

Career Woman or Housewife? –Japanese Female University Students’ Attitudes on Gender Roles

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore Japanese female students’ attitudes towards gender roles. It is a longitudinal research study of four years from 2014 to 2017 focusing on how young Japanese university students view two news articles regarding women’s gender roles, and what choices and decisions they may be triggered to make in the future. The result shows that among 308 participants who demonstrated their perceived gender roles as women, an average of 74.75% voiced the willingness to continue their career even after they get married and/or have children. This resonates with the result reported in the news article in 2011 that 65.8% wish to continue their career even after marriage. The result also suggests a significant leap in women’s attitude and perception change over the last few years. However, there is no significant change shown in the percentage of becoming housewife. Although the result indicates a slightly higher percentage of becoming career women in 2014 and 2016, in general there is no distinguished difference found in between.

Research Background

In Japanese society, women’s main responsibility is perceived to be child caretaker (Holloway 2010; Vogel 2013). About 77% of married women agreed that “mothers should focus on child rearing until children are three years old” (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2014, 43). However, according to the study of Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (2014), over 44.6% of participants, among which 43.2% of women agreed that “men should work outside, and women should stay home as caregivers”, whereas 49.4% including 51.7% of women, among which 58.6% are at the age of 20-29, reported the opposite. This depicts a change in younger generation’s attitudes. Although traditional gender role of women has been viewed as “men devoting to material success outside the home and women at home caring for children and household chores” (Sugihara &

Katsurada, 2002), the result of the government study indicated a change of perceptions and attitudes towards the roles women play in modern Japan.

As the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2016 & 2017) summarized, as a developed country, Japan's gender equality ranked 114 among 144 countries, 3 ranks lower than last year. According to the Cabinet Office (2016), the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace was approved aiming to "provide actively and exploit opportunities to hire and to promote women; Improve an environment where women and men can balance work and family life; Respect woman's choice with regard to her balance between work and family life". This has legally empowered women to participate more in society and provided more opportunities for them to be "Half the Sky" (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). The traditional gender role attitude of men as the breadwinner and women as child caretaker has been challenged. Women are no longer satisfied with this tradition, many of them, especially the younger generation choose to pursue career instead of focusing on seeking a reliable marriage partner and settling down as a housewife and a mother. Priorities such as having a decent marriage, being a good housewife and mother are gradually taken place by others such as becoming independent both financially and mentally, having more power in the process of decision making. This awakening for gender equality has revealed its impact in various aspects. Many women choose to stay single than compromising themselves for the purpose of getting a marriage partner. There are also more and more successful women playing active roles in different walks of life.

Given the above background, it is worthwhile and important to examine the perceptions and attitudes of gender roles younger generation of Japan, in particular, women have nowadays. Specifically, this study will explore how female university students, one of the major future labor force, think about gender roles in Japan and what choices they will make.

Research Method

1. Research Participants

The research participants were 18-year-old female freshmen of a 4-year women university in Japan. The same study was conducted in the same method continuously from 2014 to 2017. A total number of 306 participants provided available answers.

2. Research Procedures

In classroom settings, the participants were asked to read two online news articles published in 2011 and 2014 (Appendix 1 & 2) on women's attitudes towards gender roles as groups, and summarize and present their opinions and feedback. After the group discussion in class, each of them should submit one report with approximately 800 words demonstrating their opinions and feedback within one week.

News article 1 was uploaded by Asahi News on September 30th, 2011. The title is "Which do you choose to do after getting married, work or become a housewife?" As the research study done by Ministry of Labor of Japan with more than 3000 male and female aging 15-39 via internet indicated, one out of three single women wanted to become housewives after marriage whereas less than 20 percent of men declared that they expected the spouse to become housewife. There showed a big gap between men and women's attitudes in their role perception after getting married: more women want to be housewife than men expect after marriage.

News article 2 was uploaded on June 17th, 2014 by Jijitsushin about the increase of single women, the delay of child birth as well as the difficulty of having both balanced. As it reported in A 2014 Declining Birth Rate White Paper (Cabinet Office, 2014), the population of the generation who chooses to remain single continues to rise as observed from the data of the last ten years, nearly 71.8% men are single, and women 60.3%. The average age of women having the first baby has also risen up to 30.3 in the year of 2012. The White Paper pointed out the necessity of making effort to provide a better environment for work and child care.

Regarding the reasons that more and more people choose to stay single or delay their marriage, men and women reported significant differences. The most reported for men is "not having enough financial backup", whereas the same age group women reported to be "not wanting to lose freedom of being single" as the no. 1 reason, followed by no. 2, "wanting to focus on career or study". Again the difference of perception regarding the meaning of marriage has shown a very obvious contrast between men and women.

Apart from the perception difference, nearly 54.6% married women reported that they are not happy with the understanding and consideration they get from their colleagues when they get pregnant or give birth. About one fourth of the women who quit work said that they wanted to continue

their work but they had no other choice but to quit because it was hard to keep a balance between work and family life.

