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## A Study of Japanese Women's Attitudes Toward Hiring Domestic Laborers

Kamata, Suzanne<sup>1</sup>; Kita, Yoko<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In the Global Gender Gap 2020 Report, which tracks gender parity in education, health, politics, and economic participation, Japanese women were ranked 121<sup>st</sup> out of 153 (World Economic Forum, 2019), lagging far behind other Asian countries such as the Philippines, which came in at 16, Singapore, which ranked 54<sup>th</sup>, and Thailand in 75<sup>th</sup> place. Although Japanese women are highly educated and in good health, this represents an all-time low for Japan and might be seen as a setback. although the number of working women has increased, most are not engaged in career-track jobs; the number of women in executive or managerial positions, as well as high level government jobs, lags far behind that of other industrialized nations (Shim, 2018). Shambaugh et. al. suggests the less than stellar labor market outcome for Japanese women may be due to the possibility “that work other than full-time and regular employment is a better fit for the circumstances and preferences of some working women” and that they choose jobs which enable them to “balance employment with non-work obligations” (2017). In other words, they may be choosing part-time or lower-level jobs because Japanese working women who are married with children still bear the brunt of childcare, housekeeping, and caring for elderly relatives. Furthermore, they are left with little time for career development activities which might lead to advancement. This, however, is not a uniquely Japanese dilemma. Women in other countries often hire workers to help with domestic tasks. Hitherto, little research has been done to determine the effect of hiring help on gender disparity in the Japanese workplace. In this paper, we will examine the results of a survey on attitudes toward hiring help to better understand why working women in Japan tend to not outsource domestic work.

**Keywords:** domestic labor, Japan, working women, housework, surve

### Introduction

Hired household help was once considered a luxury in many countries, including

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Japan, but it is becoming more and more common. In Singapore, for example, when women began to enter the workplace in the 1960s, they began to rely on domestic workers, often from neighboring countries. As of 2016, 227,100 foreign domestic workers were employed in Singapore, where the labor force participation of married Singaporean women was 62.2% (Au-Young, 2016). Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, a survey found that nearly half of young professionals aged 25-34 hire household help, or would like to, because they consider themselves too busy to clean even a one-bedroom flat. (Morley, 2017). Additionally, a study by the UCLA Labor Center found that 54% of Californian households hire domestic help for cleaning their homes (2016).

As author Megan K. Stack writes, “[Housework] is a ubiquitous physical demand that has hamstrung and silenced women for most of human history.” For those who can afford it, “paid domestic help takes the pressure off parents and marriage; off employers and society at large” (2019). Of course, intersectional feminists have pointed out that some of those who perform domestic tasks for others may still feel pressure surrounding their own childcare and household tasks. However, when fair labor practices are in place, domestic workers may make professional advancement possible for women.

In Japan, mid-career teachers, for example, earn above-average salaries, but they work long hours. A 2019 survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that Japanese junior high school teachers spent an average of 56 hours per week at work. This far exceeds the total average of 38.3 hours among the 14 other countries and regions which participated in the survey. Furthermore, elementary school teachers in Japan spend on average 54.4 hours at work. The survey also found that, among those surveyed, Japan ranked last in “total hours spent a week on professional development activities to improve individual skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as teachers” (Yajima, 2019), with less than an hour on average for both elementary and junior high school teachers. These career-enhancing activities might include language lessons, writing and publishing papers, engaging in networking events, and studying for exams to become vice principal or principal – all of which must be completed during a teacher’s “free time.” As many teachers, especially those who are female, are expected to also take on domestic labor at home, hiring outside help seems like a potential solution for generating free time and reducing stress, but few do. This paper will attempt to begin to answer the question, “Why don’t working women in Japan outsource housework?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Many discussions have centered upon negative issues associated with domestic help such as disparities of economic and social status between household employer and employee (De Matos, 2009; Land, 2019; Stack, 2019; Nimble & Chinnasamy, 2020), exploitation and/or abuse (Austin, 2017; Haynes, 2014; Suryomenggolo, 2019), and the ethics of hiring someone to do one’s housework (Bromwich, 2014;

