond to these forces passively, are victimized, or otherwise. The examination of national surveys disputes the view that Japanese women are passive victims of the dual labor market. There is a strong preference among women to seek part-time jobs rather than more responsible, full-time employee positions. Results suggest difficulties in attributing the observed "subordination" of Japanese women to simple dual structural causes.

### **1. Women in the Labor Force in the U.S. and Japan, 1960-1990**

When one considers the overall labor force participation rates among women, Japan and the U.S. are quite similar. Approximately half of the female adult population is working. In 1990 the rates were 58% for the U.S. and 50% for Japan (Table 1). However, as data in Table 1 show, these two countries are characterized by diverse historical patterns in their female labor force participation. Contrary to the popular image of Japanese housewives who devote themselves to the family, Japanese women have worked in large numbers, at about 50 percent in the last three decades. Female labor participation rates in Japan have been relatively high and have shown very little change over time. In contrast, the overall trend for American women has involved a sharp increase in labor force participation rates, from 38 percent in 1960 to 58 percent in 1990. The American pattern is marked by the recency of female labor force participation, whereas the Japanese pattern reveals a relative continuity in female labor force participation in the post WWII economy. The notion that recent economic and social changes have brought about increases in female labor force participation well describes the American experience but not the Japanese.

## TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

A somewhat similar pattern of U.S.-Japan differences exists in terms of female labor force participation by marital status. As data in Table 2 show, labor force participation among single women in the U.S. rose from 59 percent in 1960 to 68 percent in 1990. A much more dramatic increase, however, took place among married women, with their labor force participation rising from 32 percent in 1960 to 58 percent in 1990. In Japan, in contrast, participation rates among married women have been relatively high, at about 50 percent in the last three decades. Thus, the comparison of married women between the two countries indicates a generally higher rate of labor force participation among Japanese married women. Again, Japan shows stable, high levels of labor force participation, while the U.S. experienced a sharp increase in participation during the past three decades.

## TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

**2. Labor Force Participation and the Effects of Life Cycle**

Although the above examination of historical trends in female labor force participation by marital status indicates a relatively stable, high level of labor force participation among Japanese married women, there are stronger effects of family of procreation (or life cycle effects) among Japanese women than among American women. As Figures 1 and 2 which describe female labor force participation by age group in the last three decades indicate, Japan forms an upper case letter "M" or "double-humped" line due to withdrawal from the labor force in the prime childbearing period and re-entry into the labor market in middle age. In contrast, in the U.S., there has been a drastic increase in the labor force participation among married

women after 1970. Among women aged 34 to 44, labor force participation rates nearly doubled, from 40 percent in 1960 to nearly 80 percent in 1989. For women aged 25 to 34, similarly, labor force participation rates increased from 37 percent to 72 percent in the same period. By 1989, there is no indication of life-cycle effects on women's labor force participation patterns among American women. By contrast, Japanese patterns have shown consistent and persistent life cycle effects on women's economic activities.

#### FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

In considering the magnitude of changes American women made in the pursuit of careers in the last twenty years, it is striking that in Japan the temporary withdrawal from the labor force during the prime childbearing years has remained as strong over time. Despite sweeping economic changes that Japan has undergone in the last three decades and despite much publicized increases in so-called "career minded" women who intend to pursue their careers without any interruptions, a large proportion of Japanese female workers withdraw from the labor force during the prime childbearing years and re-enter the labor market in early middle age. It is remarkable that there has been relatively little change in these M-curve patterns of female employment over time. But it is not clear what these persistent patterns mean and how they are maintained. Some argue that these M-curve patterns support the view that Japanese women still conceive of family careers as their central adulthood roles and work careers of secondary importance (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). The following section considers these questions.

### **3. Economic Rationalization of the 1970s and the Creation of Part-Time Jobs**

Recent studies stressing the effects of institutional barriers (e.g., firm-specific employment practices) suggest that once Japanese women leave their jobs, their chances of getting re-employed in the core sector of the labor market (i.e., large firms) becomes severely limited. Once leaving the initial jobs, they are forced into the acceptance of jobs at medium and small firms in the secondary market. While there is convincing evidence that the institutional obstacles are at work, we must also turn to the possible impact of Japan's dual economic structuring on women's economic roles. The examination of changes in the structure of the Japanese economy during the 1970s and 1980s shows that Japan's phenomenal economic growth has tended to limit, rather than to enhance, their full participation to the economy.

