

Work-Life Balance Issues of Women in Returning to Work due to Childbirth—Using TEM Analysis

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Abstract

This study attempted to chart a series of events, including the difficulties women face in the workplace, the causes of problems, and the solutions to problems, using the perspective of work-life balance, which is the balance between work and life, when returning to work after a leave of absence due to childbirth. It is also wanted to identify differences by nationality and the following questions were asked: 1) “What problems did female employees face when returning to work? How were they able to overcome the difficulties?” and 2) “Do different nationalities have different factors that cause the problems that women face when returning to work?” A total of two research questions were built. The qualitative research method TEM was used, which allows the analysis of background factors in choosing methods and means to solve difficulties. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight people, four Japanese women and four Chinese women, and TEM diagrams were created for all participants. Based on those data, common TEM diagrams were able to draw for a total of 5 time periods, from the period before they all joined the company to the period after the return problem was solved. Furthermore, common return-to-work problems were found, such as “unfamiliarity with work after returning to work”, “difficulties in work-life balance”, and “inability to work overtime”. We also found differences in factors such as timing of return to work” and “the role played by other members of the family”, depending on participants’ nationality. Finally, the limited number of participants and nationality setting in this study are research limitations, and future research will clarify the generalization of the factors found and compare them in a more multinational context. Likewise, a possible future research direction is to promote initiatives that take advantage of the “understanding of supervisors and work colleagues” and “use of childbirth experience” that made it easier for women to return to work, both of which were found in this study.

Keywords

Work-Life Balance, Difficulty in Returning to Work, TEM, Childbirth

1. Introduction

The concept of “work-life balance” has gradually become more prevalent in society. According to Ikawa and Hirao (2021), the discussion of “work reform” has become more active with respect to women’s activities than ever before. Women’s success in the workplace is considered to be significantly related to work-life balance. According to the Japanese Cabinet Office’s “Work-Life Balance Report 2011”, as a result of changes in wives’ employment before and after the birth of their first child, the employment continuation rate (use of maternity leave) increased from 13.0% in 1985-1989 to 43.1% in 2005-2009 for regular employees, and furthermore, according to the Japanese Cabinet Office’s “Work-Life Balance Report 2018 (Summary), the percentage of women who continue to work before and after the birth of their first child was 53.1%. The number of women who want to continue working after childbirth is increasing every year. However, Tokumitsu et al. (2020) found that the prevalence of postpartum depression in the first month postpartum was 14.3% and the period prevalence of depression during pregnancy was 14.0% in 108,431 Japanese women. Childbirth is likely to make it more difficult for women suffering from depression to return to work. As noted above, women may take leave or resign from their jobs due to childbirth and face many problems in returning to work after childbirth. The purpose of this study is to determine what problems women face before and after returning to work. This study also intends to use comparisons between non-Japanese women and Japanese women to determine whether differences in problems exist based on nationality.

2. Relationship between Women and Work-Life Balance

The problem of Japanese society, the declining birthrate and aging population, has resulted in a shortage of workers. To solve this problem, it is recommended to actively recruit female workers. However, by working, women face a more difficult situation in maintaining work-life balance. Koyama (2020) stated that working women have multiple personas, such as wife, mother, and employee, and must maintain work-life balance in all aspects of their lives. These characteristics may make them more susceptible to mental illness and more stressed. Nosaka and Iwakiri (2012) examined the effects of long-term exposure therapy on the return to work of women who had been sexually violated, and found that although the victims were able to return to work in terms of social life, their symptoms of depression and sleep quality had not yet improved, their quality of daily life had not recovered to that before they were victimized, and they also stated that their psychological and social support is still needed. Thus, the dam-

age and trauma suffered by women in their daily lives and workplaces make it difficult for them to maintain a work-life balance, and they tend to take time off from work. It is suggested that there are many potential difficulties, beginning with returning to work.