## Background

Since former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced his “womenomics” initiative to encourage Japanese women to enter the workplace, the percentage of working married women aged 25-54 increased from 58% in 2000 to 71% in 2016 (Shambaugh, Nunn & Portman, 2017). Nevertheless, most of those women are not engaged in career-track jobs, and the number in executive or managerial positions, as well as high level government jobs, lags far behind that of other industrialized nations (Shim, 2018). This may be partly attributed to the fact that married Japanese working women still bear that brunt of childcare, housekeeping, and eldercare. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020), Japanese men spend an average of 41 hours per week on unpaid work, which includes childcare, shopping for the household, and household chores, whereas men in Australia, for example, spend 172 hours per week on such tasks. Additionally, Rich (2019) reports that Japanese women who work more than 49 hours a week typically engage in close to 25 hours of housework per week, while their spouses put in an average of less than five. This disparity has led some women to forgo marriage and motherhood, possibly contributing to another worrying trend -- the decline of Japan’s population.

In fact, a gender gap regarding housework persists in many countries around the world (Burkeman, 2018; Craig, 2020). Instead of waiting for men to close the gap, women have taken steps of their own. As feminist motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly points out, “mothers are taking on less by ‘outsourcing’ some of their load. Instead of cooking every night, they might get takeout, or they may hire help with domestic duties like cleaning the house or tutoring the children” (Craig, 2020). While many cram schools have been established in Japan for tutoring children and Abe’s administration has sought to increase daycare centers to ease the burden of childcare for working mothers, it is difficult to change ingrained attitudes towards housework.

In her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote “Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition. The clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day.” While in the past engaging in domestic work for others was stereotypically seen as dirty and demeaning in a Western context (Ashforth & Blake, 1999; Sarkar, 2020), cleaning does not carry the same stigma in Japan. It is, rather, a virtuous undertaking. In pre-World War II Japan,

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Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). In fact, domestic work is frequently beneficial for those who perform it (Ueno, 2013; Killias, 2018; Suryomenggolo, 2019) and essential to many who pay for it, such as those with disabilities who are living independently (Heumann, et al. 2020).

young women from middle class families were often employed as maids in aristocratic families in order to learn housekeeping skills and thereby improve their marriageability (Lebra, 1990). As the Western press often marvels, Japanese school children clean their own schools and serve each other lunch as part of their education. A local newspaper published an essay by a student extolling life lessons learned from cleaning the school toilet (Kamata, 2013). Gross-Loh (2013) points out that the Japanese are influenced by Buddhism, in which cleaning helps to train the mind, and leads to spiritual awakening. Additionally, *sengyo shufu* (full-time housewife) has long been considered a respectable and desirable role for Japanese women (Ueno, 1987; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012). Even as government policies seek to encourage more women to enter the workplace, “charisma housewives” such as Harumi Kurihara continue to promote the idea that housework is fun and satisfying (Goldstein-Gidoni 2018, 120).

Whether or not Japanese women enjoy housework, not only are they expected to do most of the domestic work, but these expectations tend to go above and beyond those of the average Western woman. Whereas the popular American magazine *Good Housekeeping*, a source of recipes and cleaning tips which dates back to 1885, later encouraged readers to strive for “good enough housekeeping,” Japanese women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are still pressured to make elaborate bentos for their children (Stephens, 2015; Nakanishi, 2015), sew aprons and shoe bags by hand (Kamata, 2020), prepare multiple dish meals for their families (Rich, 2019; Nakanishi, 2015), and keep a tidy house (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2018, Kondo, 2014). Japanese women typically shop daily for groceries, buying only what is needed to make that evening’s and the next day’s meals. After the meals are eaten, many Japanese women eschew appliances considered to be time-saving such as dishwashers and wash the dirty dishes by hand. Likewise, washed laundry is often hung outdoors to dry on poles, whereas in the United States many homeowners associations, as well as rules governing condominium and apartment dwellers, ban clotheslines for aesthetic reasons. Here, in the land of robots, much domestic labor is still done by hand.

While interviewing harried Japanese mothers, Rosenberger (2013, 113) remarked, “I thought of my Hong Kong and Thai friends who worked full-time and came home to neat homes, warm dinners, and children cared for by maids from rural Thailand or the Philippines.” Japanese women, she points out, don’t have that option. They have “only day cares and parents to turn to.” Beyond ideological considerations, Rosenberger (2013, 113) suggests that this is partly due to a lack of immigrant labor. Stereotypically, Indonesian or Filipina nannies take care of children and household chores for clients abroad, and wealthy New York women hire staff from less affluent countries such as

Mexico and Jamaica.

