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Misako Arai, Sebastien Lechevalier

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# The Inequalities between Men and Women in the Japanese Labour Market : A Regulationist Approach

ARAI Misako

LECHEVALIER Sébastien<sup>1)</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the changing situation of the Japanese working women since the beginning of the 1990s in a Regulationist perspective. We enrich the concept of Toyotist wage-labour nexus by taking into account the gender. It means, we do not restrain the analysis of working women to the labour market, but we also study the sphere of labour force reproduction.

To sum up, we point out a phenomenon of “polarization” among the Japanese working women. Namely at least two groups among female workers are emerging : one is constituted by regular workers, who are treated (almost) similarly to their male counterparts, another one by part-timers, who experience poor working conditions. Another noticeable finding is the change of composition in the differential structure of the Japanese labour market : recently the sex is not the main criterion to understand the inequalities in Japan. It means that the concept of segmentation should be seriously amended to lead to a more satisfying theoretical analysis of the inequalities between men and women in Japan since the beginning of the 1990s.

Inequalities surrounding the work of women are a long-standing problem in labour economics, and this is particularly true in the case of Japan. Such a Japanese situation gave rise to a specific governmental policy (laws promoting the equality of men and women), of which it is important to measure the impact in the 1990s, marked moreover by tension and transformations in the labour market. So we explain the Japanese female labour in the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of changes in the labour market. First, we have analyzed, in historical prospect, the situation of the labour market before the 1990s, which is characterized by a progressive and deep transformation that nonetheless maintain-

ed the uneven structure for men and women. The second part of our study is devoted to an analysis of the 1990s. And we propose, in the third place, a renewed analysis of the Japanese wage-labour nexus that integrates the question of gender into the analysis.

1. The working women in Japan until the beginning of the 1990s. A progressive rise in the proportion of females in the labour market.

## 1-1. An overview

The most outstanding feature of women’s work leading up to the 1990s is the growth of participation by females. The number of women who work passed thus

from 18.3 million in 1960 to 21.8 million in 1980, 26.8 million in 1992 (27.5 million in 2000), whereas during that same period the total working population (men+women) was, at these same dates, respectively, 45.1 million, 56.5 million, 65.8 million (67.6 million) (Ministry of Labour (c)). However, if one analyzes the evolution of the rate of female participation and the percentage of women in the total workforce since the 1950s, the actual change in the proportion of females in the Japanese workforce is less clear. Indeed, to summarize, one can thus say that on average during that period one observes a great stability of these two ratios in spite of fluctuations: as a whole, they are 50% of the working-age women (16-60 years old) who actually work, which accounts for 40% of the total workforce. As for the fluctuations, one sees that the lowest point for these two variables is reached in 1975. That came from not only that the decline started as early as the 1950s, which correspond to the period of the high growth, but also the impact of the fluctuations of the activity on the female participation in Japan (table 1, lines 1 and 2). In fact, behind this evolution and this relative continuity a deep transformation is hiding, which appears if these total figures are broken up. If one breaks up the figures by categories of age, one sees that the fall before 1975 for these two variables is primarily due to the fall of female participation in the category 15-19 years old, which

is related to young people staying in school longer. In return, the rise of the rate of participation after 1976 is mainly due to the rise of the participation of women 20-50 years old, which contrasts with the fall of male participation since the beginning of the 1970s (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, various years). Thus one can speak about the change in the proportion of women in the Japanese labour market.

Other notable changes deserve to be mentioned. First of all there was a change in the status of women who work from the categories of "independent workers" and "workers in the family company" to "salaried employees", the percentage of the latter rised from 31.2% to 80% between 1955 and 1998. This shift was general and also concerned the men, but the rupture was stronger in the case of women, given the quantitative importance of the two above-mentioned categories until the 1970s. This was a major phenomenon, which corresponds clearly to a modernization of the structure of employment and options for employment of women in Japan (table 1, lines 3 to 6)<sup>2)</sup>. After this change occurred, the average age of women who work increased very appreciably, from approximately 26 years old to more than 37 years old between 1955 and 1998 (table 1, line 8). That corresponds to a very important qualitative change which also appears when one concentrates on the family statute (table 1, line 7), that is, the percentage of

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Table 1: The working women in Japan. A Synthesis.

	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998
1. Female labour force participation rate	56.7	54.3	50.6	49.9	45.7	47.6	48.7	50.1	50.0	50.1
2. Percentage of women in the total workforce	N/A	40.7	39.8	39.3	37.3	38.7	39.7	40.6	40.5	40.7
3. Percentage of employee in the total female workforce	31.2	40.8	48.6	54.7	59.8	63.2	67.2	72.3	78.3	80.0
4. Number of female employees ( $\times 10000$ )	531	738	913	1096	1167	1354	1548	1834	2048	2124
5. Percentage of employee among over 15 years old women	15.6	21.9	24.3	27.0	26.9	29.5	31.8	35.4	37.9	38.5
6. Percentage of women among all the employees	N/A	31.1	31.8	33.2	32.0	34.1	35.9	37.9	38.9	39.6
7a) Percentage of unmarried women among female employees	65.2	63.2	50.3	48.3	38.0	32.5	31.3	32.7	33.5	33.4
7b) Percentage of married women among female employees	20.4	24.4	38.6	41.4	51.3	57.4	59.2	58.2	57.1	56.9
7c) Percentage of divorced women or widows among female employees	14.3	12.5	11.1	10.3	10.8	10.0	9.6	9.1	9.4	9.6
8. Average age of female employees	N/A	26.3	28.1	29.8	33.4	34.9	35.5	35.7	36.5	37.2
9. Average of employment duration of female employees	N/A	4.0	3.9	4.5	5.8	6.3	6.8	7.3	7.9	8.2
10. Men/women wage differential (base 100=men)	N/A	42.8	47.8	50.9	55.8	53.8	51.8	49.6	51.0	51.0
11. Percentage of women among part-time employees	N/A	8.9	9.6	12.2	17.4	19.3	22.0	27.9	31.6	36.6
12. Percentage of women among of unionized employees	30.8	28.0	30.9	29.4	29.0	24.6	22.0	18.3	17.2	15.8

Source: Inoue (2001) p. 105.

women married among the women who work very strongly increases while that of the unmarried women decreases. That does not mean that the rate of marriage increased<sup>3)</sup>, but rather shows a major change in the behavior of the female labour

supply since it becomes increasingly common for a woman to work when she is married.