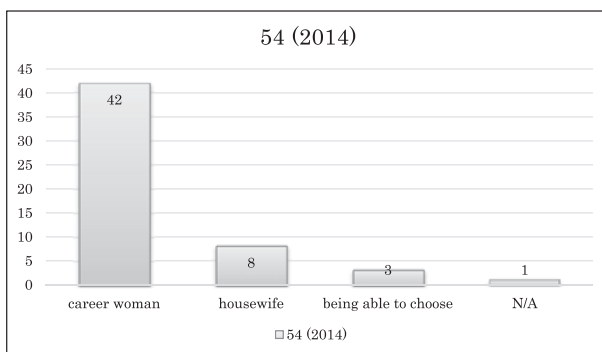
The students were asked to discuss both articles, interpret some of the key terms such as what exactly it means by “freedom of being single” for women in article 2, why men reported “not having enough financial backup” as the main reason, why women “want to focus on career or study”. The participants were also encouraged to think about the following questions: what is your opinion? Is your perception similar to or different from your parents’ generation? What choice would you make if you were in the same/similar situation? They discussed these questions as groups of 4 or 5 members, shared their opinions, and then summarized everyone’s opinion and made a presentation. Then within a week they submitted a report based on the discussion demonstrating their own thoughts and opinions.

The same procedures repeated continuously for four years from 2014 to 2017. In the end all the reports were collected, carefully read through, summarized, interpreted and analyzed.

Results

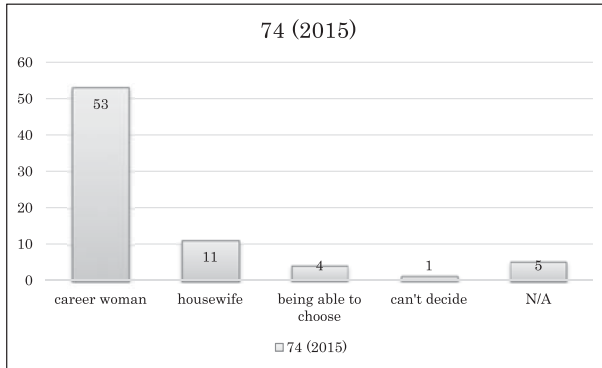
1. 2014

In 2014, there were 54 (67.5%) available reports out of 80 participants, specifically, as follows: Being able to make decision and choose: 3 (5.56%). Having own career: 42 (77.78%). Housewife: 8 (14.81%). NA: 1 (1.85%).



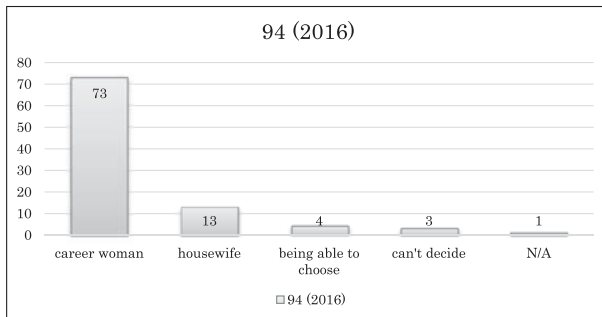
2. 2015

In 2015, there were 74 (91.36%) available reports out of 81 participants. The details are as follows: Being able to make decision and choose: 4 (5.4%). Can't decide yet (depending on the situation): 1 (1.35%). Having own career: 53 (71.62%). Housewife: 11 (14.86%). NA: 5 (6.76%).



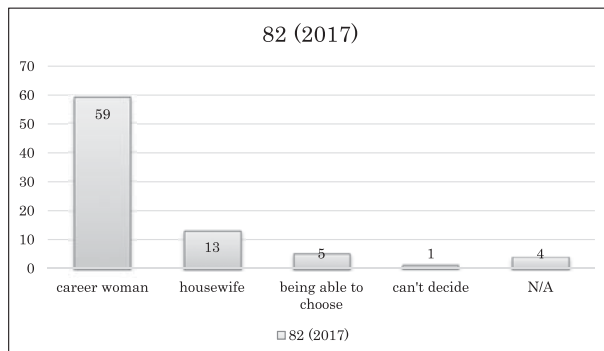
3. 2016

In 2016, 94 out of 102 (92.16%) provided available reports, in specific, as the following: Being able to make decision and choose: 4 (4.26%). Can't decide yet (depending on the situation): 3 (3.19%). Having own career: 73 (77.65%). Housewife: 13 (13.83%). NA: 1 (1.06%).



4. 2017

In 2017, 84 out of 86 participants provided available reports. Being able to make decision and choose: 5 (6.1%). Can't decide yet (depending on the situation): 1 (1.22%). Having own career: 55, (71.95%). Housewife: 13 (15.85%). NA: 4 (4.88%).



5. Summary

In 2014, there were 54 available reports out of 80 participants, 76 out of 81 in 2015, 94 out of 102 in 2016, and 84 out of 86 in 2017. In total, 308 available reports were carefully read, interpreted and summarized in the following categories: career women, housewife, being able to choose, can't decide yet (depending on the situation), and NA (Not Applicable).