The Japanese economy was radically transformed as it was hard hit by oil shocks twice in the 1970s. Observers note that many Japanese companies coped with these adverse economic conditions by creating subcontracting relationships and a temporary, part-time work force. Ballon (1989), for example, suggests that subcontracting relationships have evolved as flexible, technologically highly competitive and adaptable strategies among large corporations. Also, large firms have transferred redundant workers to their subsidiaries and affiliates in order to keep the enterprise lean. Although one might expect the gradual weakening of, and even the disappearance of, small enterprises in the modern society, in Japan, small establishments have not been absorbed by large firms. They have remained strong in the overall economy. Ballon (1983: 3) estimates that small-scale manufacturing enterprises employing less than 20 workers constitute about 80 percent of all the manufacturing firms that were created since mid-1970 and remain at that level today.

Many Japanese firms also attempted to rationalize the labor force by increasingly shifting towards part-time workers. By keeping a limited number of permanent workers to whom the company is obligated to respect life-time employment, full benefits, and competitive wages, the hiring of temporary, part-time workers gave companies more flexibility in terms of wages, hours of work, and the terms of contract<sup>2</sup>. As we see in the following section, women, especially married women, were increasingly drawn into the secondary sectors of the modern economy.

Table 3 breaks down labor force participation among Japanese women by forms of employment over time. In the post-World War II Japanese economy, a large percentage of Japanese women worked as "family enterprise workers." In 1955 half of female workers (50.6%) supplied labor as family enterprise workers. Many of these women were in agricultural industries, since the agricultural sector absorbed 43 percent of total female labor force in 1960. These female "family enterprise workers" represented the largest component of the female labor force until about 1960. By 1990, however, family enterprise workers accounted for only 17 percent of the total female labor force. The contraction of agriculture and other traditional industries paralleled the growth of modern forms of employment, as evidenced by the sharp increase of female workers in the "employee" category, from 34 percent to 72 percent between 1955-1990. Yet, further breakdown of the "employee" category in Table 3 shows that the contraction of "family enterprise workers" was accompanied by a sharp increase in female part-time workers after 1970. Part-time workers constituted only 5 percent of the total female labor force in 1970 but by 1990 it increased to almost 20 percent. By contrast, female family

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that part-time work does not necessary mean short hours of work. Some part-time workers work more than seven hours a day and stay at a same firm for several years.

enterprise workers went down from 31 percent in 1970 to 17 percent in 1990. In the same period, the increase in full-time employment among Japanese females was modest, from 48 percent in 1970 to 51 percent in 1990.

The above finding that Japan experienced a modest growth in female full-time positions but a steady increase in part-time positions is striking. It is consistent with the literature that Japan's economic success has involved the intensification of the duality in its economy in the mid-70s. By creating small firms and a temporary, part-time labor force, companies attempted to rationalize the production processes. There is clear evidence that Japan's economic miracle has not translated to the full incorporation of female workers into the core sector of the economy where workers are assured of stable employment, better wages, and career opportunities, but its success has been partly achieved by dual economic structuring. Table 4 provides further evidence that women have been increasingly pulled into the secondary labor market as part-time workers. Data comparing women's employment forms by age group between 1982 and 1987 show that for all age groups considered, there has been a decline in full-time employment ("employees") but a sharp increase in the proportion of women working as part-time or temporary workers. Among women aged 35-54, part-time employment reached the highest level, accounting for 43 percent of female workers in that age group in 1987.

#### **4. Women and Part-Time Jobs: Victims or Passive Acceptance?**

The above observation demonstrates that there has been a remarkable degree of continuity and change in Japanese women's employment patterns. On the one hand, women have experienced stable, relatively high levels of labor force participation in the last three decades. On the other hand, women were increasingly relegated to secondary labor market jobs during

the time when Japan achieved robust economic growth. The duality of economic structuring thus fits quite well in describing the unchanging nature of gender stratification in the Japanese economy.