This evolution should, however, be relativized, since the participation of women in the labour market remains char-

acterized by the significant events in a woman's life. This fact is analyzed in a very traditional way for studies on the work of women in Japan by the famous "M curve" describing the participation rate following the age of Japanese women on the labour market. There are two peaks of participation, for women 20-24 years old and women 40-49 years old, and a low point of participation for women 25-34 years old. This period corresponds roughly to the time of marriage and the birth of the first child, which involves women's withdrawal from an active wage-earning life, before a return to the labour market when the children begin school. Of course, such a profile of withdrawal is not without consequences on women's careers, wages, and types of employment. This profile holds steady until the end of the studied period, even if one notes at the same time a displacement of the profile (the date of the marriage and the first child being increasingly late) and a rise in the level of participation for all age categories, particularly for women 25-34 years old (and more generally for women 20-50 years old), which corresponds to a decrease in the number of children women are having and to the fact that more and more women continue to work after having had a child.

Can one interpret this profile of the participation according to the age, and more generally the women's average participation as a Japanese characteristic, even as a sign of archaism of its economy and

the society? It is necessary to resort here to an international comparison (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, various years; ILO, various years). The average participation of Japanese women, a little more than 40%, is equivalent to the participation level in the United Kingdom, and higher than the level in France and Germany, though it is lower than the level in the United States, with a participation of about 60%. However, the average rate of participation (men and women) in Japan is one of highest in the world, after the United States, and the differential according to gender is the most marked the most, about 20 points, whereas it is respectively 15, 12, and 10 points in Germany, in the United Kingdom, and in France (ILO, various years). But that should not be attributed to the archaic form of the Japanese wage-labour nexus. Thus, if one concentrates on the comparison between Sweden and Japan, for the urban zones, one sees that at the end of 1960, the Japanese workforce had a greater proportion of females than did the workforce in Sweden. Thereafter, the proportion of women rose faster in the Western countries, starting from the beginning of the 1970s (Koike, 1995). The famous M curve, it is a characteristic of Japan only before the World War II, because postwar period, one observed an increase for the age bracket 25-34 years old. Moreover, after war, one also sees this phenomenon in Great Britain. To finish with this analysis

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Table 2: Evolution of the sectoral composition of employment structure. Comparison of men and women.

Total	Sector			Women			
	(10000 people)	Primary	Secondary		Tertiary	Primary	Secondary
	1970	886	1791	2409	451	574	975
	1975	661	1841	2710	331	535	1085
	1980	577	1926	3020	283	605	1250
	1985	509	1992	3283	244	651	1400
	1990	451	2099	3669	215	692	1618
	(%)	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
	1970	17.4	35.2	47.3	22.5	28.7	48.7
	1975	12.7	35.2	51.9	16.9	27.4	55.6
	1980	10.4	34.8	54.6	13.2	28.2	58.4
	1985	8.8	34.3	56.5	10.6	28.3	60.8
	1990	7.2	33.6	58.7	8.5	27.3	63.8

Source: Bureau of Statistics, Management and Coordination agency, *Labour Force Survey*.

of the evolution of women's participation in the workforce, we must stress that the rise in the proportion of women in the Japanese workforce corresponds in part to the post-industrialization of the economy, but cannot be confused with it: thus in 1990, of the nearly 36.7 million people working in the tertiary sector, only 16.1 million were women (table 2).

### 1-2. An analysis of the Toyotist wage-labour nexus from the point of view of men and women inequalities

The indicator favored by economists to measure the inequalities between men and women is the differential of wages. This type of inequality is not peculiar to Japan, but it appears to be particularly marked there in comparison with other countries.

Thus if one takes as reference the statistics of the ILO, which make it possible to establish international comparisons, this differential generally lies between 70 and 80 percent for the developed countries<sup>4)</sup>. In Japan, this differential is variable according to the source used, but the variation is increasingly more important than in other countries, when the average figures are considered. Thus, according to the monthly statistics of public works by the Ministry of Labour<sup>5)</sup> (Ministry of Labour (d)), taking into account full-time and part-time employees working in firms of more than 30 employees, this differential was still approximately 50% at the beginning of the 1990s (table 1, line 10). This same differential was approximately 60% at the same date according to the Ministry of Labour

(1995, 1996), which takes into account the full-time employees who work in firms of more than 10 employees and which is more usually used in international comparisons<sup>9)</sup>.

The gender-based wage differential has decreased only slightly in time, going from 43% in 1960 to approximately 50% at the beginning of the 1990s. More precisely, the differential was reduced in the 1960s and first half of the 1970s, at the moment when the labour market is marked by a situation of scarcity of workforce, and it began to grow again starting from the middle of the 1970s (table 1, line 10). These evolutions thus depend basically on the tension on the labour market (according to the relative scarcity or surplus of workforce), a variable whose central role in the dynamics of the inequalities was previously underlined (Lechevalier, 2003).

These results, corresponding to average figures, were abundantly and rightly criticized. Indeed, the image of wage inequality in Japan based on gender changes appreciably if, once more, one breaks up these average results according to the categories of age (Economic Planning Agency, 1997). The differential of wages is weak for the age bracket 20-29 years old and is roughly the same in all the countries noted above. Japanese specificity appears starting from the following age bracket (30-39 years old), where one observes an unhooking between the progression of men's and women's wages. In a clear way, this unhooking corresponds to the part of the M curve

that describes the moment when many women leave their employment to raise their children, before returning to work later. Clearly, marriage and childcare are the principal reasons for women to leave their work, in particular between 25 and 34 years old, these reasons being each one 5 times more important than the working conditions themselves (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 1992). One can then present this differential in terms of cost related to the job loss ("job loss cost") by introducing the cycle of life, and by taking into account at the same time the loss of payment into retirement accounts, the absence of wages during the withdrawal from the labour market, the seniority effect in the posterior wages, and the form of employment at the time of return to the labour market. Compared to a woman who works from age 20 until her retirement as a regular member, when she stopped work between 27 and 32 years old, women experience a loss 30 percent in the case of coming back to their work in the same form, and 80 percent in another case of resuming as part-time employee (Ministry of Labour, 1995, 1996). This cost is so important that the conditions of return on the labour market deteriorated strongly for the women who left off their work once: whereas in 1975, in 63% of the cases those women could resume the work as regular member, at the beginning of the 1990s only 35% (Ministry of Labour (f)). Viewed this

way, the cost to a woman of leaving her employment tended to increase.