Japan, meanwhile, has long imposed limits on immigration. Recently immigration laws have changed, allowing foreign health care professionals to train to become eldercare workers. The rigorous licensing process involves two years of training, followed by a national board exam. If they pass, these workers can live and work indefinitely in Japan caring for the elderly. Hirano (2017) reports, however, that up to 38% of those who pass the exam return to their home countries instead of staying to work in Japan. There remains a severe shortage of eldercare workers in Japan. Additionally, reports of abuse of foreign trainees (Shimokoshi & Nishikawa, 2020) may dissuade temporary workers from coming to Japan.

Although it is true that immigrants to Japan are not issued visas for all kinds of domestic labor, not all domestic workers are immigrants. In fact, local Japanese governments oversee Silver Human Resource Centers, at which retired workers and other senior citizens can register to work part-time house-cleaning, babysitting, gardening, and to perform other services at reasonable rates. Additionally, a previous study found that some foreign women university instructors living in Japan hired Japanese university students part-time for domestic tasks (Kamata & Kita, 2021).

In considering the hiring of someone to do housework in Japan, we should also consider attitudes towards inviting outsiders into the home. Westerners use the phrase, “make yourself at home,” to invite friends and other guests to relax in private spaces, and are more likely than Japanese women to allow close friends to enter their messy homes, knowing that they won’t be judged harshly for stacks of laundry on the sofa or dishes in the sink. Allowing a friend to witness a house in disarray might even be considered a sign of intimacy. In Japan, however, inviting someone into a messy house is highly embarrassing and might be considered rude.

In feminist writer Mieko Kawakami’s (2020, 307) novel *Breasts and Eggs*, single mother Rika, a writer, invites her friend Natsuko, also single, over for dinner. Upon entering the apartment, Natsuko observes “Half of the sofa in the living room was piled high with laundry waiting to be folded. From the looks of things, Rika was either bad at cleaning up, or simply didn’t care...I felt right at home, like I could let myself relax.” Rika realizes, however, what is expected of her as a Japanese woman. She tells Natsuko, “I know I can’t have any of the other mothers see my place in this condition. You can’t stop rumors like that from spreading. I’d never be able to show my face at the school again, know what I mean?”

For those who are too busy to clean, or who are lacking in space, it is easier and less stressful to entertain elsewhere. As White (1988, 8) explains, in Japan:

The physical territory of even the smallest apartment or home is marked off from the outside by the *genkan* (entrance hall), the place for nonintimate communications with outsiders, who do not remove their shoes and enter the house. Family rooms are also separated into those for public and private use, even though entertaining at home is infrequent. Children do not bring friends home as often as they do in other societies. Wives and husbands meet others socially in neutral public areas such as playgrounds, shops, and restaurants, and, for men, bars and coffeehouses after work. Although the small physical size of the house discourages entertaining, the feeling that the home is not a public place is equally important.

### Methodology

We used a qualitative approach in our study. The participants were a convenience sample of 83 women located through a university inter-office email system, as well as through the researchers' personal Facebook pages, Twitter, LINE and email contacts. We especially targeted Japanese working women who live in Japan, however a few respondents lived abroad, and some were not employed outside the home. Because both researchers are language teachers, a high proportion of respondents were language teachers, or former language teachers in Japan.

The survey questions were in both English and Japanese, in the form of a Google document. Participants were sent a link or a QR code linking to the questions, which enabled participants to reply anonymously. Initially, we asked questions about age, nationality, country of residence, household income, and number of occupants per household. We also asked such questions as: "How many hours per week do you spend on housework?" "Do you hire someone to help with housework? If yes, which tasks do they perform?" "Would you consider hiring someone to help with housework? If no, why not?" The responses to our survey were gathered between October 2020 and December 2020.

### Demographics

The majority of the participants were fifty years old and above (See Table 1 below).