The dual labor market perspective contends that the duality in the labor market develops out of power exercised by firms in the core and denies women access to the more desirable jobs, while preserving privileged positions for male workers in the core. It thus views women as victims of these structural barriers and calls for structural remedies such as affirmative action laws. This perspective tends to assume that men and women have the same ambitions. However, the existing studies have not fully examined this question.

As mentioned earlier, there is growing recognition in the literature on Japanese women that Japanese women's life course is institutionalized around the collective needs of the family. Rather than seeking individual autonomy and self-realization through work careers, female construction of the life course leads women to seek *ikigai* (personal fulfillment) in the family context. Although much of the American sociological literature on family indicates the growing individualization of the life course whereby work, marriage, and family experiences are increasingly conceived of individual achievement, the life course patterns of Japanese are still largely configured through one's relationships to groups and within the context of social groups. Getting married and starting a family is not a personal, individual event but involves the construction of one's new identity and fulfillment of one's responsibilities and social obligations in a broader social context. Lebra, for example, documents that the pursuit of family careers in Japan requires the acquisition of new skills, resources, and status outside the family (e.g., neighborhood, community, company) over a period of time. Recent changes in Japan have

undoubtedly increased the tendency toward individualism, however, there has been surprisingly little change in the gender division of work and family in Japan. A large proportion of Japanese, including the young women, still accept home and family responsibilities as their primary roles. A national survey conducted by the Japanese Prime Minister's Office in 1990, for example, found that when asked, "What is the most appropriate employment patterns for women?", the percentage of respondents favoring the "traditional" view remained fairly strong in the last twenty years. The response favoring a woman's complete withdrawal from the labor force upon marriage or first child birth and a temporary withdrawal during the childbearing years was 70.4 percent in 1972 and 78.4 percent in 1990. Support for women's pursuit of work careers without any disruptions increased over time but remained low (11.5% in 1972 and 14.4% in 1990).

Data concerning attitudes towards employment and employment plans among young Japanese yield similar patterns. Young Japanese women display a primary commitment to family careers rather than to work careers as indicated by the 1989 survey conducted by the Japanese Prime Minister's Office. The majority of the female respondents aged 20-24, 70 percent, planned to work until marriage or first child-birth. Another survey (Araki, 1990) that interviewed 1,019 women (aged 18-25) who were just hired by one of the large firms in Tokyo upon graduation from high school and college also found the lack of ambition among women for work careers. While 12 percent of young female employees had clear career plans with the intention of working until retirement age at the current large firm, 24 percent of the young women were without concrete plans and only expressed intentions of moving elsewhere in the near future. The largest majority of the sample, 47 percent, had a plan to quit working upon

marriage.

The above observations indicate that quite a significant proportion of young women in Japan consider marriage and family as their primary careers and tend to show little ambition for work career achievements. While the dual labor market perspective tends to consider Japanese women as the victims of macro-level economic forces, these findings concerning female attitudes and preferences toward work tend to fail the victimization view. Indeed, a large majority of women opt for less responsible positions (e.g., part-time work) rather than more responsible "employee" jobs in order not to create disruptions with their family needs. In 1983 the Japanese Prime Minister's Office (1983: 125) conducted a survey asking, "What is the most critical factor for you to consider when re-entering the job market after childbearing period?" The results showed that the overwhelming majority of the respondents, 78 percent of men and 82 percent of women, replied it most important "to be able to work without sacrificing family careers", followed by "to find type of jobs one can use one's skills, ability, and creativity (men, 23% and women, 23%) and "good pay" (men, 14% and women 19%). The similarity in response patterns for men and women is striking in that both men and women view the family responsibilities as women's domain. Also, when the same survey asked the question, "If you are going to re-enter the labor market, what types of employment would you wish to get, part-time job, full time job, begin your own business, piece-rate work at home, or help family business?", by far the most popular response was "part-time jobs" or "piece work" (which is done at an individual's home rather than at a factory). Preference for part-time work was 30 percent in 1965. But in 1989, respondents favoring part-time jobs increased to 61 percent. In contrast, only 17 percent of the female respondents wished to work as full time employees. The