To look at the situation a different way, one can connect the differential of wages to the fact that the time women spent in a given job in a given firm is shorter than that of men. Thus, between 1970 and 1992, the average time on the job for female employees increased a great deal, from 4.5 years to 7.4 years, but during the same period of time these figures went from 8.8 to 12.5 years for men (Ministry of Labour (b)). This is not without consequence in a system of employment where seniority plays an important part in the fixing of wages<sup>7)</sup>. The persistence of such a differential remains to be explained. The question is whether the rate of separation of women is intrinsically higher than that of men (for various reasons such as maternity or the obligation to follow the husband in the event of a geographical shift), or if the rate is due to a deficit of career-advancement opportunities.

### 1-3. How to explain the persistent wages differential between men and women ?

The preceding analysis shows that two key variables in the wage differential between men and women are age and employment duration. Knowing this makes it possible to give an indication of the origin of this differential, using two main categories of explanation. According to a first explanation, the wage differential is related to differences in productivity

between men and women. Thus, when one controls by the variables of age, level of education, and employment duration, the differential strongly decreases (Wakisaka, 1997). To this argument one can add the knowledge provided by "the Theory of Statistical Discrimination", which makes it possible to connect the differential of wages to differentials of employment duration: employers give less responsibility and career-advancement opportunities to women because, statistically, they tend to quit their job in a given firm earlier than do men (Phelps, 1972 ; Thurow, 1975 ; Koike, 1995)<sup>8)</sup>. Gender thus operates like a signal for the employer in the human resource management policies, and this is all the more dramatic in the case of the Japanese firm, which provides the major part of training for its employees.

Another approach underlines pure sexual discrimination. Its proponents criticize the preceding analysis by stressing that women's rate of separation is indeed higher, but they believe that this is explained by the mediocrity of the career-advancement opportunities within companies. This approach is based in particular on data concerning the segregation of employment, which one can analyze in various ways<sup>9)</sup>. The first dimension of this segregation rests on the partial coincidence between female employment and the dualism of the Japanese economy according to the size of the firm : nearly 60% of working women are employed in small com-



panies (fewer than 100 employees) against 50% of working men, and these figures practically did not change between 1965 and the end of 1980. Moreover an age effect is added to this total figure, since only approximately 47% of women between 20 and 29 years old work in the small companies, whereas this percentage exceeds 60% after 40 years old, that is the moment of the return on the labour market for some of them (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 1996, *Labour Force Survey*). However, the differential of wages and working conditions as it relates to the size of the firm is a major cause of the inequalities in Japan, even if this line of cleavage has tended to attenuate over the last twenty years. Moreover, within a given company, the women who work full-time are often confined to repetitive tasks and not qualifying for the good work conditions (Kumazawa, 1996). If the statutes of employment are considered, it appears that nonregular employment has been mainly occupied by women since the 1960s, in the dominant form of part-time employment. However, the wages of part-time employees account for on average 2/3 of that of full-time workers, and this differential has tended to increase in the last twenty years, in particular among women (Ministry of Labour, 1994). This wage inequality between men and women thus appears at the centre of the Japanese employment system which is structurally segmented (Uemura and Alii,

2000; Lechevalier, 2003).

This uneven situation gave place to a specific policy of the Japanese authorities, influenced in part by these theoretical debates on the nature of the inequalities between men and women; "the Equal Employment Opportunity Law" (first law in 1985, revision in 1997). This law was enacted for purposes of the open door of men and women at work, mainly by the Ministry of Labour and in particular "the Office of Women" forming the design and the drafting of the text (Hanami, 2000). One may notice some points here; it is obvious that the industry did not have much to do with passage of the law. Trade unions were not also very sensitive to women's situation (Uni, 2001; Kumazawa, 1996), and Japanese employers did only the minimal amount to uphold the laws. Moreover, with the origin of this law, one emphasizes often on a traditional factor, namely an external pressure ("gaiatsu"). In fact, in 1980, the Japanese government signed a convention concerning the elimination of all forms of discrimination with regard to women, ratified by the United Nations in 1979, and the law of 1985 was enacted in accordance with this convention. But one could also understand that this interpretation is nothing but "formal". Although external pressure had an impact, contributing to modify former internal compromises, it did not directly affect the development of the law.

## 2. Paradoxical contemporary evolution

### 2-1. What was the impact of the 1985 and 1997 laws ?

As a whole, and not surprisingly, the impact of the law of 1985 was limited. One would like to insist here on an aspect whose evaluation became an object of debate. Quite a few companies introduced a new system of personnel management, "double track personal management", in response to the requirements of the law of 1985, through which theoretically women have the choice between having a career and not having a career, the first choice implying a very important investment on behalf of the employee. For certain analysts, this institutional innovation had an impact, even if limited. One thus observes an increase in the percentage of women

among the executive ranks between the beginning of the 1980s and the middle of the 1990s (Economic Planning Agency, 1997). However, these figures, as both percentages and in absolute numbers, remain weak (table 3), especially from the point of view of international comparison. Thus, if one adopts the broad definition of the framing of the International Labour Office, it appears that women account for 8.2% of the executives in Japan in the middle of the 1990s, against 42.7% in the United States, 33% in the United Kingdom, and 25.6% in Germany, with only Korea having a lower level than Japan at 4.4% (ILO, 1996, *Year Book of Labour Statistics*).

If the evaluation of the impact of these laws is debatable, it is primarily due to the fact that a situation of scarcity of workforce at the end of 1980 succeeded the situa-

Table 3 : Evolution of the occupational structure. Comparison of men and women

		All sectors	Special and technical workers	Managers	Clerical workers	Sales workers	Craftsmen & production process workers	Non-qualified workers
Number of female employees (×10000)	1960	738	60	2	170	58	240	
	1970	1096	100	5	339	112	291	66
	1980	1354	176	11	443	157	314	54
	1990	1834	253	18	631	230	378	102
	2000	2140	342	18	730	256	334	138
Percentage of female employees	1960	31.1	33.3	2.5	35.9	34.7	26.9	
	1970	33.2	40.7	3.8	46.9	32.6	25.9	33.2
	1980	34.1	48.4	5.1	51.1	31.6	24.9	36.5
	1990	37.9	42.6	7.7	58.0	33.8	28.2	41.6
	2000	40.0	45.4	9.0	59.2	34.8	25.3	43.8

Source : Bureau of Statistics, Management and Coordination agency, *Labour Force Survey*.

tion of a crisis and a surplus. If the situation of Japanese women in the labour market changed - in a direction to be determined - it is perhaps more under the impact of the transformations of the labour market than the result of these laws. It is thus important to study the labour market crisis that occurred at the beginning of the 1990s, which is the object of the following section.