**Table 1.** *What is your age? (N=83)*

Age	N	%
20-29	11	13.3

30-39	10	12.0
40-49	18	21.7
50-59	41	49.4
60~	3	3.6

The residence of participants was mainly Japan with seventy-nine (95.2%) (See table 2 below).

**Table 2. What is your country of residence? (N=83)**

Residency	N	%
Japan	79	95.2
Canada	3	3.6
America	1	1.2

Table 3 indicates the number of members per household.

**Table 3. How many people live in your household? (N=83)**

person/people	N	%
1	16	19.3
2	17	20.5
3	14	16.9
4	23	27.7
5	9	10.8
6	3	3.6
7 or more	1	1.2

Out of eighty-three respondents, eighteen were employed in the educational sector, accounting for 21.7%. This number includes elementary, junior high school teachers, lecturers, university instructors and part-time teachers. The rest were: housewife -- thirteen (15.7%); unemployed -- eight (9.6%); civil servant -- seven (8.4%); office workers -- seven (8.4%); part-time job -- seven (8.4%); nurse -- four (4.8%); care worker -- two (2.4%); doctor -- two (2.4%); service industry -- two (2.4%) and assistant nurse, baker, self-employed, employment support staff, executive, instructor, legal clerk, part-time clerk, player, researcher, therapist, university researcher and writer with one each (1.2%).

The household income ranges of the participants are indicated in Table 4 below. The majority earned a middle-class income of 6 million yen (approximately U.S.\$58,000)

or more per year (See table 4 below).

**Table 4. What is your household income? (N=83)**

Income	N	%
Less than 3 million yen	21	25.3
3.00~3.99 million yen	5	6.0
4.00~4.99 million yen	8	9.6
5.00~5.99 million yen	6	7.2
6.00~6.99 million yen	8	9.6
7.00~9.99 million yen	17	20.5
10 million yen or more	18	21.7

In response to the question “How many hours per week do you spend on housework?” out of all eighty-three respondents, only five (6.0%) spends less than one hour; sixteen (19.3%) spend seven or more than seven hours; and twenty-nine (34.9%) spend ten or more than ten hours (See table 5 below).

**Table 5. How many hours per week do you spend on housework? (N=83)**

Time	N	%
less than 1 hour	5	6.0
1~2 hours	10	12.0
2~4 hours	11	13.3
4 or more than 4 hours	12	14.5
7 or more than 7 hours	16	19.3
10 or more than 10 hours	29	34.9

In response to the question “Which of the following appliances/ machines do you use at least once a week?”, over half (53%) use none of listed appliances or machines. The listed appliances or machines were Roomba-type vacuum cleaner, clothes dryer, dishwasher, and dish dryer (See Table 6 below). Only one respondent used all of the potentially time-saving appliances regularly.

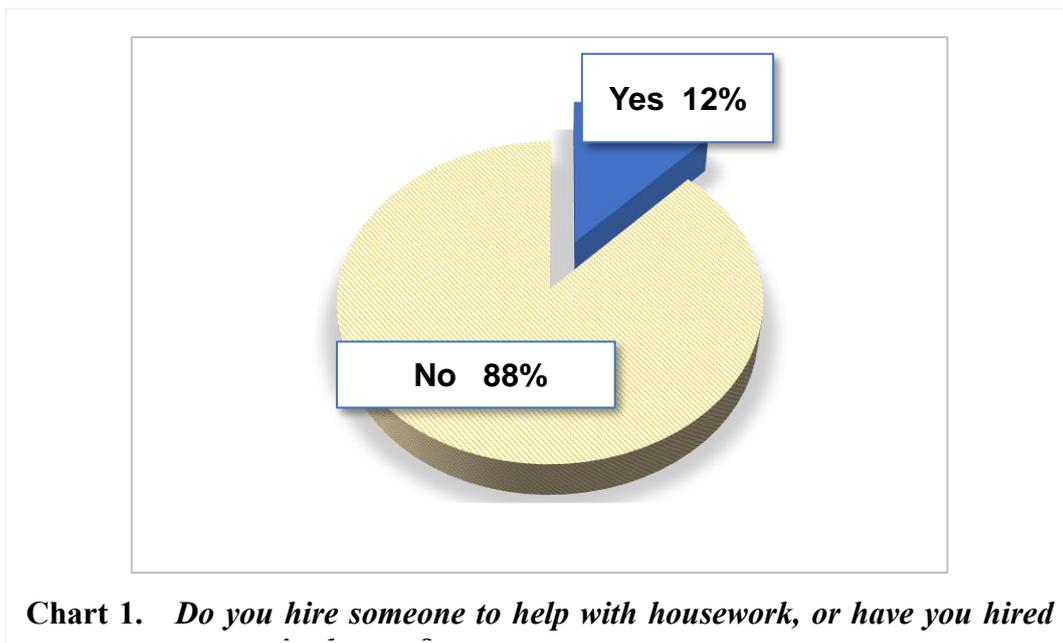
**Table 6. Which of the following appliances/ machines do you use at least once a week? (N=83)**