3. Women's Work-Life Balance Difficulties in Returning to Work

Returning to work is considered an important part of work-life balance. There is little research on the effectiveness of return-to-work support methods in Japan, and evaluations of whether or not employees have been able to return to work are unclear. It is no exaggeration to say that evaluation after return to work is also in a gray zone, and few companies are able to evaluate it correctly. Igarashi (2018) stated that after returning to work, a two-level evaluation is necessary: "whether or not the employee has achieved a return to work" and "whether or not the employee is able to continue working without taking leave again". Simply stating that the employee "was able to return to work" is not sufficient to determine that the employee was able to return to work. One can imagine how difficult it is to return to work. Female workers are likely to face many difficulties in balancing work and private life. According to Ikawa and Hirao (2021), in a study of attitudes toward working hours, young and still single employees "want to work more" while married employees who are raising children "want to work fewer hours". It is clear that the degree to which work-life balance is achieved varies depending on individual attributes and life stage. Kimura (2019) also stated that long working hours were introduced by many companies to improve the current declining labor force, but that it is important to provide support for adjusting working hours for workers who are raising children or caring for family members. Improving not just work hours, but also the time spent in captivity, including commuting time, could hasten the return to work, especially for women.

In addition to working hours, workplace relationship is another major issue when implementing work-life balance. Uehara et al. (2013) stated that direct supervisors have a considerable influence on ordinary employees because the top management level is extremely distant to ordinary employees. Therefore, it is believed that direct supervisors should play an intermediate role between employees and the top management level. Ikawa and Hirao (2021) pointed out that it is the supervisor's responsibility to provide subordinates with appropriate work roles, and that work distribution is also important for satisfaction with work-life balance. Furthermore, there are many difficulties in implementing work-life balance in daily life away from the workplace. Iwatani and Tsumoto (2020) conducted a survey on the degree of work-life balance implementation among nurses who returned from childcare leave and found that the indicator "how to spend time at home and support family" had the lowest degree of implementation in "how to spend time outside of work". Although they are expected to attend events and neighborhood association activities in the community where they live, it is possible that they are occupied only with childcare and

housework, which they think women in particular should do, and do not have the energy to participate in community activities. Considering the above, the study revealed comparative difficulties in implementing work-life balance for women.

4. Peculiarities of Problems Faced by Foreign Women Workers

The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2020) conducted the “Summary of Vital Statistics (Fixed Number) Annex” and found that the number of non-Japanese women who gave birth during the year 2020 was 18,797, an increase of 7379 from the 11,418 obtained from the same survey in 2010, the rate of increase of 64.6%. It was found that the number of non-Japanese women giving birth in Japan has increased significantly. However, Kawasaki (2014) examined the difficulties experienced by non-Japanese women in Japan and aspects of social support during the process of childbirth and childcare and found that they faced difficulties such as “cross-cultural conflicts and dilemmas”, “lack of support”, and “isolation and loneliness”. She also appealed to the public for support in four areas, including “support for cross-cultural adaptation” and “support for gaining a mother’s identity”. One can imagine that giving birth in a foreign country and the impact of cultural differences on health, such as postpartum depression, were also particular problems seen in the births of non-Japanese women. Hashimoto et al. (2011) stated that women of foreign nationality faced many difficulties and problems and tried to overcome them by seeking help from friends and family members to overcome the difficulties associated with childbirth, but it was not a way to actually solve the problems in order to return to work. Furthermore, Takeda (2007) discussed the difficulties foreign women face in working when giving birth and raising children. With the possibility of losing their jobs if they take time off from work and the current difficult employment conditions, it can be expected that they face even more complicated living conditions than Japanese women. Therefore, it is difficult to find studies that discuss how non-Japanese women who were able to return to work after childbirth solved their problems. It is not clear how non-Japanese women workers were able to overcome difficulties, return to work, and maintain work-life balance.

5. Research Questions

Based on the above, this study will clarify what problems women faced when returning to the same workplace and how they were able to overcome these difficulties and will also demonstrate the existence of differences based on nationality. Therefore, a total of two research questions were built.

- 1) What problems did female employees face when returning to work? How were they able to overcome the difficulties?
- 2) Do different nationalities have different factors that cause the problems that women face when returning to work?