2-2. A negative picture: rise of atypical work and the degradation of job security

In a general way, and not surprisingly, initially, women were the principal victims of the crisis, as they had been in the 1970s (Nohara, 1998; Tachibanaki and Alii, 2000). During the first phase (1992-1994), they were the first to be affected by the reorganization of companies. This was a shock for many women, insofar as the 1980s had contributed to their integration into firms (Sako/Sato, 1997). During this time there was a growing gap between the remarkable improvement of the level of education of women and their accession to

posts that appeared to allow for career advancement. Beginning at the end of 1980s, there was an appreciable increase in women's university attendance, with the proportion of women even exceeding that of men at the beginning of the 1990s (Economic Planning Agency, 1997). On another side, if the differentials of men and women about wages and employment duration are decreasing according to the diploma, there is not a major evolution between the end of 1970s and the end of 1990s, the respective percentages remaining approximately 68% and 50% for the university graduate (table 4). This fact demonstrates that Japan is the only country where the completion of higher studies by women does not appreciably increase their rate of participation (*ibid.*).

The most notable fact in support of the thesis of degradation of women's situation in the labour market is the rise of female part-time work. This increase is certainly not new and falls under an evolution of longer duration, which more generally relates to the rise of work known as

Table 4: Ratio of the monthly incomes and the employment duration of women compared to those of the men calculated for each category (men=100).

	Junior High School		High School		University		Total	
	Monthly income	Employment duration	Monthly income	Employment duration	Monthly income	Employment duration	Monthly income	Employment duration
1977	57	60	63	53	67	51	59	56
1987	59	67	63	55	67	49	60	57
1997	58	72	65	65	68	49	63	63

Source: Ministry of Labour (1977, 1987, 1997) *Basic survey on wage structure*, Uni (2001).

“atypical” (or “not regular”, in opposition to “regular”), which includes work that is part-time, temporary, daily, or dispatched (with contract and employment by employment agencies acting as intermediaries) work. Even if this rise of atypical work does not date from the 1990s, it has been at the center of analyses of the Japanese labour market for the last 10 years. In fact, even if there are ambiguities with respect to the quantification of this rise of work (related to the various sources of data and the various definitions), this rise is undeniable, and the situation in Japan seems to have crossed a threshold in the 1990s: broadly, atypical work went from 12% of the total workforce in 1985 to more than 20% in 2000 (figure 1). In this rise, the contribution of part-time work, primarily

by females, continues to be very important: women occupied 67% of the part-time posts in 1999. If one concentrates on female employment, it appears that the high proportion of women in the workforce is primarily due to the rise of female part-time work. Thus, of the 5.6 million female paid workers since 1986, 4.3 million are part-time workers, that is to say three quarters of the workers. In 2002, the percentage of part-time workers reached 42% of the total female workforce. Even though this phenomenon is not peculiar to Japan, the international comparisons show that the increase of this rate in Japan is exceptional: for example in the United States, where one observed on the contrary a fall of the percentage of the part-time employees, the difference of the business

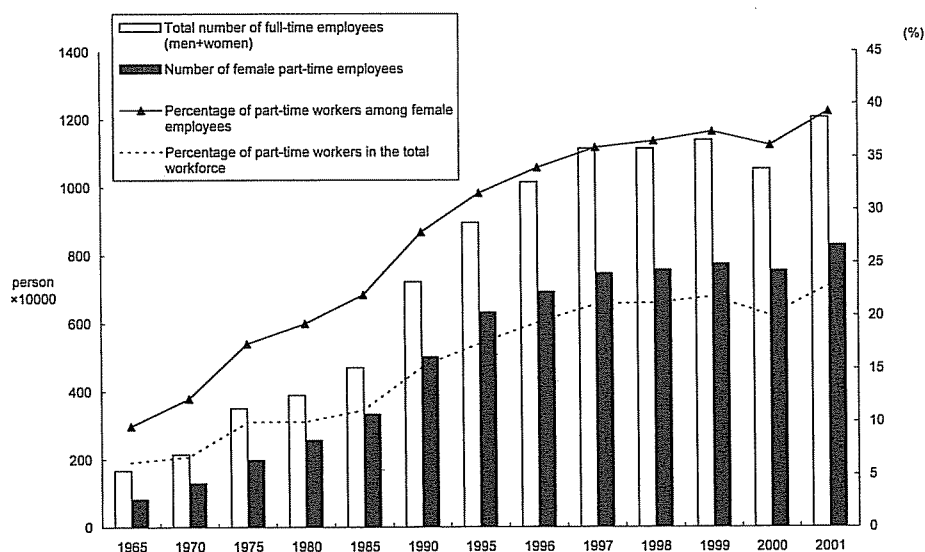


Figure 1: Evolution of the number and the percentage of part-time employees  
 Source: Ministry of Public management, Home affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, *Labour Force Survey*.

condition is not certainly few (Houseman/Osawa, 2001).

Can this rise of female part-time work be explained by the thesis of the dualism of the labour market? In other words, can one say that the rise of atypical work corresponds to a just instablization and can one establish an equivalence between the instablization and "féminisation (it means a rise in the proportion of females)"? Is this a sign that the peripheral workforce consisted primarily of women in Japan in the 1990s? In fact, things are not as simple as the total evolution would make us believe. First of all it is necessary to analyze dynamics without this rise. According to concordant analyses (Houseman/Osawa, 2001; Tachibanaki and alii, 2000), the factors of labour demand on the part of companies seem to predominate over that of labour supply on the part of women since the middle of the 1980s: in other words, the dynamics of the rise in part-time work is primarily pushed by the needs of the firms. The principal reason given by firms is the lower cost of part-time work, but also the possibility of easily adapting the quantity of work to the needs. As for the labour supply, one must stress that part-time work corresponds in a sense with women's choice, because it offers a flexibility of work schedules, and gives the image of a functional flexibility on the part of companies, which decide their employment policy by taking account of the need for labour supply (Tachibanaki and alii,

2000). In the view of these factors of labour supply side, one should not neglect a tax system that tends to support the choice of part-time work for women: beyond a certain threshold (1 million yens per annum), the incomes of the married woman are heavily taxed, which strongly discourages women from working full-time.