Year/ Results	Career women	housewife	having choice
2014	42 (77.78%)	8 (14.81%)	3 (5.56%)
2015	53(71.62%)	11 (14.86%)	4 (5.4%)
2016	73 (77.65%)	13 (13.83%)	4 (4.26%)
2017	59 (71.95%)	13 (15.85%)	5 (6.1%)

Among 306 participants who demonstrated their perceived gender roles as women, as the above graph shows, 42 (77.78%) in 2014, 53 (71.62%) in 2015, 73 (77.65%) in 2016 and 59 (71.95%) in 2017, a total number of 227, with an averagely high percentage of 74.75% of the participants voiced the willingness to continue their career after they get married and/or have children. Although the result indicates a slightly higher percentage of career women in 2014 and 2016, in general there is no distinguished

difference found. In contrast, the percentage of becoming housewife does not reveal much change over the four years with an average of 14.85%.

Discussion

This result that averagely 74.75% of the participants want to continue working as career women even after marriage resonates with the news article in 2011 in which 34.2% of the participants reported the willingness to become housewives, 65.8% to be career women after marriage; meanwhile, it suggests a significant leap in the attitudes and perception change over the last few years. Although “historically, higher education for women has been intended to foster a ‘good wife, wise mother’ (*ryo sai kenbo*) in Japan” (Fujiwara-Fanselow 1995; Holloway 2010), the result has posted a challenge to this traditional perception and reflects a major change in women’s attitudes.

Another interesting result is an average 5.33% of participants reported that they cannot decide what to do in their future yet, but they hope they will have multiple options to choose from. This implies a stronger awareness of young women nowadays hoping to have more active decision making regarding their life, and planning their future with more flexibility than simply accepting the traditional roles.

The percentage of participants (averagely 14.85%) wanting to become housewife is 14.81% (2014), 14.86% (2015), 13.83% (2016), and 15.85% (2017). In general, it remained approximately the same during the past four years. This result echoes Ohashi’s (1997) study on perceptions of university students from China, South Korea and Japan towards family and gender roles, which was, 15.6% out of 90 female students from one university in Japan reported to agree with the idea that “men should work outside and women inside the house”.

Given that participants are from a department where most are eager to be independent and develop their career in the future, a much more positive attitude and stronger willingness to be career women have been witnessed. This may explain why the percentage of becoming career women is higher than the result the 2011 news article reported. Because of this background it is hard to say that this is a general result that can be representative for all. However, it has given a good example of women who are seeking change not just in the family but also outside in the society. Comparisons with students from other departments or other universities

should be considered for better understanding of gender roles; future studies can also qualitatively focus on men's attitudes towards gender roles and compare the similarities to and/or differences from women's.

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結婚したら共働き、専業主婦どちらを選ぶ？

朝日新聞デジタル 2011年9月30日（金）6時48分配信

【有近隆史】「結婚したら専業主婦になりたい」。独身女性の3人に1人がそんな希望を抱いていることが、厚生労働省の調査でわかった。一方、結婚相手に専業主婦になって欲しいと思っている独身男性は5人に1人とどまった。

厚労省は先に公表した厚生労働白書の作成にあたり、民間のシンクタンクに委託し、15～39歳の男女の意識調査を今年3月にインターネットで実施。3千人余りから回答があった。

独身の女性に「専業主婦になりたいと思うか」を尋ねたところ、「どちらかといえばそう思う」を含めて34・2％が「そう思う」と答えた。独身男性には結婚相手に専業主婦になって欲しいと思うかを聞いたところ、「そう思う」は19・3％だった。妻は家庭にと考える人の割合は男性よりも女性が多かった。

未婚率上昇、晩産化も＝仕事と育児の両立困難一少子化白書

時事通信2014年6月17日（火）8時11分配信

政府は17日午前の閣議で、2014年版「少子化社会対策白書」を決定した。若い世代の未婚率は上昇が続き、最新の10年の時点で25～29歳を見ると、男性は71.8%、女性は60.3%。女性の晩産化も進み、第1子を出産した平均年齢は12年で30.3歳だった。白書は仕事と育児の両立に向けた環境整備の必要性を指摘している。

内閣府が実施した意識調査では、若い世代で未婚・晩婚化が進んでいる理由について、20～30代男性の回答は「経済的余裕のなさ」が最も多かった。しかし、同年代の女性では「独身の自由さを失いたくない」がトップ、「仕事や学業に打ち込みたい」が続き、男女の意識の違いが示された。

また、「子どもを持つ場合の条件」に関し、20～40代の既婚女性の回答は「働きながら子育てができる職場環境」が最多だった。

別の調査では、妊娠・出産時の職場の理解について、既婚女性の54.6%が「不満」と答えた。出産を機に退職した女性の約4分の1が「仕事を続けたかったが育児との両立が難しく仕事を辞めた」と話しているという。