6. Participants and Research Methods

The study consisted of semi-structured interviews with a total of eight female workers employed full-time in Japan. In order to examine the influence of participant's nationality, all participants were divided into four Japanese nationality women and four Chinese nationality women. Basic information is presented in **Table 1**. All participants were employed full-time in Japan, had taken a leave of absence due to pregnancy, completed maternity and parental leave, and had returned to the same workplace. The revisions were made after confirming with the individuals themselves.

This study aims to clarify whether there are difficulties associated with a series of life events, such as pregnancy, leave of absence, and return to work, among women in full-time employment after starting work and going through a series of life events, so a qualitative research method called "TEM" was used. Based on the human systems theory proposed by Von Bertalanffy (1968), which views humans as open systems, Valsiner (2001) focused on the concept of Equifinality and proposed "TEM". People make many choices along the path of life, and even if they arrive at the same destination, the paths they take along the way are diverse. The background of these diverse paths contains complex social factors, and the clarification of such complexity and diversity can be said to be a characteristic of "TEM". Furthermore, Yasuda (2015) stated that all events in the flow of life can be viewed as symbols, and the background of these symbols contains characteristics and external elements unique to the individual. "TEM" is a common research method in clinical psychology, but in this study, it is the most appropriate method for finding commonalities behind the symbolic events. It is also possible to analyze commonalities and uniqueness using the "TEM" research method to determine how and why all participants made the choices they did for the symbolic events during a fixed period of their lives. Therefore, this study decided to use the "TEM" research method.

Table 1. Participants' basic information.

Name*	age	nationality	Number of working years	Number of children
A.	thirties	Japan	11 years	1
B.	thirties	Japan	7 years	1
C.	twenties	Japan	5 years	2
D.	thirties	Japan	18 years	1
E.	twenties	China	4 years	1
F.	thirties	China	10 years	1
G.	thirties	China	4 years	2
H.	thirties	China	7 years	2

*Names are pseudonyms.

7. Findings

Based on interviews with a total of eight women, a total of eight TEM diagrams were drawn for this study. For each research question, new findings from the TEM diagrams will be discussed in detail.

7.1. What Problems Did Female Employees Face When Returning to Work? How Were They Able to Overcome the Difficulties?

The study revealed three difficulties that all participants shared: “unfamiliarity with work after returning to work”, “difficulties in work-life balance”, and “inability to work overtime”. Furth more, “possibility of being fired after returning to work” and “strange rumors in the workplace” were found to be difficulties that were not shared by all participants but were considered difficult by the majority of those interviewed. The common TEM diagram **Figure 1** was used to clarify how they were able to overcome the difficulties when they faced them.

Regarding job unfamiliarity after returning to work, Mandal, B. (2018) stated that taking an extended break or paid leave (12 weeks or more) to give childbirth can have a more positive impact on mental health once women return to work and mitigate the negative psychological effects of an early return to work. However, in addition to mental health, the actual performance of work after returning