In this analysis of the causes of the rise of female part-time work, we can add a change of the character of part-time work and of its role in the employment policy of firms. Thus, the situation of relative scarcity of the workforce during the 1980s resulted in an integration of certain atypical workers, which appears in the length of employment, which went on average from 2 years to 4.9 years between 1970 and 1995 for part-time women, even if the length remained shorter than that of regular workers (Ministry of Labour (b); Sako/Sato, 1997). Another sign of the integration of atypical workers is the fact that some of them received wage increases according to seniority (Wakisaka, 1997). In spite of the deterioration of the conditions of the labour market during the following decade, certain atypical workers continued to profit from this integration, which has as a consequence a differentiation of their situation within the same company (Gadrey and Alii, 1999). Lastly, this diversity of employment relationship of the atypical workers in general, and the part-time women in particular, is expressed

Table 5 : Evolution of the elasticity of employment to the production according to the sex in Japan and the United States.

Estimated period	Japan		the U.S.A.	
	75I-86III	86IV-99II	69IV-79IV	80I-99IV
Men	0.18	0.14	0.54	0.59
Women	0.35	0.42	0.79	0.51

Source: Uni (2001).

Notes: Trimestral data. All estimates are significant at 1%.

according to the companies, not only on a quantitative level (certain firms not recruiting part-time workers or less and less, as Nishikawa (2000) shows it), but also on a qualitative level, which is translated in fact by various models of coexistence between the nonregular workforce and the regular workforce (Morishima/Feuille, 2000). In short, the rise of atypical work is extremely complex and cannot be summarized by the idea of dualism of the labour market according to which the Japanese women would play only the part of a peripheral workforce.

To summarize this part of the discussion, we want to stress that the rise of atypical work is only one facet of a broader question concerning social compromise around job security (Lechevalier, 2001). One must thus supplement the preceding analysis by an approach which takes into account the adjustment of employment according to the evolution of sales and production (in particular integrating the question of dismissal practices and reorganizations). Such a study supports the notion of a degradation of the

situation of women in the Japanese labour market. Thus, Uni (2001) shows that the insecurity of employment - measured by the modulus of elasticity of employment to the production (the closer this coefficient is to 1, the more the evolution of employment is sensitive to the evolution of production, i.e., the stronger the insecurity) - increased for Japanese women, whereas it decreased for men. As a whole, Japanese employees have better job security than do workers in the United States. But, recently, contrary to the Japanese configuration, the situation of the American women tended to improve from this point of view and it is now better than that of the men (table 5).

2-3. A positive picture: wouldn't women be the relative winners of the crisis and of the diversification of the employment relation ?

As we have noted above, Japanese companies reacted in traditional ways at the first phase of the labour market crisis (1992-1994), while using the instruments of external flexibility to the detriment of the categories of peripheral workers, and most

of whom were women. But the situation changed as the crisis goes on. Beginning in the second half of the 1990s, a qualitative and structural change appeared in the wage-labour nexus, initially not very perceptible at the macro level. Insofar as the two crises of the 1970s and the 1990s are different, in particular from the point of view of duration, the reaction of the wage-labour nexus gradually will be different (Boyer/Juillard, 2000). Thus, it appears that from 1997 to 1998, white collar workers more than 50 years old were particularly touched by the reorganizations in progress since their remuneration was the most considerable and increasing portion of the total wage cost, and companies sought to decrease it in a visible way. In this context, women are no longer the primary target of reorganizations: besides their maintenance on the labour market became essential in a given household, where the husband is unemployed and cannot play the part of breadwinner any more. In a more general way, the wage restrictions, just like the increasing desire of women to invest themselves in work, contribute to the behavior changes of women with regard to work, and this seems to be one of the major facets of the Japanese labour market in the 1990s: from that point on, women withdraw from the labour market less and less often. That is a new phenomenon, because at one time Japanese women left the labour market in the period of business recession.

In a more general way, a fundamental rupture gradually appears on the Japanese labour market in the 1990s, with the rise of unemployment to record levels. The rate of Japanese unemployment has been greater than 5% since 2000, exceeding the rate of American unemployment for the first time since the beginning of the post-war period. In this new context, the women find themselves relatively better off than men, since their unemployment rate has been lower than that of men since the middle of the 1990s (figure 2). From this point of view, compared to the men, women would be relative winners on the labour market in the 1990s, namely for the period of the crisis on the labour market. Admittedly, we have already observed such a phenomenon in the 1970s, and when one carries out the analysis with indicators of correction of the employment rate, which takes into account the discouraged workers (i.e., people who cease seeking work and thus no longer appear in the official statistics), the women's unemployment rate is then definitely higher than that of the men, on the order of doubling it (Tachibanaki and alii, 2000). But these indicators are also the subject of criticisms, and the situation of the 1990s is different from that of the 1970s, when there was a massive withdrawal of women from the labour market after the first oil crisis. In fact, it should be remembered that female unemployment and male unemployment in Japan are basically different in the first

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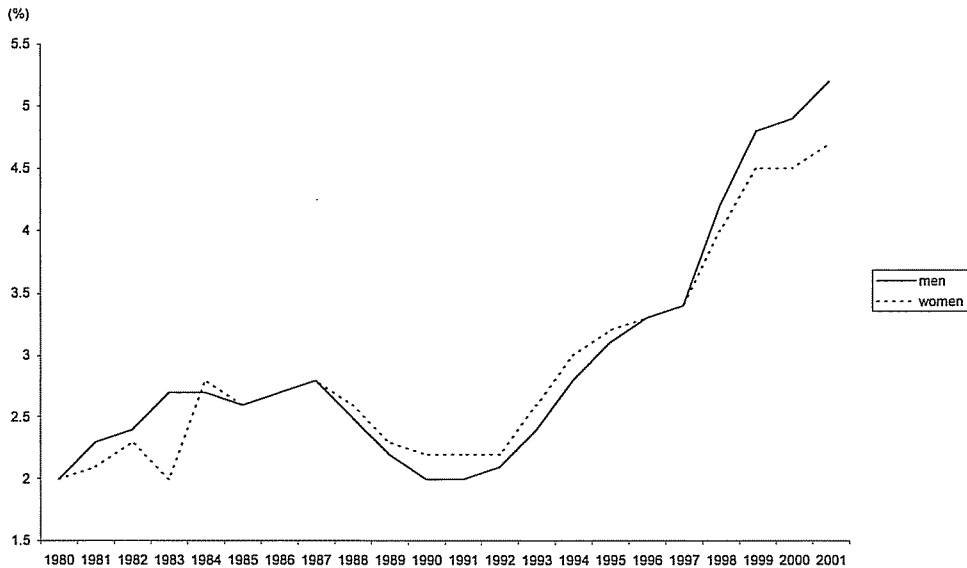


Figure 2 :Evolution of the unemployment rate of men and women between 1980 and 2001  
Source : Ministry of Public management, Home affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, *Labour Force Survey*.

place: women's unemployment is recurring but of short duration, in opposition to men's unemployment, which is rarer but of longer duration and with more dramatic consequences for the continuation of careers.

