

Preface

This book provides the keys to understanding the trajectory that Japanese society has followed toward its very low fertility since the 1980s. The focus is on characteristics of the life course of women born in the 1960s. They are the first cohort to show the decline in marriage which causes low fertility. This book explores the experiences of the 1960s cohort of Japanese women and the factors determining their choices in their life course.

After the 1980s, drastic changes in the demographic and socioeconomic circumstances altered the Japanese family formation patterns, working conditions of young people, and public opinions and social norms on work, family, and life course. This trend started when the 1960s cohort graduated school, appeared in the labor market, and entered in the stage of family formation. Labor law amendments illegalized gender discrimination, calling public attention to gender equality and the work-family interface issued in workplaces. Japanese workplaces developed a so-called course-based human resource management system, which was substantially gender based, and brought about some changes in women's career development by treating most of them as so-called *ippan-shoku* (general clerical workers not eligible for executive positions).

These changes in circumstances for women's work, along with the loosening of social norms on the timing of major life events, created a new possibility in women's life course choice. Continue working instead of getting married and leaving the labor market in their early 20s became a real option for them. Some of them stayed single, or married in the later stages of their life, or postponed the timing to have children. Childbearing thus shifted to later stages of their life course. As a result, the current average age of pregnancy is approaching the biological limit and unintended infertility is increasing due to postponed pregnancy.

This book explores the links between the changes in social/demographic conditions and individuals' experiences of the 1960s cohort. Chapters 2 and 3 outlined the changes in Japanese society from the perspectives of demographic conditions (Chap. 2) and from law, norm, and social institutions (Chap. 3), based on quantitative data. Chapters 4 and 5 describe individuals' experiences in workplaces under

course-based management systems since the 1980s (Chap. 4) and struggles to reconcile work with family responsibility (Chap. 5), mainly based on qualitative interview data.

The 1960s cohort represents a new life course pattern of Japanese women. It has been shaped through individual choices under the social structure, which still exists in Japanese society today. The experiences of the 1960s cohort women are thus the key to understanding current social/demographic problems in Japan.

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the 1960s

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