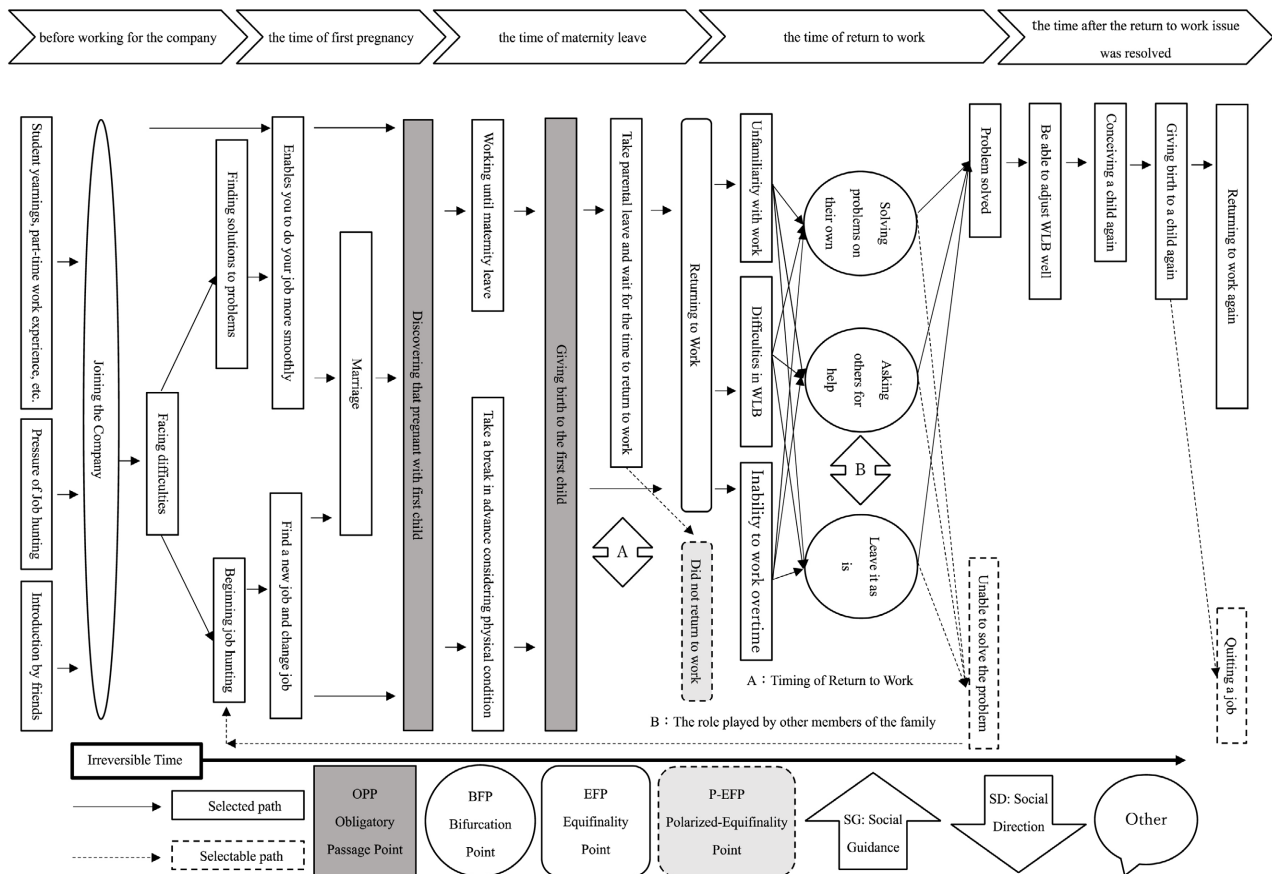


Figure 1. Common TEM diagram.

to work is also a concern for workplace women. Regardless of interpersonal relationships or office-related industries, being away from work for a period of time can lead to different systems used, different co-workers, and even different job descriptions. This study reveals that the solution is through the use of self-improvement methods such as “asking co-workers for help”. Also, the method of leaving the difficulty for a time, such as “leave it to time” and natural learning was also seen as a method. However, several mentioned that they would like to be contacted by the company when there is a change while they are on leave, suggesting a solution such as contact from the company, since the individuals on leave do not know when the change will occur.

Regarding the difficulties of work-life balance, all survey participants also described difficulty in controlling the balance between work and home life when returning to the workplace. According to Ikeda (2021), women who work while raising children have many personas in their daily lives and fulfill their roles in many situations, including housework, childcare, and work. It was also revealed that they have to change their own schedules to accommodate their children’s absences from school. In this study, it was also observed that many women considered housework and childcare as something they should do and asked their husbands to share housework and help with childcare. It is thought that the balance there may have a lot of influence on work-life balance. In addition, some participants discussed the division of roles with their husbands to maintain their work-life balance, while others sorted out their feelings by themselves.

The reason women can no longer work overtime is that their top priorities are related to their children. When they must work overtime, they have adopted the solution of asking their husbands to do so, but it was found that they try not to do this as much as possible. Most women tended to choose home after the birth of their children when faced with a choice between work and home. Even though they wanted to do their best at work, they would seek promotion at work after their children entered elementary school or after their children became somewhat independent. Since all the interview participants in this study had children who were preschoolers and had families with both parents, it is suggested that companies should take into consideration the shifts and give women who return to work after childbirth tasks that do not require overtime work. In fact, Chai, Y., Nandi, A., & Heymann, J. (2018) stated that extending the period of paid maternity leave as stipulated by law can encourage women to practice breastfeeding as mothers, leading to a smoother role in the home. As a mother, it is imagined that this would reduce the problems and barriers that occur within the family, making it easier to take a better work-life balance.