As for the wage setting system, it is another major component of the contemporary transformations of the Japanese wage-labour nexus. Indeed, more and more companies try to use the component of deservingness play a more important role than the component of seniority. However, we saw previously that the importance of the wage differential between men and women in Japan compared to other countries is explained partially by the fact that the component "seniority" is considered to be more important in Japan than in other

countries, and that men's duration of employment is longer in Japan than in other countries. One can thus hope that the differential between men and women would diminish for this period of change. But, in addition to the fact that the questioning of the principle of seniority is progressive and not general, it is still too early to be able to measure that diminution.

In fact, the thesis of a relative improvement in the condition of women in the labour market since the second half of the 1990s is based on the analysis of two major transformations which promote a rise in the proportion of women in the labour market, but which are analyzed for the moment only at the micro level for lack of data. The first relates to the sectoral transformation, more precisely the tertiar-



ization, of the structure of employment in Japan. Admittedly the augmentation of the service industry is not new (table 2). But the striking fact is that the service industry has been the only sector to create jobs, whereas employment in the manufacturing sector has strongly decreased, in particular since the second half of the 1990s (Ministry of Labour (e)). However, female employment moved to tertiary industry more than male employment: 63.8% of females work in the tertiary sector against 58.7% for the whole of the working population (men+ women) in 1990, compared to 48.7% and 47.3%, respectively, in 1970 (table 2). This sectoral evolution also relates to the manufacturing sector itself, whose main industry passed from the iron and steel to the car, and today the main industry is electronics. However the companies in the electronics sector have, as a whole, the reputation for treating women better (Weathers, 2002). In fact, the number of female white-collar workers in this sector has increased appreciably since the middle of the 1980s. The electronics firm NEC is known to have been a pioneer as regards parental leave, which is a key for women who do not wish to stop their careers when they have children.

The second evolution relates to employment in foreign firms, whose environment is perceived as more favorable to women, and whose weight in the economy has increased since the beginning of the 1990s<sup>10)</sup>. An often quoted example is that of IBM

Japan (*ibid.*). This tendency to treat female employees better is explained partly by different traditions of employee management, but also and perhaps especially by the fact that these foreign companies have a difficulty recruiting qualified young male graduates, because they think that foreign companies assure the job security less than Japanese ones.

Thus, in these transformations, it appears that the process of diversification of the Japanese labour market makes the image of the Japanese female workers and the contrast between male workers and female ones more complicated. Now one cannot summarize any more that there are contrastive groups: one side paid integrated men ("Salarymen") and the other "OL" ("Office Ladies").

2-4. A critical analysis of the two preceding pictures: taking into account the evolution of the structure of the inequalities in the labour market in the 1990s

At this stage, it appears that the thesis of diversification is partly contradicted by that of a rise of inequality: on another side, the thesis of the maintenance of the inequalities between men and women appears too simple, since in some ways the situation of women seems to be partially and relatively improved.

This cleavage between two types of interpretation, to simplify the pessimistic and optimistic explanations, is not new and

also characterizes the comprehension of the overall operation of the Japanese labour market, for which one notes an opposition between an “integrating” vision and an “uneven” vision (Lechevalier, 2003). It is clear that an analysis by workforce category, in particular the most disadvantaged, including women, young people, and immigrant workers, etc. is necessary but is not without limits, especially if one loses sight of the overall evolution of the labour market.

Several convergent studies underline a strong rise of gender-based inequalities in Japan in the 1990s, in relation to the dynamics of the labour market (Tachibanaki and alii, 2000; Lechevalier, 2003). But cleavage between men and women is not the core of this dynamics. Indeed, as the preceding analysis showed, if the segmentation is a structural characteristic of the Japanese labour market, its intensity and the lines of cleavage at its base vary as the segmented structure deteriorates (Lechevalier, 2003). One can thus understand how the cleavage of men and women can persist, just like the differential attending the size of firms or the status of employees, even if that division is not a centre of change of the labour market in the 1990s, namely “resegmentation”. The strongest line of division is located indeed at the level of companies that, in the new context of the crisis, make divergent choices in terms of the management of human resources, besides different compro-

mises on the job security. This coexistence of two productive models would bring a “polarization”, if the firms continue these measures, in particular from the point of view of the practice of the dismissals and the recourse to the atypical workforce<sup>11)</sup>.

With this series of analyses, one can understand why two contradictory interpretations of the situation of women in 1990s can coexist. The fact that the variable “sex” is not the foremost determinant to analyze the dynamics of labour market inequalities also appears when one analyzes the increasing inequality among the women who is another major stylized fact of that transformation, started at the beginning of the 1990s: the differential of wages between the female full-time workers and the female part-time workers goes from 78.4% in 1975 to 71.4% in 1985 and to 66.9% in 2000 (OECD, 1999, 2002).

Taking into account the total dynamics of the labour market and inequality thus makes it possible to more fully comprehend the work situation for Japanese women. But it leaves a certain number of questions unsolved, in particular that of the polarization of the women’s situation in the 1990s. More generally, it does not make it possible to exceed the economic analyses of the inequality of men and women, which focus on the labour market and the wage differential. It thus appears necessary to integrate elements of demographic and social analyses, especially to study the patriarchal component of the Japanese

wage-labour nexus. In other words, it is important to change our framework of analysis (Kumazawa, 1996 ; Osawa, 1998), which we shall attempt in the following section.