Roomba-type vacuum cleaner, clothes dryer, dishwasher, dish dryer	N	%
None of the above	44	53.0
Clothes dryer	21	25
Dishwasher	26	31

Dish dryer	16	19.2
Roomba-type vacuum cleaner	7	8
All of the above	1	2

In response to the question “Do you hire someone to help with housework, or have you hired someone in the past?”, seventy-three (88%) answered “No” and only ten (12%) answered “Yes” (See Chart 1).

The response to the question “How did you find your household helper?” is listed



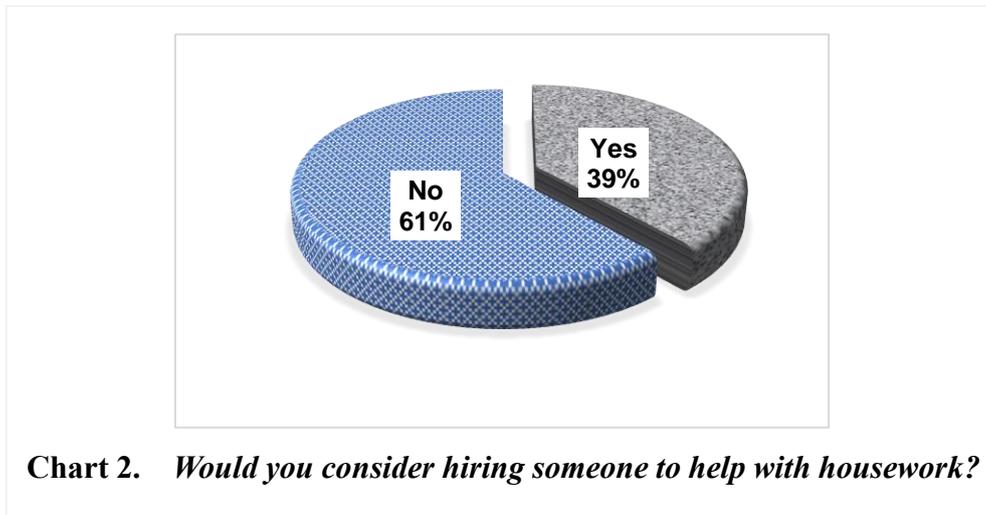
below (See Table 7).

**Table 7.** *How did you find your household helper?*

	N
through a housekeeping agency	4
through word-of-mouth	1
through a housekeeping agency & through word-of-mouth	1
through a Silver Resource Center & through a housekeeping agency& through word-of-mouth	1
other (internet)	1

In response to the question “Would you consider hiring someone to help with housework?”, fifty-one (61%) answered “No” and thirty-two (39%) answered “Yes”

(See Chart 2).



In

response to the question “Do you live in an urban, suburban or rural area?”, sixty (73%) answered “urban or suburban” and twenty-one (25%) answered “rural area”.

### Discussion

Out of all 84 respondents, 32 (39%), replied that they would consider hiring someone to do their housework. However, only ten (12%), all residents of Japan, hired someone to help with domestic labor or had done so in the past. Eight of them considered themselves urban dwellers, while six identified as living in a rural area. They ranged in age from 30s to 60s, and in household income from 3 million to over 10 million yen per year. Seven mentioned that they had hired someone because they didn't have enough time to do it themselves, or that they wanted to have time to do other things. One replied that she didn't like doing housework. Only one chose “housework should be paid labor” as a reason, and others cited the laborer's superior skills. None responded that having housework help was a status symbol, and none had hired someone because they were physically incapable of completing tasks themselves. Among the tasks completed by hired help were babysitting, picking children up from childcare, meal preparation, cleaning ventilation fans, vacuuming, cleaning the bathroom, and laundry.