7.2. Do Different Nationalities Have Different Factors That Cause the Problems That Women Face When Returning to Work?

Using comparisons between Japanese and Chinese women, two different factors were found that contribute to variation by nationality: “timing of return to work” and “the role played by other members of the family”.

In this study, we analyzed the causes of the different problems faced by Japanese and Chinese women when returning to work after a maternity leave of absence, the first of which is the deciding factor of when to return to work. While all Japanese women could only return to work after their children were enrolled in daycare, Chinese women have a wide variety of timing for returning to work. Some women returned to work immediately out of fear of losing their jobs, while some women returned to take care of the family finances. While the timing of returning to work varied by nationality, it was also found that cultural background factors influenced women's return to work. Amitani et al. (2018) surveyed Asian women whose husbands were men of Japanese nationality about their parenting difficulties and found that they faced many cross-cultural issues, including conflicts related to their native language and differences in ideas about housework and parenting. Thereby, it is believed that child-rearing in Japan is culturally caused by problems that are unique to non-Japanese women.

The Chinese women also stated that their parents were quite supportive in raising their children, and it was clear that their husbands were also willing or able to participate in raising their children. As for Japanese women, however, their parents on both sides of the family were not the first to rely on them, and their husbands were not found to be willing to participate. Therefore, although some husbands voluntarily participated in child-rearing, there were some comments that Japanese women were inconveniencing them, and the women themselves were still trapped in their own perceptions, suggesting that a change in their own awareness may be necessary. Women will face numerous problems after childbirth, and it is conceivable that women's return to the workplace will be smoother if the members of the family play the role they are supposed to play there. However, the promotion of men's maternity leave has been rather slow. Not only in Japan, but according to Kaufman, G. (2018), men in the United Kingdom are also currently not taking the leave called paternity leave, and it was revealed that this is due to the fact that workplaces are not able to support them well and that the mothers of their children take it for longer.

8. Consideration

The results of the aforementioned studies were combined and divided into a total of five time periods, beginning with the criteria by which women chose to enter the company before working for the company, the time of first pregnancy, the time of maternity leave, the time of return to work, and the time after the return to work issue was resolved, and the difficulties that all participants faced when returning to work after maternity leave, the path they chose to take, and the How they were overcome is summarized in the TEM diagram in **Figure 1**.

9. Limitations of This Study

Although this study analyzed women's return to work after maternity leave, the number of participants in the study and the nationality setting are constrained.

The number of researchers was 8, which is considered relatively large given the research methods used in this study, but it is also difficult to generalize because qualitative research is an exploratory research method to determine what the generality of the results are. Thereby, the difficulties obtained in this study needs to be done in a quantitative study to see if the difficulties really impact on return to work. About the other limitation, nationality setting, this study compared Chinese women and Japanese women to identify differences in the difficulties that non-Japanese and Japanese women face in returning to work. However, since there may be cultural differences between Asian and European cultures, as well as differences by nationality, future research should also consider comparisons among women of different nationalities.

10. Future Issues

In this study, there are some new findings related to women's return to work, such as "understanding of supervisors and work colleagues" and "use of childbirth experience". "Understanding of supervisors and work colleagues" was mentioned by many participants, and the understanding of those around them is quite necessary when there are happenings such as adjusting time off due to childbirth or extending maternity leave. This was not mentioned as a difficulty faced when giving birth or returning to work, because most participants had some degree of understanding from their supervisors to their coworkers at their workplaces. Furthermore, a total of three women in the study had given birth to a second child, and these women were able to use their experience of childbirth and childcare as they became mothers to help them return to work more smoothly after the birth of their second child. It is expected that Japanese companies will be required to understand the childbearing status of women and give more generous consideration to women who give birth to their first child. The experiences of senior female employees and follow-up from the company were considered, and in fact were mentioned in the study as a hope for the company. In addition, since some women want to return to work sooner, it is proposed that the company provide a wider range of timing for returning to work, including an earlier return to work.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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