3. A Regulationnist approach : a theoretical analysis of the Japanese wage-labour nexus integrating the "gender mode"

3-1. A lack in the analysis of the Japanese wage-labour nexus by "Régulation Approach": the gender

According to Boyer (1995a), one can classify the studies by the "Régulation Approach" on the Japanese wage-labour nexus into two main categories, those centered on the organization of the working system of "Toyota", and those that criticize this approach by underlining the character of the Japanese wage-labour nexus, which is basically segmented, in particular according to the size of the company or the sector. If the second category of studies lays emphasis on analyses of the structure of the inequalities, it does not consider the cleavage of men and women and the patriarchal character of the Japanese wage-labour nexus more than the first one. Proof is the preceding analysis drawn from Lechevalier (2003), but also the approach most often taken on the matter, that of Uemura and Alii (2000), which is centered on the segmentation of the productive system. Likewise, Boyer (1995b) underlines, in a traditional way,

the permanence of cleavage according to gender, but we can locate it on the same plan as those according to the size of the company and the level of education. Thus, as a whole, the taking into account of division based on gender is limited, and is never central in the analyses by "Régulation Approach".

3-2. A first attempt to overcome this lack : the analysis of service industry and gender (Ribault, 2000)

Several authors have tried to use a new angle to analyze inequality based on gender. Thus, Ribault (2000) compares two industries, "toyotism" and "daieism" (taken from the name of a large corporation in Japanese distribution, "Daiei"), by underlining their very strong complementarity. And it clarifies the limits of the analyses by "Régulation Approach", namely that approach concentrated too much on "toyotism" (secondary industry) and forgot "daieism" (tertiary industry), and consequently underestimated the cleavage of men and women. Indeed, Ribault (2000) associates these two industries, whose characteristics are contrastive according to the criteria of the sector (industry/service), the form of employment (use of long-term/part-time employment), and the dominant sex (men/women). That makes it possible to put two major concomitant evolutions of the Japanese wage-labour nexus, the tertiarization and the "féminisation", at the centre of

analysis. The following stage of Ribault (2000)'s reasoning is to underline the inscription of the Japanese wage-labour nexus in a patriarchal or breadwinner model: in 80% of the cases, the man brings back 90% of the resources to the house, while 80% of the wives gain less than 1 million yen, which corresponds to the threshold above which the second income is taxed. Within the framework of this model, such a men's "commitment" to household is ensured at the sacrifice of their family life, namely breadwinner is obliged to pledge allegiance to their companies or to devote oneself (himself) to one's (his) professional life. Lastly, Ribault (2000) shows that the patriarchal bases of the Japanese wage-labour nexus are a central factor of coherence of the "mode of accumulation". There is an implicit form of compromise which places women in the housewives for the natural place of the women.

If the analysis of Ribault (2000) marks certainly an important stage in the understanding of the division between men and women as the centre of the Japanese wage-labour nexus on a patriarchal basis, it lends itself, however, to several criticisms. First of all, division by sectors does not seem to be at the centre of the differentiation of the wage-labour nexus and the gender-based inequalities that began in the 1990s, as the example of divisions within the sectors of the car industry, the electronics industry, or the distribution industry shows. Even if

tertiary employment is strongly occupied by women, female employment is not limited to uses of service since more than one third of female employment is in the primary and the secondary sectors, and tertiary employment is not limited to female employment, as noted previously (table 2). In fact, the richness of the analysis of Ribault (2000) tends to make the message less clear: the simultaneous introduction of the service sector and the family sphere is not articulated, in particular because of the dichotomous character of the economic (sectoral) analysis and the sociological analysis (which takes into account the family sphere). Lastly, the idea of the very great stability of the patriarchal model in the 1990s is open to criticism: it is true that the economic crisis amended this model slightly (except that the crisis made increasingly necessary the female work as not only being complementary to that of men, since in an increasing number of cases the woman is the only one to work following the job loss of the husband), but one can also consider that the crisis of this patriarchal model preceded the economic crisis (Kimoto, 1995). There are two partly independent dynamics.

### 3-3. A second attempt: gender and reproduction of the labour force (Arai, 2002)

The contribution of Arai (2002) makes it possible to exceed these limits, that we showed, partly by using another plan. This

plan indeed seeks to enrich our comprehension of the Japanese wage-labour nexus by the articulated analysis of the production industry (manufacturing and services sector) and of “the reproduction of the labour force”, in other words, the allocation of the domestic duties, child, person advances in years, and invalid cares between husband and wife, or the extent of “socialization” (supplied as service by social policy and by commodity market) of those tasks. Namely, since one does not limit the analysis to the sphere of the production (of commodity) or the labour market, as “the Segmented Labour Market Theory” or Ribault (2000), this new attempt makes it possible to lay an important point of the analysis on the conflicting demands of professional life versus family life for women. The advantage of this step is to guarantee the articulation between the two spheres, whose problematic character one saw in the preceding theory<sup>12)</sup>. One of the keys is to recognize the importance of the tasks which women do in the home, neither remunerated nor socialized. That is not expressed only in the form of “disutility” within a neo-classic framework but also in terms of fewer career opportunities in the professional sphere, via a lowered possibility of vocational training (investment in human capital) and possibly an interruption of career, two capital aspects of the formation of gender-based inequalities within the framework of the Japanese wage-labour nexus. The taking into

account of the domestic tasks and the education of the children thus enriches the analysis of the Japanese wage-labour nexus.

This analysis of the bonds between family life and female work is not unique<sup>13)</sup>. This subject was also present in the minds of the authorities who took measures to contribute to the reconciliation of family and work in addition to the laws of 1985 and 1997 (Araki, 1998 ; Imada, 1996) : one can thus quote the establishment of maternity leave (in 1991), family leave (in 1995 and 1999), and the re-employment procedures that have been incorporated directly in “the Equal Employment Opportunity Law”, all of which show measurements going in a positive direction, even if their impact is still limited (Imada, 1996). But the originality of Arai (2002) is at the conceptual level : with the concept of reproduction of the labour force, it tries throwing light on the “joint” between productive sphere and reproductive one, instead of juxtaposing these two concepts or of analyzing them in a neutral way.

Then, which are the principal results of this alternate framework of analysis? By taking into account the family sphere, the division based on gender appears in a more marked way. Even through households with two incomes represent the majority (Ministry of Labour (c)), the inequalities are obvious in them, if one considers the allocation of the domestic tasks, that is initially inequalities between men and

women, and also between female paid-workers and housewives (figure 3), finally between the female full-time workers and part-time ones. In short, in the last few years the choices for women have become polarized: one choice is to try to make a career of full-time work, but in this case, everything encourages them not to marry or have children. On the other hand, if women choose family life, they are largely reconciled to working part-time, with unfair working conditions. These possibilities make it possible to understand the decline in the number of marriages and in the birthrate in relation to the dynamics of the labour market. These two divergent choices are the origin of the increasing inequality among women.