response from the remaining 22 percent of the respondents varied from preference for one's own business, help family enterprise business, to piece-rate work. It is also noteworthy that in Japan, the rates of withdrawal from the labor force during the childbearing period are higher among more educated women than less educated women (Edwards, 1988; Higuchi, 1987; Osawa, 1986). In the United States, by contrast, it is the educated women who have a stronger commitment to work careers and withdraw from the labor force for much shorter period of time. Also, it has been shown that in Japan women's employment in middle age is strongly and inversely related to family income, meaning it is financial considerations, rather than personal fulfillment, that determines employment among middle aged women (Ministry of Labor, 1984). Another factor that significantly influences female employment in Japan is the household structure. A survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Labor (Japanese Committee for Research on Information and Education, 1990) indicates that married women with multi-generational living arrangements are much more likely to be working than women living in nuclear households. Clearly, it is not just the perceived or actual lack of employment opportunities that drive women into the pursuit of family careers. Japanese women are not passively accepting secondary jobs in the labor market, but in fact the existing gender stratification in the labor market is partly the result of women's conscious decisions.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper examined the impact of the dual economic structures that emerged in Japan since the mid-1970s on women's labor force participation in Japan. It supports the view that Japan's phenomenal economic success during the 1970s and 1980s has tended to limit women's full participation in the economy. The increased international competition and the adverse

economic conditions caused by the oil shock during the 1970s intensified the duality of Japanese economy, and women were increasingly pulled into the secondary labor market as temporary, part-time workers. By contrast, the proportion of women working as regular "employees" has increased only modestly in the last two decades.

Although the dual labor market thesis (or labor market segmentation thesis) is useful in explaining structural causes of gender stratification in the Japanese economy, it is difficult to attribute the observed "subordination" of Japanese women to the simple dual structural causes. Data examined here dispute the view that Japanese women are passive victims of the dual labor market. There is a strong preference among women to seek part-time jobs rather than more responsible, full-time employee positions. Further studies are needed as to why there is a modest interests among Japanese women in following the Western model where women pursue both work and family careers. Also, there is need to supplement the current analysis with individual level studies examining differences between women who seek full vs part time work in Japan.

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TABLE 1

PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR FORCE  
United States and Japan, 1900-1990

Year	U.S.		Japan	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1960	84	38	85	55
1970	81	43	82	50
1980	75	52	80	48
1990	74	58	77	50

Source: Japanese Ministry of Labor (Rodo-sho) (1991). Fujin Rodo no Jitsujo (Conditions of Female Labor). Appendix 1, p.5, Appendix 96, pp. 90-91. U.S. Bureau of the Census. Statistical Abstract of the United States 1991. No. 641, p. 390.

TABLE 2  
WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE BY MARITAL STATUS

Year	U.S.		Japan	
	Single	Married	Single	Married
	(100 %)	(100 %)	(100%)	(100%)
1960	58.6	31.9	63.6	51.1
1970	56.8	40.5	59.3	48.3
1980	64.4	49.8	52.6	49.2
1990	68.0	57.8	55.2	52.7

Source: Japanese Ministry of Labor (Rodosho) (1991), Appendix 3, p.8; U.S. Bureau of the Census. Statistical Abstract of the United States 1991. No. 642, p. 390.

