Babies, Work, or Both?
Highly-Educated Women’s Employment and Fertility in East Asia*

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Abstract
Highly-educated women’s likelihood of combining childrearing with continuous employment over the life course has increased among recent U.S. cohorts, but this trend is less evident in the large number of postindustrial countries characterized by very low fertility. Among “lowest-low” fertility countries, Japan and Korea stand out as having exceptionally low proportions of women who combine continuous employment with childrearing, despite aggressive government policies designed to encourage this. Drawing on over 100 in-depth interviews with highly-educated Japanese and Korean married men and women of childbearing age, we analyze the incompatibilities between married women’s employment and childrearing in the two countries. We trace these incompatibilities to how labor market structure and workplace norms engender tacit acceptance of men’s overwork, perpetuating a strongly gendered household division of labor and leading to adjustments in fertility intentions and in wives’ employment.

*We are grateful to Xiana Bueno-Garcia, Paul Chang, Eunmi Mun, Liana Sayer, Wei-jun Jean Yeung, Wei-hsin Yu, Juliet Zhou, and participants at the U.S.-Japan Relations Seminar and Social Demography Seminar at Harvard University for insightful comments on an earlier draft.