It appears that the patriarchal component of the Japanese wage-labour nexus reached its limits. On one side, in spite of the rise of the unemployment rate, there is a real lack of qualified workers, and it is

clear that a “utilization” of the female workforce could alleviate this problem. On another side, the dramatic fall of the birth rate threatens the social balance. It is thus clear that change is needed<sup>14)</sup>. The situation of Japanese women in the labour market is defined by a larger social context that goes beyond the dynamics of the labour market. This question thus concerns a true societal choice.

At stake in the promotion of gender equality is support for women to be able to reconcile family life and careers. One can mention some measures with the object of it, provided by firms: flexible scheduling, better maternity leave policies, and generally supporting a model of “family friendly firms”, whose often quoted example is NEC. The responsibility for the authorities is also large and a coherent policy must include at the same time support for socialization of the un-paid work within the family, and give the un-paid workers access to

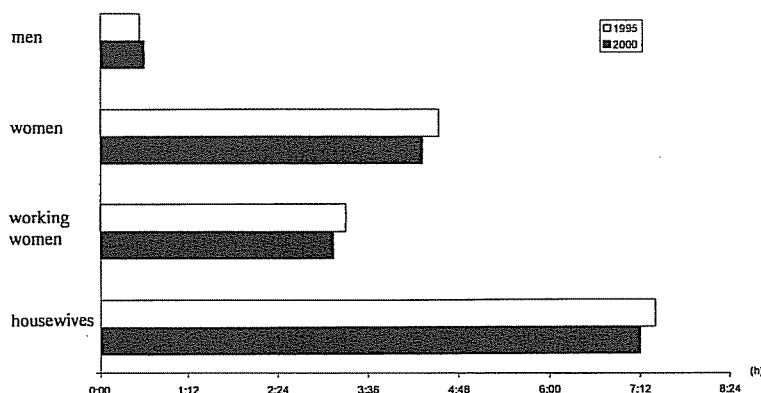


Figure 3: Division of the domestic tasks between men and women  
 Source: NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, *National Time Use Survey 2001 Report*.

social security by oneself, not via breadwinner.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the concept of segmentation cannot be used to analyze the inequalities between men and women in the Japanese labour market since the beginning of the 1990s, without being seriously amended. Particularly, it is erroneous to interpret the rise of (primarily female) part-time work as a sign of segmentation of the Japanese labour market. However, the thesis of a noticeable improvement of the working conditions of Japanese women is not confirmed, specifically if one integrates the sphere of labour force reproduction in the analysis. The inequalities between men and women did not disappear at all. It is true that one notes an integrating trend according to a certain number of criteria (an increasing duration of employment and a rising number of female executives, in particular). But, according to other criteria (wage differential, status of employment, etc.), the results are less clear if the analysis is limited to the labour market.

Therefore, it is necessary to think differently about the inequalities between men and women. Especially, it is important not to restrain the analysis to the labour market, that is, to take into account the "gender" in the wage-labour nexus and to analyze the sphere of labour force repro-

duction in a problematic way. Beyond the case of un-paid work (among others the domestic tasks), to take into account the family sphere considerably changes the analysis of the evolution since the beginning of the 1990s, and makes the question of the mobilization of the female workforce more complex. It affects the inequalities in the labour market via the variable "labour scarcity/surplus", and therefore is also interdependent with other demographic and social variables (birth rate, divorce rate, etc.).

There is no doubt that Japan is facing a crucial societal choice from this point of view. It seems unwise that Japan will return to the bases of the patriarchal model, but we cannot yet define a workable model of men and women equality. We might look at other national models in a comparative perspective, for example, the Dutch model, in which part-time work concerns men as well as women, or the Swedish model, which rests on a strong socialization of the sphere of the reproduction of the workforce. Of course, this international comparison does not exclude the fact that Japan may follow its own national trajectory in experiencing a new model of men and women equality.

## Notes

- 1) We are sincerely grateful to professors Toshio YAMADA and Robert BOYER for their very stimulating and longtime directions.

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- 2) We will consider this point further when we evaluate the evolution of women's working conditions and take into account the family sphere as its border becomes increasingly clear, in particular as the number of non-remunerated female "workers in the family company" falls.
- 3) A contrary decrease is seen from the 1970s forward, from 10 per 1000 in 1970 to approximately 6 per 1000 at the end of 1990, while the rate of divorce went from 0.9 to 2 per 1000 over the same period, in comparison with a rate of more than 4.5 and more than 3 per 1000 in the United States and in Great Britain in the 1990s, respectively.
- 4) This differential is calculated from a nominal base 100 for male employees. The weaker the percentage is the higher the differential. Thus, in the middle of the 1990s, this differential was 80% in France, approximately 75% in the United States and in Germany, 71% in the United Kingdom, and approximately 60% in Korea (ILO, various years).
- 5) The Ministry of Labour (MOL) became in 2000 the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), following an administrative reorganization. To simplify, the term used throughout this paper will be "Ministry of Labour".
- 6) The differences in results between these two investigations tend to show that this differential is explained partly by the rise of part-time work since the beginning of the 1970s. We will reconsider this point later.
- 7) To continue the international comparison, it appears that Japanese female employment duration is not too short, male one is rather long exceptionally (Wakisaka, 1997; Koike, 1995).
- 8) The relation between companies and young women in contrast reveals the long-term working condition for men: the company invests in the training of its employees only if it considers that it is profitable, according to the probability of an employee remaining a long time in the company.
- 9) See, for example, Osawa (1998) p. 155 sqq.
- 10) According to the Ministry of Labour, employment in foreign firms operating in Japan accounts for approximately 1 million posts, that is to say 2.3% of the working population. Which is still weak by comparison with the other OECD countries, but shows a significant progression since ten years ago.
- 11) Without going further into detail, we want to specify that this division is greater for firms of comparable size and within the same sector. The most striking examples are Toyota and Nissan in the case of car manufacturers and Canon and Fujitsu in the electronics field (see Lechevalier (2002)).
- 12) In a very concrete way, one can thus articulate in a coherent way two types of sources and analyses, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2001), Ministry of Labour (a), Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (various years, especially 1997).
- 13) See in particular Kimoto (1995) and Imada (1997).
- 14) For purposes of restoring the demographic balance and for solving the problem of "mismatch of employment" in the labour market at the same time, there is a way to use the massive and selective foreign workforce. This is an alternative model that we will not discuss here, except to say that the obstacles are numerous in the Japanese context, which does not have a tradition of immigration.

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(Faculty of Economics, Tokyo University & Centre Japon, EHESS)