Of those who had never hired someone to help with domestic tasks, 43 (58.9%) replied “I can do it by myself,” while 5 (6%) answered that they enjoy doing housework. (Multiple responses were accepted.) Others responded that their children or husbands helped with housework. Regarding the more negative responses, twenty-five respondents (47.2%) cited privacy and not wanting a stranger in their house as a reason for not hiring domestic help. This response is expected, since even inviting friends into one's home is

not common in Japan as it is in the United States and other Western countries. Cost was another concern. Twenty (39.2%), including four whose annual household income was 6 million yen or more, felt that it would be too expensive. Eight worried about theft, in spite of Japan's low crime rate, perhaps reflecting an aversion to risk and uncertainty. While concerns about privacy, theft, and cost are not particularly surprising, it is interesting to note that a working woman in her fifties in a household of six people responded that she was deterred from hiring someone by disapproval from her in-laws. Another mentioned that her husband would not approve, which concurs with a previous study including foreign working women in Japan married to Japanese men (Kamata and Kita, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

This preliminary study has found that although more than a third of the respondents are willing to consider hiring household help, only 12% of women surveyed have done so. The most prevalent reason for not hiring someone was the ability to do it oneself, which suggests a sense of personal responsibility regarding domestic labor. Nevertheless, prioritizing domestic tasks may impede women from advancing in the workplace although having women in leadership positions would add perspective to decision and policy-making which affect women.

A more complicated barrier to hiring household help in Japan is a desire for privacy, and not wanting strangers in one's home. Perhaps this will change as Japan invites more foreigners to care for the elderly. We can imagine that as people become used to foreign care-workers in Japan and in their homes, they will be more open to having non-family members perform other helpful tasks. This practice might also be normalized through positive representations of domestic workers in media and entertainment, as well as public discussions and forums.

In short, we believe that in conditions that are mutually beneficial, hiring domestic workers could ease the burdens of Japan's highly educated female population. With more free time and lower personal expectations in the domestic sphere, Japanese working women would be able to pursue career advancement, if they so desire, or have more time to spend on personal interests, thereby improving their quality of life. An increase of women in managerial and executive positions in business, as well as leadership positions in other fields, would lead to better, more inclusive labor practices, and would promote greater gender equality in Japan.

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## Appendix

### Questions on Hiring Help for Housework

1. What is your age?
2. What is your nationality?
3. What is your country of residence?
4. What is your occupation?
5. What is your household income?
6. How many people live in your household?
7. How many hours per week do you spend on housework?
8. Which of the following appliances/ machines do you use at least once a week?  
Please select home appliances to use once a week (multiple answers possible)?
  - a. Roomba-type vacuum cleaner
  - b. Clothes dryer
  - c. Dishwasher
  - d. Dish dryer
  - e. None of the above
9. Do you hire someone to help with housework, or have you hired someone in the past?  
If yes, how did you find your household helper?
  - a. Silver Resource Center
  - b. Housekeeping agency
  - c. Word-of-mouth
  - d. Other

which tasks do they perform?

  - f. If yes to question 9, why did you hire someone to help with housework?
    - a. I don't have time to do it myself.
    - b. I want to have time to do other things.
    - c. I dislike housework.
    - d. I am physically incapable of doing housework due to illness, injury, disability, etc.
    - e. Having a housekeeper is a status symbol.
    - f. I believe housework should be paid work.
    - g. Other
10. Would you consider hiring someone to help with housework?  
If no, why not?
  - a. I can do it by myself.
  - b. I enjoy housework.
  - c. Privacy./I don't want a stranger in my house.

- d. I would be worried about theft.
- e. It's too expensive./I don't want to spend money on a housekeeper.
- f. My partner would disapprove.
- g. My in-laws would disapprove.
- h. I would be worried about what my neighbors would think.
- i. It's unethical.
- j. Other

15. Which prefecture do you live in?

16. Do you live in an urban, suburban or rural area?

Would you be willing to answer further questions?

If yes, please submit your email address.

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