FIGURE 1

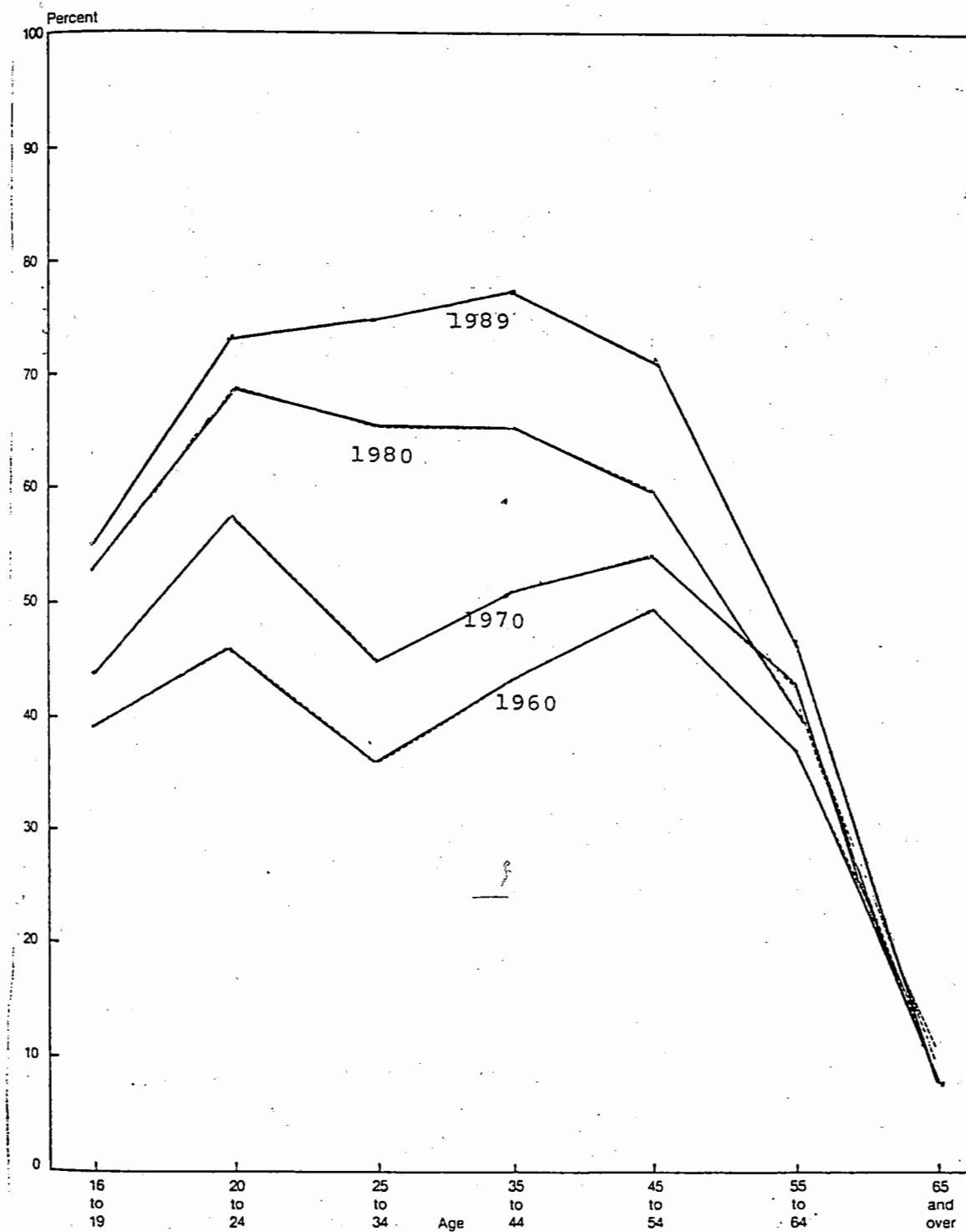
FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE BY AGE,  
UNITED STATES, 1960-1989

FIGURE 2

FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE BY AGE,  
JAPAN, 1960-1990

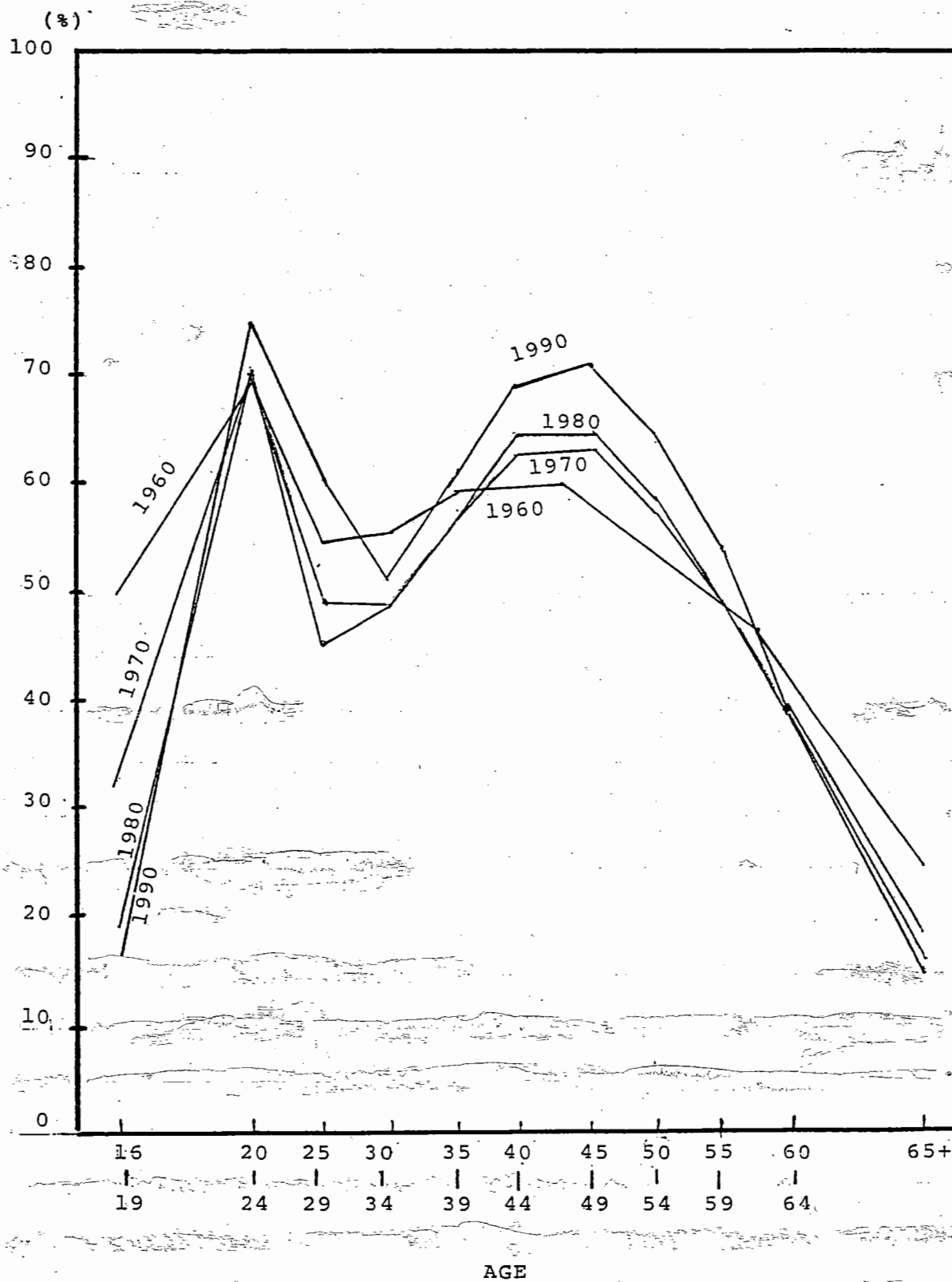


TABLE 3  
JAPANESE FEMALE WORKERS BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS

<u>Women Working as:</u>					
Year	Employee		Family	Self	Total
	Full-time	Part-time	Worker*	Employed	(%)
1955	33.6		50.6	15.8	100
1960	40.8		43.4	15.8	100
1970	48.3	5.0	30.9	14.2	100
	35.9				
1980	51.3	12.0	23.0	13.7	100
	35.0				
1990	52.6	19.7	16.7	10.7	100
	36.4				

Source: Japanese Ministry of Labor (Rodosho) (1991). Fujin Rodo no Jitsujō (Condition of Female Labor). Appendix 6, p. 10, and Appendix 97, p. 92.

\* Includes family enterprise workers and workers who perform work at home (e.g., piece rate work).

TABLE 4  
EMPLOYMENT TYPE BY AGE, 1982 AND 1987  
JAPAN

Age	Employee	Part time/ Temporary <sup>a</sup>	Other <sup>b</sup>	Total
<u>1982</u>				(%)
15-24	86.8	10.7	2.5	100
25-34	70.7	24.7	4.6	100
55-54	56.5	34.5	9.0	100
55 -	53.2	24.5	22.4	100
<u>1987</u>				(%)
15-24	81.6	22.1	1.6	100
25-34	70.4	26.3	3.2	100
35-54	50.5	43.3	6.1	100
55 -	47.5	35.2	17.2	100

Source: Rodo-sho (1990). Rodo Hakusho.  
Appendix 7, p. 351.

a: Includes regular part-time workers and temporary wage earners.

b: Includes all other forms of non-regular jobs.